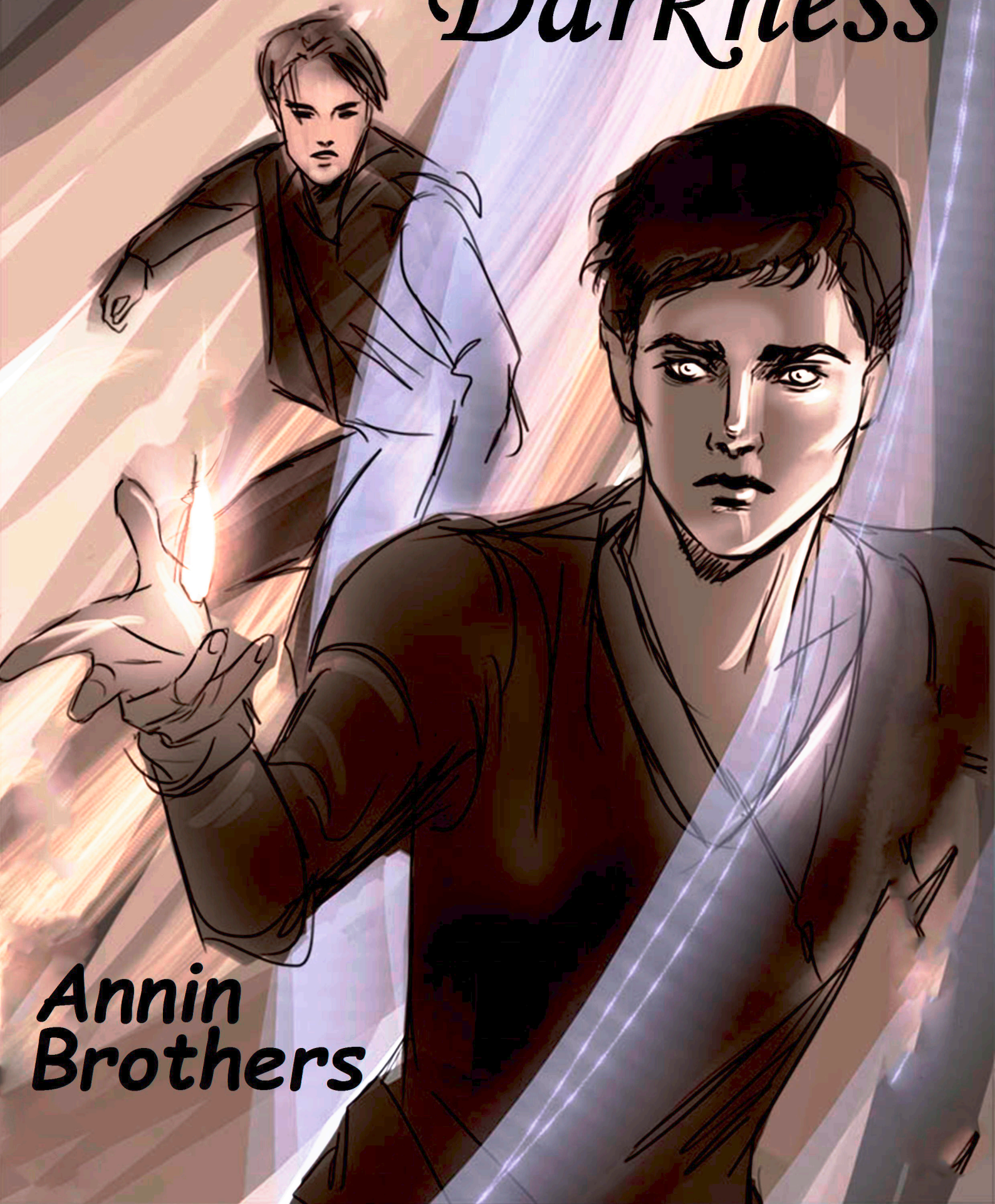


# *To Step into the Darkness*



**Annin  
Brothers**

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**To Step into the Darkness**

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## Part One

### The Non-World

#### Chapter One

##### 'I'm both here and there'

Daniel Bertridg was walking down the street with no regard for the aspects of the passersby, whether known or unknown, nor for the aspects of the radiant summer day, for the invitingly flimsy dresses that the dissolute breeze was chatting up, unashamed. Driven by some reflex, he hardly knew where he was heading, mindless of the first day of his first university vacation. He seemed to be shrouded in the veil of heady impressions which unraveled and drank up his own thoughts. He was exalted, shattered and lost, all at once, aware that his soul would be asking (was actually asking) for something magnetically vague that had been left behind in the picture gallery, in the canvases of Felix Thornton. Perchance, all around them.

Once back home, Daniel felt no relief. He craved nothing but the painful joy that had taken possession of him there. There was nothing for it but to talk to himself. Nay, not so much talk as relate his impressions to his other self that was listening... that much he was sure of.

'Should I go back to the gallery? Peer into those... into that weird world? And... get lost there? If only I could suddenly become one of those thousands of brush strokes. Felix Thornton, I wish I was a stroke of your frenzied brush... Should I go back... ?'

Daniel never knew how he found himself in the bathroom, took his time washing his hands, then undressed, went to the shower and stood there as if waiting for that phony rain to wash off the day.

'Where are you, my... old homeless folks? How I wish I could join you... You'd be chattering nineteen to the dozen. I'd love to have gone down the depths of your dig... and furrow my way into it. To hell with the gallery! May this Thornton go to hell...'

But Daniel's old folks were on an archeological dig, same as most of the time in the course of his nineteen years, and could not hear him.

'A good thing though they aren't around—no nosey parkers to fight off...'

Daniel looked in the kitchen. He wasn't hungry. He opened the fridge and took a pack of orange juice. He used a straw to take a swallow or two and headed for his den, never pausing at the living room: it didn't look inviting. With a glance around the familiar walls, he grinned and landed full-length on the sofa.

'Infected,' he groaned. 'Infected by that daub.'

Daniel got up and went to the window: it looked somewhat...

'It's okay. This calls for a look. Another look—that's the ticket. Stop in front of that daub and look. Genius. He's got genius, this Felix Thornton. What have I got to do with it? What... what? I can feel it... Ugly. Everything's ugly. I've got a feeling that the genius had dipped his brush in my gut, sprayed me and smeared

me all over the canvas. I'm there now. Two or three strokes at least. And I want it that way. I'm here and there now. That's why I'm being drawn there, me in my entirety... I've caught the bug, and I'm driven mad.'

Something has to be done, thought Daniel—the one of the two who was listening. He took the receiver and dialed one of his favorite numbers.

'Yes?' said the familiar voice.

'Chris... hi. Listen. I... I've got something to tell you. I can't help it. Don't answer right away.'

'That you, Dan? What's wrong? Your hi sounds like no hi, and your voice is somewhat...'

'It isn't just my voice. It's... I mean I'm sort of... Chris, I need your help. Even if you're busy or have plans...'

'Calm down, Dan. I want you to know I have no particular plans for the very near future, and you can depend on me.'

'Thanks, Chris. You know... you're still your old dear self, the way you were... in second, fifth, seventh grade. And thanks to you I'm coming back.'

'Where from, Dan?' Chris chuckled.

'Where from... ? From a parallel world... Does the name Felix Thornton ring any bells?'

'Felix Thornton... ? Why yes. I read something the other day on the *Art Riddles and Discoveries* site. The Eifmann Gallery's about to exhibit his pictures. They must be displayed even now; I read the article three days ago. You been there?'

'All in good time, Chris. I've been there and seen... well, that can wait. What do you know?'

'Next to nothing. A man, whatsisname, did his best to have that collection displayed in galleries all over the country. Some of those galleries won't have them shown for a variety of reasons though, you know, the writer hinted that this Thornton was controversial and shrouded his name in mystery, I think. Truth to tell, I didn't think it anything much. Just what's your interest, Dan?'

'Everything!' cried Daniel. 'All there is about him. Whatever you can find. You see... I don't know what's happening to me. I don't know what he's done to me... what his *La vue en dedans* has done to me—it's the work of a genius.'

'Why *La vue en dedans*?'

'Because that's what his exhibition's called. Each of his pictures is called that.'

'Sorry, Dan, it quite escaped me, but the name of the exhibition was mentioned several times in the notice. I thought it was nothing much at the time, but now you've mentioned it, I'm quite intrigued. You don't have to ask me to visit the exhibition right now.'

'It isn't just that, Chris. Please, find out all you can about it. All you can. Make it your priority. As soon as you can. I should've done it myself, but I'm psyched out.'

'Dan... Dan, I ask you to calm down and keep out of the parallel world. I'll do my damndest (always hoping I can) and call you right away.'



'Yes, thanks a lot... Hold on, Chris...' He had meant to say something else but lost it and had to sign off. 'See you.'

Daniel found the gallery number in the directory and dialed it.

'Hi. Could you tell me how long the Felix Thornton exhibition will last? Thanks... Tomorrow's the last day,' Daniel echoed the gallery voice. 'That means we'll meet yet again, Felix Thornton.'

\* \* \*

Daniel spent over five hours in the gallery. Then roamed the city until nightfall, balanced between the here and now and *La vue en dedans*. He came home exhausted. He overdosed his sleeping pills and they knocked him out.

At ten am the next day Daniel was woken up by a phone call.

'Morning, Dan. How are you?'

'I caught some sleep.'

'I've found something interesting on Felix Thornton. Been surfing some newspaper sites. I've printed out all I found—it's quite a compilation. Oh, and I visited the exhibition first thing the day before yesterday. It may have genius, but to my mind... No offence meant, Dan, but it's nothing short of a schizo seeing things. Anyway, I wouldn't try to get to the bottom of it, let alone torment myself. That was the emotional part of it. Now for the facts: the exhibition is taken around the country by a Timothy Bail, the current owner of the collection, who inherited it from Felix Thornton.'

'Not another word, Chris. Sorry, but I need you here. Along with all the artifacts and things, as my old folks would put it.'

'Okay, Dan. On my way.'

## Chapter Two

### The Warp

Twenty years earlier.

The entry door barked back on being kicked open, and swallowed its exasperation at its inability to force the hinges and catch up with the offender. The words were rushing up the stairs to the fourth floor, ahead of the fourteen-year-old, bouncing off the walls and ceiling and echoing the inherent ire and exasperation, as the wooden obstacles finally and nonchalantly soaked in their passion. The boy seemed to be rehearsing a theatrical part as he repeated the words:

'I hate 'im! I'll kill 'im! I hate 'im! I'll kill 'im!'

Just one door gave way to the pressure of the sounds which had despaired of finding vent.

'Hi, neighbor. Come and have some tea. And then we'll do the killing. Unless we change our minds.'

The boy looked up: a pleasantly warped face, unlike other faces, confronted him. Warped in every way, in its broad grin, its huge smiling eyes, its long

hooked nose, in the hair casually streaming down the shoulders, and in the long, lean stooping figure. He must have run past the downstairs neighbor before; he must have even dropped a casual 'Hi' his way, but he had never stumbled over this warp before or looked it in the face. The boy was about to hurl a contemptuous 'Bugger off!' only to find himself accepting the invitation: the warp had drawn him in.

'Come on in. Make yourself at home... or don't. Suit yourself.'

The moment the boy entered the room, its walls and ceiling crashed chaos all over him and captured his feelings and imagination. It was a chaos wrought in paint and a multitude of mirror shards. They were scattered helter-skelter about the walls and ceiling. Once they reflected something, they turned into fragments of nature and civilization, life and death, reality and mysticism. Dotted here and there were numerous morbid eyes, distorted faces and living creatures, turned inside out as it were.

'Don't be frightened, or do. Just suit yourself.' No one pronounced these words; they sort of originated inside the boy on their own. In an attempt at restoring reality, he tried to say something out loud, but his tongue had become a stiff lump. He was standing in the middle of the room, all atremble... only to feel a hand on his shoulder—and feel at ease.

'These are just pictures. I had spied those eyes over there.' The neighbor nodded toward the window. 'No more treachery for them on the receiving end here, nor will they be tempted to be treacherous themselves.'

'You a painter?' blurted the boy at last.

'Primarily a contemplator. Then, a painter. Let's go to wash away the schoolroom canker, and partake of the board.'

The singularity of the situation had made the boy docile. The water hissed and he started washing his hands just as the painter was saying:

'All grownups have betrayed their childhood. To enhance the truth, one might preface it with "almost," but that can hardly bring on good luck. Here's the towel. Let's go to the kitchen... Take a seat... Do you want some salad? Here's the meat dish. Don't hesitate to help yourself to some more. I'll take something too, to keep you company. Strange... Strange, isn't it: kids growing up and letting down their childhood. Letting themselves down.'

The boy looked up at his new acquaintance, only to drop his eyes. The artist responded to the tacit question:

'Given time, you'll know whether I let my childhood down or not. Later still, you'll have the answer to a harder question: if you betrayed your childhood yourself. It's like this: once you realize... come to realize that you're going to betray your childhood, will there be much point to feeling hurt when confronted with betrayal on the part of others, on the part of adults?'

'Why, he's a teach.' A sullen look was craving support, the boy quite ready to bolt unless the 'stinker' was forthcoming.

'It's just my guess, but he's no teacher. We should choose our own teachers. That one is nothing but a faulty mouthpiece.'

'I wish I could tell him to bugger off or have it out in a fair fight.'

'This is what makes this life so ugly. Help yourself to another piece of pie; I'll pour you another cuppa. If it's good we'll help ourselves to more of the same.'

The boy was dying to tell him what had happened at school. He would have the culprit verbally punished outright by this singular man, who had just told him the gospel truth.

'I hate his filthy guts!' he blurted out, and felt unease.

'Did that mouthpiece of a teacher resort to smut? You don't have to tell me if it hurts.'

The boy's lips suggested he was about to cry, but he contained the urge.

'I dropped it accidentally... the globe. Honest Injun! He said...' The boy lowered his eyes only to raise them again. 'He said I'd been breaking wind. Everyone laughed. Well, I wasn't.'

(The schoolboy had bent to pick up and replace the globe he'd accidentally upset. That was when the geography teacher's voice hit him like a rod:

'D'you know what you've just upset, Mister Hub of This World?'

'I didn't mean to.'

The teacher came up to the boy, clutched his sleeve between his forefinger and thumb and turned him to face the class.

'Do you think—provided you choose to use your brains—you'll find yourself there?' He poked his finger at the globe. 'Be it a magnifying glass. Be it a microscope. Would you spot yourself there? I don't think you're capable of anything but an SBD. Fortunately, the planet can survive that.')

'It'd have been right to kill him,' the painter said calmly and resolutely. 'Provided you'd had a plan to.'

The boy hadn't expected to hear anything like that—his eyes were a study in incredulity. The artist went on:

'And I'd be right to help you do it. Unfortunately, there's no killing them all, those stinkers. I chose to leave for my world. It'd be an even better idea to find another country. One that has no room for those who let down their childhood, where the soul is free from hate and vengeance.'

'What rot!' blurted the boy: the idea was gall to him; he hadn't expected to hear such rot from a man he'd come to like.

'What rot?'

'About the country.'

'It'd have been tommy rot if your teacher had said it. Because he's ignorant. Pray don't lump me with him. A country like that does exist, and I'll tell you about it in good time. If you don't stand to lose much here, we'll move to that country. We'll live by a different clock there.' The artist's face was transformed, as if he'd glimpsed that unknown land for a moment.

'Come again?' The boy didn't understand the part of it about the clock.

The painter's eyes came back.

'More tea?'

'No thanks, I must be going: Mom will soon be back from work.'

\* \* \*

Another twenty years earlier.

'Felix?'

Felix was sitting at the table and drawing. He went on drawing when his mother addressed him. She had just come home and was eager to say something to her son.

'Felix, you hear me? Please, stop what you're doing for a moment. I've been to Desmond Burdick's studio and talked to him about you.'

Felix forced himself to lay down his pencil and faced his mother.

'He's got to see your drawings before he makes up his mind whether he accepts you. He asked to see some of your drawings tomorrow. Select the ones you want to show him, and we'll take them there.'

'Nope,' said Felix.

'What do you mean?' His mother was aghast.

'I don't want to show him any.'

'But you do want to take a drawing class?'

'Dunno.' Neither his voice nor his eyes tried to undecieve his mother.

'Your dad and I have discussed it with you. Your gift has to be worked on under tutorship. I thought you were all for my going to the studio to talk about you.'

'Okay. I'll show him some of my drawings.' His tone was as dry as dust as he resumed drawing.

'No offence meant, son. You may have a flare for seeing things your own way... the way artists do. Even a gifted person needs schooling. And so do you. What you need is the technique of transferring what you see on to canvas to duly supplement your flare.'

There was no response on the part of Felix to what his mother had said; one couldn't be sure he was listening.

. . . Desmond Burdick had been looking at Felix's drawings for nearly an hour. There were three of them of the same room. The drawings were captioned *Room, Draught, Someone Hiding*. The one called *Room* was a pleasant surprise and the artist delighted in it. But he fought shy of praising his students, let alone applicants. He held back the words of delight. But when he laid it aside to take another, the words, even tacit ones, were overwhelmed by what he felt. *Draught* gave him gooseflesh and made the hair of his mustache and beard stand on end. The master looked on and on, now closing, now opening his eyes, aware that he could not get to the bottom of the boy's feat wrought in pencil alone. His exacting gaze dwelled most on that sketch. It was the foretaste of seeing something just as singular and potent, yet another hidden aspect of the room, that made him tear away his gaze from *Draught*. 'What a frenzied pencil,' Burdick thought when the last sketch confronted him. The next moment his face grew grim and his hands shook, as if he was the one lurking in the room, as if his was the face that the sinister shadow of the one he was hiding from had been cast on. Burdick clumsily turned the sheet over and rose. He paced the room for some time paying no attention to Felix: he had to regain his composure. Then he addressed the boy:

'I liked your drawings a lot. Have you been long at the game?'

'Dunno.'

'Has anyone taught you to draw?'

'No, no one has.'

'You can do your parents proud—I accept you.'

Felix rose to go.

'Felix, have you tried to draw faces?' asked Burdick with something on his mind.

He felt like looking the little craftsman in the eye and feel for his soul (there was something out of the ordinary in it). But he had realized that a face looking out of a sketch would tell him more than the real but closed face. He had realized that Felix the artist could not hide behind the guise that Felix the man was wearing without a difference. He had realized that the kid would reveal himself through a self-portrait.

'Yes,' was Felix's answer, altogether too laconic and nonchalant.

'In this case I suggest a deal: draw yourself, your face... Say, a self-portrait in pencil (your mother says you also use paints). I hope this task is all right with you?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Let's meet here at four two days from now. You bring your sketch, and we begin classes in the studio.'

Felix came up to the table, picked up his drawings without saying a word, and made for the door.

'Bye,' he said without looking Burdick's way.

'Take care.'

. . . Felix's crumpled faces were hitting the floor one by one. Felix was angry: the self-portrait wouldn't come out. Each of the faces he'd drawn was merely a mirror image of his face—not a trace of what he felt inside. He had spent in front of his mother's cheval glass in her bedroom all day one and half of day two, always mindful that the master had given him two days only. At some point, despair took hold of him and made him hurl his favorite tool at that intransigent glass that kept gawping and mimicking him, insensible to feeling, making Felix's aspects in pencil just as insensible. The mirror developed a crack, and Felix's reflection sported a lengthy scar that warped his features. Felix grabbed the pencil and took moments in a frenzy to accomplish what he had failed to do for two days. Moments—that was what it felt like doing his first and last self-portrait.

'I broke the mirror, Mom,' said Felix when his mother was back home after work.

She knew he had been hard at work on his master's first assignment and never said a word of reproach that might irk him. But a few minutes later she called him:

'Come upstairs, please, Felix... Did you mean my cheval glass?'

'I sure did.'

'But it's intact. Look.'

Felix approached the mirror and scrutinized it for a long time...

Desmond Burdick acted as planned. He took Felix's folder with the coveted portrait and slid it in his leather briefcase. This was the time he had to devote

himself to the students, while Felix's new sketch would call for a lot of time and as much feeling. But above all, he wanted to delight in the boy's effort all alone, in his home, for a genuine artist can only revel in another genuine artist's work all by himself.

. . . Now in for the sweet moment! Burdick made some coffee... made himself comfortable in an easy chair... sipped from the cup... opened the briefcase and produced the folder... Another sip, and he opened the folder and tremulously removed the sheet. Just a few moments to savor the triumph of his surmise that the sketch would reveal the real Felix. Just a few moments. Revealed to him all of a sudden was what made his heart throb in the gullet—he found himself short of breath. He was struggling for air and gazing. He could not help it: what was on the sheet would not let his gaze go.

'It can't be true!' Desmond Burdick gasped and died, his eyes popping out with an air of being caught between the dead dark and the warp come to life.

### Chapter Three

#### The Expedition

'You've been to the gallery again!' Christine was incredulous and even frightened when she saw Daniel in the doorway. 'What's wrong? Have you looked in the mirror? All gaunt, and shadows under the eyes! Caught some sleep, my ass! It's been barely three days since I saw you last, and I no longer know you.'

'I'm still in the gallery in my mind's eye, Chris. I'll always be there... on his world. It's... It's my world, too. You may think I'm out of my mind, but I feel: what's in Thornton's pictures has always been there, inside me... Always there... I never so much as guessed that before. Couldn't so much as conjecture.'

'Always? Inside you? Dan, you've been caught in a trap! A psychic trap of sorts. You've got hooked on an obscure, infinitesimal detail that you can hardly... no, that you're completely unaware of. It could be the gallery curator's scent. The scent your mother used to wear when you were sucking in this world in your cot. Now that room, that space (whoever it's filled by—Thornton or a fragrant curatoress) is the cot for you.'

'Stop it, Chris,' Daniel interrupted her. 'I'm no fool and I'm not a shrink's case. My greatest fear was that you'd not believe me.'

'Why not? I do believe you. And I want to help you get out of it.'

'Well, I want to understand—'

'Understand what? Those inside views? What are they all about? What must I get inside of to see that? Is it my gut? I don't care for that, and I refuse to try and fathom things like those... *Guillotine. Inside view...* Recherché, my ass!'

'That's imagery, Chris... Please, sit down on that sofa,' Daniel said as they entered the living room.

He positioned the coffee table to peruse the matter Christine had brought in grater comfort. Christine was still at it:



'Imagery? D'you know the way Thornton passed away? He ordered a guillotine a few months before his death, an honest-to-goodness guillotine (no mockups for him) to portray its likeness, as it were. And engineered an inside view for it... perchance for himself, too.'

'Wait a bit. Did he kill himself? So he knew he'd be killing himself. Painting in that knowledge. Perhaps he saw... ? Are those canvases his visions? What a pity... There's no meeting or talking to him now...'

Christine saw that Daniel had withdrawn into himself, crestfallen. She kept silent, just looking at him and pitying him. It irked her that a sea change had come to pass: there was something wrong with Dan, there was no putting it right—there was nothing for it but to drift.

'Chris, what was it you said about Thornton's heir?'

'Thornton had bequeathed his pictures to Timothy Bail, who is now touring the country with the exhibition which is a great success—judging by you. Nothing else about the man that's noteworthy. Apropos of which, Thornton's older brother never made it to the funeral because of that will.'

'I can quite understand.'

'Particularly considering that his house (reported to be quite expensive) and entire estate have passed on to Bail.'

'That's strange.'

'Thornton *was* strange—a recluse, no family of his own (unlike Bail, who has a wife and a daughter), no contacts with his brother. Broke off with him after the meteorite hunters' expedition, but that's another story, rather enigmatic, too.'

'I wonder.'

Christine produced a folder from her bag and opened it.

'You'd better read this. This is what they write about the exhibition. This is about his death. This compilation is perhaps of greatest interest.' Christine thought it best to humor him. 'It's all about Thornton's disappearance and return.'

This latter did indeed make Daniel perk up. Disappearance. Return. His consciousness had picked up a mysterious communion, however tentative, that he could hardly put his finger on, a link between himself, the 'inside views' and those words. He couldn't help crying out:

'Chris, that's classy! Thanks.'

'All thanks should go to the French for their invention: most of the articles on Thornton appeared after he had parted company with his head of genius. It even goes for Thornton's disappearance—he'd been quite forgotten for thirty years.'

'I don't care who's forgotten what. What matters is that there's a hidden door in my soul. And there's something I know nothing about behind that door. But I will find it, Chris. I'll find my way there, and you'll help me. What we need is a prompt, and we'll find one. Just don't leave me alone vis-à-vis this.'

. . . They sat, the two of them, into the small hours of the morning. They took turns reading the stories out loud. They reread them. They argued. When Christine was rustling up dinner in the kitchen, Daniel went on searching, hopeful of coming across an event, a word that would provide a prompt, a lead, a

witness—something tangible, rather than an interjection-like emanation of the overwrought imagination.

Weariness caught them up when it was going on for two in the morning. Christine was going to leave. She wanted to wind up the intervening hours with something pleasant for Daniel, something to do with his newly found enthusiasm. She thought she had it in her, she wasn't acting a lie.

'Oh Dan, I was forgetting—I did like one picture by Thornton. As I was standing in front of it in the gallery, I thought—'

'Which one, Chris?' Daniel interrupted her, for he no longer had time for patience. 'Sorry.'

'It's all right, I can quite understand. I must tell you in advance: its caption isn't to my mind's liking... or my heart's, for that matter, either.'

'Which is it, Chris?'

'*The Placeless Place. Inside View.* Remember?'

'I'd seen it!' cried Daniel, whipped by an impulse, over and over again, as if he was afraid he'd forget having seen it. 'I'd seen it! I'd seen it! Before! I'd seen it before! Not yesterday! Nor the day before! Much earlier, Chris!'

He'd given Christine quite a turn; she was quavering in response to the air that had been electrified inside Daniel, and was now taking a bite at everything around it.

'You can't have seen it before, Dan. You can't have seen it. You can't have seen it for one good reason: the picture was exhibited for the first time. You couldn't have ignored the notice *Exhibited for the first time* that was crying out in much the same way you're doing now. *The Placeless Place* is just under that notice. I remember right. Just because that was the only picture that caught my fancy. Because that was the only picture I regarded as a picture. And no one had seen it before. Nor you, Dan, either. Besides, the caption suggests that the place is nonexistent. It was just Thornton's fancy.'

Having splashed out the words full of despair, Christine ran out of the house. And burst into tears... When Daniel came to his senses and emerged in the street, she was gone.

\* \* \*

Christine was sitting behind the steering wheel of the red Honda—her parents' gift to her for successfully graduating school. The car was eagerly cleaving the air that was full of gold which melted and slid down its glossy shape on to the sheeny bronze tarmac. The car was happy: she was giving her friend a good ride.

Way back, when a plan was germinating in Christine's head how to help Dan, she was rehearsing a speech she would deliver, now flowing with tears, now laughing through the tears (a speech she could only mumble to herself, her head being anything but fresh) as she handed him the gift.

'Dear Dan... No... My dear Dan... No, that's too much... Daniel... Too formal... Dear Daniel, I want to give you a present. Well no, I haven't got it on me. It's *in* me... here.' She held a hand to her heart. 'I mean this ride... these two rides, but more about the second one later on. I can quite understand that

you are about to turn over a new leaf. I'm not about to be a spoilsport: I haven't got the power or the inclination to stop you. I'll try... not to be in the way. But I think you should... make an about turn. An about turn to head for a new life, to face fact and ordinary people, who precisely because of their ordinariness will help you to see the light at the end of this macabre tunnel... and, truth be told, to get out of the gut, saving your presence... spewed by the imagination of a schizo, or maybe a charlatan and look at it all with a human eye. And I believe that this ride will be the first step toward the recovery of the Daniel I used to know as a schoolmate...

'That's self-serving: I'm giving Dan a ride that will restore the former Dan to me as a present,' Christine summed up the speech that has now become a thing of the past.

The day had had an auspicious beginning for Christine: she'd found out the phone number of Ashley Wood, a member of the expedition that involved Felix Thornton, got him on the phone and arranged a meeting, however reluctant, with him. She was enraptured: her plan was under way!

Daniel, on the wing of Christine's inimitable patience and benevolence and hopeful of a speedy approach to the mystery's solution, soared on high as soon as they were out of the city's bounds and sped on; he had now scooted over the azure off-the-road space for about eighty miles when a familiar voice had spanned the two-foot expanse between reality and dream after an umpteenth try:

'Daniel Bertridg, wake up and shine! So much for the sleep of the just.'

'Chris?' He gave her a puzzled look and gawped around. 'Are we there?'

'We are. His name is Ashley Wood. There, you seem to be recovering from a coma. Number ninety-one... There's his house.' Christine stopped the car. 'You ready?'

'There's a bit of a buzz in my head. Ashley Wood, number ninety-one.'

Christine laughed.

'This isn't a prison visit. It isn't "Ashley Wood, number ninety-one, out with you!" but a house number ninety-one. We've stopped right across the way, and I'm waiting for you to come to finally.'

'I have. Let's go.'

'Now I can see you have.'

Daniel pressed the button of an antediluvian bell several times. The wait was alive with the thumping of a wooden object and husky mumbling. The door opened without the usual standby queries and faltering answers. Confronting Daniel and Christine was a tall man of about sixty leaning on the shoulder of his wooden assistant. Either countenance suggested that they were both as dry as dust both physically and spiritually.

'Good afternoon,' faltered Christine somewhat belatedly. 'Are you Ashley Wood?'

'What can I do for you?'

'I... I called you this morning. We arranged an appointment. A propos of Felix Thornton... his part in the expedition? Remember?' Christine was looking at Ashley Wood, doubtful that the morning had been all that auspicious.'

Ashley Wood was still silent, appraising his visitors.

'My name's Christine Willis, this is my friend, Daniel Bertridge.'

'I'm not asking you in: the pain is all over the place—the wrong sort of thing for your springtime faces unused to pain. We'll talk over there.' He waved his crutch in the direction of an arbor.'

The visitors found it easier to breathe...

When they settled on the bench surrounding the table, Christine decided to repeat what she had told Wood over the phone.

'The point is we're students, not reporters. We're amassing matter on the life and work of Felix Thornton. Won't you tell us about the expedition from which he was reported missing?'

'I'll tell you all I know, all I remember.'

Ashley Wood didn't have to be talked into telling things. He was quite prepared to relate everything, his sins, too: his soul had long been conditioned for penance by a terminal disease. The rather that they were not reporters (he could see that), whose guts he hated because given a word of sincerity, they would sell it to the devil. Also, he needed money.

'The fee up front... I need medication: my condition calls for that.' He looked aside. 'Sorry, kids.'

'Yes, sure thing.' Somewhat embarrassed, Christine hastened to produce the money from her purse. She handed Wood two hundred-bills. 'Here you are.'

He accepted them without a word and clasped them in his fist, thus suppressing his shame which had a way of manifesting itself out of turn, and rose a bit to shove them into his breech pocket.

'It was the most useless hike of all I've been party to, much against our better judgment. Well, I've been to so many such, my mind would go astray were I to list them. It was a sorry excuse of an expedition. All because of that devil of a daubster, I guess. There was invariably a foursome of us starting out. We knew one another well enough, and had no patience with a stranger, much less that Thornton Jr. However, his older brother, Eddie, had managed to talk Dick Slaton into taking the guy along. Dick's word was a law with all of us, me too: he was quite a character and would brook no opposition. It was a straightforward deal: he keeps himself to himself and looks for no iron...

'The weather turned the very first day, there was a thunderstorm and torrential rain. It couldn't have been worse with all those slippery boulder hazards around. The metal detector was out of the question. Twiddling your thumbs in camp is a sore trial. Well, that cove... started hopping around like one mad and hollering heavenward: "Give them hell! Show what you're worth! I crave you!" and things like that. Which it did: lightning set alight a tree some twenty yards from him. He was still at it, like, "That was good! Let's have more of the same. Get a bead on it. I'm here. I'm yours." I could stand it no longer and made for him. Like everyone else, I wanted to teach him a lesson. I'd sure have let off steam and given the scamp a hell of a hiding. But Eddie stepped in and somehow prevailed on his brother to desist. The dauber had made no friends, immune to reason as he was. He had a way of looking down his nose at people.'

'Did he draw?' Daniel wondered.

'Kept at it all the time. Each time I went by, he hand was busy swishing over some paper. A glance told you it was nature... say, a boulder, the sky... However, later on, he imparted some sort of ugly life to it. I don't know what it was exactly. I don't know how to put it. But it was something revolting, something his head bred... No, he wasn't a genuine artist...'

Several seconds later Ashley Wood went on with a grin:

'Truth to tell, Dick's likeness was all right. The eyes, the smirk... he hit them off to the life. Even his character was there, too, somehow. But he was all wrong... as an individual... Took his meals by himself, talked with a taunt in his eyes... and that sort of thing. He was tolerated for the sake of his brother—his brother's all right... a good worker...'

Wood fell silent. He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes waiting for the pain to subside.

'But one day we found we could stand it no more. Robby, Robert Fletcher, stumbled on Thornton Jr picking at the ground, casting aside stones. He was so engrossed he never saw Robby. Robby told about it to Dick, Eddie and me. We all thought the artist had hit iron and decided to make sure. He spotted us when we were some thirty yards off and dashed off toward the forest. Dick said he would fetch him and raced off. He returned when it was quite dark. He'd lost him. That was what he said... We searched for him the next day. A day later we decided to call the rescue team. Iron was the least of our concerns, and we struck camp. Eddie stayed behind with the rescuers. All to no avail—the dauber was gone with the wind. Eddie had to call the police, they gave us a hell of a time. Dick was a suspect. Three months later your frigging Thornton turned up.'

'Mr Wood?'

'Ashley. Just call me Ashley.'

'Ashley, what was it that Felix Thornton found? Why did he run away?' said Christine.

'Eddie said it was some rare coin. The daubster then sold it to a wealthy collector. It fetched quite a price. I don't think he would have got that much for his pictures. That's all I know... Sorry, it's past my medication time.'

There was nothing personal when Wood cut the conversation short—the pain was eating at his body, leaving no room for answers.

## **Chapter Four**

### **'The power of words and tears'**

Nineteen years earlier.

Now that he had made the acquaintance of the artist, the boy's life had taken a turn for the better—it was fascinating and facile, with a little more room for him in it. The damned school hadn't vanished by magic and was still nibbling at his naked ego. But the boy had learnt on the artist's suggestion to 'spit at the façade if the shingle over it wouldn't let you spit at the mug behind it.' The street,

his former refuge from loneliness, which had brought to the fore his numerous other weaknesses, held out no more lure to him.

The boy and the artist spent a lot of time together. He had lunch with Lee almost every day. They sat at the table as equals talking of what happened to hit their fancy at the moment. The mundane food was cooked and served by a young woman, name of Sal, who never took part in their conversation. In the evening Mo and Lee walked in the park chatting about what Mo's or Lee's soul had succeeded in spying or sneaking out of the darkness. Mo would then go home, a small apartment where his mother was waiting for him, while Lee rang his doorbell and was let in by Sal.

As often as not, Lee would take Mo to his workshop. He would paint for hours on end. The boy would sit in the swivel chair, which had been delivered for him alone and which Lee called 'refraction point,' watching. Born in front of his very eyes was a different world: it was started by assorted touches or brush strokes which miraculously turned into a gazing vision. And the gaze began putting the boy to the test, and he guessed that the gaze was governed by an invisible soul. On occasion, after several days' work, the canvas displayed what Mo could not quite put in words, what he had never seen in real life, and what he could not imagine, but what was possessed of a living force that gave him the creeps.

Mo liked best what Lee called his quick portraits. The artist would talk to the boy, touching them in.

'Who do you think this is, Mo?' Lee was indicating the portrait he had just finished.

The boy perused the likeness trying to find something that would suggest the answer.

'I'll give you a clue,' said Lee. 'Do you like the face?'

'I was very nearly saying it was an unpleasant face,' admitted Mo, having conjured he was on the right track. 'I can see by the eyes...'

Mo grew thoughtful again.

'What's he facing?' asked Lee.

'A mirror! Mirror, isn't it?' said Mo after a brief subconscious search.

'You hit right on the mark! Even though there isn't a mirror in the picture as you see. It isn't there in the space this man inhabits.

'How d'you mean?' Mo was perplexed.

'How? He's admiring himself, that's the point. Not nose against a mirror, but inwardly. He's admiring himself as a hero of his own action. Mark this: it isn't someone else admiring him—he isn't mindful of the eyes aimed at him at the moment. He's absorbed by his self. What was it you were about to say?'

'His mouth is somewhat... revolting,' said Mo with a grimace of distaste.

'Elaborate, will you?'

'As if he's got something in his mouth. Is he munching? But the way he's doing it is somehow—' Mo ran out of steam at a loss for the word he needed.

'You got it right... We were on the eyes and the mouth. Eyes that enjoy and a mouth that can't stop, even though to all appearances it's got carried away and it had better shut up. There, look at the corners of the mouth—that's foaming, a



sure sign of air pollution. We are now in a position to give a firm answer to my first question: Who's this man? I have a word for him and his like: 'lecturer.' No, he doesn't have to be a university lecturer or one of the 'green' speakers. One who delivers lectures doesn't necessarily have to be my lecturer. My lecturer is a maniac of sorts. And you remarked rightly: he's munching, or rather, stuffing his face. He's a pain in the ass for whoever has to endure him for whatever reason and wait for him to finish lecturing... Well done, Mo: you've figured him out...'

\* \* \*

That fall Mo heard from his friend Lee a strange story much of which didn't register. But he was the only person the artist had confided in. Lee prefaced it with:

'Mo, you've been aware at least once in your life how hard and unrewarding it is to withhold a secret for a long time—until it's lackluster and moldy. That about sums up my mood today...'

The boy's eyes brightened up at these words: he had realized that Lee was about to reveal a secret, a real secret.

'I'm in the mood today to share what has been my greatest secret over the years... What a good thing I've got you...'

Lee withdrew into himself. Then he said:

'Okay, listen. It happened eleven years ago. Four fortune hunters departed on an expedition. They were looking for 'iron'—meteorites. That far from civilization, I had to have backup so I joined that foursome, the rather that one of the four was my brother. I'm no iron hunter. My dream was working on location, where nothing has been limned by humans, and those humans are a rare commodity. I jumped at the opportunity... I was in luck: I made sketches of stones... their aspects and grimaces. I tried to reach for their soul. There were stones galore. They are creatures of few words, but they can sit for you like no one else... I wasn't looking for anything. It found me of its own accord. And called on me to join in. It drew me. And when I unearthed it and touched it, I realized that the touch, the moment was the point of departure for my genuine fate, no less, the guiding point for a calling, a talent.

Mo was all hot to inquire just what Lee was talking about but he dared not: Lee was pale and fiery talking about his secret.

'This moment is nothing short of an introduction to a certain force that empowers you. A certain universal force that, on top of empowering you, shares its grandeur with you... And when the pulses of that force are still at your fingertips, on your palm, you are unaware yet. Not aware at all. Then the moment comes when you suddenly do become aware. Aware that you're different from them all. That you're above them all... I bolted... I wouldn't have surrendered my find if my life depended on it. I'd sooner have killed them. I ran. A long time. I didn't feel tired. What I was clutching in my hand was charging me with stamina. I ran until I plunged into darkness. The darkness of forest. The darkness of night. Progress had become all but impossible. I ran into rough trees, into the uncertainty of blackness. I grew cold. Inside, hunger was taunting me. I had never known before, I just hadn't stopped to consider that despair could take

hold of you so soon. At some point I could stand it no longer... and burst into tears. And what I had in my hand urged me on again. I held it up to my face, for I wanted to see it. I started fingering it and twisting it in my hand. I turned my body now one way, now the other in search of a beam of light that might enliven my feelings. I peered and peered. At some point it seemed to me that I'd found the way out of that darkness. And I stepped in. My strength oozed out and I lost consciousness... I came to because someone had touched me. Hovering over me was a man. There was daylight. The grass was hugging me.'

—What are you doing in our parts? said the man.

—I've been travelling. And lost my way, I said and recalled the find of the day before.

I stirred my fingers—the thing was gone. I sat up and groped in the grass... and was frightened, for it wasn't there.

—You looking for this or this? In one hand he was holding what I'd been looking for, in the other, the pocket watch, my father's present.

I was silent, not knowing what my reply would entail.

—Which will you choose? The tone of his voice suggested that he knew which of those things was to be his.

I thought: Which of the two cherished things I should choose to keep the one that has chosen me? If I'm the chosen one, it'll come back to me.

I decided to persist.

—Why, both of them belong to me, don't they? I said.

—You are forgetting about the third thing that you would hardly want to part with. As you see, I have not taken possession of it yet, he said, clicking his fingers.

A huge dog materialized out of the grass. I couldn't stare it out for as long as a second.

—Are you after one of these two? I asked, careful not to betray my fear with voice or gesture or look.

The stranger laughed.

—I'll restore this to you if you are not silly. (Fortunately, he nodded toward the hand that my find was in.) This will pay for the bed and board as you stay with me.

I noted that he regarded the watch with fondness, such as a child would display for a toy that was more than a toy.

—You will do for me a job that I will pay for. You will do your best to do it, for you have no option.

He was right: I had no option. I was to divine the real meaning of his words later on.

—Now, get up and follow me. You have nothing to fear, he said with a grin. Our guard is ever on the ball.

I spent ninety-two days with him. I could have finished the job he'd entrusted to me much sooner. But I checked and rechecked everything lots of times. I was driven by the fascination of an artist, for I was aware that I was doing it for myself, for my future. I took my time for another reason, too: the place was quite enchanting. The serenity. The views. The sky. Mo, you have no

idea what the sky is like there. Never in my life had I seen a sky like that. No, I'm not about to dwell on it. It's too fine for words. I'd better paint it. And I'm sure you'd wish you'd be there. The two of us will go to that wonderful country one of these days...

`Curiosity was another thing that made me linger there. I wanted to see and understand as much as I could. Besides, I didn't know what was in store for me once my work was over. The hint he had dropped about a third thing couldn't be discounted.

`Soon enough, his son and I got chummy. He was your age at the time. On discovering I was a painter, he would join me in my room every day, offering tidbits that we stuffed our faces with right away, and asking me to draw something for him. I was amused and did those things for him with a light heart. We would stroll, him and me, of an evening, just like we're doing now, and talk. He told me of things curious and macabre. I have no way of knowing whether those thrillers were merely his fancy, or he was relating the lore of the land, but I would look apprehensively toward the window and listen for the noises of the night, as I was slowly sinking into sleep after those stories, held a special fascination for me, a replay of childhood.

`Time passed. My work was nearly finished. I decided to take advantage of the boy's attachment to me and one day made a sketch of my find when I was drawing for him.

“Look, Raff, have you ever seen anything like this?” I said.

`On seeing the drawing he gave a start. He was either bewildered or frightened, but I could see right away that he'd seen the object. He was about to say something (I could see that) but checked the impulse. We were silent for a minute or two, and one could see his confusion: he didn't quite know what to do for the best. My confusion matched his, and I thought my plan was ill-advised. I had no other plan, though. Embarrassed by acting a transparent lie, I said:

“You know, Raff, your father picked off me the thing you've just seen... borrowed it for some time. I'll finish my work today and leave you. I'd be embarrassed to remind him of it... Won't you help me out? If you know where it's kept, bring it to me, will you?”

“Yes,” said Raff monosyllabically and made for the door.

“Raff?” I called.

`He gave me a withdrawn look, as if we weren't chummy, as if there hadn't been communion between us all those days.

“Raff, could you get it before we go strolling?” I again felt embarrassment because of that phony `get.` “Please, bring it to me, there's a good guy.”

`He nodded in agreement and left.

`Dear Mo, even now, relating that episode, I experience the shame I felt for my deception, as if I'd deceived you. My only justification was that I had to sneak away from a man who I had a grievance against and who had power on his side, the power to rule my fate...

`I was in for quite a turn when, instead of Raff, his father entered my room that evening. His eyes spoke volumes.

—Come. I'll show you the way. You'll get lost on your own yet again.

'He stopped some three hundred yards from the forest. The first thing he said after a long silence had the ring of a threat in it.

—Did you kill the mutt?

—Upon my word, I didn't, I said, steadfastly looking him in the eye.

'He gave me a searching look.

—Who was it, then?

—It wasn't me. (I wasn't being evasive: it was my answer, and he got my drift.)

—You do not wish to let on. Suit yourself.'

'Who killed the dog, Lee?' Mo couldn't contain himself.

'It wasn't me,' Lee reiterated the answer from his past. 'Just listen to what happened next.'

'We stood looking each other in the eye. He was making up his mind what to do—I was waiting for his decision.'

—Do not come back, he said at last. I have a good enough reason to kill you. It was your own doing. I need no one to bear witness that my hands are your hands. Here are your things.

'I was dumbfounded when he held out my find along with the watch, which he had given me only when I needed it for my work, thus conditioning me to the idea that it was his.

—Why, you said you'd keep the watch as payment for the bed and board. (I was eager to listen to his explanation.)

'Instead of the explanation, he sized me up like a damned fool, and I realized he hadn't changed his mind. Then he said:

—You must go. Now, attend to what I say...

—Wait a bit, I interrupted, and gave the place I'd come to love a once-over.'

Lee wound up his story with words that suggested the story wasn't a thing of the past:

'I keep thanking my find every day. And I believe I'm yet to revisit the place where I as good as lost it. And my watch will tell me my time yet. My time and yours, Mo.'

Lee pulled out a secretary drawer and produced a gold watch.

'This is it,' he said. 'Please, take it. It's yours now.'

Lee's words and the watch that was a living throwback to the mystery of Lee's past made Mo experience both happiness and dread. He was reluctant to leave the space impregnated with a different life he felt drawn to. He stayed with his mentor into the small hours.

\* \* \*

After Mo left, Lee had a sudden fit of rage and impotence. He wasn't alone: the answer to the question who had killed the dog confronted him as a living entity, as living an entity as can only confront an artist.

He had long since made himself think of that episode as a dream. He no longer knew whether it had been a dream or reality. The only trouble with the reality of it was the death of his host's dog.

The artist and Raff had been walking that evening in the garden as usual. The quadruped guard had been somewhere nearby. Raff had been finishing yet another story that had the ring of a fairy tale:

'The dragon swallowed a terrific lot of people and washed them down with the water of the lake. He drank it all up to the last drop. It had been the biggest and finest lake in the area. Left in its place was a deep hollow enveloped in impenetrable mist. It wasn't just any mist, for it extended all the way to heaven and howled day and night like a pack of wolves. People have since been fearful of venturing there. For many years the mist huddled like an enormous impregnable tower, until finally light overwhelmed it. It howls no more, but hangs low over the hollow hiding from view its inside dwellers.'

'Who could live in the hollow, Raff?'

'People have heard sounds emanating from the erstwhile lake. They say the sounds are not unlike human voices. Whoever ventured into the mist to explore the hollow never got back.'

'Which way was the lake?' said the artist (unexpected by himself, an image of a prospective picture hovered in front of his mind's eye, only to disappear again).

'You don't propose to go there, do you?' cried Raff.

'Why, no, Raff,' said the artist, and added sadly: 'Pity, though.'

'Pity? What d'you mean, pity?'

'It came and went—that's a pity.'

'There,' said Raff waving his hand in the direction. 'The lake was over there.'

The artist turned to face the vanished lake.

'It's time I was going home; it's my bedtime.'

'Sweet dreams, Raff.'

The artist stayed in the garden. He peered into the distance rife with dreams... He was suddenly alerted by a low growl. The next moment, his host's dog silently raced by, in a fury of rage. There was a thud. The artist hastened toward the distinct sound of the sharply contained fury. The dog was lying on the trail, dead. He looked around: no one!

'Don't be afraid.'

The voice behind the artist's back made him start and look around: an intense gimlet gaze robbed him of confidence.

'Which would you rather, be savaged by the beast,' the stranger nodded toward the dog, 'or kill him?'

It was only now that the artist realized whom the stentorian, commanding voice and the gaze that had wilted his will belonged to—a humpbacked runt of a freak, elderly, too.

'What?' said the artist, instead of answering or disregarding the question.

Outraged, the humpback screwed up his face and cut the air in front of him with his stick—the artist hugged his head unable to believe the evidence of his eyes: a fissure warped the freak's face, exactly the same as had warped his own face in the mirror the other day.

'Get a grip on yourself,' said the humpback.

The artist did, and tried to ask as calmly as he could, while markedly standing his ground (if only in his own eyes):

'Who are you? And what are you doing here? Trespassing and putting down a dog? Who are you to be so presumptuous?'

The humpback laughed. The artist felt ill at ease at this air of superiority on the part of this old freak. Besides, there was nothing phoney about this superiority, for he had easily overpowered a huge dog that weighed in at least a hundred and fifty pounds and was conditioned to guard duty, and had stared down a young man who could normally stand his ground.

'Facing you is the Lord of the Hidden Side. I am here to make your acquaintance. I was called by what is in both of us. Once we have done away with the distance between us that is shrouded in the mist shielding the truth, you will realize that I am you, and you are me.'

The artist could not get to the bottom of what the humpback had said, but somehow it registered as something that had to do with Raff's fairy tale.

'Are you one of the inhabitants down there, in the hollow?'

'Had you stumbled on one of those, you'd be sorry you aren't blind. It would've been a short-lived torment, though,' said the humpback, and added: 'D'you like these parts?'

'What I've seen so far, has been an eye-opener, and in full fairness, I'd stay in this wonderful country for good and ever, if it wasn't for the circumstances of my present sojourn here.'

'I, too, am in need of these parts. We are yet to be in need of one another.'

The artist resented those words, but the next moment, he experienced a change and his soul accepted them as gospel truth.

'What'll come to pass will bond us.' The humpback hefted his stick. 'For the time being take my name...'

The artist emerged from the dream early in the morning. On finding next to him his host's dead dog, he got up to his feet and hastened inside the house, to his room. He did not know if anyone of the household had spied him.

\* \* \*

The next day, after classes, Mo raced through the familiar and unarresting pages of 'the back-home-again' chapter, plus a few flights of stairs, and rang at the door of his friend. Sal answered the door, and he could see outright that there was something wrong.

'He's out,' she said sadly in what amounted to a murmur, instead of the usual "Hi. Come on in" and added somewhat hesitantly: 'He's... he's sick.'

Mo turned to go, but Sal stopped him: 'Wait, I shan't be a moment.'

She was back a minute later and held out a bag to Mo. 'Take him something to eat. He's in the studio,' she said and stroked his head, something she had never done before.

Mo ran all the way to the studio, anxious about what had really happened, and found himself in front of the door before he knew it, the door that had to be opened to get nearer the answer. Never before had it been so hard to do it, for a



premonition restrained him. But he was too young to follow up on his premonition.

Mo entered the studio and stood stock still: Lee (it was Lee, he could see the man was Lee) was kneeling in front of the picture he had started painting. His hands were squeezing his head, as if he was trying to manage something inside, to subjugate this something. There was a brush between the right hand palm and the head. His body was shaking, and he was mumbling something Mo could not make out. Some of the words smashed to smithereens by passion broke out of his chest and grew in volume to resound in the workshop. He was aware that the words were now foreign, now those of his mother tongue.

‘. . . here... here... the words... !’

Lee got up to his full height and started pacing next to the picture. The shaking was still on him. He seemed to be looking for something in the dark that had descended on him, now afraid of its blindness, now clutching at its phantoms. He would stop all of a sudden and make brush strokes in the air, as if letting it memorize something he had captured in the dark to bring it forth to light, to put it down on canvas later on. At some point Lee turned in Mo’s direction—and Mo was paralyzed by fear. He did not know what to do for the best. He held up the bag Sal had given him to shield himself from that insane gaze. The bag served as a reminder of why he was there, and he cried out:

‘I... I... I bring you lunch. I... didn’t know...’

‘All those tears...’

‘Sal... wanted me to take this to you.’ Mo was backing toward the door.

‘. . . necessary for power?’ Lee’s voice inspired fear at those moments.

‘Lee, it’s me, Mo.’

‘The cliff will conceal...’

‘It’s me, Lee. It’s Mo. It’s me. Are you all right? Are you all right?’

‘. . . the key...’

Suddenly Mo realized that Lee could neither see nor hear him. With his back to the wall, he waited.

‘. . . to power. To ultimate power...’

Lee made for the canvas, seemingly afraid to lose whatever was to take its place on canvas. He convulsively licked the paint off the palette with his brush and daubed it on playing his hunch.

‘The power of words... and tears... The power of words and tears,’ he kept repeating in a frenzy.

Enchanted by this magic, Mo had quite forgotten his impulse to flee. He snuck to his chair, but rather than sitting in it as was his wont, he hid behind its back watching... When the work was over, Lee stood in front of it for a long time. Still and silent. The impression was he had died standing. Fear stirred in Mo again. This moribund scene did not just scare the boy per se: it had to amount to something. He waited just as the anxious pounding of his heart was reading the measure of the suspense... Suddenly Lee’s body convulsed—he had come to life. The next moment he hollered for all he was worth:

‘I don’t un-der-stand! I don’t un-der-stand! Where... where’s my brush?’

He snatched a knife off the table and stabbed the canvas over and over again.

'No, Lee! No!' Mo cried as he emerged from behind the chair and made for Lee.

Lee looked back, and dropped the knife on seeing Mo.

'Mo? You here, Mo?' he cried incredulously.

'Don't you dare ruin the picture, Lee! Better give it to me,' the boy pleaded.

'The picture? This one?'

Lee started scrutinizing the picture as if he was seeing it for the first time, as if unaware that moments before he had been bonded to it with each of his nerves.

'Who painted it?' he asked in wonderment.

'You, Lee! You painted it! Just now. I saw it with my own eyes.' The tears were coursing down Mo's cheeks.

'Don't cry, Mo. If you say I painted it, then so I did.'

'Will... you give it to me?' asked Mo, though his eyes said it wasn't so much that as the hope that Lee would be restored back to him.

'Why, sure. You'll take it.'

Mo approached the canvas and said wiping away the tears:

'Thanks, Lee. I'll take it home when it's quite dry. Just promise you won't cut it up.'

'I won't so much as touch it, Mo. Not with the knife, nor with the brush. It's all yours... We're still friends, aren't we?'

'Yes... I've brought you some food. Sal sent it. She's kind, Lee.'

'Let's go home. Sal must be waiting dinner for us.'

## **Chapter Five**

### **'There's a secret bond between you'**

Daniel had been out of sorts a whole week, ever since he had met Ashley Wood. He must have expected something more from it. On the other hand, this 'something more' was likely a figment of his imagination, and there was no secret bond between him and Thornton. But there was that frigging coin. It was what had made this genius keep a low profile, like your old conman who had hoodwinked his accomplices to emerge as a big shot... Were he alive, Daniel would have hardly cared to meet him as much as he had the week before. He even reproached himself for having been rash enough to go to the gallery on that ill-advised mission and get Christine involved, rather than lying about on the beach.

What would he do but for Christine? She had been as good as her word and given Daniel the two healing trips, and was now on a flight with him for his native place. That was what Daniel called the small town where he had spent almost all his school vacations, the town where Danby and Margaret Bushtunts, his beloved

grandpa and grandma, used to live. Now it was just his grandma. The grandpa had died eight years ago.

'Best of them all.' Daniel murmured looking out the porthole.

'What was that?' Christine leaned forward to better see what Daniel was talking about, but saw nothing save the dismal featureless space that goes by the name of sky.

'We're entering the best bit of sky ever to soar over land. We're riding, or rather flying, down the best road of them all, the one that takes me to my childhood. If you look down again after a quarter of an hour, you'll be able to see my house. A house that has no room for...' Daniel waved his hand dejectedly.

Christine laughed.

'What's so funny, Chris?'

'Ladies and gentlemen, use Nostalgie batteries. You're sure to feel real... old! Sorry, Dan, but you've been asking for it.'

'No, Chris, I don't feel old. But if they asked me how I'd have liked to live my life, what I'd have liked to be, and set other targets of the usual handful, I'd make an about-face and opt for the happiest week of my childhood (if I were to pick my memory, there'd be... well, it's immaterial how many such weeks there were, for they surely were there), I'd choose one of the happiest and expect it to be played as a loop the rest of my life. I'd sure be on the lake with Grandpa in the course of those seven days. It's got a memorable name, you know: Our Lake. We would sit on the shore and chat for a long time... No, belay that: we'd sit for a long time and chat a bit, for he wasn't much of a talker. And then—Matthew and I'd swing in the swing all day long. And for yet another thing, Grandma'd tell me something to lull me to sleep every night... I'd fall asleep at night after Grandma's story at the week's end and wake up the next morning at its beginning. As you can see, Chris, my week's down there.' Daniel poked his finger at the porthole.

'Well, I hope my week's in store for me in the future,' said Christine with sadness in her tone and her eyes directed at Daniel.

\* \* \*

Daniel swung the gate open.

'Welcome to my turf.'

'Inside view,' Christine let slip.

Christine and Daniel looked around as they made their way to the house through the front yard with a lawn. Suddenly Christine stopped and cried in wonder:

'What's that? I've never seen a swing this tall.'

'It wasn't for nothing I included it in my cherished week. Now you too will have a chance to fly in it.'

'Not on your life!'

'Don't speak disrespectfully of it—it's Grandpa's brainchild. It was manufactured and installed on his plan.'

'If my memory serves me right, you said your grandfather was a physicist.'

'He was an astrophysicist by training. But more importantly... he was essentially a great man. And a great grandfather. When sitting me in it for the first time, he said, "One can swing in a swing—or fly, in which case one can feel the breath of outer space.'"

'Were you scared?'

'You can say that again. But that other preeminent feeling was stronger than fear... But I can't put my finger on it.'

'Dan, what's this round?'

'Oh, that. It's the base of the entire structure. It turns three hundred and sixty degrees. Once you're sick and tired of facing the west, you can turn and fix the base and admire the northern views.'

'Fantastic!'

'You'll find it even more so when the safety belt has saved you from the tenacious attraction of heaven.'

'Safety belt?'

'Yes. It's somewhere in my room. Shall we go inside?'

The door to the house was ajar. Daniel paused and reached for the doorbell. A few years ago, he would have jumped at the chance. He would have squeezed through the crack, snuck on his grandma and hollered the living lights out of her—her grandchild materializing like that after a few delicious moments of his unseen presence: 'Hi Gran.' Her fright would have rendered her speechless, and then there would be ohs and ahs of delight, and kisses first on one cheek and then on the other. The room would then have been rife with sounds, words, questions and bits of chat that seemed to have been dormant for a year, only to wake up and vie for supremacy now that they were in demand.

Half a minute later the door sprang open to give room to the living figure of Cybil, the grandmother's help, that required a lot of space. Daniel knew her the moment she started talking in her boisterous fashion, helping the words on their way with her hands. Since his last visit she had grown to twice her former size, and what she had gained had robbed her of her erstwhile buxom features, with her boisterousness intact by so much as a pound, should it be measured in pounds.

'Jesus! Look who's come! Margaret, come here. Quick! Our boy's arrived. Danny's arrived! Margaret! Let me give you a hug, Danny. Never fear, I'll be careful. Where are you, Margaret? Oh Danny, you aren't alone. What's your delicious girl's name?'

The grandmother emerged from behind Cybil's broad back. Daniel stepped forth and they embraced. Cybil was at it unabated:

'Just look, Margaret, this time our Danny's arrived with a companion. What a pity Danby didn't live to see the day.'

'Cybil, just cut out your absurd innuendoes,' retorted Daniel. 'This is Christine, Christine Willis, my school- and now my university mate. I've long wished I'd show her my best loved spot on the planet Earth, but it didn't work out somehow.'

'This time I invited myself,' said Christine.

'And obliged me enormously by so doing. Meet Margaret, Chris. She's my grandma, though you must've gathered as much. And this is Cybil who's irreplaceable in the Bushtunts household, a family member, to all intents and purposes.'

'How do you do,' said Margaret gently, and sized her up in a fleeting fashion to save her the embarrassment.

In her turn, Cybil made bold to hug Christine drinking in the perfume she was wearing in her nosey manner.

'Oh, we do smell a treat.'

'Cybil, dear, get Christine's room ready upstairs, please,' Margaret hastened to cut short her help's wave of emotions, so she should not heat up the air blushing hot.

'On my way,' said the mindful Cybil.

'Come in, children.' The grandmother shepherded Christine.

Daniel stayed behind.

'Talk to Christine, Gran. I'll take in a breath of air.'

'Okay, my boy.'

Daniel approached the swing, brushed away the ravages of time from the seat, and thought back to his grandfather's 'space dust.' Danby Bushtunts had hated spring cleaning in the house: all that hustle had distracted and irritated him. He would grumble and flee outside saying: 'Silly. It's folly to try and get rid of space dust, the pastime of choice with ignoramuses and nitwits.' It was precisely for her intrinsic hate of dust that the grandfather had disliked Cybil.

Daniel settled in the swing and pushed off filling his chest with the air of his childhood.

\* \* \*

'Our little Teddy Danny has hibernated all winter and spring. The summer'll pass him by, too, unless the clock strikes ten (which it will any moment now), with him paw in mouth...'

'Until he's dead,' interrupted Grandma a piteous little voice from the lair: they had intruded on the teddy bear's sweetest dream. 'And then there'll be no one there to hibernate and wake up.'

'Little though he is, Teddy Danny ought to know that death's no joking matter.'

Danny took offence: 'I'm not little.' (It was not 'little' that he took offence at but 'death as a joking matter.') And he huddled himself up in the blanket.

He rolled over a few times, recollected that the day held a promise of fishing with his grandpa on the lake, and emerged from the lair.

'Gran, Teddy Danny's off to the rill to wash his face.'

Danny opened the cold rill, but the cold water burned his hands, so he had to open the hot rill, too... Before breakfast he went upstairs and knocked on the door of his grandfather's lab.

'Morning, Gramps. Is fishing still on?'

Bushtunts opened the door.

'Good morning, Danny. Here are the poles, take them downstairs. I'll be coming down directly.'

'Okay, Teddy, come and tuck in,' floated up his grandmother's voice.

'I shan't be a moment, Gramps.'

The grandmother shook her head.

'Teddy Danny has again left some of his strength on the plate? To be hale and strong, a bear must eat all his grandmother has cooked for him.'

'That's just grandmother talk. Gramps says that a full stomach makes one just as grumpy as an empty one does.'

'What's right for an old bear may be all wrong for a young teddy who's growing apace. Okay, off to the fishing with you!

Danby Bushtunts was not an inveterate fisherman, but he liked to sit at the lake with his grandchild when he was at a loose end, or rather, when he let it happen. The plain poles, the welcome sandwiches, the fish that had just missed being soup, and even heart-to-heart talk or heart-to-heart silence were parts of an important whole. The important whole was the lake, its drawing force. The lake lured and enchanted Danby Bushtunts; each time he approached it, the old man experienced an uncommon trepidation. It must have rubbed off on the grandchild.

On having given to its two frequenters, the grandfather and grandchild, a few moments of bliss, the lake claimed nearly three hours of their time and a teeny bit of adoration in return. Replete with Danny's company and the sandwich, Bushtunts withdrew into himself and nodded off... All around is water, as warm as milk straight from a cow. Near him is his father. He is supporting him with a hand. 'Don't curl up. Stretch along the water, it'll hold you up. Use your hands to push the water under you. There, well done. Don't drop your legs, work them. Good.' Father removes his hands. What a joy it is to swim on your own...

Danby remarked a feather floating from the crown of a tree toward the lake. He fancied it was a fledgling who had dared to fly off not far from its nest in the absence of its parents. The wings were too weak to defy the earth's gravity and the wind, so it was nearing the lake. Danby raced for the fledgling feather. He jumped up trying to catch it. He was knee-deep in water in a few moments, but his enthusiasm drowned out the rest of his feelings.

. . . What a joy it is to swim on one's own. 'Just swim on without stopping. Whatever you do, don't stop.' The water had suddenly felt different: it had lost its resilience and it was increasingly difficult to keep buoyancy. Danby looked back—no father, his father was not there. He was frightened even more. His arms and legs defied him. He was powerless to resist the blackness that was claiming him... 'Help!'

Bushtunts awoke.

'Help!' a suntanned, skinny boy was crying persistently, waist-deep in the water.

Where's Danny? was the thought that flashed through Bushtunts's head.

The boy was trying to pull someone out of the water.

'Danny!' Deathly frightened, the old man rushed to rescue Danny.



'Just support his back. I'm holding up his head. Careful!' the boy was saying.

They carried Danny ashore between them and emptied him of the water he had managed to inhale.

'Was I drowned?' said Danny coughing out the water.

'It was a near thing. You gulped in a lot of water,' said the boy, and added: 'Just mark this: when you hit a pit, breathe out and dive, and then surface calmly. The main thing is not to breathe in. Same on the river when you hit a whirlpool. Will you remember?'

'I will,' said Danny and sank his eyes, ashamed that he still was unable to swim properly, and then asked, 'Will you teach me how to swim?'

'Sure thing,' the boy agreed right away, glad of the turn of events that promised a closer acquaintance. There was something likable about the old man and the boy.

'What's your name?' asked Bushtunts, still out of breath and agitated.

'Matthew Feather.' There was confidence in the boy's voice and frank look.

'I'm Danby Bushtunts.' He extended his hand. 'And this here is my grandson...'

'Danny.' Like his grandfather, the rescued party held out his weak hand.

'What a good thing you happened to be nearby, Matthew Feather. I'd nodded off like the old man I am.'

'Not quite...'

Bushtunts gave Matthew a quizzical look. The boy continued:

'I'd been watching you. I saw you when you passed by my house and shadowed you.'

'So you did right watching us,' said Bushtunts. 'Neighbors next door, aren't we?'

'As good as: I live three doors across and down the way.'

'Classy!' cried Danny.

'Yes, we're fortunate to have a neighbor like this: he rescued both of us today.'

The boys exchanged glances.

'We'd better be on our way home. Will you come with us, Matthew Feather, and have a cup of tea?'

'Do, Matthew!' Danny eyes shone. 'Say you will.'

'Okay,' said Matthew, and thought it right to add: 'Just call me Matt.'

'Call me Dan.'

It transpired on the way that Danny and Matt had not met because Matt had moved there with his mother, Pauline Feather, a week before. His mother's older brother, Steve, who was terminally ill, had given them two rooms in his house. His wife had left him a few months before, and Matt's mother was now to take care of him. Matt's father had been a fireman and died. Not in a fire though, but in a car crash. A year ago...

As soon as they arrived at the Bushtuntses', the grandfather's idea of tea drinking had to take the back seat to his own invention—the swing. Forgetful of things earthly, Matt, magnetized by that extraordinary starship, which was to be

called by them Ghost 1 and Ghost 2, made them copilots ready to wage innumerable star wars, enchanted as Danny was with his rescuer. An hour had passed... and another... they weren't back at base yet. When the painstaking grandmother did get edgeways into the dense air traffic between the leader and the led, and the pilots finally agreed to land for refueling, they were good friends. Though no one knew about it yet, save themselves and the sky that was all theirs...

Before the Bushtunts house, with the exception of Danby's office, fell asleep, Margaret, as was her wont, stopped by Danny's room. She took a chair next to his bed.

'Gran, I went to bed later than usual tonight and thought you weren't coming. But I expected you nonetheless... and you've come... Today's been so special. I was almost drowned, but that's as nothing—the important thing is that I've met Matt.'

'That's fate, dear: like your gramps, you've been given another lease on life... and, like him, on the lake. I don't think on coincidences, I think you're the extension of your gramps... The extension of some part of him that's withheld, was withheld from him, too,' the grandmother said. She was speaking the way she had never spoken before, for the incident of the lake had given her quite a turn, and she could not contain her feelings. 'I think, Danny, you should mark this and be careful about the path you'll take when you grow up. Because that part of you will be opening up and manifesting itself... through you. Somehow I know it. Perhaps because I've lived with Danby for years and years. And because you've been staying with us every year, because my eyes've been taking note and prompting my heart. There's a secret bond between you... though you're small and Danby old.'

The grandmother's words weighed down on Danny's eyelids that were getting heavy...

Danny had never awakened that early before. He got up, put on his things and left his room. Silence pervaded the house. That meant the grandparents were still asleep. He carefully made his way, opened the front door and was enveloped in the pleasant cool of the air that had had respite at night from the importunate sun. The swing... The swing took him on high right away, so high that the house roofs and tree tops were below his feet. Danny had not had the time to fasten the safety belt. Up... and down... up...

'Danny?' The grandmother's voice suddenly flung open the window and invaded the air traversing the swing's flight trajectory.

Danny started and turned his head in the direction of the voice. The grandmother was leaning out of the window.

'I did tell you that death was no joking matter!'

She was somehow different: stern and tense. He had never seen her like that before. She was trying to trace him in the air, even though he was not hiding, he was in plain sight. Finally her gimlet eyes spotted him, she held her fist against her mouth, opened her fingers and blew at the palm protractedly—feathers, lots of feathers floated every which way. Danny could make out his among them. The swing would next go up, and he would catch his feather. The

swing went up, Danny stretched out his hand and he struck it lucky. The next moment the swing went back, and Danny, in thrall to his luck, was careless enough to let the swing slip from under him. He was in for a precipitous fall. What crossed his mind was that yesterday's feather was no feather but Matthew, Mat who had rescued him the day before and... the moment he thought about it, he felt another hand in his. It was Mat's trusty hand.

'Fly, shall we?' Mat suggested.

'Let's,' Dan agreed...

They flew like birds; it was a swift and easy flight. Down under was a lake. They saw on the far bank minute human figures. Nearer and nearer...

'They're waving to us,' said Mat.

'I can see that. I think they're hollering to us. Calling us.'

'Shall we land? Make up your mind.'

'Let's.'

Dan and Mat landed. People crowded around them.

'Look! He's come instead of his grandfather.'

'He's his extension, isn't he?'

'A chip off the old block!'

'He's got his friend with him... friend...'

'... Your friend's come, sleepyhead,' his grandmother's voice broke through the hubbub, and Danny woke up.

## Chapter Six

### The Placeless Place

Bushtunts never let on that the incident on the lake had given him heartache. He blamed no one but himself, blamed silently, never trying to give vent to superfluous words that might ease his conscience once they were out. It never occurred to him to blame Danny in any way. On the contrary, it had reawakened in him morbid pity that resulted in his locking himself up in his lab and murmuring something without being aware of it.

'He could've died today... died. He'd have lived—and then been no more. In a jiffy there'd have been nothing left between us save what had been before. Nothing left after him... In a jiffy nothing more—not Our Lake... no more words by the lake... no more feelings. There wouldn't be him calling from the swing, 'Gramps, my feet're reaching as high as the clouds.' Just a jiffy for what might've been his last. And another... and yet another... Danny, I'll do my best to give you a jiffy that would replace...'

Bushtunts did not sleep a wink that night, and the next evening emerged onto the porch and, after biding his time, called his grandson:

'Danny?'

'What is it, Gramps?'

'Come up here... Would you mind my showing you and Matthew something in the laboratory?'

Danny's eyes shone. Were he older, he would have made sure his grandfather meant it, even though he were sure he did. A visit to his grandfather's lab was not part of his wildest dreams.

'Come here, Matt. Quick! Gramps is going to show us around his lab.'

'Is it where there's a weird light at night?'

'Are you in the habit of taking night walks, Matthew Feather?' Bushtunts grinned.

'Nope. Mom mentioned it. When I told her how I made Dan's acquaintance she thought back to it. I went outdoors just to take a look. The light was weird and fascinating. What is it?'

'Okay, folks, let's go and see where this light's coming from.'

The boys had dashed upstairs and were waiting at the locked door as the grandfather negotiated the two flights of stairs.

\* \* \*

Bushtunts's laboratory was weird. Its master invariably locked it up and kept the key. No one but himself, or his wife on occasion, had ever been inside. Not even Cybil's covetous broom could sneak inside, sweeping charges on its mind, something its wielder kept complaining about to Margaret, in vain. No one had the slightest idea how the miracle materialized to give the retired physical researcher joy and turn a hefty profit.

Bushtunts's ways? He was a strange man, a recluse, 'more inside than out,' was Cybil's take on him. And the enthusiasm that he had been possessed with, body and soul, since before his retirement was just as strange—so weird, it had to be locked up. Bushtunts's life was governed by 'now' and 'now' rather than by day and night. Now he would experiment in the room that went by the name of laboratory, mindless of earthly conveniences, now he would roam the house looking for spiders, and on finding 'a specimen at work' (as referred to by Bushtunts mumbling to himself), took his time watching it, making notes and sketches. His observations resulted in Cybil's covetous glances at the forbidden corners and his hypothesis. It boiled down to this: household spiders negotiate a certain information field that surrounds people, read the data on the coming events (a person's arrival, mail, phone calls and so on) and respond accordingly, with time and place playing an important part. Bushtunts failed in his attempts to invent an instrument to identify information fields and read data. But his research amounted to an intricate doodad—a mechanical spider simulacrum. The length of its cephalothorax along with its belly was half an inch. It had four pairs of walking legs and a pair of pedipalps capable of motion (no chelicerae, though, for none was needed). It was quite a contraption, that spider. Like its biological prototype, it had a specific response to time and space.

It was thanks to the mechanical spider that the grandfather's other enthusiasm, for globes and their manufacture, proved to be something unique. Minute by minute, hour by hour, the globes claimed months, only to pay him back in gratification.

Aware of the uniqueness of his business and endowed with foresight, Bushtunts thought of passing it on to posterity, uncertain as yet who would be his

heir. The heritage of this weird inventor included: 1) a thick book with a detailed description of the technology of globe manufacture, a list of requisite materials and places where they can be obtained (with a valuable, though brief, footnote to the effect that the technology could be used to produce things other than globes, given new matrices); 2) a metal box full of matrices of different size and form to stamp globe parts (with indications as to how to introduce corrections for geographic, political and other changes that call for new maps of the world, and how to make new matrices); 3) the engineered spider called Bushtunts Jr in his honor, and a manual for handling the guy. Bushtunts Jr was kept in a small wooden box along with a telescopic pointer tipped with a hook, and an oil-can to feed the spider.

When the parts of a globe were assembled into a whole (the old man referred to it as a crude globe), the spider came into its own. Bushtunts Jr was suspended by a minute ring on its abdomen from the extended pointer's hook and lifted ceiling-high. The old man would walk it, thus elevated, about the room. The spider would suddenly start trembling and stirring its limbs. That was when you had to stop and wait. Bushtunts Jr would then descend slowly suspended from the filament cunningly hidden away in its belly. The wait could be hours-long on occasion. The spider would then stop stirring. That was where the crude globe had to be positioned over lengths of thread so it would not roll over and drop. Once the place was established, the old man would give Bushtunts Jr a light tap on the 'forehead' and it would forthwith ascend, winding in the filament, all the way to the pointer. The globe would then ripen for three weeks. It took Bushtunts seven months and a half to make the first globe. It did not just charm the old man—it had surpassed the wildest expectations of his intricate mind.

Bushtunts was incredulous and could not believe the evidence of his eyes when one night he awakened and saw his firstborn that had been completed—nay, perfected, by the habitat (the space about the point that Bushtunts Jr had spotted). The globe seemed to be soaring about the room bathed in wondrous light. The light was the weightless, impalpable extension of the globe, its aura. It lit up the globe in such a way as to make it easy to peruse it, never hindering the process. Also, it suffused the space around it. Bushtunts never had another wink that night, admiring the globe's life, its vivid reaction to daybreak and to the sun. The globe seemed to be part of nature. It manifested itself in the harmony of the two glows which seemed to whisper to each other as they met: 'It's my turn now, relax.' As the light of day invaded the house, the light of the globe petered out to repose until dusk came. Bushtunts was a bit ashamed of what crossed his mind lit up by the glow in defiance of the lyricism of the moment: 'You'll attract two kinds of connoisseur: globe collectors and lamp collectors.'

The globe was man-made: it took hands, patient and painstaking, trial and error before they learned from the error. It was a craft par excellence, fine, unusual and sublime. It called for passion in the heart and fingertips. And then again, a complete globe was a thing natural, adopted by nature as time and space and aged to maturity. For one thing, no handiwork was to be detected on a globe, any more than on an egg: it was seamless (the seams seemed to have spliced and vanished), there was no beginning, no end (as if neither had ever

existed, or was supposed to exist). Over the three weeks of life on its own, when the craftsman no longer touched it, the globe had acquired new qualities: unbelievable strength and an unordinary glow.

\* \* \*

The grandfather turned the key and opened the cherished door.

'Come on in, folks.'

Danny and Matt looked at each other and stepped inside. They immediately plunged into the gentle violet light which, lighting up and singling out the globes, had a way of drawing one to them. Supported by dedicated holders on the table were two globes. Danny and Matt caught their breath as they slowly approached them. Bushtunts came into the laboratory and stood aside. An incredulous silence reigned in this magic light. The boys were looking at the globes, which glowed and seemed to be returning look for look.

'Super!' said Danny, for some reason in a whisper.

'Super!' echoed Matt.

'Did you make them yourself, Gramps?'

'Yes and no.'

'How d'you mean?' Matt wasn't satisfied.

'How? I hardly know myself. For they're alive. What you do is use raw materials and apply your hands to engineer them...'

'It takes a head, too,' said Danny.

'A head above all, otherwise the globes would be headless.'

'There'd be no globes.' Matt grinned.

'Given time, they come to life,' went on Bushtunts. 'This is when there should be no hurry, not to hinder them.'

'Does a soul invest them, then, Gramps?'

'You bet, Danny. Each globe has a soul. Would this light be there if they hadn't?'

'I've never seen anything like that,' admitted Matt. 'Can I touch them? They're so... I wish I could.'

'So do I. They won't feel hurt, Gramps?'

'You can touch them, and twist them, too, within reason. And spot something, say Our Lake, where you met.'

'Our Lake? Is it there?' Danny was overjoyed.

Bushtunts grinned by way of reply, and then said:

'It may not be there on maps of a similar scale, but it's sure to be there on my globes, every single one of them. If you spot it and peer, you'll find something mysterious, something that isn't there on the globe. Whimsical, isn't my notion?'

The boys started looking for the lake...

'Here it is. That's the spot. Here's Our Lake! Look, Gramps,' cried Danny poking his finger at a barely visible blue speck.

'It takes quite some effort to spot it,' said Matt. 'I've only just guessed it's the lake now that Dan's pointed it out.'

'I'll provide an assistant. You shan't be able to do without one.'

Bushtunts removed a microscope from a shelf and set it on the table. He looked down the eyepiece, twisted the globe a bit and addressed with gusto the boys, agog with excitement:

'You'll now see what's behind the teeny speck.'

'You first, Matt,' said Danny, despite his impatience: Bushtunts was his grandfather, not Matt's, and he could not flaunt his privilege.

Matt sank his gaze down the instrument and gasped with wonder. He was glued to the microscope, unable to tear himself away in his avidity and tantalizing silence until Danny tugged at his guest's arm. Once unglued, Matt looked silently agape first at the grandfather, then at Danny. Danny clung to the eyepiece. A minute later, enchanted with what he'd seen, he asked:

'Gramps, is that where you were born?'

'I think so, Danny.'

'I guessed as much. I don't know how. Why does the town soar over the lake, Our Lake?'

'You will remember Granny telling you that I was found not far from that spot, yours and mine. I was unconscious, and when I came to, I could say nothing; I remembered nothing... as if the lake had robbed me of my memory along with the words, both heard and spoken, in that past. I'd probably been fighting for dear life, trying to swim, hollering 'Help!' and hoping for some intervention in those moments... Not even moments, perhaps, who knows? While the notion of that place...'

\* \* \*

Daniel nearly fell off the swing when he stumbled on what turned him back to Thornton in a series of memories, now faltering, now smooth.

'Placeless place... Placeless place... I got it! Got it at last.'

When Daniel rushed into the living room, his grandmother and Christine were sitting on the sofa chatting about something.

'Gran, sorry to be intruding, but it's urgent. I have to get into Grandpa's lab. Will you give me the key?'

'I sure will, dear. It's always on me now, so Danby might feel that the order he established is still kept, and the laboratory is still a laboratory,' said Margaret with pride.

She produced from her blouse pocket a wallet, and out of the wallet the key, and gave it to Daniel.

'Here you are—Danby'll be glad.'

'Thanks, Gran. Would you mind my taking Chris along?'

'Leaving me alone again. Be sure to show Chris your grandfather's globes.'

'Gran, dear, you're reading my mind.'

'Don't forget Cybil and me. We'll soon have dinner.'

Daniel and Christine were going up the stairs.

'What's all this hurry, Dan? You may have hurt Margaret. Attention's of the essence, if only on the first day our visit.'

'Much do you know Gran. For one thing, she's smart, and for another, she never takes offence at me, for I'm her only and beloved grandson. This way to the Bushtunts lab: you'll see for yourself what makes me so impatient.'

Daniel shepherded Christine. Suddenly she started and gripped his hand.

'It gives me the creeps, Dan. This light. It's incredible! It's a miracle.'

One of the globes was next to the microscope under a translucent dome. There were two more on the window sill.

'No electricity, no bulbs, they just glow. Frankly speaking, I'm excited too, as if I were seeing a first.'

Christine could not tear her eyes away from the globe on the table.

'It looks alive... exhaling light. That's its way of saying hi.'

'Then say hi to the other two, so they shouldn't feel left out,' said Daniel with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

'Right, I will... Hi, Messrs Globes. My name's Christine. And this is Daniel. Hope we aren't intruding?'

'That we aren't. Their job is to give joy to whoever visits them. It isn't their business to please themselves.'

'Sorry, Dan, I shouldn't have said what's the hurry.'

'Not too soon. I could've tarried awhile with what you have in front of your eyes, just not to hurt Gran.'

'No Dan, lingering in such matters is all wrong: it's a matter of feelings, not things. Feelings can't wait.'

'No, they can't,' echoed Daniel, adjusting the microscope. 'I couldn't... because of this. Take a look.'

Christine looked into the tiny eyepiece and saw what she had least expected to see.'

'I recalled it five minutes ago in the swing watching a movie about my childhood.'

'Jesus! How could you have forgotten that, Dan? It's mystifying! It's what's in Felix Thornton's picture!'

'Your favorite picture, by the way.'

Christine looked down the microscope yet again... Then she cupped her face with her hands and burst into tears. Once her tears subsided she said:

'What a pity your grandfather's not with us. I haven't seen or known him but I feel he was an extraordinary man and very kind.'

'Thank you, Chris. Gramps is sure to hear you and be happy to have given joy to yet another person. As for mysticism, I think it's just a coincidence. Gramps used to sell globes to collectors, so there: Thornton may have been one of them. Or else had seen a globe at a collector's of his acquaintance and painted his *Placeless Place* under the impression. Not too bad a conjecture, or perchance the only right answer to my shop-worn question? I'm now quite content.'

'What a damned fool I've been, Dan. Had you really seen that nice place long before you visited the exhibition? While I was...' She cried again and embraced Daniel.



## Chapter Seven

### An Exception to the Taboo

Eight years earlier.

For almost two weeks Danby and Margaret Bushtunts, their eleven-year-old grandson and Cybil had been under close scrutiny by the weird visitors to their native town. Those two had come with the express aim of casing the field to discover when the old man would be alone and visit him in private...

The blond man, about twenty-five to thirty years of age, short, stooped, with blue eyes and a grim, weary, thin and pale face approached the gate. Bushtunts was bending over the swing: he had been fitting a new safety belt to the back.

'Excuse me, old man, sir, could I have a word with you. It's a matter of a minute... a couple of minutes.' The stranger was grimacing and his voice was faltering, as if punctuating each word with a comma. 'I can see you're busy... but I need your help.'

'What can I do for you, boy?' Bushtunts drew himself up to his full height and squared his shoulders to indicate he was not that old, and came up to the stranger.

'Shall we step aside... over there. It'd afford a better sight. You'll see my point in just a minute... There. It can be seen really well. Well. Really well.'

The young man stood stock still, peering at something. He was silent for a few seconds. At last he asked, even though he knew the answer, for he had been verifying it for two weeks with great care.

'That thing,' the man faltered, as if uncertain and concealing something, as he indicated the laboratory window. 'Sorry, how should I put it? Whose is it?'

Bushtunts smiled, touched: a passerby, pretty young, had detected among the scores of windows—some nonchalant, some inviting—what he called a 'thing' and was fascinated.

'What you choose to call a thing is looking out of the window of yours truly. Nice to meet you, my name's Danby Bushtunts.'

'It's a pleasure. Archie Blake.' The stranger extended his trembling hand.

Bushtunts gripped it firmly.

'I may have dropped a brick, sorry. But it's your brainchild, isn't it?' Blake faltered.

'Brainchild is the word, for it's for sale. Just a child wouldn't be saleable. So there you are, young man,' said Bushtunts somewhat wistfully.

'Nice. Nice job! Particularly at night, with its mysterious halo, if I can call it that. I've been here before... at night. Enchanting. I wished... I wished I could meet the master... you. I know now it's you.'

There were tears in the young man's eyes. He pulled a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket.

'Are you all right? Can I help you?' said Bushtunts.

'Excuse me my weakness. It's just that... tomorrow I'm going to hospital. It'll be a long time, most probably. Now, this picture in the window is like balm. I hope I'll come back here afterwards... and see it again...'

The man's look was so rueful that he seemed to have lost all hope. Bushtunts felt sorry for him and suddenly decided to break his rule and make an exception.

'Come on into my laboratory, Archie. Why make your soul linger? Let's give it joy.'

Normally, Bushtunts would receive collectors on the ground floor. Nothing superfluous there—just a table, three easy chairs and the shelves for the globes whose fate was sealed here. His flinging the door open to this holy of holies of his being, under the circumstances made Blake's tear roll first down his cheek and then down Bushtunts's heart. It was the first and last exception to the old man's taboo.

'Sorry, I'm excited. The aura here is something... special. Everything's different here. Everything has an imprint of the maestro's soul...'

Blake was voicing the words bred by the moment in his soul. They seemed to be eating up his feelings, green as they were. They seemed to be following an unseen prompter. And the actor's play revealed his hamming up each of the words. Blake sensed it. His hands were sweaty. He fidgeted, and then dashed over to Bushtunts's workbench full of matrices and blanks for a new globe.

'Good God, and these result in this?' His eyes were those of a raptor, as his finger pecked at the air in the direction of a globe. 'Unbelievable! Incredible! Just incredible! You must be on to a secret. Are you? Are you?'

Bushtunts was silent. It was the same man and yet different, one he would never have admitted here. Blake's eyes were even shiftier than he was: they were on a mission. They shifted from object to object, from the table to the shelf, from the shelf to the closet, from the closet back to the table. They were eager to get inside the drawers, perchance even into Bushtunts's pockets (what if he carried them about next to his heart?) But there was nothing for it but for them to roam around in hunger, to chance upon a prompt... No prompt was available—Blake felt frustrated and increasingly resentful of the old man.

'Time, time, time,' he was mumbling in frenzy. 'I'm shamelessly wasting somebody else's... your time. I've told you I'm sick... and before I entrust my soul to the doctors, I'd like to... sorry... to come to terms with my soul... to make sure...'

He seemed to be feverish as he produced from his pocket a folded sheet of paper.

'Are you... all right?' Bushtunts inquired incredulously.

'No!' Blake hollered. 'I need your help. Help me. Do!'

'How can I help you, Archie? Out with it!'

Blake held out the sheet to Bushtunts.

'Take a good look. Take your time before you speak. It's a sketch and two words. We know you've got the thing. Show it to me right away. For your own... your own good.'

When he saw the sketch, Bushtunts went pale. His conscience raced back to the past, forcing his heart along. His legs were about to give...

'Make up your mind,' said Blake, and added as an afterthought: 'You'd feel better.'

Bushtunts forced himself to keep standing. He braced and summoned up the fortitude to say:

'Get out! Immediately! And not another word!'

Blake stepped back like one lost and his left hand touched the globe. He turned back and hit it with his right for all it was worth.

'What about this? A child? A brainchild? Let me have that thing immediately!'

The old man gasped for air as he managed the words:

'You... All you're ca-pable of is—'

Blake did not hear the rest of the phrase. Perhaps, the old man never finished it. But Blake had always known it, and it rang in his ears of its own accord, followed by the children's contemptuous laughter. Having lost for a moment his sense of time and place, and his ability to make out faces, he picked up the globe and rushed Bushtunts; Blake would have hit the old man, but the latter had dropped down before he could. Blake cast the globe aside and took a few minutes to get a grip on himself.

The young man, a globe in one hand and an exercise book inscribed 'Diary' in the other, exited through the gate and hurried off as if he had suddenly realized he was late for an appointment. He was oblivious to his surroundings, and mumbled something biting at the air. He utterly disregarded the impression he produced on the passersby. Frenzied by what had happened, he hardly noticed he had come abreast of the car. The door opened and he found himself inside.

'I've done it... I've done it all...'

'Calm down, sonny. It's all over; I'm by your side. Relax... Have you got the thing?'

'I have... Here you are.'

'I see. It's a globe, and it's much larger than the thing we need, isn't it? What's this... ? The way I see it, it's all about a teen's personal grievances. Retain it as a keepsake. Now be so kind as to concentrate. The question again: Is the thing I asked you to get from Bushtunts with you?'

The young man violently shook his head, burst into tears and admitted:

'Well, no... no... It wasn't there—I rummaged all over the place.'

The man seated next to him drew him to his bosom and stroked his head.

'Don't cry. You did all you could. It was a good job. Don't cry.'

'Bush... Bush... The... the old man's dead... It wasn't my doing. But he didn't say... He recognized the thing in the sketch. What do we do? He's dead. What do we do?'

'Forget it. Just forget it. The old man took his vanity with him. The chosen one had no need of a stand-in. You did right. I see now that you did right. Let's go home.'

## Chapter Eight

### Bushtunts's Chair

'Tssst,' hissed Daniel holding his index finger to his lips and listening hard. 'Looks like I have to leave you.'

He arose from the table. Christian, Margaret and Cybil exchanged uncomprehending glances.

'Gran, Cybil, thanks a lot, it was yummy.'

Daniel opened the door.

'Matt, is that you?'

Matthew sprang off the swing like a kid and came up to Daniel.

'Hi, scholar, I've seen you today, but I couldn't come up: I had an urgent order.'

'Are you still in your workshop all day long? Aren't you going to college?'

'My college is our workshop, mine and Roy's, with Roy being prof.'

(Matthew's step-father, Roy Shelton, who had the reputation of a first-rate mechanic, owned a small garage. He always treated his stepson as an equal and had thus earned his respect.)

'What about a life? What about the future?' asked Daniel for no good reason.

'What are you talking about, Dan? This *is* my life, I don't want another. I'm all against complicating issues and philosophizing. Some people may like it, don't you think?' Matthew smirked.

'I don't know what I like or want. Just a year ago I thought I did. Not any longer. Something's been happening lately. I feel there'll be a change in my life whether I want it or not. Or rather, it'll be a sea change. And all my plans, university and all, don't seem to make much sense any longer.'

'I can see things're harder for you, Dan. I can see you've changed. Speak on: I'd rather listen. The way it was when we were kids? You kept thinking things up and laying them on over and over again. And we lived those stories. I liked it that way... Will you be staying with your granny?'

'At least a week, you bet. You said: speak on. I do have lots of things to tell you. I've come to realize that life lays it on when you least expect it. You won't laugh if I tell you that I'm the odd man out in this life, will you?'

'It's long since we met last, and we must've become a bit different, but your wondering if we'd laugh at one another is out of place.'

'It was a matter of chance, you see. At one point... No, that'll wait...'

'Come on, come on, Dan, just speak your mind. Without reservation, without 'that'll wait.' I don't remember your being like that before.'

'I seem to have sorted things out, and they've fallen into place. I think on occasion that I've come to terms with it all and left it behind. But I find myself thinking over and over again it's all pretence, living a lie. It has a way of turning up again like a bad penny. The very events suggest that I keep sidestepping something important, perhaps the most important thing of all that I'm not aware

of for the time being. It's just around the corner. It wouldn't let me go for some reason or other. It... is to do with my grandfather. Remember the globes?'

'How can't I?'

'Remember the picture we saw down the microscope?'

'Sure.'

'I'm embarrassed to admit it but until today there'd been nothing but confusion in my head in place of that picture. I don't quite know how it can have happened... Just imagine: the other day I saw the same picture in a gallery. That was how it all started. I also saw other pictures by the same artist (his name's Felix Thornton, he took his own life a year ago). The point is, all those works have an inner force in common, all their own. Nothing strange about that. But they've captivated me. Not just in the sense of striking me as *recherché*—they've robbed me of this life. I sit, I hear, I'm here and now, but you see, Matt, they sort of... In actual fact I'm not here. Not bodily elsewhere. I mean, my soul is elsewhere... I don't know where I am. I can't explain a thing. Either to myself or to you. Sometimes (I'm ashamed to say that) I feel like crying. And also like shutting my eyes tight for a moment, seeing and hearing nothing... flaking out and coming to... either here or... I don't know where. D'you think I'm mad?'

'Frankly speaking, I didn't quite understand it all, Dan. But I don't care whether you're mad or not. I know one thing for sure: I'm with you... Not just me.' Matthew grinned and nodded toward the girl in the doorway. Daniel had his back to the house and could not see her.

Daniel span.

'Come here, Chris. Meet my best friend. Matt, this is Christine Willis, my—'

'... private secretary,' Christine hastened to fill the pause.

'Or more properly, an agent for extricating Dans out of sticky situations. We go way back, school in fact,' Daniel interferred.

'Why Dans? Oh, I know why: you're always different. Introduce your best friend to me, will you.'

'Professor Matthew Feather, PhD, MD: cars, bikes, you name it.'

'How d'you do, Professor.' Christine proffered her hand. 'May I call you that in future?'

'As you like, provided there's future,' said Matthew and made Christine flush (without meaning to).

Daniel came to her rescue trying to gloss the unfortunate faux pas over with chatter.

'When just eleven, he pulled apart a moribund Buick...'

'Dan, don't,' interrupted Matthew. 'I'm no film star, just a prof.'

'I merely meant the best beloved Buick jogged along to our delight, with an artificial valve, for years to come...'

'What about a spell at the Left Right tonight?' suggested Matthew. 'I haven't been anyplace for ages.'

'What's this Left Right?' Christine was puzzled, and looked at Daniel.

'You can reserve a table and dance there. Live music, and the players aren't bad,' said Matthew, aware that he was the one to answer. 'Why Left Right? No one will tell you because no one knows.'

'I'll enjoy the company of a professor and a psycho.'

'Dan?' said Matthew.

'Truth to tell, I've been meaning to spend the night in Gramps's lab. What about you two enjoying it between you two?'

Matthew and Christine exchanged glances and laughed. Then both said as if on cue,

'The diagnosis has been confirmed.'

'The diagnosis is just right.'

'You got me there,' Daniel conceded, and paid back in kind: 'You're quite a twosome, guys.'

Christine was embarrassed again.

'Would you mind my fetching you?' said Matthew, and looked at her in a way that had nothing tongue-in-cheek about it.

She suddenly felt that the voice and the look were different, were the genuine Matthew, and realized that she was in for quite a few blushes that day.

'It's a deal. That'd be time off from that nuisance of that boss of mine,' she said.

\* \* \*

Daniel was sitting in Bushtunts's huge easy chair in his laboratory. His grandmother had said on one occasion that the grandfather would take it after hours of painstaking work and doze off. And now Daniel was experiencing its unearthly gravity, nay attraction, that made both the flesh and the soul of the intruder flaccid, and rendered him reluctant to change. There were four of Bushtunts's notepads Daniel had found in the drawers, resting next to the microscope that was peering into globe. He had looked through the pads and discovered what he was looking for—a list of individuals his grandfather had sold or gifted his globes to. No Felix Thornton among them. Daniel then spent about half an hour glued to the eyepiece, scrutinizing his grandfather's placeless place. And now that he was sitting in the chair of the man who was no more in complete silence and the weird light left behind by him, a premonition materialized from somewhere (perchance, from that place, perchance from the light) that he willingly let creep into his heart... This is to be his last time in his birthplace. His last time in this laboratory, both earthly and other-worldly. Never again is he to be welcomed by granny. Never again is he to see his parents... Everything departing... or is it him departing... ?

'What's all this nonsense?' Daniel was startled but kept on sitting. 'I shouldn't have stayed here all alone. I'm being drawn in by those figments yet again. I wish I'd gone with Matt and Chris to the Left Right and dispelled these tenacious tricks of the imagination: it's been called Left Right for a purpose. Whereas here... What's this? What's all this?'

Daniel was scared. Scared to the point of the hairs on his arms and hands standing on end. He was scared by a weird touch. He realized all of a sudden that the place was drawing him, calling him. He had felt its unmistakable breath in actual fact, here, in this room. He was scared because it was alive. Because it was breathing at him, it was touching his skin. He could have touched this air if

he had not been afraid... The next moment he started... Someone was knocking on the door, and he found himself... in his grandfather's chair.

'Good night, Dan,' Christine's low voice entered through the door which had opened a crack, only to shut on those words.

Daniel had not had the time to reply, or to arrive at a conclusion as to what was what. When he came to, he thought he would join her and ask her about all that in another minute... but Bushtunts's chair, greedy for human warmth, for familiar warmth, would not let him go. And he awoke the next morning.

'Morning, Gran. Somehow, there's no sign of Chris. Cybil's fussing in her bedroom. Where's she? D'you know?'

'Your Christine's gone. She called a taxi early in the morning and—'

'What's happened? Did she say anything?'

'Just fancy you asking *me*. Bringing a girl to stay with us and losing her in your home!'

'In *your* home, Gran. It's your responsibility, and it calls for an answer.'

'I've told you all I know. She called a taxi. Would have no breakfast—just a cup of coffee. Gave no reply to my question why she was leaving so early. Oh, she did say she'd had a good time, I am a dear, and kissed me on the cheek. Is that good enough for an answer? So there.'

'I'll have my meal later on, Gran,' said Daniel and hastened to the door.

Cybil was coming down the stairs. She called to him when she saw he was leaving:

'Tarry awhile, Danny, boy! Cybil has things to say to you. Cybil's heart can feel it all.'

'What's all this, Cybil? Oh... you know why Chris left.'

'I sure do. I ran into her near the house in the morning.' Her tone, like her countenance, was conspiratorial. 'I came out just as the girl was waiting for her taxi.'

'Well?' Daniel was both impatient and suspicious.

'I'm trying to tell you, and you aren't attending. We passed the time of day. I looked at her. She looked at me. Looked, and cast her eyes down. Get it?'

'Cybil, what else is he supposed to get?' Margaret interfered, unable to restrain herself any longer.

'I say she looked, and cast down her eyes. It's as clear as day: his girl's in love,' said Cybil to her mistress, and turned to Daniel to repeat: 'Your girl's in love.'

Both Daniel and his grandmother were silent, puzzled by the absurd communication.

'Cybil, dear, lots of times have I told you not to pass conjecture for fact. Christine may have got some urgent business at home. She may have recalled something.' Though addressed to Cybil, Margaret's words were meant for her grandson, but he was no longer listening.

'Your girl... your girl...' Daniel was mumbling as he made his way to Roy Shelton's studio.

Roy's handshake was firm and protracted as he was saying that Daniel was quite grown up and the spitting image of his grandfather, with whom he had once

had the good fortune to sit at the lake and indulge in small talk... Daniel was down on his luck: Matthew was away ferrying a repaired car for a visiting customer...

Christine called the next evening.

'Hi Dan. I never thought I'd have to bother you so soon, before you've quite enjoyed your birthplace.'

'It's a joy to hear from you again, Chris. Cybil gave me quite a turn yesterday. Let's have your version of the events now.'

Christine was silent for a few seconds: she had not expected to hear from Daniel an innuendo about her posthaste departure and was not prepared to explain it away. So she chose to disregard the innuendo.

'Dan, we were very nearly missing an important news item. There was an attempt on Timothy Bail's life the day before yesterday. My heart missed a beat when I heard about it: he's as good as family now, along with Thornton. We're so much involved, we can't rest quiet. I hope I'm not out of turn when I say "we," or am I, Dan?'

'You can say it again.'

'Just what I expected you to say. The reason is: Bail's head injury has proved to be not exactly grave, and he's back home today. Naturally enough, he's interrupted his "Thornton" tour, his enthusiasm delegated to a trustee who has no time for passion. Are you still there?'

'I happen to be looking in the mirror to discover I'm all swollen ears.'

'Pooh, how ugly! Okay, listen. Fortunately, I can't see you. I've just called his wife.'

'Whose wife?'

'Timothy Bail's, Swollen Ears! She's a dear, to my mind. Any other wife would've told me to bugger off—she heard me out.'

'So what?'

'I told her that a cove associated with Felix Thornton wanted to meet Bail. Sorry, I meant you, without your consent.'

'You're pardoned because of the occasion.'

'The important thing's coming next. She asked me to call her back five minutes later. Five minutes later, she said Timothy (she just said that: Timothy) would be expecting you at eleven am the day after tomorrow. One last thing: I'm behind the wheel of my Honda, accompanied by you. Is that a deal?'

'Done. Matt and you're my best friends. A deal?'

'A kiss... on the cheek.'

## **Chapter Nine**

### **A Paper Wad**

Mrs Bail showed Daniel and Christine to her husband's office on the upper floor. Everywhere, on the walls, in the hallway and along the flights of stairs were Thornton's pictures. The gaps between them looked absurd and upset the



harmony. They obviously belonged to the pictures removed for the itinerant exhibition.

'This way, please. Timothy's expecting you.'

The man, with a dressed head, skinny, with a nervous white face to match the dressing and a hesitant look, quite in contrast to the stately mansion, stepped back on seeing Daniel and sank into his swivel chair.

'Not a word! Pray, not a word! I know you. I don't know this girl, but I'm sure I know to a certainty who you are. Sorry. Sit down. Make yourselves at home. I... I'm glad of the occasion. For eight years I've had that weight on my chest. And all this time I've been praying that God should pardon me. Now I can... I want to repent with you around.'

Daniel and Christine were shocked by this unexpected beginning, but both, on cue, thought it best to just listen.

'You're Danby Bushtunts's grandson. I can't be mistaken, for your features are a giveaway. I've never seen such eyes in anyone else. I keep dreaming of them. Yes, I do... I'm to blame. I tell you: I am to blame for his death.'

The admission was like an electric current that coursed through Daniel's body and went to his head. He was ready to rush Bail, but something stopped him—perhaps, his look from under the dressing.

'It was reported to be heart attack,' Bail went on. 'But no one, except me and one other man, knows what had caused that attack...'

'Except you and Felix Thornton?' said Christine.

'Yes,' he said in such a way as if it was not so much a word as another weight on his bosom that he had dropped.

It took Bail some time to overstep this 'yes' and proceed.

'One day Thornton came to see me in a state I had never seen him in before. I... had seen him in all sorts of states. I thought I knew him very well. He had always been kind to me. That day his look spelled hatred. No, not for me. His eyes emanated infinite hatred. Infinite! He had just visited a collector and seen there a placeless place. That said, this is what a picture painted by him long before that was called. But it wasn't his picture, not its copy or reproduction. It was an image on a globe, or rather above the globe, to be exact. It was the village that Thornton had painted. Nothing much about it, on the face of it. But that had turned him into... into... into what I had seen that fateful day. I'm ashamed to admit I was twenty-six, a grown-up man, when all's been said and done. But I turned... I don't know if you'll understand me right—I turned all atremble. I'd lost power over myself. I'd been captivated by that look, which was draining me of life. Not just me—anyone on its way.'

Christine and Daniel could not help seeing that Bail's hands and knees were shaking.

'I was captivated by those sounds which shattered space. Those were his, Felix Thornton's, words, but rather more potent than mere words. I was captivated by the potency of the... warp... in him. I could see it with my own eyes. I could not help it. He was speaking of his predestination, his being the chosen one. Of universal potency... It was there... in him... I could not help it... Sorry, Daniel, I fight shy of saying it to you, but I have to... He called Bushtunts,

your grandfather, the ultimate truth's error. He wasn't himself. He... told me to rub the truth's error off with an eraser. Sorry. He said Bushtunts had no right to this thing, he had come by it by chance. He said there couldn't be two chosen ones. Far was it from him to eliminate this man, your grandfather, bodily. Sorry, sorry yet again! He told me to remove one thing out of your grandfather's possession. I'd never seen it, though I'd heard a lot about it from Thornton. You know what is strange is that he had no word for it—just "that" or "thing"... He made a sketch of it and showed it to me (to repeat: I'd never seen it, just its likeness); he then inscribed the sketch, folded the sheet and told me to hand the sketch to Bushtunts and demand that he hand it over. Your grandfather was open-hearted in entertaining me and took me to his lab. But the thing, the sketch ruined it all. I couldn't disobey Thornton and... overreached myself. Frankly speaking, at some point I lost control of myself. I... couldn't disobey. Just couldn't... Your grandfather... sorry... died of shock.'

Bail slid off the chair, knelt and, looking Daniel straight in the eye, said in a tremulous, gasping whisper:

'Pardon me for the pain I caused in your home...'

'Pray, arise. I for one pardon you,' Daniel said, not just to put an end to this embarrassing situation; he meant it, for he had seen the anguish in Bail's eyes.

'Daniel, may I ask Mr Bail a question?'

'Why, sure, Chris. Mr Bail, are you in a position to proceed?'

'It's my duty. I believe that God Himself has sent you to me. I need it more than you do. Yes, please, Christine.'

'D'you think the attempt on you has anything to do with Thornton or, rather, his pictures, their provocative energy?'

'The Lord has sent you to me, and I can't tell lies. But I'd much rather that what I say should be between you and me, with no police or reporter involvement... I was unconscious. People helped me. Someone had chanced on my being pushed out of a car. I'd not have reported it for love or money... So there... I nearly lost my mind when four days ago I heard Thornton's voice. He called me in my hotel room.'

'Thornton? Impossible! He couldn't have! He'd committed suicide!' Christine cried, unable to believe the evidence of her ears.

'Wait a mo, Chris. Let's hear it out. There must be a rub somewhere. Proceed, Mr Bail.

'Just put yourselves in my shoes—I arranged his funeral, and there was his voice speaking...'

'Who had the good fortune to see the guillotine blade from the inside if not Thornton?' Daniel couldn't help contradicting his former remark to Christine.

'I can quite see the irony of the situation and your sentiments in that regard. And, naturally enough, I'm not going to hold back on that. Thornton had a dead ringer. He had spent years looking for a man who looked like him. The artist, the man that he was, who could see with his eyes rather more than a mere mortal, like yours truly, he was certainly picky. He said he'd found on a dump a worthless character who wasn't good enough to be his shadow, let alone cast a shadow on his good name by his mere presence in time-space. The proviso once

again: such cynicism full of contempt is gall to me, and I couldn't so much as guess it. But you will agree that genius often oversteps the mark... So I was in shock when I heard his voice. He didn't identify himself, he just asked me to come down and accompany him. I complied: reason took the back seat to the canine reflex in me. Thornton was driving. For some time he didn't say a word, letting me relax. While I—funnily enough—kept sizing him up: was it him? He stopped the car outside of the city. We got out, and he said, "Well, how are you doing, Mo?" Doubles are common enough. But after he'd called me Mo, all my doubts had been dispelled. Mo, Lee were his coinages. I liked them a lot. I was feeling a new man. He'd been kind to me, ever... That was when he told me about the double. He then suggested—a promise of long before—that we depart for a country where childhood traitors were frowned on. I'd never quite understood it. I only dreamt the way kids do, when they tell them fairy tales... I let my dream down. I declined, pleading family, wife, daughter. He was implacable. He called me a childhood traitor... And right he was: I'd betrayed my own childhood, the childhood he'd given me. Whenever I think about it I find just one excuse: had I left with him, I'd have betrayed my own daughter, whom I love best of all in the whole world. But there was something else besides at the time: it'd occurred to me that he was mad. Further proof of what he'd once said: "The strange thing is: kids grow up and let down their childhood. Let themselves down." I... I let down my childhood...'

Timothy Bail burst out crying. A minute later, he went on with this story.

'Lee... sorry, Thornton hugged me and asked me to reconsider... hugged and told to reconsider... I'd thought a moment before that he was mad. I told him again about my daughter. Then he said he'd take me to the hotel. On the way, he had a fit of hysterics. He burst into tears first. Then he laughed fit to split his sides. He went on to hit me over the head with some object. I came to by the roadside. People helped me... I know it was nothing personal on Thornton's part. He loved me... like a son...'

There was a long silence.

'Sorry,' Bail said addressing Christine, 'I see you keep looking at the picture.'

'Yes. I must admit there's something spooky about it. You don't agree, do you?'

(Faces. Distorted faces. Distorted to the extent of being inhuman. Rather like weird molten masks. The eyes, barely recognizable as human, are full of anguish, loathing and despair. People controlled by a force that is annihilating them over these moments. Scores, hundreds of people. And not a sign of salvation. And this annihilation against the background of beautiful mountains, a bizarrely tinted sky. But eternity is not for these doomed people. And hovering over it all is a feather, a drop of fresh paint still lingering at its tip. The other end of the feather abuts a mountain peak. Right overhead is a dense, dark thundercloud. Higher up, over the cloud, is a mirror reflection of the mountain.)

Bail smirked. A living sparkle twinkled in his eyes.

'This picture is something special. I may be said to have salvaged it. Thornton painted it like one frenzied. But he'd transcended the boundary. I'm at a

loss for words. He seems to leave for some place only to come back and paint in a hurry. In a hurry to put on canvas what he'd seen the moment before.'

'Why a feather rather than a painter's brush?' asked Daniel, puzzled. 'It calls for Thornton's brush.'

'Bravo, sir!' Bail squealed overjoyed. 'Bull's eye!'

Bail rose.

'I'll next answer your question. When finally Thornton emerged from his trance and studied his work, as it were, from the outside... what do you think he cried in amazement? He cried, "Where's my brush?" snatched a knife and started destroying the picture. I don't know if you'll be satisfied with Thornton's reply. Alas, I haven't got another... I dashed over and pleaded with him not to ruin the picture. He gave it to me.'

Bail resumed his chair.

'*The Power of Words and Tears,*' Christine read aloud the caption under the canvas.

Thornton never revisited the picture. I supplied the caption. But it isn't mine. When painting it, he kept crying out actually without hearing himself. The words "power of words and tears" rang even more piercing than the others. They amounted to a verdict... Sorry, I seem to have been carried away. What about a drink?'

'No, thank you. We must be going,' said Daniel.

'Another minute if you will. You won't be sorry,' said Bail and rose to his feet.

He came up to the wall with the picture and lightly pressed his palm against the wallpaper pattern—a door opened to reveal a secret niche. He removed from a shelf two things: a globe (Daniel saw right away it was Bushtunts's brainchild) and a copybook.

'These belong to you,' said Bail restoring the things to Daniel. 'I'll keep the past shame and the gratitude for meeting you. And remember: Timothy Bail's always yours to command.'

Daniel was clearly agitated. Accepting his grandfather's things, he suddenly felt he must offer that man his hand.

'Thank you,' murmured Bail shaking Daniel's hand with both of his.

\* \* \*

When the Honda was in its stride, with the emotions silent and in check, Daniel said:

'You know, Chris, I thought back to that day in every detail... the day of Gramps's death. When Bail gave me the book, my hands somehow remembered accepting Gramps's wad of paper. How could I have forgotten... ? It was just the thing (I don't know, I don't know yet what it is), just the thing that Thornton was dying to get.'

'So you did hold it in your hands?'

'I held the paper wad—the thing was inside.'

'And you have no idea what it was?'

'I said, no.'

'I was very nearly asking Bail about that thing, about what was sketched on that sheet...'

'And a good thing you didn't, too, Chris: it's one thing establishing the circumstances of Bushtunts's death, and mere curiosity is quite another.'

'Right you are,' conceded Christine.

'Now could I be so forgetful, Chris?' Daniel had suddenly remembered something.

'What was that, Dan? What crossed your mind?'

'My plain version's been exploded...'

'What version?'

'That Thornton had spied his *Place* through the microscope eyepiece. Which he had, but many years after he'd painted it. What was the place *en plein air* that he painted? It's somewhere around my grandfather's birthplace.'

\* \* \*

Eight years earlier.

Danny parked his bike at the gate. He'd cycled around to collect his swimming fins and go back to the lake where Matthew was waiting for him. He entered the house. Going up the stairs he heard his grandfather's choking murmur.

'Dan-ny, Dan-ny, Dan-ny...'

Bushtunts kept saying his grandson's name until his eyes alighted on Danny. Danny had entered the laboratory's open door, and was taken aback: his grandfather was lying on the floor in the middle of the room, his face immobile and white, his hair in disarray and his arms wide apart. All around was littered helter-skelter with what was his world: his globes, matrices, drawers that had been pulled out and emptied of folders, a repository of Bushtunts's ideas and feelings. The old man's countenance was like that of an orchestra director frenzied to rein in the chaos and order it into harmony, but toppled by a whirlwind that knew no mercy. He seemed to be frozen in that desperate impulse.

Danny was at a loss. He did not know what to do for the best.

'Gramps!' he cried.

Bushtunts marshalled what little strength he had left.

'Danny, come closer.'

Danny leaned over him.

'Take this,' said Bushtunts in a barely audible whisper and indicated with his eyes his right hand: there was a wad of paper on its palm. 'Don't unravel it... and don't look... don't. Don't show it to anyone... Don't tell anyone about it.'

Bushtunts fell silent. Danny was frightened even more: he thought his grandfather was dead. He called:

'Gramps! Gramps! You alive?'

His grandfather's mouth stirred, but the old man did not have the strength to turn thoughts into words.

'Gramps!' called Danny again.

Bushtunts murmured:

'Take it to the forest... and bury it. Promise... Danny... do it... right now. And forget all about it... Forget for good and ever... Get it?'

'Yes, Gramps. I'll do as you say. I'll cycle it to the forest in a jiffy and bury it. I'll take a spade.'

'Go now.'

'What about you, Gramps? I'll call...'

'No. Just go.'

'What about you?'

'I'm with you,' Bushtunts breathed the words out; he smiled faintly with his eyes and closed them.

Danny did his grandfather's bidding. Driven by the will of the dying man and the dread of reliving the day, he forgot all about that wad. For eight years. Now it had come back to him. Now he knew all about his grandfather's death... No, not all of it. The old man had taken with him the part of the truth that hid a secret.

\* \* \*

When Timothy Bail, despairing of getting what Thornton had told him to find, left the Bushtunts house, the old man summoned the strength to get up with one thing on his mind. He did not pick up the pieces or his best beloved globes: he had neither the strength nor the time for the work of a lifetime. He got up to do one thing only: he came up to the grandfather clock, reached his hand between it and the wall and removed the thing he used to hang from a Christmas tree branch as a kid, the thing that had long become accustomed to being the involuntary time keeper, mindful each of the seconds it counted of what its master had forgotten but what it was ready to remind him of any moment. Bushtunts reached the window and began scrutinizing it in an effort to understand what was there in it to have attracted that day's visitor. The thing did respond—he shuddered and was as good as blinded for a moment. Plunged into darkness, he had a total recall of what had happened before the incident of the lake, of the meaning of the two words of the caption on his treacherous visitor's sheet. And then his heart told him he was dying. His legs gave and he fell down. His hand was going cold as he reached for the recalcitrant sheet of paper and put it on his chest. His other hand carefully dropped the particle of his life that had been revealed to him irreparably late, wrapped it in the paper shroud and started to fight back death until Danny arrival...

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Scribbles in the Diary**

Daniel leafed through Danby Bushtunts's journal dwelling on assorted lines he chanced to detect. He delighted in this presence of a man he held dear and he would have liked to have more communion with, or so he thought. He was

mumbling something, nodding and smirking... Christine did not interfere with this intimate process.

Daniel stumbled on an unusual entry. He thought nothing of it at first. However, his interest was fueled by repetition, it occurred seven more times. And each time it had a page all to itself, with no other text to crowd it, unlike the rest of the pages. The entry struck Daniel as weird. At first glance, just two lines comprising a sentence. But it was unreadable: each of the eight words (which looked like words) was represented by scribbles casually strung together. It was altogether a rambling, faltering entry, blind and somewhat irritating, repellent too. With something like a caption or signature similarly scribbled below.

'Chris, look at this entry in the young Bushtunts's diary.' Daniel pointed out the page holding the journal in his hand.

Christine looked at it out of a corner of her eye and pulled over on to the shoulder braking hard.

'What's the matter? Did I distract you?'

Christine was pale and obviously frightened.

'Don't be silent, Chris. What's the matter?'

'Sorry, Dan,' said Christine in a low voice looking away from him.

'What is it? Do speak up!'

'Well, this is your grandfather's journal and I'm afraid to hurt you,' Christine began reluctantly in a roundabout way, aware that she would have to explain her reaction.

'Why? Why hurt? I can't understand it. In any case, don't hold out on me, please,' Daniel exploded in puzzlement.

'Okay, Dan I'll tell you, I will.' Christine words were just as tense as herself. 'It's an abyss. Contained in these words is an abyss. I'm no longer myself. I feel spooky.'

'Did you make out the text? What's the language for goodness sake? What're you on to, Chris?'

'There, you sound hurt. There's metal in your voice.'

'No, I am not. I wish you could see your face.'

'You don't have to look.' With these words Christine looked away and fell silent.

Daniel regained composure and said:

'All right, Chris, don't be silent. I blew up because I couldn't understand.'

'Neither can I. It's just that I got spooky. I can't begin to explain. There was nothing I could make out. I'm clueless and I don't know what language it's in. It's just that I sensed something. Something to do with the entry. It sort of breathed something.'

'Breathed what?'

'Dunno. This Thornton must've driven us all crazy. Let's not talk about it any more.'

'Chris, what's Thornton got to do with it if the diary is my grandfather's?'

'It's like getting lost—that's what it breathed. An inside view, that's what it breathed. Dan, get behind the steering wheel, I'm in no position to drive.'

\* \* \*

It was that year of all, and none other, the year Danby was fourteen, that he made that weird entry in his diary eight times. Each of those eight nights he had been dislodged from sleep by a whisper that alienated his soul. It would intrude his world of dreams shattering it and scaring Danby. The boy was afraid to face the whisper, because he thought he knew it would be a spooky vision. He awakened fleeing the whisper and the vision that lay in wait for him. But it was not a complete awakening. Obedient to the will behind the whisper, Danby would get up, come up to the table and put down what he had heard in his dream. That finished the anguish, the boy would lie down and fall asleep. The next morning the boy would open his diary, for he was anxious to know whether it had been just a dream with no entry in the diary or he had indeed gotten up in the dead of night to record something of great importance. Sunlight did nothing to dispel the importance of what he had heard. Danby would open the diary to find on a new page two incomprehensible lines. That meant he had not written it down in a dream. That meant he had not written it down when he was quite awake. What a pity he could make neither head nor tail of it.

\* \* \*

Daniel and Christine were driving in silence. Christine chastised herself for allowing her intuition to hit back at the scribbles, those mute bogeys, and for having unwittingly cast aspersion on Dan's grandfather. While chastising, she was also confirming her guess that looking him in the face were hellbent horror signs scratched by a naïve childish hand. Her attempt at reasoning herself into the belief that her immediate reaction to the diary entry had been brought on by the hours of driving, dizziness and hunger was taking in her mind the shape of an importunate ink blot, which could not by definition be side by side with those two lines. Christine wished she could have it out with Daniel, say something encouraging to him about his grandfather to the effect that... But she discarded all she thought of to the whining noise of the engine, so she never said a word.

Daniel clutched hard at the steering wheel thus mentally assuring himself of the oath of allegiance to his grandfather and his own self. He vowed that Danby Bushtunts's journal would from then on be always on him, rather than in anyone's secret drawer, that he would get to the bottom of the mystery behind—he was sure of that—that weird record, whatever the cost. Daniel now knew what he had to do in the very near future. He wished he could say as much to Christine who was helping him along to the detriment of her own business. But somehow he did not share his plans and ideas.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **'I've got to go'**

'Hi Matt. I was afraid I wouldn't find you in. I took a Sunday flight for that reason.'



'Hi Dan. You should've called. I'd have met you at the airport.'

'I was afraid,' grinned Daniel. 'I was afraid you'd have more wheels to ferry.'

'Come in.'

'Not just yet. I want to get you... to take a walk. Truth to tell, I haven't even stopped by Gran. I headed from the airport to your place.'

'Why didn't you? What's all the hurry? I can hardly believe Daniel Bertridge didn't see his grandmother first thing.'

'All in good time. There's urgent business I must attend to,' said Daniel gravely. 'It's to do with my grandfather. All this hurry is the urge in me, because of this business. I'll tell you more on the way. Just take a spade and we'll go.'

'Treasure hunt, isn't it?'

'So it is.'

Matthew fetched a spade, and the friends went down the familiar lake road, much like they had done as kids.

'Two days ago I talked to a man (his name's Timothy Bail), who was involved in Gramps's death.'

'Did you, now? What a pity I wasn't with you.'

'Wait a bit. It isn't as straightforward as that. He repented, and I forgave him. Eight years ago he had called by Bushtunts and demanded a thing. The artist I told you about when last we met knew about the thing. He wanted to get it and sent Bail along. Bail overdid it and leaned on the old man almost to breaking point. But he didn't surrender the thing—he should've known Bushtunts. Before he died, Gramps gave me the thing. And that's what we have to find. I buried it then, eight years ago.'

'The thing's called "thing," Dan?'

'The point is that I don't know what I was burying. Grandfather... had scared the living lights out of me. He was dying when he told me to bury it. That alone gave me a shock. Just imagine that: my grandfather lying prone on the floor in his lab, white, still, with just his eyes alive. Looking at me and squeezing out the words rather than, mark this, asking for help or passing a message on to Grandmother or telling me to call the ambulance—no, he was just telling me not to look at the thing, show it to no one and never speak of it. Asking me to forget it. Bury and forget. I never said anything at the time, even to you. I'd never thought back to it since. And then it called to me... after all those years. There must be something behind it.'

'What about the grandfather's bidding? Before he died... ?'

'I know. But I was just eleven, probably not mature enough to understand something, and Grandfather had considered all that and, therefore, sounded so categorical... Saying which, I'm aware I look for loopholes trying to outwit Grandfather and overreach myself.'

'Dan, d'you want to know what I think?'

'I'd appreciate it a lot. But whatever you say, I'll do what I think fit. Nothing personal.'

'Personal indeed! I'll speak my mind... Should you turn back, you'd let down your grandfather.'

That gave Daniel pause. Matthew was waiting. Daniel looked at his friend... And they marched on. Matthew continued:

'Your grandfather said that because he didn't know what to do for the best. I think he'd either invented something or was proxy to some secret. And could no longer safeguard that secret because he was dying. Nor could he have safeguarded you if he'd confided in you. You couldn't have safeguarded yourself at the time. You can, now. We can.'

'We'll get to the bottom of it, Matt, we're sure to. D'you remember my saying to you that the artist, Thornton, had taken his own life? Well, he hadn't. It was a put-up act: he'd guillotined a tramp, his double. Bail told me and Christine about that.'

Daniel noted that Matthew's countenance fell at the mention of Christine.

'Mind you, Matt, Chris has always been my chum. My sister, if you would, a sister of mercy. Joking. Or not.'

'Well, I can barely follow you: Thornton first, Chris next,' said Matthew.

'It wasn't me.' Daniel gave him a wink.

'But seriously, it's a good thing you were the one to say that. I'd hate to be in your way if that wasn't the case... if Chris wasn't just a sister of mercy for you. I've been thinking and...'

Well, don't.'

Daniel had thought of something and stopped. He produced from his jeans an exercise book folded on itself. Leafed through it.

'Look. Our hands'll be soiled when we start digging. It's Danby Bushtunts's journal. Timothy Bail surrendered it two days ago. This entry scared the daylights out of Chris. She said she'd whiffed an abyss. We had a bit of a tiff in consequence.'

Matthew perused what Daniel had called an entry and shrugged.

'Sorry, Dan, I can't make head or tail of it. Can you?'

'I hope I'll crack it given time.'

'What I know is that we have to unearth it now.'

Just short of the lake, Daniel and Matthew took a trail toward the forest.

'There's the birch,' cried Daniel. 'I think it's the one. I remember racing past it. There must be another one some three hundred yards from it.'

'I can see it. Is that where you buried it?'

'I parked my bike next to it. I did the digging across the way, nearer the forest. I didn't venture into the forest: Grandfather'd scared me shitless. There was a fallen tree there. I buried it next to it. One thing I remember is that ants were running all over it, they gave me a turn.'

The friends found the fallen tree right away, or rather what little was left of it.

'The undergrowth is so dense I hardly know where to begin. I wish my old folks were here to dig it up and unearth those secrets for me.' Daniel closed his eyes trying to think back to eight years before. 'No, I'm at a loss, Matt. I hardly know the place.'

'Well, you've spotted the birch. And this tree. We should dig around it, it isn't a terrific lot. Just how deep did you bury it?'

'Some ten inches. Or less. I was in a hell of a hurry.'

Matthew started digging. Daniel was back at the birch where he had parked his bicycle on that fateful day. He was eager to get hold of the events of eight years' past, if only echoes of them. He walked toward the forest again. Unavailing. He repeated his tracks over again.

'You're digging up the wrong place. I've recalled something.'

'Out with it before you forget, you bungler, you!'

'When I parked the bike at the birch I made for the forest right away. I'd meant to bury it in the forest. But there was that tree. I hopped it and fell down. But when I raised my head and saw the forest I was scared. Afraid to venture in, if you know what I mean. We should dig near the tree, but on the side of it facing the forest. Let me have that spade, I feel inspired... What a good thing I had the forethought of wrapping it up in some candy foil—the paper wad didn't look secure enough and might unravel unless I fixed it.'

Daniel and Matthew took turns digging. Both were silent, their nerves intent on the yet unseen but anticipated silvery flickers that would call their attention the moment they were out of the sepulchral dark. The virgin turf resisted their efforts. The dug up area of three yards along the tree side by one yard forestward had nothing to show for it but utter disregard of geometry for emotions.

Daniel stuck the spade in the ground instead of passing it on to Matthew.

'Isn't it too early to call it a day, Dan?' Matthew said calmly, sensitive to his chum's impulsive intent.

'You have a better idea?' Daniel chose to match a question to a question.

Matthew was clueless.

'No offence meant, Matt.'

'None taken: I have no ideas.'

Matthew kicked a clod and jumped following its path.

'This is where we dig. This is my idea, and this is where your grandfather's thing is.'

'I haven't a clue, but I'm ready to dig,' said Daniel: some of his friend's emotion had rubbed off on him.

'The clue is plain: eight years ago your fallen tree was a tree rather than the skeleton it is now. I think you dug under it, not beside it. Because you were hiding the thing. Put that in your pipe and smoke it while I'm busy with the spade.'

Matthew upturned a sod, and the two friends froze in wonderment. Matthew had picked up and was brushing the wad they were after. It winked in the sun as he handed it to Daniel.

'Here's what's yours by right.'

'Stand by my side as I unwrap it, Matt. My heart's throbbing in my head. What can it be?'

'Your grandfather's secret. It's yours to find out now, or else put it off until another time.'

'There's something to this pause between anticipation and discovery. I've known it since childhood and Christmas presents. Something inimitably pleasant.'

A tear coursed down Daniel's cheek: he had remembered his grandfather's last look. And his last words: 'I'm with you.'

'Shall we?' said Daniel.

'Let's,' said Matthew.

Daniel carefully removed the fragments of foil along with what had once been paper. Resting on his palm was the 'thing'—a spherule just over an inch across. (A student of mineralogy would say at a glance that it was shaped from amazonite: it had a wavy turquoise-green sheen.)

'Great! It must've been engineered by your grandfather.'

Daniel said nothing: his feelings were still on the strange find... His eyes and hands were touching it to get in return what they had never experienced before and what Daniel could not put his finger on. He stood like that for a minute or two sensing and not comprehending. Then he held out the spherule to Matthew.

'Take it, Matt... What do you feel?'

'It's as if someone was blowing on my hand. Or as if your hand were against a crack experiencing a draught.'

'Yes, Matt. I'd have said someone was pouring air onto my hand. No material weight at all.'

'And another thing: it's my impression that it's about to spread over my palm like a drop of water.'

'Yes, Matt. I could feel as much. Incredible! Can this bead have been created by my grandfather? But why did he never mention or show it to anyone? His globes were no secret.'

'Too dear, perhaps? I mean valuable. Considering its uncommon properties,' ventured Matthew in an attempt to explain Bushtunts's silence. 'We have the evidence on our hands as to its uncommonness.'

'How could Thornton learn about it? Just how? It's the case of *Place* all over again, and the picture on the globe.'

'What's your drift, Dan? You lost me.'

'I've told you: Gramps's globe and Thornton's picture present the same place. Thornton also knew all about the bead and wanted to get it, courtesy of Timothy Bail.'

'What did Bail say?'

'He knows nothing about the bead. He'd never seen it, just a sketch of it. He passed the sheet with a sketch of it on it to Grandfather, and we now know what the thing is. But you're right, Matt: this thing's valuable not as an object of art, far would it have been from my grandfather. Besides, Gran would have been aware of that enthusiasm of his. Others, too, for what's there to hide? And there's no way of hiding it.'

'What do we do with it, Dan? Here I am holding it without comprehending a thing.'

Suddenly Daniel burst out laughing.

'What's so funny, Dan?'

'You're handling it as if it were a fledgling.'

'So I am. I'm afraid of dropping it in case it's alive.'

'See if it is.'

'How?'

'Press it with your finger.'

'This is no bun, and I'm no child,' said Matthew and gently pressed the bead with his index finger.

Both Matthew and Daniel cried out each other's name as if on cue. Matthew held back his finger the same moment.

'Did you see, Dan? Did you?'

'I did. What did you see? Out with it!'

'When I pressed it... No, I didn't have to press, it just yielded. Or rather, it did... with its flux. And once I was past that flux, the part of the finger that was in... sort of vanished. But I'm sure of one thing: my finger went in the length of the bead's diameter. Did you see as much?'

'Yes, yes, I did! But I didn't see it poking out of the other side. It didn't, did it?'

'That's it. It didn't. You see, Dan, it didn't, it was somewhere inside. And there, inside, I could feel a draught or a flux. Just have a go.'

Daniel accepted the bead.

'I'm afraid,' he smirked. 'Matt, I'm scared, much as I was of a jab as a kid. Okay, not another word. Just a moment...'

Daniel tried to pierce the bead with his finger.

'No go, Matt,' he said incredulously.

'Push harder, don't be afraid.'

'It's no go. The finger slips aside, the flux's pushing it out.'

'Let me... No go... Some force, isn't it!'

'Force? I wonder what's inside the bead, what is that force. What was the secret that Grandfather withheld? What about Thornton? Wait a mo. There was something Bail said... What was it? What was it... ? Oh, I have it, Matt: the chosen one. He said: the chosen one. Once Thornton saw at a collector's the likeness of that place on the globe, he flew into a rage. He told Bail there couldn't be two chosen ones. You see? He meant himself and my grandfather. And then he told Bail to get it, that bead, for him. What's the mystery lurking inside this tiny thing?'

'What do we do? What must we do to understand something? We've got to understand, Dan! Here it is, in my hand. I wish we could pull it apart like an old Buick and look inside.'

Daniel's eyes shone.

'Well, do!' he cried. 'Not as a car mechanic, but as one consumed by curiosity.'

'Where's the keyhole?' Matthew rolled the bead on his palm.

'I mean it, Matt. I've some sort of foretaste. Just look inside the way you looked into a kaleidoscope as a kid. Just imagine it's the eyepiece of a kaleidoscope.'

Matthew took the bead to his eye.

'I can't see through it. I feel like a clown.'

'Nothing inside?'

Daniel would not budge, even though he was aware of the absurdity of it. He persisted because something was pushing him on, calling on him. It was beyond his comprehension, and beat comprehension.

Matthew made another attempt just to humor his friend: looking at its impenetrable body, he started shifting it to obtain a change, however insignificant. Suddenly, Matthew froze. Daniel was wise to it the same second because he had been watching him, expecting a miracle.

'What is it?' Daniel cried.

Matthew gave no answer as if he did not hear him. He stood like that some more time, as if a certain part of space had paused along with him, as if he belonged and explicitly conformed to its laws. Then everything came to life. Matthew shuddered, recoiled, let the bead go and fell down. Daniel ran up and crouched down beside him.

'What happened, Matt?'

Matthew got up warily looking around.

'Where's the bead, Dan?'

'Here it is.' Daniel picked it up. 'Are you all right?'

'I think so. It gave me quite a turn. I'll tell you in just a moment.'

'Was it something you saw?' Daniel was impatient. 'Was it?'

'I did see something, Dan. Your premonition was just right. I saw it as clearly as you see me. I saw nothing at first. Then there were those waves (it's all about waves), they stirred. Then there was a scratch... no, a warp rather, black and vertical. Then it grew. It... Dan, it was incredible: it went beyond the bead, and right in front of me in the air there was a crevice, as if space had split apart. I was scared shitless, Dan!'

'I was by your side, Matt, watching, but I saw no crevice. Could it be a bizarre optical delusion or an interplay of mirrors and glass, the way it is in a kaleidoscope?'

'I don't think so.'

'I hope so.'

Daniel picked up the bead and slowly took it to his eye.

'Nothing... nothing... Matt, it won't show me its horrors!' he said in exasperation and even frustration, addressing the bead rather than Matthew.

'Don't stand still. Just turn from side to side. No, wait! I was here when I saw it. Proceed from the same place.'

'Okay, Matt. Watch me.'

'I'm with you, Dan.'

Daniel took the bead to his eye again.

'There it is. I can see some movement. The warp's there! It's growing, Matt! Growing! It's... transcended the bead! Can you see it?'

'Nope.'

Daniel progressed slowly.

'Have you lost it, Dan?'

'It's a huge crevice. It's leaving me. I've got to go, Matt. If you will go with me, give me your hand: back of it is blackness.'

## Part Two

### The Keepers

#### Chapter One

##### Shwarrawsh Is Coming

It came on suddenly, the way it had hundreds and thousands of years before. There could not have been any foreknowledge. It had given no sign of its immediate advent. Nature, though sensitive, continued untroubled, intent on her usual games that the inhabitants of Dorlief and other villages had got accustomed to and took in their stride. Night alone on occasion bred dreams redolent of trouble. And those dreams hovered over habitations and would invade their worlds of dreams leaving them shaken and anxious to hide away in vain, flee, holler voicelessly and wake up in tears, cold sweat and the horror which unaccountably followed them from the World of Dreams into the Waking World. Prophetic dreams were the talk of the neighborhood which gurgled their way into the inhabitants, each of them, inspiring anxiety and fear that fed on their memories and extracted as if out of oblivion, one word that drowned out all other words and sounds: 'Shwarrawsh... Shwarrawsh...' And people could no longer live the lives they were used to before they were besieged by dream and rumor, but rather different lives encumbered by the invisible and yet encroaching shadow of Shwarrawsh. They started checking the security of their cellars and the stocks in them. They would remind their kids now and again not to wander off too far from home. They would now look the way of the Frigging Forest, now toward the Tanuth Ridge, now toward Lake Lefend, now skyward, into the alien middle distance, with eyes that were purblind...

\* \* \*

'Norrone! What roused thee at this unearthly drowsy hour? Perchance an alien sound harped on thy wary ear? Or an obscure call jarred on thy anxious soul? Or else a crooked face out of the World of Dreams set thee all atremble?'

'I thought I could hear a knock,' said Norron in response to the unseen voice. 'I'll go have a look.'

'Stay. Render thy ear: the children's chambers are all peace. Look at Marramy: not an eyelid has stirred. It is merely thy fancy. Night has a way of insinuating what is not.'

'There's that knock again. I can hear a knock on the door.'

'Stay, Norron! Stay! Dorlief is all dreams, all quiet. It is just thy heart. It is thudding louder and faster than usual. It is echoing the steps of dicing doom. What doom has in store for thee is best confronted face to face but once. Stay! Do not anticipate the moments lest thou mayst be sorry.'

Norrone, taking no heed of the unearthly voice, left the room and made for the hallway. The words of caution caught him up again. This time they were even

more anxious and insistent, as though whoever it was wanted to spare him some sinister and irreparable encounter.

'Norrone, beware! Come back! Lie down and embrace peace. If you, the Keeper, approach the door and comply with the illusion, it will be too late. There will be no way back.'

'Why did you say Keeper? What has my onus to do with it all? Why Keeper?' cried Norron.

The door shook clanging the bolt as the thuds grew impatient. Norron took a step forward.

'Thou standest to lose thy kid son,' declared the unseen voice. 'Thou wilt lose Natan. Stay!'

'I can't... I can't lose Natan... I can't lose Natan.' Norron's soul was aflutter. He was anxious to take his son in his arms and cling to him lest he should lose him. 'I can't lose Natan.'

But it was too late. The door was flung violently open—Norron was paralyzed with horror: confronting him was the one rumor had secretly been afloat about, the one the human soul abhorred. Horror dissolved Norron the man outright, Norron the man ready to stand his ground, Norron the father ready to stand up for his son. Standing in the doorway and shaking with fear was the boy named Norron, his hand clasping the hand of another boy, Natan. No way would his hand release that hand! No way! His hand... A moment later, an irresistible force made Norron... unclasp his hand and Natan step over the threshold. And the Natan that had been before he took that step vanished in the thin air.

Norrone emerged from the nightmare mouthing something unable to find his voice and let loose the lump of sounds that formed a name dear to him—Natan.

'It was just a dream... a mere dream. It hasn't happened. It couldn't have... Dream,' he softly stirred the air, not to wake up Marramy, to see if it would respond in the unbidden voice.

The air mutely swallowed the words... so mutely Norron thought he could not hear them either. Just like dense air, he thought starting and getting up to check on Natan immediately. He made past the older boys' rooms for Natan's. His heart was throbbing again. It took him a few moments to bring himself to open the door a crack and peep inside, the way he would in the night when one of the kids was sick. Finally he opened the door all the way—and recoiled with his hands over his head. Struggling his way through confusion and the dense air that made him clumsy, he made for where he had just been rendered unable in his dream to save his son.

Natan was standing in the doorway, his back to him. Norron had the scare of a lifetime—there, a couple of paces from where the baby Natan was standing, was the edge between his home and an abyss. Natan was immobile facing the abyss, as if awaiting the verdict. There was nothing he could do.

Crossing his mind were fragmentary thoughts which could neither explain things nor suggest the solution: What had brought him to that boundary... ? He's little, too little to... What force was driving him on... ? Grip him? No, I can't. I'd tried my best in my dream, only to enrage him enough to split us apart... What's wrong? What is it that I fail to understand... ? Where's Marramy? Will she be able



to talk him out of it... ? Why can't I see the back of his head? Why did the abyss draw his gaze... ? Am I as impotent as that? What, what must I do... ? The dream... What else was there in it... ? Why Keeper?

Suddenly Natan turned his head and looked at his father in such a way as to make him drop to his knees in desperate impotence. The next moment Norron hunched the tentativeness of things around him. Nor was he wrong: everything stirred, went to pieces and started dropping, as if the abyss were devouring the very ground that had been holding things together. As he dropped into blackness, Norron had his eyes on Natan who stood framed by the doorway that was still there, no longer the entryway into their home...

\* \* \*

Norron spent the morning in brown study. He was trying to understand what the World of Dreams Lord had told him, what he had warned him against by lifting the veil over things to come, which way in the Waking World had been marked by Him with His secret sign.

The call horn had summoned the Dorlief inhabitants to the downtown square. Each house had delegated a representative; some families had arrived in their entirety. It was anticipation that had brought them there, the anticipation that had pervaded the air of Dorlief, the anticipation that everyone breathed, big and small, the anticipation that seemed unending. Anticipation made people look for a mainstay in communion.

Flamalf, secretary to the Governing Council, had this to say:

'Dorliefans, you are here today at the bidding of Keeper Norron, member of the Governing Council and as bidden by your goodwill. Keeper Norron will address you.'

Norron got unto the dais. Dorlief held its breath as it directed hundreds of eyes at him. Norron took his time imbibing them all.

'Friends,' he began softly. It was not an address, not yet. He addressed that word to himself: it meant for him what he had seen in Dorlief's eyes.

'Friends,' Norron addressed them, 'I had to see you today. I had to talk to you today.'

There were cries in the crowd: 'Stick to the point, Norron we are listening.'

'I have to tell you that from now on, my thoughts and acts hinge on the World of Dreams Lord, for I believe that what He has revealed to me will pass on from His World into my World, Waking World. Friends, I had a dream last night which I deem prophetic. I did not understand all that was presented to me, for dreams are mysterious and tentative. But I understood the main thing.'

'What's in store for us, Norron? Tell us.'

'Darkness... to which even our nights are as nothing...' Norron paused: it was hard for him to impart what he could barely admit the inevitability of to himself. 'Darkness which will consume life...'

'Did you see it?'

'The World of Dreams Lord showed it to me.'

'Shhh...' It was as if the wind had caught Norron's drift, was the first to guess who Dorlief was asking about, dropped a hint and abated in fright. But it was too late, for the hint had dropped on people's lips.

'Shwarrawsh? Was it Shwarrawsh? Speak up, Norron!'

'Never fear, Norron, speak up! Out with it. Did you dream of Shwarrawsh's advent?'

'I said to myself this morning...'

Dorlief seemed petrified for a moment.

'I said to myself: Shwarrawsh is coming. Now I say to you: Shwarrawsh is coming.'

Norron caught confusion in Dorlief's eyes. It was running like an unseen wave from person to person and extinguished all specks of life that had enlivened them moments before.

'My friends, we have no time for despondency. That is not what I have summoned you here for. Darkness would not be what it is, we would not make it out, unless there ever was light in its way. No, we do not know as yet how to confront Shwarrawsh; we can only, like so many wild animals, go to earth. Each of us is within his rights either to run to earth each on his own or as a Dorlief community. But before we do, we have to put in some communal work. We have to get brushwood ready for fires about Dorlief. Remember: fires are the beginning of a new life, fires are Dorlief, its soul, a living memory of light. That is what our forefathers believed who had the ill fortune to witness Shwarrawsh's advent... If your food stock is short, go to the warehouses. The Governing Council will have issued the requisite order. I would like to ask ferling fanciers to send the birds with messages of the imminent trouble to neighboring villages. Do that before you get down to work.'

The crowd was inspired.

'We'll do everything, Norron. Never you fret.'

'Lutul the Beanstalk has a dozen ferlings or so. He has a family of ferlings, on top of himself.'

'Look, Lutul's got his kid ferling along. He's teaching him how to fly. Lutul, show us how you do it.'

The square livened up. Lutul the Beanstalk, whose beady eyes and hooked nose put one in mind of a ferling, was embarrassed, unlike his white fledgling flecked with silver and perched on his shoulder, who knew his worth. (Dorliefans kept ferlings of every color; Lutul would have none but silvery ones).

'Old Rupt, I mean Rupt, that old man—blast his twisted name!—spends all his days sending ferlings to his daughters with wishes of all the best on the occasion of yet another newborn. He has married his daughters off to every neighboring village. Lost count, haven't you, old man?'

'He's as good as new. His wife, Dorrody, is going to give him yet another daughter one of these days.'

Norron had raised his hand waiting for attention:

'Thank you, friends. Something has just crossed my mind. I've remembered making our first roof of measureless between us. Old Ruptatpur—even though his

name defies some of us—was the first to open his heart to the new business, and his home, to living light.'

Old Ruptatpur was inwardly fighting back his detractors as evidenced to the bystanders by the violence of his stirring mustache; however, on hearing praise, he became all smiles and sank into reverie.

Norron went on:

'Many of us were opposed to the novelty, at first calling it just as useless as the plant itself, not good enough as feed or herbal medicine, or anything else for that matter. But the moment they stepped over Ruptatpur's threshold, their eyes brightened, they flocked to his workshop to order new roofing, and helped all they could. You are now used to living in your light-filled houses; it is a habit we now have in common, it is what has made our hearts open to one another... Where was I... ? And then... You know what... there had to be a then...'

Norron was agitated. The lump in his throat would not let him finish. But the Dorliefans unwittingly attended nonetheless.

'Pray do not let darkness fill your souls, each of you, and doom you to aloneness, do not let darkness scale your eyes and rid you of the gift of seeing one another. Then... emerge from your shelters (your hearts will tell you when), make your way to the appointed places and light fires. The fires will attract others. Talk to one another. Recollect. Dream your dreams. And sort Dorlief's life, our life, out in the firelight. And you will see in New Light Day. You are sure to see in New Light Day.'

'We'll see it in with you, Keeper!' The emotional cry echoed all around the square was expressive of Dorlief's overall mood.

'We'll do as you bid, Keeper.'

'Thank you, Keeper. Keeper... Keeper... Keeper...'

Norron's countenance had suddenly undergone a change, as if he had been left alone with himself. He had just had notion of yet another sign apportioned in the nightmare by the World of Dreams Lord; he had cracked the riddle he had spent the morning solving... Norron's thoughts and feelings turned back to the people. He raised his hand again and the square fell silent.

'Thank you, friends. Thank you for your trust,' said Norron.

A short but meaningful pause later, he spoke the words whose genuine meaning was known to him alone (this is where a period—full stop—belongs: the rest is superfluous), the future alone could reveal it to the rest, not all of them but such as are most perspicacious. At the moment, however, those words were taken to mean the Keeper was sorry he could do for them no more:

'Dorliefans, pardon Keeper Norron's weakness.'

The Governing Council was not long in session. The four Keepers and members of the Council, unburdened by the honorable and valued onus, knew Norron too well to question his moves. Each took leave of each and left the Council in the knowledge of what he was to do as trouble loomed nigh.

## Chapter Two

### Keeper's Abdication

When Norron came back home his wife, daughter and kid son were waiting in the living room.

'How was it, Norron?' asked Marramy.

'The Council carried my motions, and work will begin today. Bring my travel bag, I'm leaving.'

'Everything's ready.' Marramy indicated the chair with the bag, cape, girdle, dagger and hatchet. 'I never thought it'd be this soon but got them ready just in case. I guessed right.'

'Where are Novon and Ratitar?'

'Away at the shelter helping people to settle.'

Norron shook his head:

'Another guess?'

'They were at the general assembly. Then came back home for a moment to take something to eat with them. And chattered fit to kill. They had Gelleg and another guy along, a forestman, I keep forgetting his name.'

'Paltrian, Mom,' said Falafy.

'Falafy was very nearly going with them, I had a hard time telling her to stay.'

'I want to, too—Mom won't let me.' Natan *would* have his injured feelings on his sleeve.

'Natan, you're coming with me. Right now. Get ready.'

Marramy and Falafy looked at Norron, puzzled: he looked firm.

'Are we going to ride Porrop?' Natan's eyes shone.

'Yes sonny.'

'Mom, help me pack my travel bag.'

Marramy glanced at Norron again—there was nothing for it but to get her son ready for the road.

'Falafy, honey,' said Norron to his daughter. 'Pray, stay at home today, stay put, by your mother's side, always by your mother's side. And help her all you can.'

He stroked her head.

'And now get Porrop out, it's time to leave.'

'Never fear, Pop: Mom and I'll be all right, we're staying behind in a sturdy house. Besides, Ratitar and Novon said they'd be back as soon as they can. Do come back soon, Natan and you,' Falafy's look was full of sadness: unlike her words, her look could not play along with her wishes, for it was to do with a hunch. 'Will you, Pop?'

Norron smiled at his daughter. She was off to get the horse out.

When the father, mother and kid brother emerged in the yard, Falafy had already bridled Porrop and was busy whispering in his ear and patting its withers. On seeing her parents' faces in this dear piece of her birthplace space, in this gentle air aloft between earth and sky, she suddenly went pale with fright: it

seemed to her for as moment, perchance her hunch had reached something hidden from eyes to reveal its veiled face and make her soul writhe—she had the impression that all this would be gone as soon as her father left. She went limp, dropped to her knees, cupped her face with her hands and burst into tears. Everybody rushed to her side. Norron lifted and hugged her. Natan held her hand murmuring endearments:

‘Don’t cry, Fal. Pop and I aren’t leaving for good. We want to help people. We’ll help them and come back.’ He looked at his father. ‘And I’ll tell you and Ratitar and Novon all about it. Next time Pop and I’ll take you along. Of course, we won’t manage, all of us, on Porrop—you’ll be riding Soros, will you?’

Falafy’s whimpering hooked a giggle, and another, and another to be finally replaced by them. Marramy put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder—Falafy took the hint.

‘I know, Mom. Let Pop and Nat go. I’m all right. Go, Pop. I’ll be waiting, Nat.’ She stroked her brother’s hair.

Norron embraced his wife and said softly to her:

‘Marramy...’

‘I love you,’ Marramy whispered in reply.

Norron held Natan up, sat him on the horse and hopped on, too. They started out. Norron was not urging Porrop on. Marramy and himself looked at each other long in parting, until they could no longer make out the dear features, much like two leaves on a branch fearful of a coming storm.

‘Hold tight now,’ Norron warned his son letting the horse gallop...

He galloped away from Dorlief’s eyes. He would have galloped like that for all eternity just not to have to do what was in store for him. Porrop’s hooves pushed against the ground, and the Dorlief soil seemed to be responding to that gallop with just one word which throbbed in Norron’s temples: Kee-per, Kee-per... The wind resisted that gallop: it burned Norron’s chest, resting on which was what made him Keeper, it seemed to be reminding him of it. But, contrary to the voice of the Dorlief soil and the will of the wind, Norron had to tear away from his chest what it was his lot to safeguard as a holy of holies, for the World of Dreams Lord had offered two outcomes only—he had chosen the forbidden one, the one that would burden him with the onus of self-abnegation.

Oblivious to everything, Natan was reveling in that fleeting flight. He had never traveled that fast, not even with his father. But at some point he was alerted by protracted silence, so long as if there were no one back of them. On such trips (far it was from him that they were traveling on business) his father used to be different: companionable and facile. The silence had suggested to Natan a hunch: something was wrong. He fidgeted, turning back and looking at his father. And Norron realized he would no longer cope both with himself and his son in another moment. He reined in Porrop making him stop. Porrop bucked snorting, hoofing the ground, and thus releasing the energy of its fiery muscles.

Norron jumped off the mount and helped Natan get off.

‘Hold Porrop, Nat. When I call out, come up to me immediately leaving Porrop here.

‘Where are you going, Pop?’ cried Natan.

Norron was a few steps away, but Natan's anxiety made him come back. He put his hand on his son's shoulder and said calmly:

'Fear nothing, Natan, and try to do as I say. It's very important. I've got to find something. I'll call you as soon as I do. I'll be within your sight: it isn't far off.'

'What are you going to look for?'

'You'll see when I find it. Just wait.'

Natan watched him, all eyes. Norron took some forty paces, paused, and walked on. He was now stepping slowly, warily, changing tack. He seemed to be stalking someone, afraid of spooking the prey. (Is Father trying to catch a butterfly for Fal, as a bribe for being left behind?) He kept his right hand extended. (He'll next be snatching it.)

'Nat!' Natan started at the call. 'Come here, Nat.'

He hurried to his father. What he saw surprised him: his father froze standing, his hand extended in front of him but there seemed to be no butterfly in it...

'Pop, is this... ?'

'You know what it is,' said Norron calmly, though firmly (he seemed to be in a hurry). 'Come closer. Look. Look here. Do you see?'

'I'm scared, Pop.'

'Did you see?'

'Yes.'

'I'll pass it on to you. Don't be afraid. Take it. Extend your hand. Right... Do you see?'

'No.'

'Try shifting it right. Take your time.'

'I can see it, Pop. I'm scared.'

'Listen, Nat. we don't have much time. I can see you're frightened. But you must do it. For your sake. For mine. For all of us. Look that way again. D'you see?'

'Yes,' whispered Natan.

Norron sized his son up. He had his bag strapped across his back.

'Come here, sonny,' he commanded.

Natan looked at his father, and suddenly saw in his eyes what told him to comply... He stepped forward and again heard voice behind his back:

'Keep walking there, inside. Don't stop. Whatever you do, don't stop.'

## **Chapter Three**

### **Faddaf**

Norron was riding to his people. He would work with the Dorliefans. He would work with the Dorliefans toward meeting Shwarrawsh. They would call him Norron the Keeper. They would heed his word. No, he would not disclose his secret to them. He would not tell them he had breached the Dorlief law, that he

was no longer Keeper, no longer Norron, because he no longer thought he was. He would say nothing to them, lest they lose faith in him, and in their potential. He would work and wait.

Norron was riding to his people. But his soul, which had betrayed the Waking World, was unclaimed by the Spirit World back where he had taken leave of his son. Looking for solace, it ran into the name of Faddaf. Faddaf... How could they forget... ? How could he have forgotten? In his prophesy he had warned us about the advent of Shwarrawsh. Content with a life of peace, we had lost our connection with the past. I should have remembered and told the Dorliefans of his prophesy. Faddaf's words, once confirmed by my dream, would have left no doubt even in those of them who would stick to them and abstain from action to their detriment. Faddaf's words are clear and potent... But Faddaf had not only warned of Shwarrawsh's advent. He had mentioned another trouble... and the Word, the secret Word whose Path is long and hard... As often as not, we act blindly and in desperation not just because we can't see, but because we are not aware of what we see. I wish... Norron's soul was illumined by a ray of hope.

No one had seen Faddaf for nine hundred years. Many believed the myth that he had left for the Wild Woods and sunk in the Dark Waters. Some believed that he had shifted his shape and turned into a bear forever doomed to hunt down Dorlief's ill-wishers. And just a few of the forestmen, who had a reputation for being the best guides and pathfinders had had a trail revealed to them which they associated with the old hermit.

Some called Faddaf a prophet. Others, a wizard. The only tongue known to him was that of the Waking World. But he did understand the tongue and secrets of the World of Dreams, and invariably spied the right direction in the intricate dream mazes. Each Dorliefan had known as a kid that the souls of the fallen and the slain go to the Spirit World. But Faddaf alone had in his lifetime experienced a whiff of that World and fought back its call and clutch when exploring the Path at the request of the Dorliefans.

\* \* \*

When Faddaf was seventeen, he approached the Governing Council and asked to have his say.

'I'm too young to disturb Dorliefan life with my word. But the vision I've had is too clear-cut to withhold the inherent thoughts and words. Do I speak, or do you wait for further signs?'

'Can you put the sum total of your vision in a nutshell?' said Maruram.

'Three words will be plenty, by your leave.'

'Speak up.'

'Death or war.'

'But Dorliefans haven't fought from time immemorial, for there's no one to fight. All our neighbors are as gentle and peace-loving as ourselves. All of them are our friends,' Gordrog, the oldest Council member, said. He merely meant to steer the youngster to a weighted statement, rather than humble him with mistrust.

'I've seen: many of them will be among the fallen on the invasion day,' said Faddaf, his face a picture of confidence and anxiety, with not a trace of doubt.

Gordrog nodded, gratified: the youngster's argument seemed cogent to him.

'Who are the ones that will impose war on us? Whence will they come? Drop from heaven, will they?' smirked Tragart. 'Answer, if your vision is as clear-cut as all that.'

'I saw stones. Living stones. Hosts of them. I saw their eyes. They had an inside look, as it were. There was intelligence and malice in them.'

'Has anyone of you, esteemed Council members, seen such stones, if only once in a lifetime?' asked Tragart and looked around the assembly.

The Council members exchanged glances and shrugged, perplexed.

'The same question to you, my young friend.'

'The World of Dreams Lord didn't reveal the stones' vital essence but let me in on the essence of their doing. I saw dismembered people. There was a rider in my vision. He said he was the only one to stay whole... I've no knowledge whence the stones have come, or what village the rider's from. I couldn't place him.'

'What do you think of your vision, Faddaf? What else do you have to say to the Council?' said Tlanalt.

'I'm sure it'll come to pass. I'm afraid the Dorliefans haven't much time.'

'Can you say how much?'

'On rousing, I asked myself how much and started counting. I arrived at one hundred and seven when I saw the war-mongers again. I feel an uncommon anxiety in my gut. Dorliefans have to arm themselves. We have to ask forestmen for assistance. And pass the communication on to the neighboring villages.'

'Very well, Faddaf. You may go. The Council will let you know its decision,' concluded Gordrog.

'We thank you, Faddaf. You did right taking your anxiety to the Governing Council,' Tlanalt thought it best to add to Gordrog's words.

The next day the Governing Council called the people to a general assembly. Faddaf took the floor. On hearing him out, the Dorliefans decided they had to get ready for war. The call horn sounded eight times in a row: Dorlief thus appealed to the forestmen's Lord to respond under egregious circumstances.

## **Chapter Four**

### **'Your war is our war'**

Dorliefans and forestmen had lived hundreds of years as good neighbors. No one knew which of them had settled on the land before the other. Neither laid any claims on that score, the rather that the forestmen had forest and mountain for their habitat. Strangely enough, they did not consider those their turf either. They emerged from forest and they returned to forest. No one had even seen



their habitations, arguably forest denizens though they were. Perchance, they were hidden away in the densest forest inaccessible to other people?

Forestmen were respectful and considerate of the inhabitants of Dorlief and other villages. Whenever they met, by chance or not exactly, they always took note of whatever assistance the villagers were in need of, and always helped them all they could whenever the need arose. They would often leave nuts, berries and mushrooms next to the villagers' dwellings. Each time they went on a long trip (to a neighboring village, hunting or traveling), Dorliefans would employ forestmen as their guides, the equal of whom there were none.

Forestmen liked to see in New Light's Day, the Dorliefans' chief feast, together with them. No one quite knew how many of them lived in the neighboring forest. But that day, people's numbers were visibly growing, and the Dorliefan glance kept invariably running into visitors, with lots of women and children, who were normally a rare sight on ordinary days among them, thus making the occasion the more festive, colored as it was with company. The forestmen's hair was the color of fire, with distinctive tinges, the same way that one flame differs from another. Men's shirts and ladies' robes seemed to be stitched together of lengths of daylight heaven overhead in Dorlief, with no customary gneiss or smoky hooded capes in evidence. (The forestmen's capes were fine, flimsy, weightless and highly durable—a snaggy branch with such a garment hooked on it would snap sooner than the garment. When furled, the capes would be attached to the back of the girdles and all but invisible.) On New Light's Day, like the grateful guests that they were, they gave Dorliefans presents. Presents of beads and necklaces, caskets and flashboxes, New Light Tree decorations and flowers. All of those were made of stone or inlaid with stone. Stones—their warmth and cold, their bounty and avarice, their facets, both living and petrified, their interplay and response to the touch, whether of a look or hand—stones had an inexplicable magic power that enchanted and lured Dorliefans, as if suggestive of another world.

\* \* \*

The Dorliefan appeal had been heeded. The next morning Duguan, the forestmen Lord's envoy, arrived at the Governing Council. He was met by Council members Tlanalt and Tragart. Tlanalt had known Duguan as a kid: their fathers would go hunting and take them along. The friendship the boys had established on the hunting trail had often been put to the test by the fangy, dense thickets of Sadorn and the treacherous slopes of Tanuth and Harshid.

'Hello, good friends. The eight horn calls unsettled Fariard, and here I am today at his bidding.'

'We're glad to see you, Duguan, and grateful to Fariard for his speedy response,' said Tlanalt and came right to the point: 'A great trouble has made us appeal to you. The World of Dreams Lord intimated it to a young Dorliefan, name of Faddaf.'

'What is the threat to Dorlief?'

'Faddaf has told Dorliefans that in one hundred and seven days, hosts of those he dreamed of in the guise of stones—'

'They will be here to kill,' added Tragart. 'But he does not know whence they'll come. How would you like it if I said Faddaf is only just seventeen? I make a point of it because the way I see it is different from what the Council thinks.'

Duguan's countenance fell and he cast his eyes down.

'What ails you, Duguan?' said Tlanalt.

'We know each other well, Tlanalt, and your eye has unerringly spotted my nervousness. It stands to reason: the vision withholding whence the stones will come is fraught with the greatest danger. Our forces would be stretched and made to repeatedly change tack.'

'Our forces?' Tragart echoed: Duguan's resolve and certainty had surprised him.

'Does it not answer your first question, Tragart?' was Tlanalt's comment.

'When sending me on my way to Dorlief, Fariard said: "Whatever we do, Duguan, remember that we are indebted to this earth, heaven, and people." That is why I can say on my behalf, as well as on behalf of all forestmen, that your trouble is our trouble, your war is our war. I am not mistaken, am I, that Dorlief is adamant in its resolve to rebuff the unbidden guests?'

'Right you are, Duguan, we'll have to fight, even though... we don't know how and we have no arms. We've called you, our good neighbors, to ask you for advice. You have a superior knowledge of forest and mountain. You're good hunters. You—' Tlanalt paused.

'You don't have to go on, my friend. I can quite understand your anxiety and confusion. Fate decreed that war sidestep these lands. But is it a bad thing that you know nothing about arms and warfare... ? We'll help you.'

Tragart gave Duguan a questioning look. But the look held not only a question, rather dubiety; it seemed to say: What can you, hunters and guides, oppose the hosts of bloodthirsty creatures with?

'Yes, Tragart, we'll help you,' Duguan repeated confidently. 'I can see two ways. The first is for the Dorliefans to learn how to make arms. Our craftsmen will teach you to master the art. But this is a way of trial and error, no matter how skilful the teachers and talented the learners. It would take a lot of time, which is at a premium. The hundred and seven days Faddaf mentioned is barely enough to learn how to wield arms.'

'You keep surprising me, Duguan, forestmen's envoy,' Tragart interrupted him with hauteur and, perhaps, mistrust. 'You have only just told us of the path we're in no position to cover. You mentioned skilful teachers. No offence meant, Duguan, but it isn't prods we need or arrows fit only to bring down a roe. What other way do you have in store?'

'None of us knows what weapons we'll be in need of, much less the enemy we'll have to fight. But both a prod and an arrow are invaluable if they're in good hands.'

'Tragart, I have to remind you that we have summoned forestmen, and we have no right to reproach Duguan for anything.'

'Pardon me, Duguan, I got carried away.' It took Tragart an effort to rein in the haughtiness that had got the better of him. 'I should have heard you out. And I'm ready to.'

'My friends, doubts are all right: they pave the way to truth. No offence taken, Tragart. My duty is to suggest the ways I see. It's up to you to choose. There's another way...'

Three days had passed. A train of wagons was making its way on the morning of the fourth from Dorlief toward the Sadorn Forest. There were two men in each. They were progressing at a leisurely pace easy on the horses, so they would have no trouble traveling back. Heading them on horseback was Tlanalt. Everyone was preoccupied with one thought: what was in store for them in one hundred and seven days? What deeds must they fill them with? What was today's meeting about, that was to usher in something? Hope and confusion were chaperoning the train.

Tlanalt was the first to see the forestmen waiting for them. All along the forest edge was a long sheet. It could be taken from afar for a reach of a river. But everyone knew that there was no river there. The sheet, or rather several lengths of fabric, covered what the Dorliefans had arrived there for. On coming closer, Tlanalt saw Duguan stepping out to meet him. He dismounted. The friends hugged each other.

'I'm happy to see you, my friend.'

'Morning, Duguan. I see you've done a good job.'

'Come and see what we've prepared for you.'

Duguan signed to his people, and they lifted the cover—the next moment thousands of sparkles were set free to fill the entire space above the earth, as if what splashed them out had lingered in a dungeon hundreds of years harboring their passion for battle. And now this passion, having materialized in a sparkling mass, was cutting, piercing and shattering the air.

Tlanalt was confused on seeing right in front of him the mind-boggling battle weapons and gear... He looked at Duguan but could not bring himself to ask. Duguan helped him out:

'My friend,' he put his hand on Tlanalt's shoulder, 'this is our history. Our forefathers did fight long ago. But it was so far away that no ferling could have reached those places. Warrior blood is running in our veins, not just that of pathfinders, and we've been keeping it up. And a good thing, too, judging by the events. Don't torment yourself with questions. We go way back, and you trust me. Your people should have the same trust in mine. We make you this present of arms and gear, and apportion twenty men to teach you how to wield these weapons, so you might defend yourselves.'

'I thank you, Duguan. I must admit that what I saw confused me a great deal. But you've dispelled my confusion. Your weapons' sparkles have all but crushed me and are about to blind the Dorliefans, winning our respect and friendship for the forestmen who haven't been flaunting their power.

. . . A hundred days had gone by from the day Faddaf had had his vision. Dorlief had been living a new life. Surrounding it were two rings that had changed its body and soul. One ring had been growing outward and in depth day by day until it became a moat ten paces wide and two human heights deep. The moat was full of dry tarred branches masked with a covering of grass. There were footbridges across it in several places, which could be easily drawn as the enemy

approached. The other ring was not to be seen but heard. It was what had captivated Dorlief's soul. It was a ringing ring. Its ringing was very special... It was all about the air calling in a metallic voice... The air weeping metal tears... The ringing of battle... Some of the Dorliefans, about fifteen hundred of them, produced that ringing sound with their hands hefting swords, lances and pole axes... They were busy fighting and getting ready for the coming battle. The other part—the rest of the Dorliefans—was battling in its mind's eye, in its imagination, and thus taking part.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Invasion of Stone Humpbacks**

A hundred days had gone by. Dorlief was increasingly anxious. The Governing Council had decided to station watch around the village... Another five days had passed. The troops were split into three units. Tlanalt's unit, four hundred strong, was to cover Dorlief from the Wild Woods. A similar unit, headed by Sawas, Faddaf's older brother, was ordered to defend the approaches to the village from Lake Lefend and the Shiwun Forest. Tragart was to deploy his unit along the Tanuth Ridge. The unit had the most men: seven hundred best of the best. The decision was the result of Faddaf referring to the invaders as stones in his vision. The toothy cliffs of the Tanuth were the best guess as to the origins of the stones gone amock. At least that was what Tragart thought. The forestmen had offered to defend Dorlief on the Sadorn Forest side. Their three-hundred-strong unit was headed by Duguan. He had asked as much Fariard, forestmen's Lord.

At the close of day seven, Tragart had a word to drop. He had been haunted by an idea for the hundred and seven days which finally materialized as so many sounds:

'Perchance there'll be no war. It may have been the vaporings of a juvenile mind, a phantom. He's been racing around the hills overmuch, hence those stones in his dreams. We'd better find him a nubile lass and get ready for a wedding rather than war.'

The word was heard by his men. It then went the rounds of the other units to finally settle in Dorlief. And the shining weapons dimmed. So did the men's eyes, misted with doubt. No one felt relieved because of no battle materializing.

The Governing Council ruled that the units stay put for another three days and three nights. These days and nights seemed unending lingering like a marshland fog when the quick cannot wait to see the light of day... They did end nonetheless to give way to things new.

Sawas and Faddaf had spent a sleepless night. They were waiting, still confident that Faddaf's vision would come to pass. They knew that should the men leave their station to leave for Dorlief, it might be caught unawares.

'Sawas,' a lookout who had come down from the watchtower said, 'a horseman's riding toward Dorlief. He's coming our way. Look, he can be seen.'

'I can see him, Kronork. I think he can barely keep his saddle. We have to meet him halfway. Take a horse and go, Kronork.'

'I think it's the man of my vision,' Faddaf said to his brother softly. 'He's the bearer of ill tidings. We have to be on the ball, all of us.'

'Right you are, Brother. Alert the unit, Tazzat.'

The horn call roused the men who crowded their commander.

'Dorliefans,' Sawas addressed them, 'we're to break camp and go home today. And that's what we're going to do unless the rider coming from the forest bids we do otherwise.'

'We're weary of waiting,' yelled one of the men.

That was a general sentiment.

'We're weary of waiting for a phantom,' echoed another.

'We quit business to get ready for battle, only to discover it was a lie.'

'You're about to see whether it was a lie or not,' Sawas said in response to the dissent and murmurings. He could quite understand the men's mood and had no quarrel with that.

The stranger on horseback, accompanied by Kronork, came up to Sawas through the passage the men made by stepping back. Silence fell. He got off his horse and staggered. He looked utterly exhausted. Sawas removed the canteen from his girdle and handed it to him. He gulped, choking, for a long time.

'Sawas, he told me he's Patap of Natlief. He's been on his way for three days. What he's seen has shattered him,' said Kronork.

'Can you talk, Patap?' said Sawas when the Natliefan had quite slaked his thirst.

'Yes. I'm here to alert you.'

'Speak up. Everyone wants to hear,' called the men. 'Speak up. The men are waiting.'

'I'm Patap of Natlief. Some of you know me.'

'I know him.'

'So do I.'

'It happened three days ago. I was coming back home after a night of hunting. My brother Latuan, a forestman, was with me. He'd stayed in the forest to join his people. When I caught sight of Natlief, there were people assembled on the outskirts. Their attention had been drawn by something.'

'Were they stones?'

'Let me have another drink of water,' asked Patap and went on after a few swallows: 'I, too, thought they were stones. So did all the rest, because they looked like grey stones that had rolled down the Kaduhar peaks.'

'Were there many of them?'

'They were in their thousands, I think.'

'It can't be true. Fear hath a hundred eyes.'

'I think that was what had lured the Natliefans out of their homes. No one had ever seen a sight like that before.'

'What were the stones?'

'Some of the Natliefans thought back to the Dorlief messages the ferlings had brought, and hollered that the stones were alive and we had to flee for our

lives. The people were frightened. But it was too late. The stones came to life as if on cue: they all got up to their feet and seemed intent to charge. I was frightened even though I was far off.'

'Are they bipeds?'

'No, they had four legs. But their forelegs are longer than their hind legs are, and their stature is different from that of wolves or boars. They put me in mind of...' Patap was dismayed.

'Speak!'

'I'm afraid it will have a hollow ring.'

'Speak up! Don't beat about the bush.'

'I'd compare them to people, but...' Patap was embarrassed.

'What's wrong with them being like us?'

'They... they had no heads. I could see neither their shoulders nor heads. Where there're withers in beasts, they've got huge humps.'

A hubbub of puzzlement rolled over the men's heads.

'Huge humps? What about the rest of them? What size are they?'

'They look more powerful than us, much more powerful.'

'It they have no heads, where do they do their thinking?'

'And what do they eat with?'

'I can't tell. I had no time to scrutinize them. The humpbacks charged. There was a panic. The people fled for their lives. I took fright and ran back toward the forest. I was in luck: I whistled to one of the horses galloping away from Natlief, for they'd sensed trouble.' Patap looked crestfallen.

'Go on!'

'On... ?' Patap was about to say something and burst out crying.

The men were hushed waiting for the Natliefan to compose himself.

'It was quite some time before I was out of earshot and could no longer hear the cries and moans. My heart bled. No one must've escaped with his life. That's that.'

There was silence for some time. Then Sawas said loudly:

'You've heard it all, men. I'm sure each of you's thinking on my lines: we have to stay put and not let the humpbacks get to Dorlief.'

'We stay, Sawas.'

'We'll defend Dorlief.'

'That's settled then,' said Sawas and gave an order: 'Kronork, take Patap to Dorlief, to the Governing Council. Let him give them his story. Then go on to Tragart: his unit may be on its way to Dorlief. Tell him we are expecting an attack from the direction of the Shiwun Forest. Tell him all you've heard. He's a Governing Council member and a commander; it's up to him to take decisions. Right, gallop off. Faddaf, go to Tlanalt. Tell him Sawas is expecting reinforcements.'

'On my way, Brother,' said Faddaf and made for the horses. He hopped on to Korrok and galloped away.

'You've heard it all, Dalylad. Go to the forestmen's unit. Find Duguan, their commander. Tell him what's happened in Natlief.'

Sawas considered for a while what else had to be done. Then he came up to Tazzat.

'Tazzat, take a hundred men to Dorlief. Get stationed beyond the moat. Several people must always be ready to set the moat on fire.'

'It's quite an onus you're burdening me with, Sawas, taking men rearward.'

'No offence, friend. I'm thus unburdening myself of the onus of looking back.'

'They're coming!' was the cry from the watchtower.

'Tazzat, go outright. Take all the horses with you.'

'Good luck to you, Sawas.'

'We all need some.'

Tazzat and his unit of men, none of whom wished to turn his back to the Shiwun Forest, were leaving the forefront.

The remaining three hundred men formed three files on Sawas's orders. He stood in front of them. He knew just what he had to do. He had never gone to war, any more than those looking at him and waiting for instructions.

'Dorliefans, whoever you see next in front of you, don't be scared, that's the main thing. Patap of Natlief's said they're a bit like us. That means their gaze doesn't kill. Unless it's a wife's one directed at her husband.'

The commander's joke livened up his men.

'Patap said they're more powerful than us. We can make that up with the weapons we've come to wield with some skill,' was Sawas's comment.

'Patap said they have no heads,' someone called from the file.

'I rather doubt that. But we'll soon see for ourselves.'

'I wish!' Each was consumed with impatience.

'To begin with, we'll feed them arrows,' Sawas went on.

'Shooting at the humps? Is that where they hide their brains?'

'It's worth a try. What we do is hit. If the arrows don't stop them, we'll stake them with our lances and forks. Then for the swords, hatchets and pole axes. We should stick together. Or else they'd crowd us and make short work of it.'

'I can see them, Sawas,' cried one of the men waving his hand in the direction.

Sawas turned to look that way.

'I can see them, too. The humpbacks!' He felt both excitement and the fright that his voice had betrayed.

The headless humpbacked creatures were slowly moving toward the unit which had frozen still. The Dorliefans were sizing them up:

'As tall as a heifer.'

'The larger they are, the easier it is to hit one with an arrow.'

'That means they're not as spry as wolves.'

'It's true: no heads.'

'But they have to see.'

On hearing someone's guess Sawas remembered Faddaf speaking of eyes that looked from the inside, of the intelligence and spite in them. Could they be inside of their humps? he thought.

The nearer the humpbacks came, the fewer were the words. Sawas joined the front file. A man from the back file gave him a lance. The humpbacks stopped three hundred paces away. For some moments they could not tell them from the huge grey boulders on the ground.

'The intruders seem to be wearied by the trip and they'd decided to have a nap. Shouldn't we interrupt their quiet with a few arrows, Sawas?'

'Madydam's down!' There was a cry full of incredulity and anxiety. It was a man standing next to Madydam who was crying.

Sawas came up to find out what had happened. The young man who was lying prone was turned on his back. Sawas bent over him to see whether he was breathing.

'He's alive.'

'Alive! Alive!' was the cry across the files.

One of the men splashed water over Madydam's face—his eyes opened. There was fear in them.

'What's happened, Madydam?' asked Sawas.

'I... could see the eyes...'

'Eyes... They've got eyes,' a whisper went around the men.

'They've got... power... I was frightened...' murmured Madydam in a barely audible voice. A tear coursed down his cheek. 'Sorry, Sa—'

'He's dead,' said Sawas rising.

'Dead... Dead...' The murmur hovered over the Dorliefans.

'Men,' cried Sawas. He could ill-afford to let his men swallow the poisonous air of their first setback. 'Let's avenge Natlief and Madydam on the humpbacked stinkers! Archers, get ready to let go! Go!'

Many of the arrows found their target: the forestmen were good instructors. Scores of stones went wobbly, and the sea of stones gurgled with death rales. But none of the humpbacks moved, none of them charged, stung with taunting bites, none of them, bespattered with their brethren's blood, stepped back, as if they were driven by a will that had more power over them than mere instinct and made them as hard as stone.

'The creatures are indifferent to death and contemptuous of us. Let's see how long they'll last. Archers, let them go! Shoot! Shoot!' Sawas was urging his men.

The men enlivened and encouraged one another:

'They no longer seem to have the use of their legs. That comes of fear, not indifference.'

'They'd believe it's just a nightmare.'

'That's what makes them snore a lot.'

Sawas, as eager as the next man to fend off presentiment with bravado, was worried to see the creatures' strange behavior. Any other beast would have let on what its intensions were.

'What are we waiting for, Sawas? Should we go and coddle them with pole axes?' Ragogar was spoiling for a fight. The energy of his powerful body found no vent and set each of his cells aflutter.



'As far as my eye can judge, their bodies are covered with straggly hair, rather than dense fur,' said Gunug giving them the benefit of his keen eyes, those of a hunter.

'So they are. Just the thing for our swords and hatchets,' said Trosort.

'And about time we made use of them, Sawas,' Ragogar was still at it.

'Quiet!' Sawas raised a hand. 'Do you hear?'

Everyone strained his ears: proceeding from the stones was a sound—now like a whisper, now like a gentle cough. The men were alert. The stone humpbacks got up to their feet and slowly progressed toward the Dorliefan files. The arrows decimated their numbers, but they kept on walking with utter disregard for their slain brethren.

'Eyes are peering out of their humps!'

A desperate cry heightened confusion in the Dorliefan ranks. Many of them had made eye contact with the gazes out of the humps and were looking aside.

'Present lances! Hit their humps!' ordered Sawas. He had observed that stone humpbacks dropped dead whenever arrows hit the lumps on their backs.

There was more hoarse whispering, and the humpbacks rushed the people. No one expected them to be that spry.

They were broad-chested and sure-footed while spry and quick. Before the final lunge they poked out the heads from their humps on sturdy sinewy necks. Their heads and snouts were unlike those of wolves, boars or bears. At first glance, they were unlike human faces. Steep furrowy foreheads which hunkered over the caves of their snouts lurking where was what was peering, sniffing, and cutting lives short. All around the thick-lipped protruding jaws were dense dark-grey mustaches and beards. But their noses were flat with nostrils that jutted out. Their ears were essentially human. The hair on their heads and necks was thick and short, and dark-grey in color. But what made them what they were, was their eyes. Deep-set, dark, they looked sullenly out of their sinister cavities. And no eyelids. There was something eternal about them. Their gaze frozen stiff once and for all boasted inexorability and superciliousness. And no allowance for a chance weakness. No sign of communicability.

Before the final lunge, they produced their heads revealing their eyes. Two dozen men fled for their lives toward Dorlief. Some were petrified. There were those among them who fell flat, and buried their faces and fear in the mud. But most stood their ground and engaged.

The eye contact with the stone humpback racing at him rendered Sawas weak: his hands were no longer clutching his lance with the wonted force, he was no longer aware of firm ground underfoot, his feet having got bogged down in springy quagmire, his soul having wavered and intimidated to him that he was no match for the adversary. But he was as good as his resolve, as he got ready for the first skirmish: gaining some purchase with his right foot, he lunged forth resting on his left and hit the humpback's head with his lance. Chance would have it strike his eye. Sawas pulled it back and tried to hit another humpback who was rushing him. But the creature recoiled and reared. Sawas made another lunge trying to reach him. The humpback snatched the lance with its forepaws, pulled it clear, dropped it and rushed Sawas again. (Many humpbacks were performing

that trick over those moments, and thus gaining an advantage. It came as a surprise to many Dorliefans that what they had first taken for quadruped beasts were in fact human-like, with five-digit paws, prehensile and tenacious). Sawas grasped the hilt of his sword, pulled it out of the scabbard, crashed it on the creature's head and cut its cranium. He suddenly felt a sharp pain in his left arm. It was another humpback. It had dug its fangs into his armor just above the elbow and was fiercely pressing its jaws, unable to bite through it. It would have ruptured Sawas's arm in another moment. But Ragogar, who was on his left, stole a march on the humpback. It was the fifth humpback beheaded by his pole ax. (There were just a few in Dorlief who could match Ragogar size for size, strength for strength, and speed for speed. But his impetuosity, 'ferocity' as the villagers would have it, was unmatched. No force of nature could stop him when he was aflame). Stone humpbacks' eyes that drained many of strength did nothing but enrage him, and the humpbacks that singled him out for a victim ran against the limitless human passion that was ablaze at the tip of his pole ax.

'Retreat, Trosort! Retreat!' cried Sawas as he rushed to his rescue.

Trosort had fallen back behind the Dorliefan unit that was losing ground and, surrounded by three stone humpbacks, fought them back hanging on by his eyelids. Turning this way and that, he kept cutting the air with his sword and holding the attackers at bay.

At the same moment, a humpback on Trosort's right sent another Dorliefan flying. He then jumped at him and snatched at his arms which were flailing, trying to protect his face from the fangs. It had pulled off his armor, the humpback was tearing at his body and punching it. The man was crying in horror, rolling about the ground and shrieking something awful.

Sawas ran; he was a few paces short of Trosort when his death cry shattered the Dorlief sky. Sawas could see one of the stinkers evade a sword cut, seize with its forepaws Trosort's arm and gnash it with its teeth. Two others brought him to the ground and tore his body to pieces... A sudden blow to his back toppled Sawas...

An awful pain in his right leg made him come to. He opened his eyes: a chunk of sky and men's exhausted faces. He raised his head: he was being carried on a cape toward Dorlief. He inspected himself: what was left of his right arm had been tightly dressed with some cloth, with his blood seeping through it. But his leg was rather more painful. Sawas recognized Gunug in one of the men above him.

'Gunug— What about my leg?' he asked in a weak voice.

'The humpbacked blackguard gave you hell. The thigh's torn to the bone, and you've lost a lot of blood. The arm... you can see for yourself. They've applied tulis to the wounds. If it hadn't been for Ragogar— Ragogar rescued you. As he has many others.'

'Where's he?'

'Fighting. He can run circles around the humpbacks.'

'It's his passion overwhelms them—they can match strength for strength,' commented a man Sawas could not place.

'Are there many fallen?'

'Saving your presence, fewer than a hundred left— under a hundred... The rest have fallen. We're retreating, Sawas.' Gunug made no effort at concealing his despondency.

Sawas tried to sit up to see if they were far from the moat, and blanked out again...

'Come to, Brother! It's me, Faddaf. Sawas— Sawas, come to!'

Sawas came to. He had been laid on the ground.

'Faddaf, you... with Tlanalt?'

'Yes. His unit'll engage them immediately. I'll be joining them. See you later.'

Sawas heard the hooves and felt the earth tremble: it was Tlanalt's cavalry.

'Faddaf, wait.'

'I'm here.'

'Don't look humpbacks in the eyes: they stare you down... And another thing,' Sawas was short of breath, strength was leaving him. 'Their paws're prehensile... like hands.'

'Don't succumb, Sawas.'

'You— hold your own... I'm departing for the Spirit World... Sorry,' Sawas murmured and died.

'I am sorry: I couldn't make it.'

Faddaf mounted his horse and rode away... He galloped weeping and saying:

'Sorry... I couldn't make it...'

He was blaming himself for failing to help his brother, for leaving him alone. If he had not galloped away before the battle, he would not have let them kill his brother. As Korrok shortened the distance between Faddaf and the stone humpbacks, his face was petrified with hatred and his eyes soaked up the dreadful thing that was manifest in him like an awful disease and craved contact with the eyes that Sawas had warned him against: 'Don't look the humpbacks in the eyes.' Faddaf's eyes betrayed an insurmountable thirst for vengeance.

The stone humpbacks never wavered at the sight of the multi-head reverberating wave that was sweeping their way and spelled death. They met it with petrified gazes and marched to meet it.

At the decisive moment when the swords of Tlanalt's riders shot up over their heads and the lances quivered with tension, the horses under them went berserk, spooked, prancing, spinning about, shaking off their riders and trampling them under hoof. Tlanalt landed on his back. When Tassat jumped over him he got up and was prepared to meet his death (he had no sword in his hand) for flying toward him was one that would kill him. The humpback bared its fangs, jumped at Tlanalt and... came down in a manner fit to crash the earth around the victim it had not ravaged. Two arrows had brought the humpback down—they were stuck in its neck and head. Thank you, Duguan, thought Tlanalt, nor was he mistaken. At these moments the arrows let loose by the forestmen saved many a Dorliefan, let down by his own horse. Tlanalt spotted his sword, hefted it and instructed his men:

'Close ranks! Advance! We have forestmen's support. Let us be as good as our teachers.'

On catching up with Tlanalt's troops, Faddaf sprang off his horse and rushed the humpbacks.

'Here I am. Get me!' he was teasing the enemy and turning the battle into a cruel game where he was concerned. 'Slay me with your gazes! With your fangs!'

He ran without baring his weapons. He evaded one humpback on its way to rush him, then another. Finally, surrounded by humpbacks, he pulled out both of his shortened swords and started wielding them.

'Here's comeuppance to avenge Sawas. Sawas! Sawas! Sawas!' he cried out over and over again.

(Thirty days before, Taguar, a forestman who was instructing Dorliefans in the use of weapons, had taken off his girdle with the swords, dagger and cape and given them to his best learner.

'These are yours to wield, Faddaf,' he said. 'But mind you don't let them take hold of your soul or make their thirst your thirst.')

The memory of fiery blood on their mind, Faddaf's swords seemed to have gone berserk. There was blood everywhere: running in the veins big and small, running up and down, right and left, front and back—one had only to be here and there and everywhere to soak in its fire and wax red-hot. And Faddaf's flaming, lightning-like swords were here and there and everywhere, aided by his flair for foresight crammed in a nutshell.

Meanwhile, the forestmen joined the battle. Duguan had dispatched a hundred men to the Dorlief moat to reinforce the second line of defence while attacking the humpbacks on the right flank with two hundred men. Having assessed the foe at a glance, Duguan ordered:

'Deploy threesomes. Each threesome should be as one. Lance and prong to be supported with sword and pole ax. Archers, disregard the first rank and let loose at the next ones!'

Row after row of humpbacks went down all of a heap, for the forestmen's arrows did not rely on chance or give one to the victims they chose. The stone ridges thus engineered hampered the advance of the humpbacks that followed. Forestmen's threesomes had no trouble overpowering those on their positions. This kind of engagement was repeated by the forestmen twice. Once Tragart's unit engaged after bypassing Dorlief and crossing the moat, Duguan ordered his detachment to advance...

The warning against looking the stone humpbacks in the eyes had gone the rounds of the Dorliefan men, but many, in the heat of battle, forgot all about that and were downed by this treacherous weapon. However, the forestmen made eye contact with this unknown force and none of them was overwhelmed, for countering the evil force was another one, the one that safeguarded. The force was encapsulated in the small pebbles they wore on the chest. Nor could they pass this safeguard on to Dorliefans: it was not them finding the stones, but the stones finding them as decreed by fate.

The battle raged a whole day, with neither side winning. It looked like it would never end. It looked like it might end when no one was left alive. The battlefield was strewn with stones, dead stones, and human bodies. The Dorliefans were exhausted by that unending fight. On Duguan's orders, the forestmen were stretched the length of the front. Their threesomes appeared where sword and pole ax had given way to fangs, and the living eyes had been overwhelmed by lethal gazes. The forestmen were skilled and brave fighters. They died serene and uncaring. When they fell they uttered the word only they knew the meaning of: *Palerard!* They uttered it as if they knew their life would go on there...

The battle raged on unabated the whole day. And when everybody heard a whisper over the land, powerful and all-pervading, the battle ceased. Each of them thought that the whisper was next to him, and each of them downed his weapons without knowing why. A moment later, the men found their willpower, but they would wield their weapons no more, because that was when the humpbacks span about, withdrew their heads as one and made for the Shiwun Forest. None of the Dorliefans had the strength or the passion to pursue them.

'Retreat beyond the moat, everyone!' cried Tlanalt.

'Beyond the moat, everybody!' echoed the command several voices.

## Chapter Six

### Lelean

The villagers' care, healers' attention, food and rest were waiting for the warriors beyond the moat. Trains of wagons stretched across the moat to the dreadful field. Standing at the rim of it, with his back to Dorlief, was a man. He took his time looking into the middle distance where the stone humpbacks had fled. He was holding two swords in his hands, two slowly cooling swords.

Faddaf was back at Dorlief base camp in the dark. Fires were blazing everywhere. The men were resting. Sitting by their side were the nearest and dearest. Many got up and bowed on seeing Faddaf. Soft voices said:

'Thank you, Faddaf. It's thanks to you that we're alive.'

'Look, Faddaf's coming, our Faddaf.'

'They say he had no equal in battle.'

'Take care, Faddaf.'

'Come and join us by the fire, Faddaf. Have a rest. Take some food.'

Faddaf neared the voice and sat down by the fire. A woman gave him a bowl of fried meat and boiled vegetables followed by a hunk of bread and a cup of herbal infusion. Sitting by the fire were two more women, an old man and a boy with his head against the old man's shoulder; the boy was nodding off: sleep was getting the upper hand of curiosity. On the other side of the fire two men were sleeping on wolf skins spread over the ground. Someone touched Faddaf's back. It was Latotal. He lived a few doors from Faddaf's, and they knew each other.

'I've got to tell one of the leaders what I saw today. You're the leader for me in this war after Sawas's death, Faddaf. Let me tell you.'

'I'm no leader, Latotal. I'm a mere warrior and your neighbor. But if you have something to tell me, go ahead.'

'After I lost my arm, Faddaf, I still ply my trade, you know. But now I always go ferling-hunting. Ferlings are strong and know no fear. A ferling, once mature and trained, can overpower a wolf, and a boar, too, on its own. My drift is: all the time you were fighting those humpback beasts, my ferlings were ill at ease, raging, calling, beating about the cages, scratching and worrying them with their beaks. Their eyes were... rage itself. I asked Sorcros—his ferlings were like things mad, too. So I bethought myself: they can be good in battle, for boars are beasts, just as beastly as those humpbacks. What do you say, Faddaf?'

'I think they might be, yes, Latotal. Thank you.'

'What do I do now?'

'Spoiling for a fight, are you? You won't have to wait long: they'll soon be back.'

'If it wasn't for my arm, I'd join the ranks.'

'I'll tell Tlanalt of your idea. You'll fight yet, you and your help.'

'Me... and my help... Thank you, Faddaf. I'll be waiting. And intimate the good news to them.'

'Do.'

Faddaf got up to his feet.

'Thanks for the heat of the fire.'

'We thank *you*, Faddaf. And Sawas, your brother, too: he made the ultimate sacrifice for us.'

Faddaf was walking to the Governing Council house to see Tlanalt. He was reluctant to see those other people. He knew he would have to, but fought shy of meeting the eyes of Teoety and Brarb, Sawas's wife and son...

\* \* \*

It had happened fourteen years ago, when Sawas was Faddaf's present age. Sawas and his friends were hunting in the hills. They were descending down a gorge to further follow the river course. Sawas was the first to descend, and when he was near the river, a stone's throw from the water, he spied a kid. He had nothing but a flimsy shirt on. He was quite motionless and did not utter a sound. You never knew whether he was dead or alive. Sawas ran up to him, knelt and touched his palm—the boy opened his eyes. He neither bawled nor hollered, he just held up his hands. Sawas lifted the boy. His friends caught him up and were all around them. Everyone was puzzled: how could a kid have found his way to that barely accessible place, a kid who was no more than four? Whether he meant it as a joke or not, Sawas said:

'I'm no longer alone: I've found a brother.'

'What's your brother's name?'

'Faddaf,' Sawas said without hesitation. It was clear that he meant it: that was the name of his father who had died along with his mother in a fire the year before.

The Governing Council permitted Sawas to take the boy home with him. And when it transpired that no child that age had been lost of late in the neighboring villages, Faddaf was recorded as an inhabitant of Dorlief, Sawas's brother.

\* \* \*

'Faddaf—' It was Teoety's voice.

Faddaf paused and glanced at Teoety. Brarb was near her.

'Why don't you come home? You need a rest.'

When they were close by, he dropped on his knees and bowed his head. Teoety laid her hand on his shoulder.

'Don't torment yourself. You're not to blame. Like Sawas, you were brave defending Dorlief.'

'Do come, Faddaf,' said Brarb. 'We'll be waiting.'

Faddaf was kneeling like one turned to stone. Teoety and Brarb had left him one-to-one... with anguish which would torment his soul for years to come.

'Sawas... you found me... I've lost you... I've lost you,' Faddaf's trembling lips were whispering...

Faddaf opened the door behind which the members of the Governing Council and the commanders were debating something.

'What a good thing you've come, Faddaf.' In the middle of the debate, Tlanalt's tense face was touched with benevolence. 'That means you have things to tell us, some of our arguments will be corroborated and some undermined.'

'They'll be back at daybreak, when Dorlief is still asleep. So let them think it is,' said Faddaf.

'True,' Duguan said. We must outwit them. Another battle face to face will doom us to failure and perdition. Dorlief's lost more than half its men.

'If you can see it all so clearly, our dear Faddaf, tell us what we should do,' said Tragart with a smirk. 'Or else you, Duguan, perchance know what smart games we've got to play with these men-slayers. Those are all fibs. My men have shown heroism and have no time for hide-and-seek. We can amass such another host if need be.'

'That's presumptuous of you, Tragart,' Gordrog interrupted. 'Those are not *your* men, they are Dorlief men. Do you insist?'

'Yes. I move that we advance right now, night though it is. Toward the Shiwun Forest and further on to Lake Lefend. As soon as we see the humpbacked creatures, we dismount and launch an attack with all we've got to teach them the lesson of a lifetime.'

'Don't you think you might land in a trap, Tragart?' said Duguan. 'The humpbacks are hard to tell from stones in broad daylight, let alone nighttime.'

'I think your pathfinders will know better than be beguiled by night.'

'We can't risk human lives,' said Maruram. 'Duguan's right: they get the better of us in open combat, while night's allied to beasts, not men.'

'You're forgetting the whisper that told the stone humpbacks to attack, and then cease—and not only them,' reminded them Faddaf.

'D'you think they are intelligent?' said Maruram.

'I don't know to what extent, but I've no doubt that they bow to one will. And the will did display both power and intelligence.'

'You're a hero today, Faddaf. But I can hear your lips raving,' Tragart ventured another taunt. 'Better tell us what you've been withholding so far—what do we do next?'

'While Tragart was insinuating something, I had my eyes on Duguan and saw a suggestion. I now know what we must do.'

Duguan smiled:

'I think I can guess what it is, Faddaf.'

'Pray, Duguan, let Tragart hear it out of you lips. Perchance, he won't think it raving. And another thing, esteemed Council members, something I promised Latotal. He's a ferling hunter and knows their worth. He said today, while the battle was on, they were raging and thirsting for a hunt. The cages alone contained them. I've no doubt they can help us,' concluded Faddaf and left.

There was a girl on the porch steps. The color of her hair and cape suggested a forestgirl. The girl raised her head.

'Hello, Faddaf,' she said in a gentle voice. 'You *are* Faddaf, aren't you?'

His eyes looked wonderment.

'I am.'

'I'm waiting for Father. Do you know when the Council sitting will be over?'

'Soon enough, I think. That makes you Duguan's daughter. What's your name?'

'Lelean.'

'Lelean,' Faddaf echoed: he could not help it, he liked the name so. It crossed his mind that it was a very becoming name. 'Lelean, aren't you scared traversing forest at this late hour?'

'I've a detachment of men to guard me. Another forty men will defend Dorlief.'

'What about the way back?'

'I have my flambeau,' said Lelean, grinning. 'I know the trail: I've been to Dorlief twice for New Light Day celebrations.'

'I didn't see you at the celebrations. How do you know me?'

'You're the talk of the place. Know what they say?'

Faddaf lowered his head.

'That you're the youngest and smartest warrior. Even before that, talk was rife among our folks that you'd prophesied the invasion of stone humpbacks. And those swords are a gift of Taguar.'

'You know all about me, I don't know a thing about you. No, I do. I know now your name's Lelean. And the name's yours.'

'How d'you mean?' Lelean wanted to hear Faddaf's explanation.

'The name's yours,' Faddaf repeated. 'When you with your soul and your face saw the light of day, it noted you and made for you father's lips. He wanted to give you a name and it dropped from his lips. *Lelean* was in the air.'

'Where had it been before?'

'Floating about. Waiting for you.'



Lelean smiled. Faddaf feasted his eyes on her lips and could not tear them away for some time. On seeing Lelean watching, he looked aside and said, just to veil his confusion:

'I know nothing else.'

'I'm not the talk at every fire... Were you scared?'

'I wasn't: they'd killed my brother, and I was in a rage. I must be going now. Bye, Lelean.'

Lelean said after a pause:

'Bye, Faddaf.'

After a few steps, Faddaf looked back: Lelean was still there looking at him. He retraced his steps.

'I'd like to ask you a question.'

'What is it?'

'Palerard—what does it mean?'

Lelean looked away. Then looked at Faddaf again. Her countenance fell: a shadow of estrangement was on her face. Then it became somewhat sad.

'What's wrong, Lelean?'

'It's nothing personal, Faddaf. Don't ask our folks about it. A forestman would be ill at ease to embarrass you with silence, but you won't get an answer. Nor can I tell you what it means. I mustn't.'

'Sorry, I didn't know it was—' Faddaf was at a loss for the right word. 'Excuse me my curiosity... I've got to be going.'

'Faddaf?' Lelean wanted him to pause. 'You said I know all about you, while you know nothing... You will yet. We're going to meet again, aren't we?'

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Kaduhar's Whisper**

. . . Suddenly the dark whispered. This whisper was deafening in the night quiet. Everything quavered on this side of the moat all the way to Dorlief. The sinister whisper was equalizing: those taut like a bowstring waiting for a time warp; those deep within themselves daydreaming and eager to stop time and stay there given half a chance. Following the whisper that had condensed the air was the wild roar of a thousand voices that shattered the air. Neither the dread of disgrace nor the strength of the armor could still the shivers that many men were prey to. Then the cover and the brushwood at the bottom of the moat cracked: they were on their way. There it was, just starting.

'Shoot!' shouted Duguan and his fiery strands hidden by the night flashed with his arrow.

A host of burning arrows shone up the firmament. A moment later the entire enemy side and the moat and the field beyond strewn with humpbacked bodies, which Dorliefans had poured tar on overnight, seemed to be ablaze. The flames were bursting from the ground, roaring and screaming. The humpbacks

that had made it through the trap ran into Faddaf's and Ragogar's weapons, and those of the best Dorliefan and forestmen...

The power of the fire proved more potent than the will that urged the humpbacks on, and they paused. But they would not budge. The urge was still there: they rammed their forepaws into the ground and snorted digging it up, rearing, opening their maws and baring their fangs; their glares were stronger than their flesh, which succumbed to the fire, and still displayed intransigence. Thrice did the commanding whisper reverberate, thrice did the stone humpbacks advance at the humanity, and thrice did they lose the encounter with the fire and pause. The men fed brushwood to the fiery tongues of the monster heightening its fever and spared no arrows for the humpbacks. But it was not the fire or the monster that made them turn their backs on the Dorliefans, retract their heads and flee. Long afterward would the Dorliefans question themselves and one another whose whisper made the belligerent creatures docile and humanity confused, and find no answer.

'Loosen the ferlings!' commanded Duguan.

Latotal removed the covers from the cages, opened the doors and cried in a voice that was half bird-like, half human:

'Coo! Coo!'

Four ferlings instantly emerged from the cages with a great deal of noise and wheeled over the moat. A dozen more hunters called 'Coo' and the ferlings caught up with the humpbacks in no time at all. The birds dropped on them, cut their backs with their talons and broke through the humps with their beaks. Instinct made the humpbacks fight back. They dashed about and reared trying to grab at the attackers with their forepaws. They tried their damndest to throw off the tenacious birds, and poked up their heads in an attempt to capture the bullies with their eyes and give them a taste of their fangs. But the moment the heads showed, the ferlings dealt their final crushing peck.

At a horn call, Tlanalt's and Tragart's cavalry crossed the moat right and left and charged. The objective was clear—the stone humpbacks had to be destroyed. Faddaf joined Tlanalt's unit trailed by those who owned the warriors of the feather.

Three days and three nights had the Dorlief riders chased the humpbacks killing them on the run... It was Kaduhar that stopped the people; it was supercilious and ruthless, hiding behind its many humps numerous hazards, both known and unknown. The humpbacked survivors blended in with the grey rocks and cliffs, the impression being that it had given them refuge rescuing them from people, people who kept prying where they were least wanted, undaunted by altitude. The men's horses pawed the ground and snorted in anxiety: they had either felt the danger of the bleak, unknown turf or caught their riders' lack of resolve, for they had lost sight of those who made them fight back exhaustion.

'What do we do now, Tlanalt?'

'I think, my idea's the same as yours, Tragart. We have to go back before we lose more men. The horses suggest that the humpbacks are somewhere nearby. They've just shifted their shapes and defy our eyes.'

'What a pity we let the ferlings go too soon. Their keen eyesight would've distinguished the humpbacks among the rocks.'

'The ferlings were sent back because they'd got tired. And then, what would they have done, with the humpbacks hidden in crevices and caves? Nothing.'

Tragart glanced at the cliffs and said in a frustration he could not help (what he wanted was glory in its entirety—nothing truncated would do):

'Why, yes. It would never do to risk the lives of men to kill a hundred creatures or so.'

He turned his horse about, rode off and cried in a loud voice:

'Dorliefans, we've done a good job. Back home now.'

Before the squadron had made much headway, there was a fiery shout that turned all faces back, toward the hills:

'Kaduhar, you hear me? I, Faddaf, Sawas's brother, will be back yet! And you'll surrender those you've hidden!'

The men could understand the youngster's rue and let him be. As they progressed, they heard what he had heard. The whisper seemed to have seeped through the cliffs, snuck on Faddaf and fell on him like a ton of bricks before he could so much as reach for his sword hilts. The whisper was more potent than a yell. It was accompanied with some clanking that reverberated throughout Faddaf's body. The whisper and clanks, between them, made him freeze, unable to offer resistance.

'Do I hear you? Yes, I do. Frastrafargurn will be waiting. You'll look him in the eye before you die. Go now. I let you go.'

Faddaf seemed frozen in his tracks, listening to the cliffs, for a while... Not another word.

Four days later, Dorlief was welcoming its men. There were five Natlief kids with them. They and old Malam, who had refused to leave his hut, were the only survivors after the stone humpbacks' invasion. The rest (what was left of them) had been buried in a fraternal grave. The welcoming party included Teoety and Brarb. They had been waiting for Faddaf. Nearby, in the throng, was also Lelean.

The next day the Dorliefans elected Faddaf to the Governing Council at a general assembly. Dorlief legislation stipulated that to be elected Governing Council member one had: 1) to be a Dorlief inhabitant of at least fourteen; 2) to have done some good for Dorlief and/or Dorliefans; 3) not to have done ill for Dorlief and/or Dorliefans; 4) to be ruled in their life by the maxim: 'You are for the kids, not the kids for you,' and 'A kid soul's needs are above your own;' 5) to have the support of no fewer than ninety out of a hundred Dorliefans of at least fourteen years of age.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Frastrafargurn**

Eleven years had gone by since the humpbacks' invasion and the discovery of the Path. The intervening years had seen a life of peace in Dorlief. Faddaf

alone had not come to terms with his brother's death: he had not put down the swords still hanging from his girdle, and was still at war. Preceding the discovery of the Path was Faddaf's fateful hunt.

Early one morning, Faddaf was standing within two paces of Korrok ready for a long journey and talking to the swords he was holding in front of him:

'My friends, did you hear what Tlanalt said to me? You didn't? Why, sure, you were sheathed. He asked me if you weren't ready for retirement in the Dogush Cave where your brethren are dozing. But it wasn't a question. It was my good friend's advice. But he has no knowledge of either me or you... Oh, I can see: you aren't ready yet. I know you won't rest at peace until the air I breathe and my brother could have breathed sustains those who slew him, be it even one of them. Nor can I rest at peace.'

Lelean emerged from her hut. Faddaf sheathed the swords and approached her.

'You're crying, Lelean?'

'You're taking to the hills again, Faddaf, leaving me behind with anxiety in my heart,' Lelean said to her husband with no hope for her words prevailing over his passion. She need not have spoken. Like tears, they left her soul of their own accord to speak for her.

'Not to worry, Lelean. It'll be okay. But I swore over Sawas's grave, and I have to do away with them. There must not be a single humpbacked creature left.'

'Senseless blood won't bring Sawas back to life. Last time you came back more dead than alive. I'm afraid, one of these days it'll be word of your death that'll come back.'

'Perish the thought before a journey!'

'It haunts me. And it will. You're forgetting you've got another Sawas, a living Sawas, who's nine and who needs you. I wish you could see him waiting.'

'I think the world of him, Lelean. No one's quite as dear to me as you and Sawas.'

'I think on occasion that it's your swords that you hold dearest. You keep on talking to them as if they were animate.' Lelean wiped away the tears. 'I'm scared, Faddaf. I am. D'you know what I'm scared of?'

'You don't have to be, Lelean. I'll be safe.'

'Do hear me out. I'm afraid you'll be left alone... you and your swords. I don't know where it comes from. Me and Sawas, there doesn't seem to be anything lying in wait for us. But the fright is there, in my heart, and wouldn't leave.'

Lelean burst into tears and dashed inside.

Each time he was on his way to the Kaduhar Mountain ridge, he would stop by Natlief. His nearest and dearest had been living there for quite a few years: Teoety who had married Ragogar two years after Sawas's death, and Brarb whom he cared for and who was as good as his own.

Scores of families from Dorlief, Hoglief, Cradlief and even remote villages (Nefenlief and Parlief) had moved to Natlief right after the humpback war or later. The people would not have this beautiful village with lakes and greenery all

around forever haunted by the shadows of the fallen. Many of them were native Natliefans, many had relations there before the humpbacks' invasion, some would just keep their friends company.

Ragogar was always pleased to see his old friend. They also had a compact: they would travel together as far as the Kaduhar foothills, then Faddaf would make for the mountains, while Ragogar would take Korrok home and wait for Faddaf six days later where they had parted company. Faddaf would not agree to a different arrangement. Ragogar, the Ragogar who would never look the other way and always win, said to Faddaf:

'Kaduhar is the sort of place where one is weaker than one and two are stronger than two, Faddaf. I'm coming along.'

'Thank you, friend. But I say no. This is my personal hunt, and its set of rules is different,' said Faddaf and looked either at Ragogar or past him, the way he had never looked before.

Ragogar saw in his look what he later on dismissed after talking himself into the belief that he was mistaken. But he was to encounter that look again.

This time was the same as the rest of them, save that Faddaf had not shown up after six days. Ragogar did not hesitate: he let the horses go (Dokod knew the word 'home') and set out immediately in search of his friend.

. . . He had been walking for two days. He was careful: no calling to Faddaf, no seeking to meet a beast, no taunting Kaduhar with superciliousness and risk. He was playing his hunch. His hunch made him suddenly leave a trail and go down the Wedolick Gorge. Just as suddenly something lured him from beyond the mountain River Guiss and he crossed it. As he approached a cliff he spied an obscure cave mouth. Ragogar lit a torch and squeezed in between the stones. Its unwelcoming and unpredictable interior beyond a rim of light made him strain his eyes and ears, and heft his dagger. It was a long walk accompanied by the jarring voices of his footsteps and whispers of his breathing, until he saw a dim light. Once outside, he saw a slain humpback and knew he was on the right way. He could visualize Faddaf emerging from the cave, sword in one hand and torch in the other. The humpback must have leaped at him from his right, from a cliff, a ledge. He had sensed Faddaf from afar, when he had been still in the cave, and was waiting. Would I have been as quick as Faddaf, would I have evaded and killed him with one accurate strike? The cave tensed my feelings and light has relaxed them... Why didn't he go back? What trap was in store for him... ? It'll soon be dark.

Ragogar was slowly walking up a narrow mountain trail. It was getting dark and increasingly dangerous to go on with the search. So he settled for the night on a suitable ledge with an overhang as soon as he saw one. His hand found a small bag tied with a string on the inside. He opened it—there was bread there... made by Darrad the baker. He knew it right away, for he had liked it as a kid. It was especially good with milk fresh from the cow. Ragogar had with him a bundle of cream flat cakes baked by Teoety, but he could not resist the temptation of nibbling at the Dorlief bread, just to revel in that taste. The bread was (or so Ragogar thought) quite fresh. Ragogar had no doubt that Faddaf had spent one of his nights here. He was pleased that he had not wasted the time that was of the

essence in vain. It was a satisfying experience, eating his favorite bread as left by Faddaf...

'Rise and shine, Ragogar. Day's breaking.'

Ragogar thought for a moment that it was Faddaf. He opened his eyes and, looking against the dim light, saw a dark silhouette, aware that it was not Faddaf.

'Who are you?' he asked in a menacing voice.

'Roaring like a bear with a flea in its ear... Get out of your lair and see,' said the stranger, and Ragogar thought he had heard the voice before. 'We got to be going.'

Ragogar emerged from his body-warm shelter into the cold air.

'Know me now?'

'Hello, Lebeard.'

It was Lelean's brother. Ragogar had made his acquaintance in Faddaf and Lelean's wedding and seen him again at the New Light Day's celebration they all enjoyed in Dorlief.

'Did Lelean send you along?'

'Yes. I was at Dorlief and called by her. She wanted me to find Faddaf. She thought he was in great danger. You, too, had been brought here by anxiety, and Faddaf is the reason why, isn't he?'

'How did you find me?'

'Your footprints are all over the place. Which way now?'

'Hmm. I'm still half asleep.' Ragogar would not let on as to his strange idea of search. 'Faddaf's been here. He stopped here overnight. I stumbled on his bundle with some bread inside.'

'Good. I think we should hit the Parsar Pass trail to Mount Hawur. That'll take us right to its terraced slopes. We'll look there terrace by terrace. Many of them have access to the Hawur caves. Any of the caves can be the haunt of the stone humpbacks. That means Faddaf is somewhere there.'

'All right, Lebeard, let's get on our way.'

. . . It was a tortuous trail with numerous ups and downs. The mountain crags pushed it to the bluff, making it narrow, barely negotiable. Lebeard's pace was relaxed; he seemed to be hardly aware of the precipice on his left that lay in wait for someone uncaring. It was all Ragogar could do to keep pace with him.'

'Hey, Lebeard?' he called after him. 'Just tell me something. It's been as sore a trial as these cursed cliffs. How come the kids of the forest are so expert at hopping mountains like so many ibexes... ? Silent, are you? No tradecraft for sale?'

'It *is* tradecraft, Ragogar, so extensive, it could accommodate all the mountains you can take in at a glance.'

'Come on, tell me: is it your back, your hands and legs, or magic?'

Lebeard murmured a word and said:

'Okay, I'll tell you: it's magic.'

'I wish I had some of your magic.'

'Mum's the word.'

'Is that a suggestion or magic?'

'It's pathfinder law.'

Suddenly there was a squeal behind. Lebeard looked back—no Ragogar, just his squeal. The squeal was still there. Lebeard realized that Ragogar had managed to get hold of something. He ran toward it and looked down: Ragogar was hanging over the precipice from a small ledge.

'I'm here, Ragogar. Stop squealing, there's a good boy.'

Ragogar desisted.

'Now listen. Try to find some purchase with your foot.'

'There's none!'

Lebeard was aware that not even Ragogar's strong hands could sustain such weight long.

'Don't stir, then, just save your strength. And be silent!'

'I can't be silent for long. So you'd better hurry up with your magic.'

Lebeard produced from his travel bag a hammer and a length of rope with two bits of it branching off: one short, one long. Each of them and the node in between had a spike attached. Lebeard hammered the three spikes into the rock.'

'I'll throw you the rope next, Ragogar. Don't try to catch hold of it right away. Let it steady. Get me?'

'Be quick about it!'

'Now get hold of the rope, first with one hand, then the other. Well-done! Get up hand over hand.'

Lebeard never thought Ragogar would be up with such dexterity.

'Hands that strong could've sustained you long.'

'No, they couldn't. You told me to be silent. Now, being silent where there's company is a sore trial for me: it's like starving next to a groaning board. So what was the magic you applied to get out of a precipice a hefty guy like me?'

'Your silence.'

Ragogar shook his head scrutinizing and testing the rope to the touch.

'You've got quite a rope, friend. I've never seen its like... Oh, I know, I think: your bowstrings are made of the same material.' Ragogar looked at Lebeard with a sly grin. 'Some rope! And light. Thank you, Lebeard, and thanks to whoever has woven this rope. Put it away. And let's go.'

'Take the lead, will you?'

'No, you lead, same as before. Just a touch slower.'

'Okay, Ragogar.'

They progressed in silence, shaking off with each pace the yucky aftertaste that craved justification but did not seek it... The precipice lay in wait. Waiting was its livelihood...

\* \* \*

'Fastrafargurn will be waiting for you. You'll look him in the eye before dying.' Faddaf kept thinking back to those words. Each time, before hunting, he would pause at the Kaduhar foothills where he had heard them and intimate his arrival to whoever had that weird name. This time, too, he shouted at the crags:

'Fastrafargurn, it's me, Faddaf! I'm here again! I'm here to kill the humpbacked creatures! I know: your will is vested in them! I'm after you!'

Without waiting for an answer Faddaf made for the hills. This hunt was something special. He had a greater drive than usual. He had told Lelean nothing about his vision, about his brother coming to see him.

'Faddaf,' he had said as he confronted him, 'you'll do away with this ill. Promise.'

'I swear, Sawas, that I'll...'

'No! No! No!'

A wall of darkness rose between them. Faddaf came to. Then he closed his eyes again in the hope of seeing more of Sawas. Moments later, Sawas confronted him again.

'You'll do away with evil, Faddaf. Promise!' The voice was taut, with each of the sounds full of thirst for overcoming something.

'I'll do everything to...'

'No! No! No!'

The dark would not let them continue. Faddaf open his eyes and said in a soft but resolute whisper what he had had no chance to tell his brother:

'I swear that I will do whatever it takes to rid this earth of ours that the living tread and the dead are buried in of these humpbacked creatures.'

Faddaf did not ponder long over this vision: it was clear, with no riddles or rigmaroles, and it concerned him alone.

'No! No! No!' he echoed Sawas's words. 'Brother wanted to stay longer with me. He did not want to go. But something would not let him... We are not empowered to unveil the curtain between the Worlds... We'll meet yet, Sawas.'

On the seventh day Faddaf finally reached Mount Hawur. His eyes caught some vague stirring three hundred paces from him. Grey moving over grey, as if a rock had got up and run off. Faddaf tried to keep track of the humpback that had blended in with a crag and vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. Faddaf kept his eyes glued to the spot where the humpback had blended with the faceless crag. He unslung his bow, pulled an arrow out of the quiver and let go at random, trusting his hand. A moment later, a stone fell off from the crag, as if the arrow had split it off a monolith. Faddaf came up closer. The humpback tucked out its head, pulled the arrow out of its thigh with its forepaw and, bending over, started licking the wound. It then got up and slowly limped away. It was a cinch to run and do it in, but he decided to tail it. 'You'll do away with evil,' flashed across his mind. So he'll take me to their lair, thought Faddaf. Nor was he wrong: the humpback limped down a trodden trail without looking around or sniffing the air. When it ascended one of the lower terraces and turned toward a cave, Faddaf released an arrow that finished it off. He snuck to the mouth, unsheathed his sword and listened: a souging sound reached his ear. He bated his breath treading with care inside the cave. Without waiting for the humpbacks to sense him and make the darkness and his soul shudder, Faddaf lit his torch—the dozing humpbacks got up and, clinging to the ground, tried to rush him poking up their heads, all rage, out of the humps. Faddaf got wise to their creeping attack: they wanted to get him from below, where there were no stinging flames. He cut the air just in time with his lashing torch right in front of their snouts and made them recoil and rear—then Faddaf's sword saw its chance.



Faddaf emerged on to the terrace. Left behind in the cave were three humpbacks cut down by him. 'You will do away with evil... You will do away with evil...' kept throbbing in Faddaf's temples. He then decided to investigate terrace by terrace, cave by cave. 'You will do away with evil...'

Another two days had gone by when Faddaf reached the third terrace. The wound on the left shoulder was aching and bleeding: that night in the fifth terrace cave he had missed a stone humpback's lunge and now felt his strength draining. Faddaf sipped some grappian infusion from his canteen that restored his strength and drive somewhat and scrutinized the terrace. There's something wrong here, he thought, nothing's as wild as on the other ledges... at this altitude... The stones underfoot seem swept with a broom... Door? And a light behind it... I've tracked you down, Frastrafargurn.

'Come in. I've been waiting for you, Faddaf, Sawas's brother,' the voice behind the door must have been reading his thoughts. It was a different voice, the voice of a different man, one that had no trace of the overwhelming power Faddaf had once felt as he had stood at the Kaduhar foothills.

Faddaf pulled his swords out of their scabbards with vehemence and kicked the door. Standing at the bottom of the cave that looked like a human habitation was a man, tall, thin, with grey hair and green eyes that beamed intelligence and authority. The shabby off-white jersey suggested he never parted with it. There was a catskin vest over it. The broken boots. Back of him was a flat stone slab with a bearskin over it that Frastrafargurn had just left to meet Faddaf. By its side was a helmet on the flat top of a tall stone; the helmet was uncommon: white, circular with a black jutting mask that had no openings. Faddaf had not seen its like among the ones forestmen had let them have before the humpback invasion.

'Who are you?' said Faddaf. 'Tell me before you die.'

Frastrafargurn mouthed a supercilious grimace and laughed.

'All right, I'll satisfy your curiosity. I'm a warlord who's lost his battle. I haven't taken everything into account, that's right. But I'll be back yet. Except that you'll not be there to see it, any more than your brother.'

Faddaf could barely contain the swords that were ever on vengeance.

'So much for that,' cried Frastrafargurn in irritation, in a drawl that made all his facial muscles incredibly taut.

The cry and the grimace and the eyes held despair and hopelessness, and Faddaf realized that 'So much for that' was not just to do with him or with their encounter that the master of the cave meant to cut short.

Frastrafargurn snapped his fingers waving his right hand. Faddaf heard something scratch stone back of his head in response to the snap and reacted to the uncertainty that might hold a threat the way Taguar had taught him: he fell spinning and cutting the air with one sword, and once his back felt the floor, made a sudden lunge with the other. The next moment the sword felt a hundredfold heavier and his eyes met those of a humpback. Faddaf extricated himself from under the dead beast and got up to his feet.

'Now I say: So much for that!' said Faddaf firmly.

Frastrafargurn took hold of the hilt on his girdle and cried with pain—his right arm fell limply, cut with Faddaf’s sword. He dashed over to the stone table and snatched a small object with his left—in his haste he stumbled and dropped it: a small black stone rolled on the floor. Frastrafargurn dropped to his knees and caught it. He seemed to have forgotten his injured arm and his foe. Holding the stone in front of him and peering into it as if it were a jewel of sorts, he staggered to the wall and cried:

‘Veroline! We’re leaving!’

Faddaf saw he was about to leave through another, secret, unobservable by a strange eye, passage in the wall. There was not a moment to be lost, and he darted the other sword—Frastrafargurn fell all of a heap to the stone floor. A woman emerged from the left wing of the cave. She knelt by him weeping. (She, too, was wearing an old jersey and patched pants).

‘The helmet!’ screeched Frastrafargurn.

‘No, Argurn! No!’

‘The helmet! I beseech you!’

The woman hastened to oblige: she carefully lifted his head and put the helmet on it—a whisper of authority pervaded the environment. That was Frastrafargurn’s final call.

The woman looked at Faddaf. There was despair in her eyes. She arose, stepped forward and said in an agitated voice:

‘The door! Close the door, quick! They’ll kill you.’

Faddaf came up to the door and bolted it.

‘Shoot all the bolts, pray!’

Faddaf did as bidden and went back to collect his swords. The black stone next to Frastrafargurn’s lifeless hand drew his attention again. He picked it up. The woman made for him and paused, cupping her mouth involuntarily. Faddaf realized it was the stone.

‘Veroline? Is that your name?’

‘Yes.’

‘What were you about to say, Veroline?’

‘I— I—’ she faltered. ‘Oh, yes, it’s your wound. I can help you.’

The door rattled. The rattle was enhanced by roaring. The stone humpbacks.

‘You’re so calm, as if devoid of feeling,’ said Veroline nervously.

‘I know the creatures, and I’m not afraid.’

‘They’re best of the best. His bodyguards. His favorites. You’re here because he never ordered them to kill you.’

The door withstood the humpbacks’ vehement attack. Just the sounds broke through. They went their fierce rounds of the cave and suddenly stopped.

Faddaf staggered, for the wound had taken its toll.

‘Let me see what it’s like.’

Faddaf did not resist: something had to be done not to lose his arm. Veroline inspected the wound.

‘It has to be washed immediately,’ she said. ‘I shan’t be a moment. Sit down: your legs are putty.’

Veroline was back soon. When she was back, Faddaf asked with a nod at the door:

'Are they gone?'

'No, they're lying low. They're smart. They'll lie in wait for you.'

'What about the other exit? I saw Frastrafargurn trying to leave that way. We can—'

'His name was Argurn,' Veroline interrupted Faddaf and added firmly: 'There's no other way out.'

Faddaf came up to the wall, inspected it closely and pushed it in several places.

'That's strange,' he said. 'Am I weak enough to be seeing things?'

'Let me see to your wound,' Veroline offered. 'But first drink this.'

She held out a bowl of water and some small white balls. Faddaf gave her a close look.

'Trust me. It'll help.'

Faddaf trusted her eyes.

'It'll hurt a bit—persevere.' She dipped a swab in a bowl of limpid liquid and washed the wound, then smeared it with something like resin and dressed it.

'Thank you, Veroline... What is he and why are you with him?'

'I'm with him because... he's my husband. I loved him... What is he... ? A scholar. A researcher... There were three of them: Frasty, Raff and my husband, Argurn. All researchers are crazy about something. These were no exception. They were outcasts in their own land. After a few incidents... accidents with the mungs...'

'What accidents?' Faddaf wanted to know.

'Don't! Don't ask. The long and the short of it is that when Argurn discovered... I mean when the opportunity offered (I wish it hadn't) they decided to go on with their work elsewhere — where there'd be no one in the way. Another question? All right, go ahead.'

'Where are you from?'

Veroline shook her head and grinned.

'Oh, we come from afar! Quite a long way from here. We first found ourselves in snowy parts. We'd grown four years older before we got here. Four years of roaming and search... Frasty died fourteen years ago. He'd stayed—where he shouldn't have. Perhaps it wasn't just chance but his choice. Raff... he was nearly drowned in a mountain lake. Argurn couldn't have yet another like-minded friend lost. He rushed to rescue him even though he wasn't— hadn't been much of a swimmer... Blast that murky lake!'

Faddaf did not interrupt Veroline even if he had questions. He was afraid to mess with her memories.

'The rymals proved to be smarter and stronger than the mungs,' Veroline went on. 'Their very looks made the mungs pause. They slew the mungs. They slew Raff. He was lost in the game with the rymals at work. Their work ethic had the better of their instinct of intimacy. Frasty and Raff— they went toward Argurn's new name. He'd loved them. But he loved the rymals and his idea even more. While the rymals really obeyed only—'

'Argurn,' Faddaf ventured confidently when Veroline paused for some reason.

'No,' said Veroline with a heavy sigh and cupped her face.

Faddaf was waiting.

'Both rymals and Argurn himself were in the power of that dreadful runt, that all-mighty freak. He seemed to have taken over Argurn's soul and mind. Argurn, smart, strong, had been subjugated by him, and had dedicated the cause of a lifetime, and life itself, toward humoring that bloodthirsty creature. The freak could have stopped the rymals and saved Raff. But he wouldn't. He just stood there tapping his stick on a stone and watched them kill a man. And what had happened eleven years ago was his doing.'

'Who is he?' asked Faddaf.

'The one whose voice you'll remember till you die. He was a chance encounter on our way... to change that way. He showed the rymals to Argurn (Argurn's shone: new opportunities) and helped to move them here. Argurn forbade me to ask or talk about him. I've come into my own now—at the time I was afraid of the humpback and... that stick of his that was with him on all occasions. He killed a rymal without hesitation within my eyeshot: he thought he wasn't forthcoming enough. You know very well what rymals are like. Well, he killed him on the spot. With a stick tap.'

'Where can he be now, Veroline?'

'It's anyone's guess where he comes from and where he goes. He left us right after the rymals' defeat, and I haven't seen him since.'

'Why didn't you leave, Argurn and you?'

'Argurn had been so much the worse for what had happened. He didn't know what to do for the best and where to go. All those years he'd been waiting for him... and you, as he'd been told. He— he was out of his mind.'

Faddaf could see Veroline's torment. He got up and made for the door. After two paces he staggered and could barely stand. Veroline hurried to help him. She took his arm.

'You can't leave the cave today: you're feverish and weak. Pray, stay here. It'd be a good idea to catch some sleep.' She took down a skin from the wall and laid it on the floor. 'Lie down.'

Faddaf did not resist: his knees were putty. Veroline covered him with another skin.

'Thank you, Veroline. You're not like Argurn.'

Veroline hesitated: she was about to ask him something.

'Your eyes are a giveaway,' said Faddaf.

'Is it a bad thing?'

'What is it you want?'

'The stone,' she said softly. 'It— It's dear to us... to me.'

Faddaf produced the stone from the leather pouch on his girdle, handed it to Veroline and sank into oblivion.

Dreadful sounds in which he could make out his name invaded his dream and made him spring up.

'Faddaf, Faddaf, they're breaking down the door!'

Veroline was making straight for the door whose fissures sported fierce mugs. She was crying out the words Faddaf could not make out. But he realized she was trying to still the humpbacks. Suddenly she turned on him.

'Hold it!' She threw the black stone she treasured so to Faddaf. 'Go! Quick!'

But he was unsheathing his swords to charge at the humpbacks. The humpbacks had broken down the door and were rushing Faddaf. One of them leaped at Veroline, felled her and tore her to pieces...

\* \* \*

'Look, Ragogar.' Lebeard indicated a hilltop some two hundred paces away. 'That sinister cloud over Hawur—it's buzzards wheeling, a sure sign of a meal still warm.'

'A bad sign, Lebeard. Hurry up, I'll follow you.'

Ragogar and Lebeard discovered Faddaf on the thirteenth day of their search. He was lying on a terrace next to a cave mouth amidst dead humpbacks. The pools of blood had not dried up yet. The rage and hatred were still there. It gave Ragogar the creeps. They came up to Faddaf. His whole body was ravaged and bloody. Ragogar bent to release his left hand from a humpback's maw—Faddaf's sword was stuck in its gullet. He then touched Faddaf's neck to feel for signs of life in him, only to recoil with a shudder: Faddaf opened his eyes, and Ragogar did not know them. They were not the eyes of the man he went way back with. He saw in them what he had seen once before, what he had seen in the eyes of the humpbacks when he fought them. After Faddaf's sword went down the humpback's maw, he had lost consciousness, dropped his eyelids to fend off the eyes of a beast who had just been killing other beasts, and the killing was done with a look, too. Now that the eyelids were raised the weapon was there...

Faddaf came to when his friends had started a fire in the Hawur foothills. It had been a hard descent, and they had to get some rest before the long way. They sat in silence, each sick at heart, each fighting off the sickness in his own way, so it should not have to be couched in rueful words. Faddaf's pallor unaffected by the color and heat of the flames and no moans fed it...

'My— swords,' mumbled a feeble voice, and they exchanged glances, each seeing in the other's eyes a ray of hope.

'Your trusty friends are in their scabbards, Faddaf,' said Ragogar, bending over him.

Faddaf fell silent again...

## **Chapter Nine**

### **'Take a piece of darkness'**

. . . Many days had passed before Faddaf was quite his own man. He had thought a lot. He had dreamed of Veroline. She would come and leave him quizzing: 'No other way out... They were outcasts in their land... When Argurn

discovered... When the opportunity offered (I wish it hadn't), they decided to go on with their work elsewhere... Oh, we come from afar! Quite a long way from here... He stayed where he shouldn't have... I don't know where he comes from and where he goes... Hold it! Go away! Quick!

He knew that Sawas had found him in the mountains. But who had left him there? Where was he from? From far away, perchance?

When Faddaf felt he was strong enough, with his spirit potent and determined, he came to his friends in the Governing Council, told them about Veroline and Argurn and let them in on his conjectures and doubts. His friends were puzzled and sounded confused. Tlanalt voiced what all the Council members leaned to and what not even Tragart could disagree with:

'Faddaf, you're a member, same as us. But you're endowed with what none of us has. You've posed questions and conjectures today. It takes a clue to turn them into answers. We entrust you with the onus of looking for the clue. Should you need our assistance, don't hesitate to rely on us.'

After much thought Faddaf decided to try what he had never tried before. From time to time, the World of Dreams Lord gave him very special dreams, dreams marked with signs. But each time it happened independently of Faddaf's will. Now Faddaf wanted to appeal to the Lord and ask Him for a sign. Each night he went to bed he repeated one word, 'clue.' He hoped it would be taken with him to his dream, so he would utter it. He hoped it would be answered from His abode closed to human sight even in dreams. As he repeated the word over and over again Faddaf mentally marshaled around it the questions that kept haunting him.

On the ninth night he did manage to sneak the word 'clue' into his dream. It was a festive Dorlief he dreamed of. Everyone was seeing in New Light Day. Lots of people were assembled around a decorated New Light Tree: there were Dorliefans and forestmen, many of them wearing masks. Faddaf and his brother were right in front of the tree. He was still small, with Sawas holding his hand. A forestman came up to them. It was Deruan, Sawas's friend.

'Happy New Light,' he was saying.

'Happy New Light,' Sawas was saying.

'Happy New Light,' Faddaf was happily saying for the umpteenth time that day.

Deruan had two caskets in his hands. Faddaf guessed the caskets were for his brother and him. And so they were: Deruan was giving them those wonderful boxes. Faddaf was overjoyed. He was holding his casket. It was marvelously fine, with the stones winking at him: Open it, open it. Faddaf tore his eyes away from the casket to look at his brother, a question in them.

'Open it,' Sawas was saying.

There was a key in an opening on its side.

'Twist it,' Sawas was suggesting, even though Faddaf knew well enough that the key had to be twisted, but he was tremulous before the moment actually came.

The moment was on him. Faddaf was turning the key to hear the cadence as the stones giggled that had been winking at him. The lid was opening. Faddaf

looked inside, only to see nothing but blackness. Faddaf was scared and at a loss, but he could not tear his eyes away from the blackness and appeal to Sawas.

'Look around!' a voice was commanding as it emerged from the blackness inside of the casket.

Faddaf was turning his head obligingly in fright to see a cave—*the* cave. Faddaf was no longer the kid he had been a moment before. No festive Dorlief, no Sawas, no casket—they had been mere fancy. Confronting him was the darkness of the cave stirred only by a flickering candle.

'Proceed! Don't be afraid!'

Faddaf took a few steps inside the cave. The candle flickered out, and he was immediately surrounded by darkness. It was clinging to him, trying him. Faddaf was waiting. Something was telling him to wait. If he did not endure he would be resolved into the dark.

'Hold out your hand and take a piece of darkness.'

Faddaf did not know how one could take a piece of darkness but complied, held out his hand to clutch at what could not be clutched and held. His hand was suddenly feeling heavy and perceptive. He unclasped his hand to peer at what had manifested itself, however faintly... Blackness. Blackness all around. Blackness on his palm. He fisted his hand again—whatever was in his hand was pulling Faddaf, guiding him. He was resisting the force.

'Follow what's urging you on!'

Faddaf complied. He took a few steps only to run into the cave's stone wall. But the stone was relaxing... relaxing... losing its solidity and vanishing.

\* \* \*

The day broke to see Faddaf and Lelean packing.

'The World of Dreams Lord's summoned me on the way, Lelean. I must go.'

'Where to?'

'Hawur.'

Lelean shuddered but never said a word.

'Put a box of flashes on top. One of those forestmen gave us. I wish to see someone.'

'Won't you visit Teoety and Brarb?'

'That wasn't what you thought. You were wondering if I'd take Ragogar along. No, Lelean, I'm not: I won't need him.'

Lelean packed in silence whatever a long way called for. She had had no chance to get out of the habit. Faddaf was not much given to talk either: he was still in the grip of his dream. He had to match it to reality.

Before starting on his way, Faddaf stopped by his son's room and looked at him for a long time, quietly asleep. Lelean was waiting in the yard, all atremble. She feared the moment the door would open... Faddaf gave her a hug, mounted Korrok and rode away. Lelean wept the tears of happiness: his were not the eyes of a warrior that day, nor did he have a girdle with the two short swords on it.

Faddaf decided against stopping by Natlief. He did not want to injure Ragogar with refusal, but he had no doubt that Ragogar would not let him go alone to the Kaduhar turf. This time he decided to leave Korrok with old Malam

who lived all alone in a forest lodge in the back of beyond on the way from Natlief to Kaduhar.

\* \* \*

Rumor had it that Malam was one of the forestmen. But there was nothing to corroborate it save his appearance, of which some said, 'It's just his way,' meaning that he was no forestman, just different. He was different, and his looks were different from those of both forestmen and villagers. Malam was short, at least a head shorter than the shortest of the adult villagers. People ascribed it to the huge hump on his back, which had usurped the force that was supposed to pull a man up. His skin was orange in color, the only such skin in the neighborhood. His hair was the color of straw, and curly. His big round face with chubby cheeks and beady hazel eyes with a twinkle in them suggested that his soul was not in his hump, withheld from humanity.

Malam liked best of all New Light Day celebrations, something no one would venture to call into question. He would stand leaning on his stick in front of the New Light Tree, his eyes exuding happiness. After a while, he would move to another spot, and another, and so on, until he had come full circle and looked at the tree from all sides. He seemed to be afraid he would miss a single decoration. He had his favorite globes (he liked globes best of all) that he knew like the back of his hand. Each New Light celebration, he would spot them in the tree and be delighted to meet them. Whenever a new globe came his way, his soul would mark it for his favorite. He kept saying something under his breath on making their acquaintance.

New Light would see him now at Natlief, now at Dorlief, now at Cradlief, you name it. But finally his place of choice was Dorlief, and he attended three last celebrations there. He explained his choice to himself like this: Dorlief is larger, there are invariably more people there, with Dorliefans, forestmen and visitors from other villages. So much the merrier and richer. ('Richer' in his parlance meant variegated, decorous.) It was there finally that two globes were waiting for him in the New Light Tree: dark-violet and orange-colored with spangles, which he referred to as the teary orange one.

Malam lived in the back of beyond not because villagers had hurt him, for they had done nothing to hurt him. He just did not want to embarrass them with his looks (New Light celebrations excepted), while they left him to his own devices. None of the villagers would so much as think of calling him a humpback, the one adult lodge-dweller around Natlief and environs who had survived the humpback invasion. There was some baby talk involved in reference to him: the Carroty. However, jokes were rife.

'Hey, Malam, out with it: have you got carrots in that bag across your back? Let's have one, there's a good guy.'

Malam ascribed those jokes to his carrotty skin, rather than his hump, and had a couple of carrots for the occasion in his pocket, which he handed to the punster, thus cutting him down to size.

'What's that you've got in your bag, Shorty? Is that treasure trove you're carrying about?'



'Treasure trove it is: name of wisdom.'  
'Let's have some of it. It may come in handy.'  
'Swap, do we?'  
'What do you trade it in for?'  
'A bit of wisdom for a bit of height.'

There was nothing for it but for the wag to shake his head with a smile and a gesture of dismay.

Malam's door and heart were always open to whoever chanced on his abode. He was hospitable and generous, if somewhat reserved. He gave way to his feelings when the visitor left. He was happy and grateful to whoever had crossed his threshold and would savor the encounter, thinking back to, and mouthing, what had been said by him and his party.

\* \* \*

Faddaf stopped at the open door.

'Hello! Is anyone there?'

'Come in, Faddaf,' came the voice from the galley. 'Have a cuppa. I've only just brewed it. It's parate-flavored.'

Faddaf went in the galley.

'There's the lot I've dried.' Malam indicated the small bags over the ingle nook. 'The fragrance... is something special'

Malam poured a cuppa for Faddaf.

'Take a seat and try it. I'll have another with you. Cookies or flat cakes?'

'No, thanks, Malam, just the tea. I'm not hungry.'

'The cookies are sweeter. But the flat cakes are fresher: I've only just got them at Trort's. They could be yesterday's at Wartraw's. At Trort's they're always fresh from the oven.'

Faddaf took a cookie and a flat cake.

'Have a go, do. Well, is it sweet? I told you so... Try the flat cake with your fingers... There, it's spongy!'

'They're delicious. Thanks, Malam. It's been a long time, hasn't it? We last met on New Light Day, didn't we?'

'You haven't seen me since, but I saw you not so long ago... Don't bother, you've no way of remembering. You couldn't have seen me. Your friends, Ragogar and Lebeard, had brought you to Natlief as good as dead.'

'Not so much dead.' Faddaf waved the notion away with his hand.

'You were every bit a dead man...'

The host and visitor paused.

'The call of the hills again, I see,' said Malam frowning.

'So it is, Malam.'

'I caught a glimpse of you out the window and thought: the hills're calling out to Faddaf again. Where're you going?'

'Hawur.'

'It's a long way,' drawled Malam.

'Well, I'd better be going. Thanks for the food. Your tea is just wonderful. It's long since I had tea like this. They're given to rux tea in Dorlief.'

Malam was all smiles.

'Natlief, too, is all for rux, Hoglief, Cradlief—they're sold on rux. Me, I'm a parate man. Parate is hard to spot, it isn't all that common in these parts. Rux is like ill weeds, it grows apace. What's on your mind, Faddaf?'

'I've a request.'

Malam was all concentration, he seemed to be intent on Faddaf's mind: his brow furrowed, his gaze glazed, his nostrils seemed to be flaring, and his lips pursed not to let the perspicacious tongue mess with the target.

'Will you take care of Korrok while I'm away in the mountains?'

The old man's face livened up.

'Never fret about Korrok, Faddaf. I'll take care of your Korrok.'

'Well, thanks.'

'Are you going to Hawur by way of Parsar?'

'It's a short cut by way of Parsar.' Faddaf got up to his feet. 'Oh, I'm forgetting: I bring you a box of flashes.'

Faddaf opened his travel bag and held out a box of flashes to Malam. Malam received it with both hands as if it were a living thing, a pup. He fumbled with it... and looked at Faddaf with the eyes of a happy kid.

When Faddaf left, the host sat at the table for a while admiring the gift. The feeling he had as soon as his fingers touched the present was growing in intensity, and now that it was ripe, urged him—suddenly Malam got to his feet, snatched the stick parked in a corner by the door and dashed outside.

'Faddaf, Faddaf!' he called after him. 'Unhitch Korrok!'

Faddaf stopped, puzzled. Seeing the old man insistently waving his hand, he came back to listen to him.

'Don't be in too great a hurry: time's a great cheat. Unhitch Korrok. You ride in the front, and help me get on behind you.'

'Why would you want to ride with me?' Faddaf asked as gently as he could.

'You'll see. Get on, waste no time,' Malam insisted deigning no explanations.

Now it's 'Don't be in too great a hurry,' now 'Waste no time,' crossed Faddaf's head, but seeing that the old man looked grave, engrossed in an idea, he jumped upon the horse.

'Let me give you a hand.'

'Take my stick,' said Malam, nimbly pushed it at Faddaf and, clutching his hand, was on horseback in no time.

'Let me have my stick, and full ahead!' he ordered and tucked his stick under his girdle to better hold on to Faddaf.

Faddaf smiled as he shook his head, and spurred Korrok on.

'Okay, hold tight, you rider!'

They were galloping in silence. Malam did his best not to be shaken off the dancing back of Korrok. It was all Faddaf could do to guess the little Carrot's intentions.

'We aren't going to Kaduhaar!' cried Malam all of a sudden.

'Wherever, then?' Faddaf looked back. 'What are you up to, oldie?'

'I'll tell you,' said the voice from behind confidently and calmly.

'But I've got to go to Hawur.'

'I know as much, Faddaf, I do... Turn right at the White Stone. We'll then proceed to the Three-headed Hill.'

Faddaf complied, and they were soon at the Three-headed Hill. The approach was rocky scree. Long before, the Three-headed Hill had been the tallest mountain of one of the Kaduhar spurs. Suggestive of the spur now was a chain of stone slabs all the way from the hill to Kaduhar proper.

The riders dismounted.

'What are we looking for here?' asked Faddaf, barely hiding his frustration.

He had long been craving clarity. Also, Malam had disrupted the mood he had been in because of the sign-dream.

'Say good-bye to Korrok, Faddaf.'

'My dear Malam, tell me what's on your mind. Why are we here?'

'See those three stones?' asked Malam calmly, as if unaware of Faddaf's irritation.

'I see the Three-headed Hill and a lot of rocks.' There was nothing for it but to answer the unbidden guide's questions without a murmur.

'Have a better look. They've joined to form a three-petal stone flower. There isn't such another here.'

'I can see it, Malam.'

'Come and mount one of the petals. Wait! First say good-bye to your friend.'

Faddaf whispered something into Korrok's ear and made for the stones together with the Carroty. He got onto one with agility.

'Now sit down on the stone and listen. Listen closely.'

'That's what I've been doing, listening to you, Malam.'

'There's a narrow fissure between the stones. It goes underground into a tunnel. It's the Companion-giving Tunnel. No one in these parts knows or should know about it. The Tunnel is the shortest way to Hawur and Tusul. But the tunnel is also the way to nowhere.'

'How would I know where to leave the tunnel?'

'Turn left at the bifurcation. The left arm will take you to one of the Hawur caves. The right one goes all the way to the Dark Waters hidden by the walls of Mount Tusul... and a good thing they are, too.'

'I've heard forestmen mention Lake Tahl...'

'Woe is him who takes the Dark Waters for Lake Tahl!' the old man interrupted Faddaf who was wondering more and more.

'I've heard say of the Dark Waters once and again. They are supposed to be hidden by the Wild Woods.'

Malam frowned.

'No one knows just how many such places there are, but wherever you come upon one, give them a wide berth. There's no negotiating them, for they force one under, no matter how accomplished a swimmer one is.'

The old man fell silent.

'What did you call the tunnel I'm to take?' Asking the question, Faddaf hoped Malam would let on more than he had done.

'The Companion-giving Tunnel. And remember, Faddaf: the tunnel is no place for fire. Once you light a torch, you lose the companion... and lose yourself. Farewell!'

Malam turned about and marched toward Korrok with such dexterity and confidence that Faddaf could not help thinking: What does he want with this stick of his?

Faddaf faced Hawur and started sliding down the rock. At some point his feet found no purchase, and there was nothing for it but to leap inside. The fissure proved to be deep. The tunnel floor met him with a suddenness and hardness—his legs would not support him and he fell down. There was darkness before his eyes. He got up and tried to stretch his arms wide apart, but the tunnel would not let him: it was very narrow. Faddaf took a few steps and felt he was blanking out. But he had to go, and he did, slowly. Suddenly, some twenty paces in front of him, he saw in the dark a boy. The boy stood facing him, as if waiting. He thought he knew the face. The boy beckoned him and walked on down the tunnel. Faddaf followed him. How can he walk in utter darkness so fast? he thought, just as another thought crossed his mind: Why can I see nothing but the boy? Faddaf caught his foot on something and lost sight of him.

'Where are you? Stay!' he cried.

No response from the boy. Faddaf produced a torch from his bag and lit it. The next moment he was stunned by what he saw: the tunnel he was following branched off in four look-alike directions, let alone the small burrows which were all over the place and had lurking in them, like hollow eye sockets, all manner of uncertainty and fear, luring and repulsing at once. He looked back—the same four tunnels full of holes, there was no way of saying which of them he had just been following. He shut his eyes.

'What's wrong? Why am I here... ? Why, yes, the World of Dreams Lord summoned me on the way. I must go... What was it the old man said... ? The way to nowhere...'

Suddenly Faddaf heard some thuds—they gave him the creeps. He recalled those other thuds... the blood curdling thuds at the Kaduhar foothills. He recalled the voice... the sinister voice at the Kaduhar foothills. He recalled the words of Veroline about the freak who never parted company with his stick. He recalled... Malam's stick.

'There's no way out,' murmured Faddaf. 'It's him. He's got at me.'

The fear to find himself in that maze of a tunnel would not let him open his eyes. The voice of Malam's stick made him do it though. It stirred the air impregnated with fear that enveloped him. Faddaf opened his eyes and was dazzled by the torchlight.

'The tunnel is no place for fire. Once you light a torch, you lose your companion and get lost yourself,' Malam's voice seeped through what felt like stone walls.

Faddaf put out the torch right away and slid its sleeve over it. Then he called:

'Where're you, companion?'

No response. No one was to be seen through the black veil in front of Faddaf's eyes. He whispered in despair:

'Do help me! I can feel you're somewhere nearby. Show up in the dark!'

The boy showed up as suddenly as the first time round. Faddaf, undoubting, unquestioning, followed him without calling to him. He walked on and on, keeping his eyes on his mysterious and silent guide. It was like sleep-walking. No sense of time or weariness. No thirst, no hunger. Even the thoughts of where he was heading had been left behind at the start of the way...

Faddaf seemed to come to when he ran into a cold stone obstacle. The boy had vanished outright. He's only just been with me, I've been following him. Can I have dozed? Faddaf groped about with his hands: the wall dropped off both on the right and on the left. Where do I go? He was trying to compose his thoughts, to remember something and proceed accordingly. The old man... Malam... yes, Malam... He sent me here... Faddaf tried to take it easy and recall what Malam had said to him... 'Where the tunnel bifurcates turn left.' Thanks, Malam. Groping his way around the obstacle, Faddaf skirted it and slowly walked along the wall groping for it from time to time. He did not walk long: murky light ahead meant that the exit was near. It was an exit to one of the Hawur caves. Faddaf knew that air. It was different: it neither extended nor confused thoughts. Lucidity was coming back to him. He unexpectedly realized how he knew his little companion. It was him, Faddaf, the Faddaf of his latest dream, the Faddaf he had been many years ago...

The light was seeping into the cave through the fissures above. Faddaf clambered up the wall to one of them and got outside. At that point he realized he was exhausted. He thought he would make camp, even though dusk was way off. He found a suitable ledge, leaned his bag against the side wall and dropped off the moment his cheek touched it...

It was hunger and cold that woke Faddaf up. He opened his eyes: daylight was fading. The cold breath of night was nigh. Faddaf wolfed two hunks of bread and drank some grappian infusion. Should I wait here until morning or go to the cave? I won't be able to fall asleep again. Why waste time if Malam indicated the short cut. Malam... he's weird, that Malam. Whoever could have thought that the obscure oldie knew what no one else did? Hmm, obscure, indeed... Humpbacked and carrot. I wonder. Conspicuously obscure. Where's he come from... ? Where am I from, for that matter... ? Time I was going. I might make it before nightfall: I know the way. Faddaf came up to the bluff edge and looked around the gorge.

'I can see you, you humpbacked stinker, I'll get at you yet,' he said, his eyes corroborating.

Night had stolen a march on Faddaf: the terrace was still a steep ascent away. He got out his torch and lit it. Then he gave the incline he was to negotiate as close a scrutiny as he could in the wind-whipped dancing light of the torch, memorizing juts, cracks and even small but useful pockmarks. Rather than putting his torch out and away, Faddaf threw it on to the terrace to fend off the spirits until daybreak. A few moments later he saw a fiery bundle rolling down the slope. It's fate shedding fire and light down the abyss. I'm yet to return to the blackness of the cave and dream to collect a... piece of darkness.

'I'm after you!' Faddaf called, raising his head.

When up on the terrace, he lay long: the ascent from memory had taken its toll. But there was another thing—that piece of darkness. He could not return without it. A piece of darkness. Lacking faith in what was inside, in the cave, he could not enter it. A piece of darkness? Finally he had enough composure to get up and enter the cave. It was like featuring in the dream again. He remembered: 'Hold out your hand and take a piece of darkness.' He stretched his arms and groped for the immaterial dark. Each hollow, stupid touch made his breathing louder and angrier. In despair Faddaf started punching the emptiness with his fists... caught his foot on something and fell down.

'Take a piece of darkness. Take a piece of darkness,' he repeated like an incantation, taunting himself and snatching at whatever was to hand on the stone floor of the cave: bones, bones, a rag, more bones... Suddenly Faddaf froze: he had stumbled upon what instantly reminded him of Veroline.

'Veroline— You were trying to save me in that seat of evil. You then appeared in my dreams to help. Won't you help me now to find the exit?'

. . . The way back home was long. Once back, Faddaf reported to the Governing Council:

'From now on, Dorlief has a clue—the key that opens up the Path. I've traversed it and I can be a judge of it. Once on the Path, there's no stopping. If you stop, the Spirit World will be opened to your soul, and it will wish to leave your body, you won't have the strength to hold it back. If you follow the Path all the way to the end without stopping, the Non-world will accept you. And then the danger will involve not just you but all of Dorliefans and other villagers. And I now don't hesitate to state that Dorlief needs a law against starting on the Path, to reduce the danger to a rare accident. The onus of guarding the Path should be on Governing Council members, such of them as are fated to do that, or are entrusted to do that by Dorliefans, temporarily fated to do that. Each such will pass on his onus to the Governing Council member singled out by his reason and heart. You can see the clue-key as well as I do, and you understand that there can be many such keys. I therefore say: people, rather than one man. I suggest we call them Keepers. This word, *Keeper*, is triune for me: clue keeper, Dorlief peace and quiet keeper, and the Keeper's honor keeper.'

Three days after the Dorliefans had said yes to Faddaf at a general assembly, Governing Council passed two laws: On the Ban on Starting on the Path, and On Keepers. Faddaf had become the first Keeper.

## Chapter Ten

### The Carrotty Joyous and Sad

Faddaf was back from a hunt at night. He took off his girdle and hung it on the wall.

'Thanks, friends,' he thanked his swords.

Suddenly he heard Sawas's faltering voice. Then that of Lelean. Is he all right? he thought and rushed to his son's room.

Lelean sat on the bed next to Sawas comforting him.

'Sawas had a bad dream, Faddaf,' she said, reproach in her eyes, in response to her husband's tacit question.

'I had a bad dream, Pop.'

Faddaf came up to his son and stroked his head.

'It's all right. I, too, have bad dreams. So did Mom.'

'No, Pop. It was a *very* bad dream. I had never been frightened that much.'

Sawas pressed his body to Lelean as he looked away from his father. Faddaf realized that he had said to his son what occurred to him at the moment, but they were not the words that had to be spoken—he should have said nothing, rather than that.

'Do you want to talk about it to Father and me?'

'I do. Tomorrow. I'm sleepy now and afraid. If I'm alone in the room I'll have the dream again, and I'll be unable to sleep ever again.'

'I'll stay with you until morning,' said Lelean. 'Go to sleep, Sawas. Don't be afraid of anything. You'll have another dream, a good one.'

'Good night, Pop.'

'Good night, Sawas.' Faddaf made for the door.

'Will you stay at home tomorrow or go to war with the humpbacks?'

Faddaf was surprised to hear his son say 'go to war.' He glanced at Lelean.

'Just answer your son's question.'

'I'll be at home tomorrow.'

'And I'll tell you and Mom all about my dream?'

'So you will. Good night.'

Sawas was not troubled by fear the next morning: no nightmare interfered with his sleep the rest of the night. But it had not left; it was lurking inside, and now Sawas's soul wanted it done away with. There was only one way about it. While his parents had an unhurried breakfast glancing at him now and again, he stuffed himself with some cheesecake, washed it down with rux tea and began his story.

'First I dreamt about you driving me around in a pushcart exactly as before, when I was small.' Sawas looked at his father. 'You took me all around near the house, and then said, "Would you like to go far?" I said I would, because I enjoyed it when it was long and fast. You were taking me through Dorlief when Werew and Garurag appeared. They chased the cart, with me teasing them and crying to you: "Faster! Faster!" and you ran so fast they fell behind. Then you deliberately slowed the pace and they nearly caught us up clutching at my shirt. Then I called to you again, and you increased your pace. It was fun and I was laughing. Then Werew and Garurag dropped behind, while you ran on and on. I looked back and didn't see Dorlief. I asked you to turn back. It was a strange and desolate place, and I think I was frightened. But I wasn't frightened too much, just a bit. You never looked at me and kept on running. I shouted very loudly, "Pop, Pop, let's go back home!" You heard me and turned your head my way, and it wasn't you. It was your brother Sawas.'

'Tarry awhile, Sawas,' Faddaf interrupted his son. 'How did you know it was my brother? You've never seen him.'

'I don't know, Pop. But it was Sawas. I'm sure it was Sawas.'

'All right, Sonny.'

'Sawas shouted. He shouted for some reason, and I was frightened again. He was running, looking back and shouting. And I noticed that he was looking and shouting not at me but whoever was behind me. I was afraid to look back and see the one he was fleeing from. Then I looked behind, and it was you, Father. Sawas was fleeing and shouting at you.'

'Do you remember what he was shouting?' asked Lelean.

'At first I couldn't make out his words because I was afraid, but then I did—he kept repeating them.'

Sawas felt silent and hung his head: he was to tell the main and most dreadful thing, but he did not know how his father would take it.

'Tell us, Sonny,' Faddaf said gently, seeing Sawas was undecided.

'He was shouting, "Faddaf, you'll do away with evil!" While you... you couldn't catch us up. You, too, were crying— You were crying, "Give me back my son!" I saw Sawas running straight for the abyss. I cried and asked him to stop. And I woke up... Dreadful dream, isn't it?'

'Very dreadful,' said Lelean honestly, but trying not to let on that she was party to the danger, alive in her mind's eye. 'But you've told us, and it's no longer yours.'

'Sawas?'

'What, Pop?'

'D'you want to go hunting with me? We'll stalk stone humpbacks,' said Faddaf turning the tide away.

'Yes! No!' cried Sawas and Lelean simultaneously.

'I do, Pop! Let's go today,' Sawas's eyes were shining with happiness.

'Not today, Sonny. Pop and me will have to get things ready for it,' said Lelean glancing at Faddaf and hoping he would be forthcoming for a change.

'Mom's right, Sawas. It'll take some time. We'll soon be going to the hills, I promise.'

'May I tell Werew and Garurag I'll be going humpback hunting with you?'

'You sure may,'

'I'll go for a walk.'

Sawas dashed off to his room to collect his girdle with two lath swords and popped outside a few moments later.

'Look, Faddaf,' Lelean said and paused.

Sawas was standing in the doorway.

'What is it, Sonny?' said Faddaf.

'May I take a real bow and some arrows?'

'Well, that's what I've been teaching you how to shoot for.'

'Thanks, Pop!' Sawas dashed for the great outdoors like a shot.

'Faddaf,' there was anxiety in Lelean's voice, 'you don't seem to have paid much heed to that frightening dream.'



'Lelean, honey, I promise I won't leave Sawas's dream unsolved. I feel that the World of Dreams Lord had hidden something on the way from home to the abyss. It has to be found.'

'There's something else you must promise me.'

'Speak.'

'We're going hunting, the three of us. You'll take Lebeard along. Just to make me more comfortable.'

'I'm game,' said Faddaf with a smirk.

'But why humpbacks of all creatures for the first hunt?' Lelean flared up after having kept her feelings pent up. 'Why not an ibex, or a boar? I know boars are very dangerous. But they're beasts. While a humpback's— a foe!'

'Sawas has got to learn to look an enemy in the eye. The sooner the better. Many a Dorliefan has died because he couldn't.'

'I'm going to fetch Lebeard right away. Stay with Sawas today. Act father for a change.'

'We'll expect you and Lebeard for dinner. Sawas loves a party.'

'Sawas loves you the best of the party.'

\* \* \*

. . . Sawas wanted everything to be for real (and asked his father as much) and stuck to his choice. On the first day of the journey, he would not make camp for the night. He had made up his mind to eat and sleep on horseback. He slept half the night astride Korrok, leaning against his father, and the other half on Nan, with Lebeard. Faddaf did not object, he even liked his sudden persistence.

Late the second day, Lebeard suggested they let the horses get some rest, and Sawas agreed. They spent the night by the fire. Faddaf did not feel like sleep. He was watching the flames as they flared up, only to be dissolved in the dark as if they had never been there... He thought back to Lelean's words from the bottom of her heart: 'Act father for a change... Sawas loves you the best of the party.'

'The best of the party...' Faddaf echoed.

He thought back to her desperate look when she was leaving to fetch Lebeard. He thought back to their first date... and the words dissolved in time: 'You said I knew all about you while you knew nothing about me... You will yet. This isn't the last time we meet... is it... ?'

'It isn't, Lelean... When Sawas and I come back home, you'll see it all in my eyes...'

The nearly four-day trip to Natlief had tired Sawas out. He had become grim and sullen. Faddaf could see it all, but little did he think that it was not just exhaustion. The recent dream was the real reason why. It had left the boy without retiring to the World of Dreams—it was still in the Waking World, and as it happened, it had made its abode after much wandering in precisely the parts the three humpback hunters were passing by. Sawas knew the road, the place and the wild apple tree by the roadside—he could feel the space and himself in it. He looked around for a different place, only to find to his horror what he had seen in his dream... But he could not bring himself to get up and tell the whole truth.

He could not own up to Lebeard who walked alongside leading by the rein Nan astride whose back Sawas was now sitting, for Lebeard knew nothing about his dream; nor to his father, whom he could not let down. It was not the dream or the trail in his dream that he spoke about. He said:

'I never thought Kaduhar is like this.'

'Like what, Sawas?'

'I never thought Kaduhar is this... dreadful.'

'You note right, Sonny. There're many dangers lurking in the hills, and their formidable aspect is a warning against people taking them for hospitable hosts. But we have nothing to fear: we'll take a trodden trail and not make Kaduhar cross. You know, Sawas, there are hospitable hosts in these parts, too.' Faddaf saw his chance of proposing that they put up at Natlief. 'Tomorrow morning we'll be on Kaduhar turf and start stalking humpbacks. We must be well-rested for that, you know.'

'I know who you're speaking about, Pop.'

'Shall we, then?'

Sawas was silent. (He loved Ragogar, he loved it when the man and his stories filled a party to overflowing, but this was not the case. Besides, he had no patience with his wife and grown son.) His silence and sullen look spoke volumes. That was when Faddaf had another idea.

'You guess wrong,' he gave his son a cunning look. 'I can see at a glance you guessed wrong.'

'Why?' said Sawas.

'If you'd guessed right, you'd have spurred Nan on.'

Lebeard stopped in puzzlement.

'So I guessed wrong too.'

Sawas livened up.

'Who did you think?'

'Ragogar. You?'

'Same here.'

'So you both guessed wrong,' said Faddaf in frustration and looked away, seemingly unwilling to go on with that talk.

'Who do we put up with for the night, Pop? You've been so long about it.'

'With the Carrot.'

'The Carrot?' Sawas's eyes shone.

'The Carrot.'

'Let's go, quick!' cried Sawas. 'Lebeard, mount. Quick!'

\* \* \*

The Carrot popped out of his hut and minced along to meet the riders. The moment Faddaf got off Korrok Malam rushed to hug him like an old friend. Faddaf had to bend to stop him hopping up and down like a small kid.

'Hello, my dear Faddaf. Hello, my friend. I'm happy, ever so happy to see you and your companions.'

'These—'

'This is your son Sawas,' the hoarse voice of the old man interrupted him (he grimaced in so doing, which sent Sawas rollicking). Malam hopped up to him and gave him a hug, too. 'I've never had guests this young! It's quite an occasion! A real occasion!'

The next moment he stood in front of Lebeard tapping him on the shoulders with his two tiny orange hands.

'Lebeard's... my name,' said Lebeard, a bit embarrassed.

'Little did Malam reckon on entertaining in his house a forestman! It's a great honor for me. Oh!' Malam's nimble eyes focused on the charm on Lebeard's chest. 'Stones of the kind are not to be found in these parts. Well, come on in, dear friends.'

His gaze reaches farther than his eye, thought Lebeard.

Malam saw his guests to a small room and had them seated at a table which was laid in moments. The shape of the Carroty was now on one, now on the other side of the table (as if there were three or four carroties rather than one) to introduce yet another dish.

'Try some of the beetroot salad... Stewed carrots, savor these... Partake of these carrot balls... Here's rabbit in carrot sauce.' The host winked at Sawas who could not help smiling at this carrot invasion... Potatoes stewed in goat's milk are just on time... Mushrooms, too, stewed in goat's milk.'

Malam sat down at the table and said:

'Once at table, never say you aren't hungry. Have a nice hunger, my friends.'

The moment Sawas saw the Carroty, his heart went out to him, and he was eager to please. The opportunity offered at last.

'Have a nice hunger, Malam,' he uttered the pleasantry he had heard for the first time.

Malam was overjoyed to be thus honored and to have become after his young guest's heart.

'Thank you, my friend. Just remember: whenever it's your last best hope, Malam will come to the rescue at the first call. And now, have a nice hunger.'

Sawas smiled and nodded in response.

While the Carroty served and laid the dishes, one could only surmise that he was partial to the joy of sitting with relish at a table groaning with viands. But when it came to the eating, there was no doubt that he was reveling in the munching process: now he minced (with his chin hopping up and down, and his upper lip growing bloated and jutting out) satisfyingly smacking his lips, now he paused as he hit the right taste, closed his eyes and raised his eyebrows, rolling it around with his tongue to savor its shades...

The chat was measured, with the main thing unhindered.

'Have you been expecting company, Malam?' asked Faddaf. 'The table is groaning with food.'

Malam smiled with just his eyes. He would not be hurried over the taste of rabbit. Then he answered:

'You bet I have—and here they are.'

'Who let on we'll be coming?'

'It's in the corner next to the door. It can hear ev-ry-thing.'

'What's that?' Sawas was in wonderment under the impression that there was an animal lurking in the corner.

'Is that a goat you've got hidden there,' said Faddaf with a grin.

'Go look for yourself, Sawas. Don't be afraid... Who's there? Whom have I got hidden?'

'No one there. Just a stick.'

'That's it, the stick. It told me about you.'

It was getting dark. Malam lit candles.

'I'll see if the tea's ready.'

As he passed by Sawas he stroked his fiery head.

'Here's tea with flat cakes. Baked today. Tuck in.'

'Parate-flavored, isn't it?' Faddaf, too, was eager to please.

'Ah, so you do remember! You liked parate tea, didn't you?'

Sawas and Lebeard also liked parate tea with flat cakes.

'Thanks for the food, Malam.' Faddaf was on his feet. 'I've got to see Ragogar. He'll accompany us as far as Kaduhar and get back with Korrok and Nan.'

'Why not me, dear Faddaf? I'll take care of the horses and feed them. Exercise them, too. Why not me, dear Faddaf?'

'No, Malam, it's the compact we have: he'll be coming to the Kaduhar foothills every night with the horses. No offence meant, I just can't burden you.'

'Well, if that's the case, go to Ragogar... Compact indeed.' Malam shook his head in frustration.

You can take care of my son and friend.'

'Not to worry. Small though my hut is, there'll be room for everybody.'

'Go to bed early today, Sawas, don't wait for me. We'll be starting out at daybreak tomorrow morning.'

'You'll have to rough it, my friends. I don't care for pillows and have none,' Malam warned his guests.

. . . Back after meeting Ragogar, Faddaf found Malam despondent in his galley. He was sitting in a chair next to the wall with his hands about his head. When he raised his eyes, there were tears and sadness in them.

'What's up, dear Malam?' Faddaf asked softly.

'Nothing.' The old man shook his head.

'Sawas? Lebeard? Are they asleep?'

'Sawas was soon asleep, thanks to the travel. Lebeard thought he'd walk before sleep.'

'What makes you unhappy? Your rueful look dismays me.'

'It dismayed me.' The old man nodded at the stick next to the wall.

'Your words puzzle me, but you're all anxiety.'

'Anxiety is a warning. I'm anxious about your son and you.' Malam closed his eyes.

'Pray, go on.'

'I can see your souls are getting to be as one, but it...' He indicated his stick. 'It tells me that you're drifting apart, your son and you, drifting apart fast.'

'How d'you mean "apart," Malam?'

'Apart? A space between you two. That's all I know. That's what it told me.'

'What makes you cry?'

'Isn't that reason enough... ? You'll have to stay alone to let your head sort it all out. Go and take a breath of fresh air. You won't be able to sleep now, anyway.'

'Well, thank you, old man. I'll consider it, even though I don't have much faith in that stick of yours, a mere marshland bitubular.'

Faddaf made for the door.

'My friend—' said Malam.

Faddaf paused in brown study.

'Have patience,' said the Carroty in heartfelt care. 'It can't be crossed in a leap.'

'What can't be?'

'The space.'

## Chapter Eleven

### A Distance Immeasurable by an Eye

Faddaf was aware that humpback stalking might take him all the way to Hawur. But the short cut to the mountain by way of the Parsar Mountain Pass had too many hazards lurking for Sawas to be taken there. The Companion-giving Tunnel was out of question. Malam's tear-marked words, though still regarded as whimsical, could not but give him pause: whether by accident or design, they echoed back to his son's dream that had given him quite a fright. So he decided in favor of the roundabout way, through the Wedolick Gorge, along the River Guiss, and then by the Rewdur Pass.

. . . The second day of their trip was drawing to a close. Lebeard was slightly ahead on the right side of the gorge progressing against the Guiss stream; Faddaf and his son were on its left. Their gazes, weary of humpback stalking, were increasingly drawn to fissures, ledges and passages between crags—whatever could provide shelter for them all. Sawas did not like the cave his father and himself had only just explored. It was too deep and humid, with a bumpy floor.

'It's so uninviting, Pop, and you can't see beyond the front part. You'd keep thinking someone was crouching there. I won't be able to sleep a wink.'

As soon as they emerged from the cave, Lebeard whistled to them waving his hand. They crossed the Guiss in a hurry, jumping from stone to stone.

'Look, the spoor's fresh... A humpback must've passed this way recently.'

'It looks like that of a huge man,' commented Sawas.

'What about the big toe?' queried Lebeard.

'It never occurred to me. No man would have one like that.'

'More spoors, can you see?' Lebeard went on inspecting the giveaway humpback area. 'A tuft of hair. He crossed the river, same as you. The hind paw slipped on a stone and left a heavy imprint, while this crack tugged at its hair.'

Sawas raced over to the other bank of the Guiss to see if there was spoor there.

'Lebeard, Pop, come over here!'

'I see, Sawas.' Lebeard was bending over the spoor. 'This is where a humpback was drinking river water. The dents were left by his hind paw toes when he bent to have a drink.'

'What do we do, Lebeard? Sawas?' asked Faddaf.

'Why, pursue the humpbacks, of course! We'll catch him up in no time. Lebeard says the track's hot— Don't look like that, Pop, I'm not tired.'

'We'll move on while it's still light,' Faddaf agreed.

The hunters hit two more humpback tracks, but twilight made them put off the pursuit and stop for the night.

The third day had an unexpected beginning. As soon as they emerged from the small cave that had given them refuge for the night, Sawas said in a loud whisper indicating with his hand:

'Look, Pop, Lebeard: a humpback. Our humpback!'

Some three hundred steps ahead of them, on the other side of the gorge, a humpback was walking at a leisurely pace.

'Well-done, Sawas. You've got the eyes of a hunter,' Lebeard encouraged him on seeing he had gripped his father's arm. 'We mustn't lose it.'

'Hush!' whispered Faddaf.

'He must've sensed us, I think.'

Some time later, Lebeard's words were borne out: the humpback walked looking back at his pursuers from time to time.

'The strange thing is he's not trying to turn into a stone at the earliest opportunity,' remarked Faddaf.

'It crossed my mind, too,' conceded Lebeard. 'He may know a passage to achieve a safe getaway. We'd better unsling our bows, Sawas.'

'Why isn't the humpback running away. Is it unafraid?'

Sawas was noticeably agitated.

'He isn't afraid of us, Sonny. He's in no hurry, looks back from time to time and doesn't hug the wall. He wants to lull us into carelessness and give us the slip.'

'Look! He's stopped and waiting... Walks on again. What could it all mean?' Lebeard wondered aloud searching for an answer in his mind.

'D'you think it's trying to lure us, Lebeard,' said Sawas eyeing it closely, and persisted: 'Is it?'

Lebeard and Faddaf exchanged glances: they had not expected that conjecture from their uninitiated companion.

'You're right, Sawas. To all appearances, the humpback's trying to lure us,' Lebeard said calmly. 'We've got to head him off.'

'It's time,' said Faddaf. 'Get ready to shoot.'

'Wait a bit, Faddaf. There's a narrowing ahead, with the gorge turning right. When the humpback's round the corner and loses sight of us, we'll dash to the corner to come closer to him. It'll then be easier for Sawas to shoot him.'

The moment the humpback was hidden by the crag, the stalkers raced. Lebeard was the first to turn the corner and stopped short—waiting for him on the other side of the gorge was the humpback. He stood by the river looking straight at Lebeard. The humpback's eyes were full of rage; he was ready to rush the pursuers at any moment. They were only thirty paces apart, a distance he could cover in a few leaps.

'Stay!' said Lebeard to his friends who had caught up with him. 'Not a moment can be lost: he's about to rush us.'

'Take aim, Sawas! Ready?' said Faddaf, and unsheathed his swords crying: 'Hey, you creature, whose fangs are longer and sharper?'

The humpback bucked and bared its fangs. Sawas was all atremble and found it hard to take aim.'

'Loose!' his father commanded.

For a few moments, Sawas's fingers could not let go of the bowstring, as if he had lost control of them.

'Sonny!' His father's voice and the passion in it helped his fingers come to life.

The arrow hit the humpback in the belly—the beast roared and writhed.

'Got him! Got him!' cried Sawas.

'That was a good shot, Sawas. I'll finish it off... so it shouldn't suffer, shall I?'

'Do, Lebeard,' Sawas agreed.

Lebeard's arrow pierced the humpback's head through an eye.

'No more work left for us today: my son's done it.' With these words Faddaf sheathed his swords. 'Sawas. Would you like to come up to him?'

'Yes, Pop.'

Faddaf put his hand upon his son's shoulder.

'Go.'

He followed his son with his eyes. One step. Another. Yet another. Sawas was crossing the Guiss.

'Relax, my friend, it's all over,' said Lebeard as gently as he could on seeing that Faddaf was tense again. 'You take it as if a distance immeasurable by an eye were between you, not just a few paces.'

Faddaf was stunned to hear 'a distance immeasurable by an eye.' Well-known words seemed to have come to life in his mind: 'You're drifting apart, your son and you, drifting apart fast... Soon you'll find it hard to catch him up... While a humpback's... a humpback's a foe... You'll do away with evil, Faddaf!' He thought he knew what the words meant.

'Sa-was!' he yelled as if he could contain time with his voice and make it alter the past, stop the present and unfetter the future.

'Sa-was!' the hills crushed the boy with a resounding roar as he approached the slain humpback.

He started in fright and turned to look at his father. He saw him pulling from his quiver and sending his way one lethal arrow after another. He could hear the arrows cut through the air all round him. He could see his father's eyes that were life-ending. And his life was finished, and blackness prevailed...

'Sa-was!'

Faddaf's arrows bit at the crag and fell down. But two of them pierced a stone. It was a living stone. Its death betrayed the life in it. It split from the crag, poked its snout out of its hump and plummeted down with hoarse choking sounds. Yet another stone split off and leapt Sawas's way. But Lebeard's arrow made its fangy snout tear away a hunk of air, rather than the boy's throat, that the humpback choked on.

Faddaf and Lebeard ran up to the unconscious boy.

'He's safe, Faddaf,' said Lebeard after quickly inspecting the boy. 'He's fainted.'

'Sawas, sonny, come out of it,' whispered Faddaf, bending over his son. 'You've done well, you've felled the humpback. Pray come back now, be strong. Open your eyes. And let's go home.'

But Sawas would not come to. Faddaf held him in his arms and wended his way back in silence. Lebeard trailed him at a distance not to interfere with his feelings...

\* \* \*

Ragogar was waiting for them at the Kaduhar foothills, where he spent all his days and left his station only for the night, along with Malam who was his companion that day whether by chance or not.

'What's happened, Faddaf?' asked Ragogar. 'Sawas? What's wrong with him?'

Without waiting for an answer he looked Lebeard who was carrying the boy in the eye.

'I don't know, Ragogar,' he said. 'He wouldn't come to after a faint.'

'But he's alive, isn't he?'

'He's alive, but he's not with us,' said Faddaf at long last.

'Let me carry him, Faddaf.' Full of determination, Ragogar mounted his horse.

Lebeard questioned Faddaf with a look—he nodded his approval and walked toward Malam who was silently waiting for him on the sidelines.

'Don't wait for me, go to Dorlief,' he said looking back. 'I'll catch you up.'

'What do you tell me now, Malam?' he addressed the old man somewhat drily.

'Time will—not me.'

'What brings you here?'

'Sawas's fate will be sealed at the Crossroads.'

'What Crossroads, man. Cut out your riddles.'

'You're lost and tired, Faddaf. Understanding will come later on. For now, listen and remember. You'll tell Lelean—'

Faddaf's look was a picture of puzzlement.



'You'll tell Lelean to take Sawas to the Crossroads and leave him there. Her brother will help her, not you. She'll understand it all.'

'Why not me?' Faddaf was outraged.

'Why not you? You'll find the answer in your gut. Now go to Lelean.'

Faddaf span briskly and made for Korrok... He caught up with Ragogar and Lebeard in no time. When he drew up alongside them, he said:

'I've got to see Lelean before you bring Sawas.'

He kept his eyes on his son for a few moments. Then he spurred his horse and cried leaving:

'Farewell!

Lelean met Faddaf in a way that suggested she knew something and was prepared for the worst. Her very countenance showed her feelings had got petrified.

'What do you bring instead of my son? What is it this time? What anguish?'

'Lelean?' he exclaimed as if asking whether it was her.'

The distant, cold Lelean unsettled him, and he was at a loss how to break the news to her.

'Lelean, Sawas's alive. Our son's alive. You'll soon see him.'

'Why are your swords with you and no Sawas?'

Never before had Faddaf felt so lost and doomed.

'I've things to tell you... Something unexpected happened...'

'What do you refer to as unexpected? You're the harbinger.'

'Don't start, Lelean. I'm barely aware of what happened. Sawas fainted... and wouldn't come to. But he's alive. There's not a scratch on his body.'

'Would not come to—and alive? No. Wouldn't come to doesn't mean he's alive. Will he regain consciousness, harbinger?'

Faddaf's eyes were cast down, for he had nothing to say.

'Sorry, Lelean. I wanted... a different comeback.'

'Over the past years I've wanted a different life. But you would see nothing and hear nothing. So, finally it's your way.'

Faddaf was badly hurt.

'I've things to tell you, Lelean... It's to do with our son. Malam, the Carroty of Natlief, says you'll understand.'

'Speak up!'

'He said that you and Lebeard should take him to a certain Crossroads and leave him there. He said our son's fate would be sealed at the Crossroads.'

'And there you are, saying Sawas is alive,' Lelean cupped her face with her hands and broke into tears.

'What do his words mean?' asked Faddaf.

Lelean was silent.

'Is there nothing you have to tell me?'

Lelean did not answer.

'Sorry, Lelean, I'm leaving.'

'So are we, me and my son.'

Faddaf felt like saying something else... Or rather, find himself in the past and start from scratch, from the porch where he first met Lelean. But it was impossible. It was all over. He had left everything behind. Forever.

Faddaf went outside, said goodbye to Korrok and made for the Dorlief Governing Council: he had to see Tlanalt... Tlanalt was not there. Ralar, the Council scrivener, told Faddaf that Tlanalt had left for home. So much the better, thought Faddaf, no one to explain things to...

'Good to see you, Faddaf. Come on in,' cried Tlanalt on seeing a visitor that was always welcome.

'Hello, Tlanalt. I'm in a hurry. This brings me here. There, take it. You're Keeper now.'

'What d'you mean, Faddaf? How's that? What's happened?'

'I'm standing down. I've broken condition four.'

'No, you can't have. I don't believe it. There's something else involved. Explain.'

'There's much I can't explain to myself. I can only feel. And know. Farewell.'

'I can't believe it. Stay, Faddaf! Don't go. Let's sort it out between us.'

Faddaf looked back.

'It's too late, Tlanalt.'

. . . When on Dorlief's outskirts, Faddaf recalled his brother's words and turned back.

'I'll do away with this, Sawas. I know it's late. Late for me. Late for Lelean. Late for... our son. But for you... Thanks for trying to save me. And forgive me for my tear turning to stone before it reached the ground you were lying on.

Coming up to his house, Faddaf saw Nan. Dokod was not in the yard. They've brought Sawas, he thought, Ragogar's left. The door to the house was open. Lelean's and Lebeard's voices reached him. Lelean's voice was agitated. Faddaf took off the girder with the swords and laid it down by the porch. Suddenly a word he had long forgotten jarred on his ear. Lelean had uttered it. 'Palerard.' The word hooked him and very nearly made him cross his threshold again. But he shied off, afraid of something, and fled the words, the thoughts, the feelings... He came to on the Wild Woods boundary. He whispered before stepping in:

'I'm yours. Receive me.'

## **Chapter Twelve**

### **The Prophecy That Will Be Forgotten**

Seventeen days later Darrad the baker took his fourteen-year-old son to the Governing Council. Tlanalt and Maruram were there.

'Hello, folks. My son Plilp has something important to tell you.'

'We're happy to see your son and you, Darrad,' Tlanalt greeted the visitors. 'Take a seat. What brings you here, Plilp? Tell us.'

However, instead of telling, Plilp whispered to his father:

'I did ask you. Tell them.'

'Pardon my son, but he says he was told to tell it to all the Governing Council members.'

Maruram looked questioningly at Tlanalt.

'Since our visitors say it's an important matter that calls for all the Governing Council members, so be it,' said Tlanalt.

'Tlanalt, Maruram, sorry, but I have to be back in my bakery. I'm leaving my son behind.' Darrad got up. 'Tell them, Plilp, the way you told it to me. Leave out no details. Take your time and don't be afraid... Gently does it with this boy.'

'Go, Darrad. Plilp isn't that small, he'll do all right. Take care,' said Maruram by way of goodbye.

'May your ovens be on good heat,' said Tlanalt.

All the time it took the esteemed members to assemble, Plilp kept mouthing his words, and his gaze at the wall said the wall was not there. When finally everybody was assembled, Tlanalt addressed them:

'This here is Plilp, the son of esteemed Darrad. He has important words to say which have to be heard by each of us.'

'I hope they are as important as his father's bread on our tables.' Tragart's remark, as was often the case, implied more than there was on the face of it.

'Let's hear and see,' said Tlanalt.

'Plilp's been patiently waiting. Let's be patient enough, too, to hear him out,' chimed in Maruram. 'Fire away, Plilp.'

Plilp got up.

'I was walking my ferling back of our orchard this morning. Suddenly a grey-haired old man called to me. He was walking from the Wild Woods. I was frightened a bit and thought I'd go back home. I know... everybody knows that there's no way out of the Wild Woods.'

'It's true,' corroborated Gordrog. 'No desperado who'd ventured there ever came back. Just go on, Plilp.'

'Wait a mo, Plilp. Tell us: had the old man emerged from the Wild Woods, or you merely thought so?' asked Tragart, his mouth awry in a smirk.

Plilp hesitated.

'Speak, the Council's waiting,' Tragart urged him on with studied severity.

'I thought he had because he was walking from the Wild Woods.'

'What else did you think, our young friend?' Tragart was at it again.

'I thought it was Faddaf.'

'Sorry to interrupt, Plilp, but what made you think so?' Tlanalt ventured cautiously. 'Faddaf doesn't look old.'

'I thought it was his voice; besides, everyone knows he left for the Wild Woods. Many people saw him leaving that way.'

'Go on,' said Tlanalt.

'When the ferling and I walked fast away, he called to me... by the name. I didn't mean to stop, but he called me again, so I waited.'

'And it was Faddaf?' asked Gordrog.

'I don't know. I was frightened a bit. He looked like Faddaf and called me by the name. But Faddaf's not old, and that one was a white-haired old man... No one has even come back from the Wild Woods.'

'Are you through? Is that it? We now must consider it and make up our minds if it was Faddaf.' Tragart was at it again.

'Tragart, if you have important business that needs attending to, do so. We won't insist on your presence. Neither will Plilp, will you?' Tlanalt interceded.

'Sorry, Tlanalt. I merely thought Plilp had imparted his important news to the Council. Sorry, young friend, if you have anything to add to what you've said, be kind enough to go on.'

'What did the man you met say to you?' asked Tlanalt.

'He told me to memorize his words exactly and pass them on to the Governing Council members. He said the words had to be put on paper and kept for the coming generations to see.'

'Our Faddaf seems to have made so bold as to regard himself as guardian of souls, whether now living or in the offing—all the coming Dorliefan generations.' Tlanalt was obviously unable to restrain himself from a jibe.

'Shut up, Tragart!' Tlanalt flared up. 'Faddaf is Dorlief's hero, and no Dorliefan would stand slurs on his name, no matter how his further fate shapes up. I'm cautioning you: I'm going to submit your today's behavior with regard to Plilp and your dirty innuendos with regard to Faddaf to Dorlief's judgment.'

'We are yet to see who Dorlief'll side with. The Wild Woods and its inhabitants, I don't think!' Tragart walked out on the meeting on that note.

'Now we can hear out our guest in quiet,' said Maruram, markedly content. 'You were hard put to it to speak, Plilp, but do go on, finish what you started.'

Plilp raised his eyes to the ceiling, seemingly to see if the old man's words were there.

'Over and over again will Dorlief's quiet life course be upset, as it was in the remote past, by the unbridled will of the mighty monster dubbed Shwarrawsh by our forefathers. Many of those born for life and much of what's dear to us will be irretrievably lost in his murderous embrace. But there'll be left, as they were before, those who will not let the fire of life go out forever, and Dorlief will rise from the ashes again and again. But once, when a burgeoning Dorlief goes to bed and wakes up under roofs that are as one with the skies and light, Shwarrawsh will again visit his mad ire on it, robbing it not only of thousands of lives, heaven and light but span over to the past across time-space an invisible bridge which will let in more woe. Patience, labor and goodness alone will not be enough to do away with it. But a Word will be spoken, a Word that will be granted man by the World of Dreams... A Word that will not get lost in the Non-world, a Word that will not be dissolved in the Spirit World, a Word that will fathom Shwarrawsh's mourning and make the beginning and end meet. This Word will be able to do away with the woe. Mark my words, Plilp, and tell your father about meeting me. And my prophecy, word for word...'

'Come to, Plilp!' said Gordrog loudly.

Plilp started and looked at the Council members as if he was seeing them for the first time.

'Didn't the old man ask you to tell us anything else?' asked Maruram, restoring him to the present.

After some confusion Plilp finally came to and became aware of why he was there.

'Sorry. I got lost in thought when telling you what I'd heard from the old man.'

'I suppose his being lost in thought has helped him not to lose anything else,' said Tlanalt with a smile. 'Have you got it all down, Ralar?'

'I have, Tlanalt, word for word.'

'We thank you, Plilp. You may go home.'

'Stay, Plilp,' said Maruram. 'Did you notice where the old man went after meeting you?'

Plilp cast down his eyes. Then he looked at Tlanalt and Maruram.

'Ziz and I walked a bit, then I looked back to see the old man going to the Wild Woods.'

## **Chapter Thirteen**

### **Lights in the Dark**

It was not a long wait. Daylight had not waned yet when the very idea of waiting suffered an anticlimax. Shwarrawsh... Shwarrawsh had manifested himself to the Waking World. He had come from Lake Lefend.

'Falafy, I think the cellar ought to be kept open. Will you open it, please, and wait for me at home. I'll go and see if Novon and Ratitar are coming,' said Marramy to her daughter.

She had been out to investigate time and again. Her heartache were her sons and Norron, and they were not by her side at this hour. She stood at the gate looking now at the road, now into the middle distance. All Dorliefans were in a state of confusion and waiting.

Norron was making the rounds of the Dorlief outskirts. Everything was ready for the bespoken fires: deep pits had been dug, some three-five paces across, brushwood and firewood had been laid, with long poles over them (one of their ends had been rammed into the pit edges, with the other fixed to a tarred stake sunk in its middle). Nearby, people were now making stashes of food and water brought by wagon from the Dorlief warehouses. Generally given to chats during public work, they were working in silence today. Their faces were grave and concerned, their eyes hidden from those opposite, afraid of seeing themselves and their fear in them.

Norron stopped and dismounted near one such formicary. He passed the time of day with the people and received a sack of potatoes from a wagon. Hardly had he made a few steps to the stash when a cry behind his back made him look back: the boy on the wagon who had only just passed the sack to him was shrieking like mad and pointing his hand toward Lake Lefend:

'Look! Look!'

All traffic came to a standstill for a moment. Everyone was looking into the distance and their next moment was there. A black dot had appeared in the sky over Lake Lefend. It soon grew to a hairy stain as if some blotting paper had been applied to it, the paper having been consumed outright. And another, and another... The stain was enormous, its greedy belly bloated with all that blotting paper, and rolled out of the depths of the sky as a black bundle, solid and sinewy. The bundle was grasping whatever came its way and winding it about it: parcels of forest, hills, lakes, meadows, villages. It seemed to be devouring the very space and light and informed them. The bundle was incredible and uncontrollable. At its sight, trepidation and paralysis took over the will and flesh that was known as 'humanity.' Then everyone was enveloped by thick blackness, not only visible but also palpable skin-wide that inspired a very special horror that one had to deal with one-to-one over the last moments.

Marramy was two paces short of her home when something made her look back. She saw a gigantic black ball followed by pitch darkness that fenced her off from all the dearest things about her. After a moment of blindness she saw herself in front of her, herself alone, as if there was nothing in existence besides. She saw in the eyes looking at her, her eyes, infinite despair and hopelessness. She saw herself turning into nothingness, into blackness.

Salasy, Marramy's neighbor and friend, her husband and their three children were in the cellar when Shwarrawsh arrived. They could not see the sinister ball rushing at Dorlief, at their hut. They were separated by blackness, each of them seeing himself, just himself, before the end and hearing the nearest and dearest cry as they were seeing just themselves.

\* \* \*

Lutul came to because of some sounds. He opened his eyes but could see nothing. Blackness did not frighten him because he was not afraid of the dark and because he knew Shwarrawsh would bring it along.

'I seem to be alive,' he said out loud to hear his voice that would confirm his perception of life. 'I'm alive.'

He felt something was weighing him down. He made an effort to release his arms and legs—no go. Another try—no go again. Again and again... The sounds from above came again. It was something knocking, cracking, rustling. They now grew louder, now softer. What's that? thought Lutul. Is someone else alive? Trying to get out, same as I?

'Hello! Who's there? It's me, Lutul. Speak! This is Lutul here.' The cry sounded hushed, constricted, for he had to overcome the weight that resisted his every breath. You hear me? It's me, Lutul the Beanstalk.'

Lutul had remarked that when he cried, the sounds above abated. He made another effort to clutch at the good luck lurking above him.

'It's me, Lutul. Lutul the Beanstalk. Respond! If you find it hard to speak, shriek something. Just shriek.'

He heard in reply what he had not expected to hear at the moment. It was a ferling call. He thought he knew it.

'Lul!'

'Ye-oo-oo!'

'Lul!'

'Ye-oo-oo!'

'Lul! You're alive, boy! You're alive! Come here, will you?'

The knocking and scratching resumed with a vengeance. Now Lutul knew with certainty that the sounds meant rescue.

'Ye-oo-oo!'

'Ye-oo!'

The voices suggested that Lul's call had been answered by another ferling, that they were talking to each other.

'Lul, I can hear you aren't alone there. Who's helping you? Nuny... ? Sasy... ?'

'Ye-oo!' It was Sasy.

'Sasy! I can hear you.' Lutul caught his breath. 'Good for you, Lul, Sasy. I can't help you just yet... My hands... I wish I could get my hands free.'

Lutul never thought his release would be so long and exhausting. Hearing his ferlings, knowing they were so near, he let himself be deluded into gearing his own time to it, he let his hope do the opposite—leave him exhausted. His hands and legs had gone numb. It was unbearable to stand it all; he, the living and powerful Lutul, Lutul the Beanstalk! It seemed to him that there was less and less air. He could no longer urge them on quite so often. He blanked out a few times.

Lutul dreamed he was wading into lake water, swimming and enjoying its freshness. He dived into its depth, surfaced, lay spread-eagle on a laky sky, took a deep breath and... came to. Lutul regained consciousness. He still could see nothing but felt he was free, his body filling with life. In another moment he realized he was being dragged prone someplace. His face was washed with fresh waves of healing air—it was the ferlings waving their wings and thus helping themselves drag their master away from what might have been his grave.

'Lul, Sasy, dearest,' whispered Lutul.

On hearing him, the ferlings stopped, released their hold letting go of his shirt and vest and leant over him.

'Ye-oo-oo!'

'Good birdies! My saviors! What would I have done without you?'

The ferlings were pressing their weighty but gentle heads to his chest. Lutul used his still weak hands to stroke them fingering their soft down whose silver had been licked away by the blackness.

'I should have known, Lul. You were the one to undertake my salvation. Who's that there? Wait a bit. Tat? You here, too, Tat! Sorry, I didn't know you because of the experience, good birdie. Now, this here is Sasy, Sasy the Beauty. I seem to have forgotten someone. I don't know him.'

In actual fact, Lutul knew the moment he touched his head it was Rur, the one he had been in the square with that morning.

'Just talk to me. Let's hear your voice.'

'Ye-oo!' said Rur.

'Rur,' Lutul drawled with pleasure. 'I know you now, Rur, smart birdie.'

'Ye-oo!'

Lutul sat on the ground caressing the ferlings about him with word and hand. (Of his eleven birds, only four were intact.)

'Now we must make a fire, my friends. I have to inspect you.'

Lutul was not great on foresight, save that before leaving home he always took along a bag of bird feed suspended from his girdle. But that day had been special: he had stopped by home to take a spade, a bag of food and, above all, something he had been mindful of, a box of flashes, after the Dorliefan assembly.

Lutul shoved his hand into the vest pocket and remembered he had given his flashes away for the communal fire. (Next to each fire site, Dorliefans dug out a small hole and put in it a box of flashes and paper tubes, after which the hole was filled with stones.)

There was dense and cold darkness from earth to heaven. The very sky had been consumed by it. One could only grope his way, slowly and with caution. Lutul remembered where he was when the reality all around was shaven away by Shwarrawsh. The fire site at the moment was nearby. But now, in the blackness and chaos, one could not either determine the requisite direction or stumble on a prompt by chance, whether it be a familiar tree, or an arbor for relaxation, or a landmark boulder. Lutul was racking his brains how to move in the right direction: whether to choose a bearing and follow it, or explore some area crossing it up and down at random. He was confused for a moment by the sudden idea that there were no fire sites left, but he chased it away. But he would not chase away another sudden idea: Ferlings will take me to the food hoards. And, before starting out on the way, he repeated to them several times the word they had imbibed as fledglings: 'eat.' He then let himself be guided by his saviors and slowly made his way in darkness. They helped him whenever there was an obstacle on the way either by voice or by nudging at him with their bodies, so he could negotiate it. From time to time, the word Lutul had let fly would search for Dorliefans, find no response, lose its impetus and get lost without trace... But at some point the ferlings livened up, called without stopping, flapped their wings and beaked Lutul's clothes and arms. Lutul got down on his knees and hands and groped his way. He suddenly touched something soft, and his fingers told him right away it was a dead ferling. Where is it from? Lutul thought. Could its master have taken it with him? Could he be somewhere near? He went on with his exploration to the ferlings' importunate calls.

'What makes you so agitated? Cut it out! Hush! Hush! Let me listen! I wouldn't hear a man for this din!'

As if in reply, Lul beaked his shirt and pulled him, then stopped and pecked at something solid. Sasy, Tat and Rur joined their leader. Lutul's heart missed a beat, and he groped for what his ear suggested... That was it, a ferling feed box. There was no confusing it with anything else, for he had made it himself, designed for two dozen ferlings. No one in Dorlief kept more than two or three birds—Lutul dreamed of two dozen. He realized that his saviors had brought him home, or rather the pathetic remains of what had not been consumed by Shwarrawsh. He realized he had just found the body of one of his charges.

'Feed time... Feed time... You're ravenous, folks,' mumbled Lutul and started messing around.



He mechanically took a bag of nuts, emptied it into the feeder, and was suddenly overjoyed to realize that the bag was intact.

'Tuck in, birdies, they'll make you strong. Your strength will come in handy yet.'

The ferlings pecked away at the feeder, reveling in the tidbits. Lutul sat by their side dapping his eyes and cheeks on his shirt hem...

\* \* \*

The moment Shwarrawsh's breath blew out the candles in the cellar, Falafy sensed somehow that Dorlief was no more. An infinite anguish filled and momentarily incapacitated her heart. Her thoughts and feelings started taking leave of her as if on cue, replaced by nonsensical hubbub: the human and animal calls that had at some point got stuck in the air were now let loose, the tender taste of an apple-and-carrot pie licked by the flames, and the gaze of a paraplegic ferling pleading with the fire: 'Do touch my feathers and embrace me, quick!' and the cold Tear of Shwarrawsh and the human tears for the words...

'Come back, will you!' Falafy cried to her feelings and thoughts, straining the remains of her reason to the utmost.

They did heed. She fell asleep, quite drained.

When Falafy came back from sleep into the blackness of reality, it took her long to overcome her fear and open the cellar trap door. But the thought of her mother prevailed over fear, and she finally brought herself to get out and call to her mother. And then over and over again. She soon realized that there was nothing left of the hut save the cellar. She did not know what to do for the best, but she would not go back to that dungeon full of ghosts. She also realized she did not feel like crying or appealing for help. She felt that she had changed somehow, that she was no longer the Falafy of the day before, and that she could drive her fear away. She had acquired the feel of her hands. She had not had that feel before. She felt that, sensitive of the fire in her soul, they give and take—nay, not things but something invisible and yet potent, a power of sorts.

'Ah— ouch...' It was either a moan or a feeble cry proceeding from the dark.

Falafy went its way. She thought it was proceeding from next door.

'Salasy!' she called at random. 'Salasy!'

No answer. More piteous sounds stirred the sheet of blackness. And Falafy realized it was the puppy next door appealing for help. It must be all alone, poor thing, she thought and made haste.

'Klowolk! Don't cry, Klowolk! I'm coming!'

The pup gave vent to its voice again. This time around it was no longer a moan but a resounding bark redolent of joy. Human presence and a familiar voice had roused it. It barked on and on. Falafy finally reached the place from where the barks proceeded. She realized they were coming from below, from a deep pit it could not get out of on its own. She knelt and reached down with her hand, only to feel it hopping on to her hand and tumbling back again.

'Take your time, Klowolk. Do. Let me get hold of you. Does it hurt? Come to me, mutt. There, we're free.'

Falafy pulled out the pup and pressed it to her breast. Klowolk was all atremble trying to reach her face with his and lick it all over in gratitude. Suddenly Falafy saw a light out of the tail of her eye. She turned to face it: it was not to be lost. But it was licked off in a jiffy by blackness. Falafy stood stock still waiting: she was not seeing things, there was something there, she had seen it... The darkness again gave way to a light... It endured... It was growing. A fire! Someone's starting a fire, she thought. She took cautious steps, though her heart was racing, toward the fire. Some thirty steps short of it, she heard a voice and knew whose it was right away. Lutul. Lutul the Beanstalk. But of course, he's started a fire on the site of his hut. Talking to his ferlings!

'Lutul!' she cried and ran toward him.

Lutul turned his face to where the cry was coming from and made to meet Falafy halfway. They embraced and stood thus hugging each other in silence as if each of them had spent many days on a desert island, lost the use of their tongue, and was now afraid to speak out of turn.

'Who's that there?' said Lutul at last.

'It's Klowolk. He couldn't get out of a pit and called to me. Then you lured us with your light. It was the first time you had trouble starting a fire—lost your touch.'

'Let's give Klowolk something to eat for starters—I've found something at home. You, too, Faly, have this.' He held out a flat cake to her. 'Still spongy. Somehow they were left intact... It's a good thing I found some flashes: a fire makes things look a lot better.'

'D'you remember treating Natan and me to some flat cakes on New Light Day? They were exactly like this one.'

Lutul paused.

'I'll make more on New Light Day, a lot of them, and treat all and sundry to them as soon as they talk to me. It's a treat I thought up for myself on New Light Day.'

'What a good idea, Lutul... Lutul—' Falafy suddenly cried, frightening Lutul, Klowolk and even the fearless ferlings who flapped their wings as if fighting off the cry. 'Look! Somebody's eyes! Can you see them? Can you?'

'No, Faly.' Lutul was at a loss.

Falafy ran up to the place where she thought she had seen some eyes flash. She squatted and started raking the earth with her fingers.

'Come here, Lutul... Look, it's... your ferling. I think there's a spark of life in it.'

Lutul started to shovel the earth away with his huge hands.

'It's Dudy. It's my girl Dudy.' His voice was trembling. 'She doesn't stir... She's silent. Say something, Dudy. She's dying, Faly.'

Falafy could see her hands reaching for the dying ferling. But she did not withdraw them as she would have done, afraid to hurt the bird, if she were the same Falafy. On the contrary, she sent them her heart's urge, and started carefully touching Dudy's body. Each of their motions suggested they knew what they were doing. They detected barely perceptible currents that Falafy was not aware of and responded in kind. Lutul sat silently watching. The ferling's neck

seemed to have drawn them and would not let go. And the fingers performed their magic on it for a long and tense time. Then Falafy drew her hands away, and they went on with their work on an imaginary neck exactly as before, manipulating what they had removed to restore it to the ferling as soon as possible. They seemed to be shaping something out of clay, attaching and congealing things, fine-tuning them. They stopped for a moment, threw what could not be seen at the motionless bird's neck—Dudy stirred, stretched her neck, got up, uttered a call and flapped her wings. The four of her kindred also called, flapped their wings and ran up to her. What Lutul saw rendered him speechless.

'I'll lie down for a spell, Lutul.' Falafy's feeble voice and deflated look said she was a spent force after reviving Dudy.

'Make yourself comfortable at the fire.' Lutul took off his vest and spread it over the ground.

Falafy lay down.

'Come to me, Klowolk,' she said, barely able to move her lips and fell asleep.

She was awakened by human voices.

'Lost, lost,' Ruptatpur mumbled shaking his vegetable bag with a long rope attached to it.

'Hush, Ruptatpur! Let the girl sleep!' whispered Lutul with feeling.

'What girl? Can't you see?' He raised his bag again. 'Can't you?'

'I can. It's just a bag.'

'Just a bag!' mimicked Ruptatpur, reproach in his voice.

'Hush! Norron's daughter's sleeping.'

'I'm awake, Lutul,' said Falafy rising and came up to them. 'What's all this worry, Ruptatpur? I hear you've lost something.'

'He seems to have lost his potatoes. The bag's all holes,' Lutul taunted the trouble-maker.

'I've lost Dorrody!' Ruptatpur's voice trembled.

'Oh, sorry, Rup. I didn't know it was genuine woe. You should've said Dorrody's dead right away.'

'Perish the thought, you senseless Beanstalk, you!'

'What's wrong this time?'

'Lost, that's what I'm saying. Can't you hear? Lo-ost!'

'How did you lose her, Ruptatpur?' Falafy interfered to cut short the recriminations that were quite out of place and find out finally what had happened to Dorrody.

'I lost my wife on the way, daughter. I was dragging her in this bag to your fire. Then I stopped to see how she was, and also have a rest. I spoke to her—she wouldn't answer. I groped about—you could see nothing a pace away—and found a snag instead. It scared shit out of me: I thought she'd been twisted into a snag. Then I made it out—it was a piece of wood. I called and called, groped around with my hands in this blasted darkness—no wife!' Ruptatpur waved his hand in despair.

'What was wrong with Dorrody? Why did you have to drag her?'

'She got both her legs crushed. I had a hard time pulling them out. We then hid in the cellar. It was a good thing we were out: Shwarrawsh had razed our hut to the ground. The cellar, too: it's a miracle we were both alive.'

While Ruptatpur was recounting his woe, Lutul found some wood and set three pieces alight.

'Let's go look for Dorrody. She won't make it without our help,' he said resolutely.

Everybody went in search, both people and their helpers. They walked close to one another listening to the silence. Soon enough Rur called out of the darkness. Ruptatpur was the first to rush to the ferling's call, the rest following him. But he could not bring himself to approach the human on the ground. He let Lutul go ahead.

'It isn't Dorrody, it's Krogork the teacher,' said Lutul after an inspection and let Falafy take his place.

Falafy handed her torch to Lutul and knelt beside the teacher. She shuddered the moment her hands were above him.

'He seems to be all chewed up inside. Life's long since left him,' she said softly and cried. 'Krogork the teacher is no longer with us... He'd been so full of life.'

Lutul drove the longest stake he had with him into the ground next to Krogork's body.

'We'll find the dead and see them off into the World of the Dead later on. Now we'll go on looking for Dorrody.'

'Dor-ro-dy! Dor-ro-dy!' wailed Ruptatpur in despair. He was like one lost under the impression of what he had seen. 'My Dorrody's lying like this somewhere. And dying... Perhaps, already...'

'What a thing to say, Ruptatpur!' Lutul interrupted him. 'That's no way of speaking. Daughters from everywhere will be visiting you. Shwarrawsh might have stepped aside from them or else given them less of a beating. Have you sent ferlings with messages for them?'

'That I have. I sent them right after the assembly.'

'Well, you see? Losing heart like this and bewailing one alive! And cursing me!'

'What d'you think you're doing soft-soaping me? I'm not one for this baby talk. Just think: she's alone, has no use of her legs, with a bun in the oven.'

'Well, you see? There's a boy coming. Just give him a proper name to get one's tongue around.'

'Don't expect me to talk to you, you blasted Beanstalk.' Ruptatpur was offended. Then he cried: 'Dorrody? Dorrody?'

'Ouch—' the blackness seemed to reply in a feminine voice.

'Did you hear that?' Falafy brightened up.

'I could hear something,' said Lutul.

'It came from there,' Falafy indicated the direction. 'Come quick!'

. . . Dorrody was sitting on the ground leaning on two sticks. Ruptatpur rushed and knelt by her side.

'How come you got lost, honey? I brought a snag to the fire instead of you. You should've cried.'

'A snag's just right for a fire.' Dorrody the beauty smiled. I couldn't cry out, for your snag must've hit me and left me senseless. You shouldn't have run around in loops like a hare. If you'd progressed in a straight line, any snag would've been yours on the way. Well, this is no occasion for tears: you've found what you lost. Hello, Lutul. Hello, Falafy. Thanks for coming to fetch me. These crutches are a sore trial. I'm flat out after the three paces I've made.'

'May I have a look at your legs, Dorrody?' said Falafy.

'Let her,' cut in Lutul. 'I've seen her bring dying Dudy back to life. Here she is, my Dudy. Am I speaking the truth, Dudy?'

'Ye-oo-oo!'

'Do, daughter. My legs wouldn't mind, neither would I.'

Falafy asked Ruptatpur to hold a torch. Lutul held Klowolk in his arms, so it would not be in the way, and stepped aside...

Lutul carried Falafy all the way back to the fire. He felt he was guardian of the petite and helpless savior of Dorliefans. And this feeling inspired him with faith in his invincibility. Dorrody walked alongside pressing Klowolk to her breast and crying for happiness. Ruptatpur was also happy, even though he had learnt from Falafy that it was another girl. One thing irked him: Lutul would not let him carry Falafy, eager though he was to show his gratitude.

'Time we let our legs get some rest and have a proper meal,' said Ruptatpur as he approached the fire. 'The snag, blast it, drew all my living juices.'

'Thank the snag for drawing your greedy stomach's reproach,' commented Dorrody.

She produced from her bag a length of cloth, tore it into strips and dowsed each in tulis leaf tisane, pouring it a bit at a time from a canteen. (She had always had tulis tisane on her when she went to the forest with her girls to gather mushrooms, berries or nuts.)

'Take a cloth, Falafy, and dab your hands on it: it's good for removing dirt and healing cuts.'

'Thank you, Dorrody. I know as much: it's a domestic cure-all in our household, too. Whenever someone left home for a long time (mostly father, of course), he would have a flagon of tulis with him. It smells good, I like it.'

'So do I. So much for the firewood, Lutul. Come and wash your hands, I'll let you have some pie, all of you. You, too, Rup, rub your hands with it.'

Dorrody produced from her bag a pie wrapped in paper and cloth. When the pie showed flush in firelight, Falafy was confused to see the apple-and-carrot pie she had dreamed of in the blackness of the cellar when she was hiding from Shwarrawsh, while the flames licking it were those of Lutul's fire at which they were settled now.

'What is it, darling?' said Dorrody.

'Just a recollection.'

'We'll all be recollecting now. For a long time.'

Dorrody carved the pie with the knife Ruptatpur gave her, and she treated each to some. Nor did she forget Klowolk (he was curled up next to Falafy's legs). The pup livened up, wagged his tail and started sniffing and licking his piece.

'The fire's nearly burned down, and there's nothing to sustain it with,' Lutul said what was lurking in everyone's consciousness as they sat by the fire burning down under their very eyes. 'I think we should light the torches and go look for fire sites, all of us. Some of them must be intact.'

'Right you are, Lutul the Beanstalk, though I'd rather not,' said Ruptatpur, yawning. 'There's the food, the forest, unless Shwarrawsh had licked them all off. In fact, that's where the last best human hope's vested. The survivors must be sitting around in their cellars and shaking with fear. Once they're outside they'll come to life when they see a fire.'

'There's some truth in what Dorliefans say: Light's in, fear's out,' said Dorrody rising. 'My legs don't seem to mind it and neither do I. I've some pitch in my bag. It's come in handy. Pour some over the wood pieces, Lutul, they'd burn all the better for it.'

. . . They were treading the ground Dorlief used to be on and were confirmed by every step they made that it was a different ground, the ground that was not their native land, which did not hear them and did not speak to them. It was faceless, dead and had no trace of rebirth. They did not meet living beings on their way and kept saying to themselves that the living were hiding in their cellars. After the teacher Krogork, they did not run into another dead body. That made their hearts grow heavy because each of them realized that Shwarrawsh had seized the Dorliefans irretrievably, and none entertained the delusion that he would allow their souls to pass on to the Spirit World. They walked like this for a long time searching... without finding... And the despondency fed by the darkness and failure settled in their hearts. They no longer asked one another, 'What's there?' the way they had at the beginning, when one of them would spot something, pause and peer. Now they only listened to one another...

'Lights ahead!' exclaimed Falafy. 'Look, three lights far ahead.'

Everyone perked up and joined her.

'These are torches,' said Lutul. 'They're moving... Three people there. Most probably they're coming from the Sadorn Forest. They must be forestmen. They seem to have noticed our lights and are signaling to us. Let's go toward them. Mind your feet.'

A flare soon scorched the blackness which was quickly becoming a big bonfire.

'They've found him. They've found him,' Falafy cried, overjoyed. She ran up to Dorrody and hugged her.

'So they have, kid. So they have. People will find it easier from now on.'

The spirit of fire had warmed their chilled souls rather faster than they made it to the fire. The forestmen greeted them. Latiard was one of the three. Every Dorliefan had heard about him. He was the best guide in the neighborhood. His father, grandfather and great grandfather had also been guides. Latiard had known the forest, the hills, and all the welcoming and unwelcoming trails even as

a kid. He was prepared for any contingency, any danger lurking in the forest and hills, any danger, whether animate or inanimate, or looking inanimate.

'Hello, Latiard. Have you met my father?' asked Falafy.

(She knew Latiard well: he was her father's friend and often visited them. Latiard, his wife, daughter and son always came to see in New Light Day with them.)

'I'm ever so pleased to see you, Faly! Come closer to the fire. Sit here. My people and I were helping Dorliefans nearby when Norron rode by. We nodded to one another. He didn't stop, just rode on.'

'What about Natan? Was Natan with him?' Falafy was worried: she thought it strange that Latiard had not mentioned her kid brother.

'Norron was alone, but I'm sure: if he had made up his mind to leave Natan somewhere, it's a safe place.'

'Sorry, I heard the girl ask about her father Norron,' a forestman standing nearby said.

'Speak, Townar,' said Latiard.

'I was coming back from Hoglief where I'd shepherded a Nefenlief family, and I saw Norron galloping toward the Wild Woods. He had a boy with him. The horse was racing like mad.'

Suddenly Falafy got to her feet, stretched her arms in front of her and walked slowly and carefully, as if all around was still pitch darkness and no fire. The way she was mouthing suggested she was saying something. All this seemed strange to Latiard and he called to the girl:

'Are you all right, Falafy?'

There was neither a word nor a sign in reply. He came up to her and touched her shoulder, saying:

'Do you need my help, Falafy?'

Falafy started and came to. She looked at Latiard, a question in her eyes. He asked again:

'Do you need my help?'

'Thank you, Latiard. Don't worry. I... was merely thinking.'

'You seemed to be walking in the dark and talking to someone.'

'Sorry, I can't reveal what was in my vision.'

'I can quite understand, Falafy. Each of our souls can sometimes hold something we shouldn't turn into words for other people. Relax.'

Falafy settled by the fire again and retired into herself.

'Loner,' whispered her lips and lights coursed down her cheeks one by one. (Never again will she ask about her father.)

Dorrody sat next to her. Klowolk, who had been dozing in her arms, started on nosing his mistress (he regarded Falafy as his new mistress) and settled in her lap.

'Hello, good folks.'

Everybody turned toward the croaky voice that had taken them by surprise: approaching them was a shortish man leaning on a stick, one that had transcended the boundary between light and darkness, one who had a hump on

his back that was conspicuous even from up front. His countenance touched by the heat and colors of the flames had an orange glow. It was Carroty.

'Discernible in your looks as elicited is wonderment: you never saw me enter your house. Pardon me.'

'This is Malam of Natlief,' said Lutul after some soul-searching.

'Natlief?' Ruptatpur was agitated. 'How are my daughters, Ravary and Statsy, doing?'

'I've no knowledge of that, for I left my home nine days ago. I can't say what's befallen them... Confident of my trusty stick's voice, I had warned the Natliefans of imminent danger and called on them to follow me. They wouldn't leave their perch. Some children would have joined me, but their parents fought shy of letting them go. My old friend Ragogar would have gone with me but he couldn't leave the people.'

Ruptatpur cupped his head with his hands keening.

'How did you make your way when darkness fell?' asked Latiard. 'You weren't lighting your way with a torch, or we would've seen you coming from afar.'

'My stick guided me, forestman. I whiled away Shwarrawsh in the Tawsus Cave,' said Malam, and addressed Ruptatpur: 'Don't you bewail your daughters before their time, good man. Chance helped you out—it'll help them, too. Ragogar's promised me to take the Natliefans to Cradlief.'

'I've heard Father mention the Carrot, Dorrody, and seen him once on New Light Day. They say he's a thousand years old and used to know Faddaf,' Falafy said in an undertone.

'Ask him to join us at the fire, kid. He's tired after his journey.'

Falafy approached Malam.

'Come to the fire, Malam, you've got to have a bite and some rest. This way. This is Dorrody. My name's Falafy.'

'Thank you, Falafy. I'm happy to meet you two. The pup, too. Whose name is—' he looked questioningly at Falafy.

'Klowolk,' she said.

Malam sat next to Dorrody, with Falafy on his other side. She could not pull her eyes away from him: something drew her to him...

'Have a bite, Malam, you must be starving.' Dorrody handed him the rest of the pie.

'Thanks. Once at table, never say you aren't hungry...'

There was sadness in Dorrody's eyes. She hastened to dab at them with her handkerchief.

'Wonderful apple-and-carrot pie. My favorite. Out of the oven just in time, and the ingredients are just right. Thank you, Dorrody.'

Malam fumbled in his cape pocket for something and put it in Falafy's hand—her heart skipped a beat. He murmured gently:

'I found it on the way to Dorlief. The thing is meant for you. I realized it the moment I saw you.'

Falafy involuntarily thought back to the eerie visions in the blackness of the cellar...



'Sotowal, stay here. Keep watch and bank up the fire. Our folks will soon be here to help the Dorliefans: Wentear's on his way to fetch them,' said Latiard to the young forestman. 'Townar, we'd better get going. We'll have to start the rest of the fires and go on looking for people. Are you going with us, Lutul?'

'I'll take my ferlings with me. They got me out from under the debris, and they'll get out somebody else as well.'

'Good. The more smart help, the better.'

'You aren't leaving me behind, are you?' Ruptatpur had got up to his feet.

'It's your choice, Ruptatpur. We're setting out.'

'Here's another smart assistant.' Malam got up, too. 'My stick will respond to life's stirrings before any one of you sees or hears its signs. I'll be on hand as usual.'

Latiard shook his head and said in reply:

'It remains to be seen if your stick is as good as you make it out to be.'

. . . Another six saving fires had been started around Dorlief. People were being drawn to them; people bred by wilderness and crowded by darkness, as it were, the ones that were destined to survive. Many of them were maimed, many scared. Almost each of them had lost someone of the nearest and dearest. Many had lost them all. There were such as had got quite lost, their sentiments scattered in the dark, with nothing to marshal them and sort them out. Little by little, people got warm by the fires, their hearts thawing, and they began sharing their warmth. They began thinking life and, on finding eyes that were in quest, shared with them. There was another tiny light that both warmed and pepped people up, even such of them as had lost all hope. The light was Falafy's gift. She took it from fire to fire, from one disabled individual to another, and shared its sparks in as candid and sincere a way as she had accepted it from fate.

Time, which manifested itself as permutations of light, seemed to have ceased. Day, with its kaleidoscopic events the color of living paints, was no longer there. Night was no longer there, either; gone was the mysterious shroud, a gift of the World of Dreams. Shwarrawsh seemed to have erased both day and night, leaving a vacuum filled with darkness in their place. And life, tamed by time and now left by it, was at a loss in stupefaction. People were powerless to set time ticking again. But they could start fires whose light was food for memory and for the hope of its revival...

**Part Three**  
**The Aliens**  
**Chapter One**  
**Semimes**

The skies were filled with fresh light bountifully shared with Dorlief that was slowly rousing. The hut nearest Lake Werent on the outskirts of the village had quite woken up and was in the midst of routine household chores. Living in the hut and keeping it busy were two men, Malam and his adoptee Semimes. The hut was redolent of a morning of parate and bread fresh from Darrad and Plilp's bakery. Malam kept the inglenook going, feeding it firewood. The flames flushed his contented orange face. Watching the fire under a teapot or wok always made him happy.

'Off on a mushrooming hike, aren't you, Sonny?'

'Yes.'

'Good idea, too: we'll have mushrooms fried or stewed in milk for dinner. Should you run into some stinggrass, look around for parate, it's always there hidden among stinggrass. Well, you know as much, don't you? If you find some more, we'll dry it.'

'I will, Father.'

'Use your stick to handle stinggrass with care lest your hands go all blistery like the last time you went. Don't lump parate with the mushrooms. Take a dedicated bag.'

'All right, Father.'

'Take some bread and a canteen of tea. Flashes, too, just to play it safe.'

'I've packed some.'

'Keep away from the thicket. And don't turn right toward the Tawsus Cave: it isn't safe these days.'

'I know, Father. I'd better be going.'

'Should you run into danger, don't fidget—listen to the stick: it'll take the bearing and tell you. Go now, Sonny.'

Ninety-three years had gone by since Malam's encounter at the first fire started on the site of Dorlief destroyed by Shwarrawsh. It was in those hard times that he made up his mind to become a Dorliefan. When light finally came back to that land, he applied himself to the rebirth of the village that could have no other name save the one people had long carried about in their hearts and in their identity. Malam had chosen the site for his hut on his own—well, not exactly: he had taken his smart stick's counsel.

Another important event had taken place in his life sixteen years before.

People did not know what to do with a boy who both looked like a human and did not. He had been born to a Dorliefan lady and a Shwarrawsh warrior, one of those dubbed by the villagers nutheads. His mother had died in childbirth. Eleven days before her death she had made her escape from the nuthead lair by

miracle, for no one had ever managed the feat before. The place, what used to be Lake Lefend, had been drunk up by Shwarrawsh, and was now appropriately called the Emptied Lake. A dense fog hid it from human eyes, and harbored beneath was an increasingly malicious force. The people were dismayed, fearful of nursing a kid who would spell woe. Their other concern was what it would be like for this creature among other kids, should it be left in Dorlief. They only took heart when Malam confronted the Governing Council and said:

'Good folks all, give me a close look.'

The Council members complied, though the request had struck them as strange. Malam went on:

'Let me have the infant. I'll raise and educate the boy so he should live in harmony with other people, same as me; the rest will assess him on merit.'

'Have you chosen his name, Malam?' said Falafy thus implying her consent to the adoption.

'His name's been floating in the air for three days, dear Falafy,' said Malam, a twinkle in his eyes. 'Make an entry to this effect: Semimes, son of Malam.'

'So be it,' summed up Gordrog, the Council's oldest member, after looking Tlanalt, Faryraf, Sufus and Safasy in the eye.

On coming back home, Semimes in his arms, Malam said to himself:

'This is your son, Malam. Be always mindful of that.'

\* \* \*

'Take your time and don't try to get them all,' Malam had instructed his son when mushrooming. 'Cut them level with the ground, don't pull them up.'

But today, forgetful of it all, Semimes was in a hurry. Bent and peering, he ran from one place that boasted one or two brown caps to another that sported yellow or orange funnels, like a hungry beast, busy cutting off mushroom after mushroom until his bag was full to overflowing. On seeing clusters of stinggrass, always ready to punish an unwelcome visitor, he gave his stick the run of the place to make his way to the cherished sprig of parate.

'Go on, sting, don't spare me,' he mumbled in his rasping screech. 'I'm not going to spare you. Have at you! There!'

Semimes had always had the upper hand of stinggrass, for he was as quick as a squirrel. But that time around, he had let it win, and his hands went all blistery. A few moments before that, he had seen his reflection in a river pool... and let himself go. He had shoved his stick under his girdle and rushed to rake through the stinggrass with his bare hands, to stifle the spiritual anguish with that of the flesh, of which he was getting a good measure.

Semimes was in a hurry not to get back home sooner with his booty—to fry or dry it. He had a different objective.

'Done!' said he, throwing twigs on top of the bag full of mushrooms and the parate pouch.

He drew himself up to his full height and looked around to memorize the place, and set off at full pelt away from Dorlief, toward the Harshid, a mountain range that commenced beyond the Sadorn Forest. He was to get back home before twilight, so his father would not worry. No Dorliefan, young or old, could

run as fast and long as he. Today Semimes was running as fast as never before. He wanted to have more time for his search. He was eager to find a Tear, and hoped to find Her in the scree at the Harshid foothills or on its slopes. It would be the best gift for Falafy.

Five days ago, when nut-picking, he had leapt from one tree to another, missed and had a great fall. He made it home on one leg, with the other limp and more dead than alive. Sure enough, it was alive because the pain was something awful. However, Falafy's husband, Lutul the Beanstalk, shook his head and said:

'Your leg, Semimes, is as limp as dead, but not to worry—Falafy will put it right, make it as good as new.'

And it came to pass exactly like that. He was now running like a wolf, knowing no weariness, further to scale the crags like an ibex knowing no dread of height.

Only once had Semimes seen a Tear. As usual, at the year's first Dorliefan assembly (this time Malam was there with his son), the Keepers—Tlanalt who had two Tears, Falafy who had got a Tear from Malam ninety-three years previously and had not had the time to pass Her on to a Governing Council member before she became one, and the siblings, Sufus and Safasy, who took turns wearing a Tear—showed their Tears to the Dorliefans, thus tacitly reporting to them on their bearing the onus of Keeper in a seemly fashion and reminding the Dorliefans of their duty.

One idea had been haunting Semimes of late. If he, Semimes, found a Tear, he would appear before the Governing Council and present Her to Falafy, with all Dorlief instantly knowing of the event, and all Dorlief talking about it, and all Dorlief remembering it and regarding him as marked by fate. Marked by fate. There would not be a figment of imagination in it. It would be nothing but the truth. He did not quite know which was the more important to him, thanking Falafy or being famous... Well, there was another way: what was wrong with a Tear hidden from sight... with a stone that no one knew about, crawling under another stone, with only him, Semimes, in the know? It would then be him as Keeper, him, Semimes. The Tear might come in handy—who knew what was in store for the likes of him?

Semimes was running, running and thinking of the Tear until his feet felt they were treading on rocks.

\* \* \*

Daniel came to and opened his eyes: a delicately green undulating veil was high over the space... The sky... Daniel remembered the entire way from beginning to end, up to the moment when, disabled by fighting back his own fear and the unbearable wish to stop, he fell and lost all sensation. He remembered the knot that bound the friends' hands together getting very nearly undone. One of them might have been left inside.

'Mat—' Daniel uttered his friend's name anxiously.

'Dan.' The reply came from nearby.

'Are you watching this green sky?'

'Yes. It looks like a sky.'

'I don't think it's a dream, Mat. Nor do I think we're in heaven. We've been able to get out, and we're alive, not just our souls but our bodies, too... If we were in heaven, my back wouldn't be aching so.'

'Dan?'

'What?'

'Have you got the bead?' Matthew asked, an uncommon tension in his voice.

'What makes you ask? It isn't merely a question... Why did you ask that, Mat?'

'You know why,' replied Matthew after a pause. And it became clear what he meant. 'But it's up to you to decide.'

'I have decided... I opened my eyes, saw that greenish sky and thought I'd been born anew... Born where I should have been born, meaning here.'

'Perhaps it was your rebirth that Bushtunts was afraid of? That was why he'd hidden that weird bead from you? We now realize it wasn't a mere plaything.'

'You can go back, Mat. I wouldn't mind. But I am here to learn all about... myself.'

'I may have my doubts, but I know one thing for sure—'

'I know what you know for sure, Mat,' Daniel interrupted him. 'You know for sure that you're with me.'

'I know you know this, Dan. It's just that these words make me more resolute.'

'What a pleasure it is to just lie and look at the sky... These waves in the sky glow.'

'Almost like your gramps' globes.'

'The bead is still here, Mat. It is next to my hand. Make a mental note of it just in case—I'm putting it in my pouch. And don't worry: it's never too late to flee.'

'What time is it, Dan? I took nothing but the spade with me when we went hunting for your treasure.'

'The cell phone's in my anorak... the anorak's at the dig... We're in a timeless situation...'

'Do we get up then? Let's begin with time-space.'

'It makes me scared,' said Daniel, in part as a joke, and added: 'We get up.'

Daniel and Matthew got up, saw each other (they were a few rocks apart) and realized on looking around that they were in the middle of a mountain ledge.

'I don't remember clambering up a mountain,' said Daniel.

'It doesn't matter now. See that forest? We'll have to go down to it.'

'You sure? What about sitting down and thinking. Perhaps it's a better idea to climb higher and see something else, on top of the mountains and forest?'

'It's daytime now and warm. Come night, we'll be shivering with cold and exhausted from the ascent and hunger. Besides, I'm not much of a mountaineer.'

'Same here,' admitted Daniel. 'We've taken nothing along. We could do with Gran's sandwiches that we fed to the squirrels.'

'Well, we weren't going on a hike.' Matthew smirked and then, looking toward the forest, added on a serious note: 'But it's going to be quite some hike. Let's see where we can get down. Pray take care, will you?'

'You, too.'

\* \* \*

'Two hundred and thirteen... No, She can't have chosen this stone: it would have looked to Her too inviting... too rough, a regular spitfire... Two hundred and fourteen... Stone by stone, hollow by hollow, fissure by fissure.'

Semimes had inspected two hundred and fourteen hideaways that might have given a Tear refuge.

'Two hundred and fifteen... Just the most inviting, the most welcoming, the most reliable places, one of them. She wouldn't have gone for a different one. She's just— my cup of tea, so considerate. She also needs pity. It isn't any old stone that can give her refuge. Give her refuge and sacrifice some of its serenity and warmth... Two hundred and sixteen... This fissure's breathing cold; even my hand can feel it. One like this can't be home to a Tear... Yes, a Tear's just righteous, much more so than humanity. Compared to Her, they're crooked... so crooked! The Tear's a great equalizer because they're all crooked for Her... Provided the crookedest one of them all finds Her, picks Her up with cautious fingers and puts Her in a burrow... a soft, untroubled burrow... Her new home... and gives Her warmth...'

At these words, a pouch of lilac velvet appeared in Semimes's fingers. His other hand picked up the stone that had drawn his attention and put it in the pouch. He then placed the pouch on a stone, settled next to it and pressed his cheek to the velvet.

'... There'll be not only the velvet but also his tear to make Her warm. Making a Tear warm with a tear... Making a Tear warm with a tear.'

A very real tear, not an imaginary one, was coursing down his cheek. And another one...

Fate might have deprived him of something, but for a Tear all humanity is crooked. Whatever fate had deprived him of, it was not cordiality, it was not tears. He might keep Her better than any of the Keepers. They have many chores, and they become forgetful of the Tears that are always on them. They get used to the Tears always being with them and forget Them. This crooked one would not, because no one needs him, nor does he need anyone save a Tear, and his father... Two hundred and seventeen...

Semimes pulled his hand from under the leaning stone and hugged a crag.

'How inopportune. How inopportune,' he murmured and hefted his stick in a tight fist.

Daniel and Matthew were slowly, clumsily descending.

'Wait a bit, Dan. We can't descend here, there's no purchase. Have a rest while I try that ledge to the right. It'll probably be easier from then on.'

For some time they eyed the only path available.

'It's too narrow, you might slither,' said Daniel for no good reason.

'I can't see anything but this ledge, Dan. Don't keep on saying it's narrow. I'm going.'

'It's just right for us to negotiate it,' Daniel hastened to humour him. 'You'll make it, and so will I.'

'Wait, I'll let you know.'

Matthew hugged the wall and, feeling for purchases, moved sideways, slowly and with a thereto unknown sensation that only closeness to a bluff could give, with each step letting him progress by no more than a foot length and making progress longer: the smaller the steps, the more of them would be needed... There was a small platform behind the ledge. Matthew had to leap. He paused and waited until he felt he could tear his petrified body away from the crag and his legs were capable of motion again. He leapt and his chest finally took in a good helping of air now that it was free to do so, no longer in a vice between stone and abyss.

'Dan?' Daniel finally heard Matthew's voice he had despaired of hearing. 'You were right: the ledge is just about negotiable, and there'll be grips throughout for your hands and fingers. They'll give you confidence. But take your time.'

'May I, now?' asked Daniel with a smirk.

'Yes, do.'

'No, I mean, may I take the stage? Is it right for histrionics? What about the purchases for the feet?'

'Got your point: I'm piping down. Take your time. I'm not all that impatient to see you.'

It occurred to Daniel that fate had taken him there to make him lose his grip and fall down the precipice as he resolutely stepped on to the saving stone strip...

The friends were soon down and wasted no time making for the forest.

'Let's make that issue rest for the time being. I know it keeps haunting you. Me, too, to the same extent. But I mean to cheat it. Let's just live on. Live the life of the moment, rather than reflecting on the World around us... why we haven't seen the sun instead of the light-green waves of light, if "instead" is the right word under the circumstances, which I think it isn't.'

Matthew was silent.

'You hear me, Mat?'

'Some chow. Did I get you right, Dan?'

Daniel laughed.

'You got me better than I do myself... I wish we had a handful of nuts, or rather, two handfuls provided they grow here. I wonder what nuts grow in these parts.'

'What about a coupla handfuls of strawberries or huckleberries?'

'Anything else to suggest, Mat?'

'Let me see... Fire's a long shot, so we'd better leave meat alone... I got it! Bird nests full of eggs, always provided...'

'That's it: provided.'

'Dan—' Matthew stopped and held Dan back. 'There's someone in the forest, I think: I could see someone dashing from tree to tree.'

'Why are you speaking like this?'

'Like what?'

'In a cautious manner. If there're people around, we're in luck. Call to them, shall we?'

'Wait: there're people and people. Besides, I'm not sure it was people. It could've been a moose, or else...'

'A man-eater grizzly,' said Daniel jokingly.

'No crying, though. Let's just stand and wait. They're sure to see us without crying,' said Matthew and added: 'They may have seen us, though. I feel anxiety. When we got down I thought someone was watching us.'

Suddenly Daniel seemed to have got petrified under Matthew's very eyes. He stood stock still looking toward the forest and a bit upward, his face transfigured by fear. The fear would not let him speak. In another moment Matthew guessed what had happened.

'You saw someone, Dan, did you? Who did you see?'

'We're being watched,' said Daniel finally, barely opening his mouth, without looking at Matthew, as if afraid of the deadly consequences. 'He's in a tree. At the top of it. Look without showing we've spotted him.'

Matthew started looking at the tree tops without raising his head to spot whoever had given his friend such a fright. A bough stirred and he saw... It could not be reality. It could only be seen in a dream. In a kid's nightmare. A huge head poked out of a crown, much larger than human. The features were barely discernible. Like Daniel, Matthew was gripped by fear. The fear bred by that unnaturally huge head, those blurred, unclear features which had captured them with their gaze that consumed the distance. Matthew felt in his gut that the face spelled a threat. Faces like that only occurred in dreams: at once blurred, unreadable and eerie. That face seemed ready at any moment to charge and snap at your belly, your throat...

Suddenly the face cried something (it was more like a beastly growl)—Matthew and Daniel shuddered... and saw two people emerge from the forest with similarly huge heads. They looked like warriors; they had body armor, one of them was hefting a pole ax, the other a bow, with a mace suspended from his girdle. Matthew and Daniel stood in utter frustration. The unreality of the goings-on and the fear, still on them, made them irresolute. A warrior took an arrow, pulled the string and took aim. Matthew, feeling suddenly that the arrow meant death for Daniel, came out of his stupor, knocked him down and fell to the ground along with him. The arrow hit the ground a pace away.

'Can you run, Dan?' shouted Matthew right in Daniel's ear.

'Dunno. I'm shaky all over. My legs're putty.'

'You didn't half run. Come to your senses. They're nearing.'

The huge heads were drawing nearer and nearer.

'Wake up. We have to run for our lives.'

'I can, I can,' Daniel had cupped his head and was murmuring impulsively either to himself or to Matthew. 'Just give me the cue. The cue.'



'On your points, get set, Dan!'

'Ready!'

'Go!'

The friends fled toward the crags.

'Toward the scree!' Matthew cried, indicating the direction.

Daniel was keeping pace. He felt he could run even faster and outrun Matthew the way he had done as a kid when they raced each other to the lake. But he would not split the space made one by the danger.

Suddenly a guy emerged from behind the rock they were approaching... He was holding a stick. His aspect struck them as weird and... frightening. The friends stopped short in dismay.

'Don't be afraid of me,' he screeched. 'Hide behind this rock.'

There was nothing for it but for Matthew and Daniel to comply. They fell to watching from behind their shelter. The guy took a few steps in the direction of the pursuers and stopped. He leaned on his stick and bent over it like an old man. He seemed to have withdrawn into himself and the danger was the least of his worries.

The huge heads were now quite near and could be made out. The heads were like lumps of clay that someone had tried to give a human shape to, but cut the business short when those lumpy startups began coming to life and fled in horror. Their body armor was an array of long and narrow strips that looked like sedge leaves and hung limply from their shoulders and breast. The upper, shoulder, row overlapped the second, the second overlapped the third, and so on down to the knees. The armor had a black circle over the heart pierced by an orange arrow all the way from the left shoulder down and right. They stopped some twenty paces from the guy. Or rather, something stopped them. In a moment, when the huge heads peered at the stick, it became clear that it had somehow checked their charge.

'See, Mat? They seem to be charmed by the stick.'

'Yes. Fancy him disregarding the monsters. What's that stick against the pole ax and mace? Did you see his face? Perhaps *it's* the secret rather than the stick?'

The warriors exchanged glances and short phrases. One of them pulled an arrow from a quiver across his back and aimed it at the guy. The guy never stirred.

'What do we do, Mat,' whispered Daniel, 'if he does shoot?'

'I don't know. There's no retreating,' replied Matthew. 'But something tells me he won't.'

Daniel felt for what he had just thought of to make sure it was still there. Matthew saw him do it, but did not comment. Neither did Daniel.

Matthew's guess was right: the huge head lowered his bow. The warriors fell to discussing something again for a minute or so; they could hear them mention a Lord. Then they turned about and left back for the forest. The guy had drawn himself up to his full height and was following them with his eyes. After making sure they would not be back (their brisk and determined gait had told him that) he came up to Matthew and Daniel.

'I'm Semimes, son of Malam.'

'I'm Daniel, and this is my friend—'

'Matthew.'

'Daniel... Matthew... Daniel... Matthew...'

 Semimes echoed his new acquaintances' names internalizing their ring.

The friends silently (their silence shrouding curiosity) looked at him, waiting. Semimes screwed his eyes.

'Were Semimes a whole man—' he screeched, his face a picture of injured feelings.

The friends exchanged questioning glances on hearing this slip of the tongue.

'... he would say—' Semimes went on, only to stop, as if considering what he would say, if that were the case, 'that you come from afar, way afar. If that were not the case, you'd be called Danad, and you Matam. Which would be right if you agreed to be called that while you're here, in these parts... in Dorlief.'

'What about Mat and Dan for short?' said Daniel.

'For brevity and spiritual closeness, for your own folks in a word,' Semimes was spelling out as his injured feelings were replaced by contentment, 'for your own folks and friends, it would be most befitting. Yes, most befitting.'

'Do you come from Dorlief, Semimes? Did I get it right?'

'You got it quite right, Danad. I come from Dorlief. My father and I live near Lake Werent. Our village is the most beautiful in the neighborhood.'

'Is Dorlief a long way from here?' asked Matthew as he thought that they might stay in that village, with that guy their companion.'

Semimes smirked.

'It's much nearer than where you come from, Danad and Matam. It'll take us a day if we travel at a leisurely pace. I've used all the trails here, and I'll guide you... What village are you from?'

The friends exchanged questioning glances, and Daniel suddenly thought back to Gramp's globes.

'Our village is called Globe,' he said without a pause.

'Globe,' Matthew corroborated him resolutely to shake off the surprise that was glued to his face.

'I haven't heard of it. You must've gone a very long way. It may have been a hundred days' long.'

Matthew's and Daniel's eyes met again. They looked grave and suggested that Semimes's words meant rather more to them than Semimes intended when he said he had heard nothing of Globe.

'We also have a lake. It's simply called Our Lake,' added Daniel.

'Our Lake,' echoed Semimes. 'A very nice name.'

Semimes lightly hit his stick on the ground, his eyes closed.

'What were those huge heads in armor, pursuing us, Semimes?' Matthew said.

Semimes's face darkened, he tensed and even snorted. It took him some time to compose himself.

'Those are Shwarrawsh's men, nutheads. The Emptied Lake's their lair. They make sorties, attack and slay humans. They're real villains. Our neighbors in Natlief and Cradlief get the worst of it: they're next to the Emptied Lake.'

'What do you mean, get the worst of it?' Matthew was outraged. 'They should fight.'

'All right, Mat, you're too hotheaded. Let's listen: it's fascinating,' Daniel tried to cut him down to size.

But Semimes was hooked on the word.

'Fight, you say? Why did you flee, Matam? Were you frightened?'

'They should get ready and rebuff them. You can't fight pole axes and swords empty-handed.'

'So they should. No offence meant. People are amassing weapons. It isn't just that. Father says the Keeper Ragogar of Natlief did right to have the villagers build a fortress that would protect Natlief on the side of the Emptied Lake. It was built by people from all the villages under the guidance of forestmen who know a thing or two about that, and weapons, too.'

'What does that Keeper of Natlief keep?' asked Daniel.

Semimes hesitated, his boisterousness gone.

'Keeper? It's one whose business is safeguarding peace and quiet. Ragogar, as you might have noted in my story, safeguards Natlief's peace and quiet.'

'I thought he was entrusted with keeping and safeguarding a valuable thing,' said Daniel pointedly, aware that Semimes was withholding something.

'Thing... thing... There're things and things.' Semimes looked this way and that both looking for, and concealing, the reply. 'Some of them should be safeguarded... Thing...'

'So what is it your father says?' Daniel changed the subject to help Semimes out of a difficulty: he was ashamed to have caused him all that trouble with a chance word.

'Father?' Semimes brightened up. 'Father says that soon the nutheads would be quite strong—and things will start happening... Dorliefans, too, had to remember they had arms hidden away for hundreds of years in the Dogush Cave. Forestmen instruct Dorliefans in the use of those arms, like in time of yore, in Faddaf's times. Dorlief used to have a hero, and my father knew him well. He's told me about him lots of times. Watches are stationed around Dorlief every night. Forestmen keep watch alongside Dorliefans. Should you visit Dorlief, you'll see everything with your own eyes.'

'Semimes,' Daniel interrupted him again, 'you've told us about ancient times, about what your father knew—'

'Faddaf,' Semimes helped him out.

'How old is your father?'

'I know that at least a thousand years,' said Semimes with pride.

Matthew and Daniel could not help smiling but kept their counsel not to embarrass the weird lad.

'Who's this Shwarrawsh? Is he their Lord? One of the... nutheads mentioned some Lord,' Matthew inquired (a smile had already wiped off injured feelings from his face).

'I can tell you this, Matam and Danad—'

'We'd much rather you called us Mat and Dan,' said Daniel.

Semimes was all smiles, but wiped them off, frowned and took on a grave demeanor.

'I can tell you this, Mat and Dan, my friends: Shwarrawsh is a mighty and horrible monster. Ninety-three years ago, the skies over Lake Lefend could no longer support his malice; it disemboweled his wrath upon our lands. It was the work of a moment for him to lick away Dorlief and other villages, drink up Lake Lefend and envelop it in impenetrable veil up to heavens. And it became the sinister place it is, where over thirty years ago nutheads were hatched.

Daniel and Matthew listened to Semimes with something like light-mindedness.

'Shwarrawsh,' he went on, 'raced helter-skelter, only to soar yet again on high leaving behind darkness, nutheads and his own Tears... Lord? They call Lord whoever tamed them and made them serve him, him that people had never seen. He rules nutheads, hidden behind the veil of the Emptied Lake.

'Darkness, nutheads and Tears... Evil Shwarrawsh shedding Tears?' Daniel smirked.

'Yes, Tears. They say that Shwarrawsh cries seeing what he has done in his madness. And people find his solidified Tears... Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that, but for the evil, trouble and disease—' he reflected on something and added, downcast: '. . . and crookedness, people might live in peace for ever.'

Matthew and Daniel suppressed the question at the tip of their tongues. Daniel said to Semimes instead:

'Chin up, friend.'

Semimes's face filled with life with as much ease as it had been downcast before.

'I see you ought to have a bite, very much so.' Semimes produced from his travel bag some bread, broke off a large hunk for each of his new friends and a bit for himself. 'We all have to fortify ourselves before the long road. Here's some tea, too. Drink! I won't, I don't feel like tea. Have a nice hunger, friends of mine.'

Matthew and Daniel echoed after some hesitation as if on cue:

'Have a nice hunger, Semimes.'

Daniel and Matthew tucked away Dorlief bread with a gusto they had never experienced, thus enormously pleasing Semimes. Semimes can please people, too, he thought. Semimes can be a friend, too.

'Shwarrawsh's warriors' heads are like some nuts, aren't they, Semimes? Dan and I have been reflecting on what this forest has to offer.'

'This here is the Sadorn Forest. Pity I haven't got a single barynth nut on me. It'd provide the right reply, Mat. You and Dan might partake of one then.'

Having munched his way through the bread, Semimes wielded his stick again lightly tapping the ground.

'What a good thing we've had a bite. The way home's barred for us today,' he intoned.

'Whyever is it, Semimes?' Matthew asked, aware that he had tested the ground first. 'There's still enough light.'

'Just a moment, Mat. What's all this hurry?' Semimes let them enjoy their tea in peace.

'The tea's just wonderful!' said Matthew with feeling, restoring the canteen to its owner.

'You've taken the words out of my mouth, Mat,' said Daniel.

Semimes screeched a laugh.

'In the whole of Dorlief, it's just Father and I brew parate tea. I was picking parate leaves this morning; we'll collect them on the way home... mushrooms, too. I left them in the woods. But we'll have to wait till morning, and look for shelter in the hills.'

'But why, Semimes? I didn't understand a thing,' Matthew repeated his question.

'I haven't said it, so you didn't understand. Sneak a look, and you'll see why.'

Matthew stepped out from behind the rock.

'Sneak it,' repeated Semimes pointedly. 'You'll stop an arrow should they see.'

Matthew hugged the rock and took a careful peep.

'Are they heading this way?' Semimes asked Matthew who was holding his breath.

'What is it, Mat?' whispered Daniel.

'Nutheads, at least ten of them. They're quite near,' said Matthew.

Daniel took it in bad part when his hand made for the girdle. Semimes's glance caught both that and the bulging pouch, which looked as if it was stuffed with a barynth nut or something smaller... though dearer... something very valuable.

'Don't panic, Mat, they can't see us. You, too, Dan, get your wits about you... Two became ten—we don't stand an earthly. So, we'll have to chum up the hills. Follow me, my friends. Step where Semimes's foot steps, grip what Semimes's hand grips.

Semimes tucked his stick under the girdle and set out.

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say there're short cuts in the hills, but no short paths,' Daniel and Matthew heard as they followed him.

## **Chapter Two**

### **'New times are coming...'**

A bit more than a year back.

A man stepped into Knank's tavern, Nefenlief. Whoever knew his real name would have said or, at least, thought that he came from afar (nor would he have been mistaken). Other signs were not unlike dubious conjectures. The man took a vacant table in the corner, beckoned a flunkey, who was heading his way anyway.

'Call the mine host,' he said as soon as the flunkey's gaze hovered over him.

The landlord appeared a minute later.

'Welcome. I'm Knank. Will you order anything? Is it a room or a bunk?'

'I've got no money on me: travel expenses, you know,' the stranger said, produced a box from his pocket and opened it. 'Will you take this for bed and board?'

The mine host took the brooch.

'What are you called, stranger? Tell me if you can.'

'Tronort,' the stranger said without a pause: he had learnt his new name by heart long before he came here, and had answered to it on numerous occasions in his dreams.

Knank appraised the brooch with a long look and asked:

'How long are you going to stay here, Tronort?'

'Just for the night. And a meal now and in the morning.'

'Done,' Knank made up his mind, obviously pleased. 'What will you order?'

'Wine, meat and whatever veg you have.'

'We have stewed lamb. Roast rabbit, too, served with vegetables.'

'Stew, I think.'

'What about some tea? Flat cakes or apple pie?'

'Tea in the morning. Better pie. Just wine for now. And boiled meat in the morning, a lot of it. And fried chicken and cabbage pie to take away for the road if you can...'

'Will do.'

'. . . and a canteen of wine. I'll give you another thing, you won't be sorry.'

'I'll give the necessary instructions, Tronort, not to worry.'

'Wait a mo, Knank. I've a favor to ask. I'm going to Natlief; will you get me a guide?'

'Natlief?' The landlord shook his head. 'What business have you got there? I'm not being nosey. It's just that there's unrest in those parts. Quite some unrest... I'll make inquiries about a guide and let you know right away. All sorts of people come this way.'

. . . Tronort was dozing off when there was a knock on the door. He came up to the door and opened it. It was Knank in person.

'Sorry to bother you... but it's about your request. A forestman, name of Lawuan, will accompany you to Natlief. He's got two horses from Dorlief.'

'Tell him we're setting out at daybreak.'

'Won't you go down to him?' Knank was obviously surprised.

'We'll get a load of one another on the way. I'd like to have some rest now. Get me woken up in the morning.'

'I'll wake you up. And get everything ready for the journey, as agreed.'

'I remember the arrangements, Knank.'

'Just a word of advice, Tronort. Don't offer a fee to the forestman: they're strange folks, don't charge for their services.' Knank smirked. 'Come New Light Day, they present fine things to all and sundry and only want goats in return. Eerie people... Horse rental will have to be paid for to their master in Dorlief. Lawuan'll point out the man. Well, good night, then.'

When Tronort shut the door, the landlord shook his head: he could not understand why the man would not talk to his guide.

'We'll see what you're like, forestman.' The door would not let the words out of the new arrival's room.

\* \* \*

'We won't stop by Dorlief, no point in wasting time, Lawuan. I'll pay for the horses later on.'

'Whatever you say, Tronort.'

'I wonder how my old chum Faryraf's doing. I haven't been in these parts for close on... no, over thirty years. You know Faryraf?'

'Who doesn't? He's well-known in the neighborhood. What he did for the Dorliefans is a constant reminder.'

Tronort's countenance fell, he grew tense: he knew what the guide was talking about.

'Do you mean the clock, Lawuan?'

'I see word's reached the back of beyond, where none of our guides ever go.'

'The wandering folks are full of anecdotes and fibs. They have no use for guides, for no guide will know their ways. Like the wind, they look for an exit... or an entryway they know nothing about... because they were born at the wrong place and the wrong time.'

'I'm sorry for them.'

'Why are you sorry for those who can neither betray nor be betrayed?'

'That's precisely why: they have no one and nothing they can call their own.'

'Did Faryraf really make a clock?'

'It's up there in the square telling time: day, tittle-tattle and night.'

'Tittle-tattle...' echoed Tronort in delight: he liked the Dorliefan 'tittle-tattle' that incarnated time.

'It's when day and night are given to tittle-tattle about the rest of the time,' explained Lawuan, unaware that it was superfluous.

Tronort burst out laughing.

'Dorliefans are duly appreciative, and have elected Faryraf Governing Council member. A similar clock was mounted in Natlief and Cradlief. The smiths are busy working on one in Hogleif. Everyone wants a clock like the one in Dorlief.'

Lawuan suddenly spied a warp in Tronort's countenance. It ran its way leaving behind a morbid superciliousness. Tronort's horse bucked and snorted. Tronort burst into laughter again, his laughter somewhat warped.

'New times are coming, forestman!' he said tolling a threat to old times.

'What are you talking about, Tronort?' asked Lawuan: his companion's strange words baffled him; besides, he had not addressed him by name.

'What about? We're in our eighth day of travel, and you haven't wondered who I am or what brings me here.'

'Whoever feels like it, tells of his own accord. I can't ask what a person may want to be a secret.'

'You did observe my horse pause and shudder?'

'A horse is ever attuned to its rider's soul: yours must be restless.'

'I think the clock in Dorlief paused for a moment as it observed my soul was out of joint, only to go on ticking again to record new time—my time. And Dorliefans will soon pay attention, too, to the New Lord and give their hearts away to him. It only needs—'

'The way to power from the last heart given over to you is easy and short-lived,' Lawuan interrupted him. 'But the way from the first heart to it is thorny unless it's the power granted to you by your wife. Aren't you overreaching yourself, stranger?'

'Better tell me, Lawuan, if you know anything about Tears of Shwarrawsh?'

The stranger's disrespectful talk and this unexpected question alerted the guide; he had been leading him who on the eighth day revealed his intentions that were anything but good.

'I'll tell you this, Tronort. Everybody, big or small, knows about Tears of Shwarrawsh. We, forestmen, know about them, too. But it isn't a done thing talking about them, as is the case with anything sacred. Fate gifts a Tear to an individual who then entrusts it to one of those who are responsible for Dorlief's fate.

'Is Dorlief rich in those Tears?' asked Tronort with a false smile.

'The sacred's not measurable by quantities,' said Lawuan.

He did not feel like going on with that conversation, so he spurred on his horse and called, mindful of his duty as a guide:

'Keep pace!'

It was the horses' hooves that indicated there were two travelers all the way to the Tawsus Cave. Even the silence of one traveler would not have been as intense as that of those two... Lawuan dismounted at the cave, Tronort following suit.

'Do I think right that we're going to spend the night in the cave, my silent friend?' said Tronort (the silence was getting on his nerves and making him dwell on the uncertainty of what he was nearing, while words might have made light of those thoughts).

'Conversation hasn't made our way short and easy, Tronort, more's the pity.'

'Then a fire and good wine may warm up the air between us and loosen our tongues.' Lawuan said nothing and made for the woods to get some dry brushwood...

'Well, the clock was made by me, not Faryraf,' said Tronort when Lawuan was back with a bunch of firewood.

On hearing those words, Lawuan stopped short and looked at his cheeky companion with distrust. Then he drew up closer to discern the cheat in the twilight. But Tronort's eyes seemed to corroborate his words: there was injury in them. Lawuan took the firewood into the cave and started a fire. Once outside, he said:



'Come, you'll help me gather wood for a good fire.'

The fire did its job well: it seated the travelers around itself, soothing their souls with gentle crackling, warmth and light and paved the way to conversation.

'Answer if you would, Tronort: has a Tear brought you to our parts?' asked Lawuan, indicating with look and tone that he had forgotten all about the spat.

'You guess right, Lawuan.' There was nothing of the taut bowstring in his voice, either. 'Over thirty years ago, She found me and helped me assert myself.'

'And, taking Her for your guide, you didn't know where you were going, did you?'

'Yes and no. Before meeting Her, I could see the outline of the path I was following without realizing it was leading nowhere. The Tear... became my guide in the dark and took me where my genuine predestination was awaiting me (and still is under the circumstances). I felt it the moment I touched Her.'

'Was that when you met Faryraf?'

'He found me sleeping near the Sadorn Forest. I don't know which I was: more of a guest or captive... A guest, where his son Rafar was concerned.'

'And you made a clock for Dorlief? And then he let you go?'

'You can put it like that. I made detailed sketches easily convertible into a clock... I waited long. Now I am here. My time has come.'

'Keep your shirt on—you could go to the Governing Council and tell your story. I'm sure the Council members would understand and act accordingly.'

'I'm not used to wheedling out what belongs to me by right.'

'But the Tear... You will still have to appear before the Council. Having the clue-key to the Path, however inadvertently, you would pose a threat to the villagers nearby. From now on you aren't alone: the Council members would have to share your fate. I think there might be a solution advantageous for everyone.'

The crooked smile on Tronort's face reminded them of itself. Lawuan guessed what it meant.

'There's one thing you're mistaken about, Tronort,' he said in the hope of gaining understanding if not consent. 'The Tear holds a tremendous force. But it wasn't the Tear that made you thirst for power: She hasn't got the Dorlief Keepers thirsting for it, for they are moved by concern for the villagers' peace and quiet. The warp is in you: I saw as much, and so did the horse under you. It's this warp that's the source of all that passion.'

'What are you talking about?' cried Tronort, suddenly getting up to his feet.

The fire flames flared up at that moment, as if driven by some invisible force, with fragments of them and sparks flying all over the cave and vanishing.

'Of this,' Lawuan said quietly, indicating the shrunken fire. 'Pray sit down and be quiet: I mean well.'

Tronort sat down.

'All right, guide, show me the right way,' he said, driven by curiosity, rather than the wish to question his right. Only to hear what would have shaken anyone's belief.

'To overcome the warp, there's only one way—stopping at the Crossroads... and waiting. The Path holds the danger of no return. Once you have stood the test of the Crossroads, you'd be endowed by the Spirit World Lord with vital

power and the will to accomplish... There's one among the forestmen whose wait at the Crossroads hasn't turned into eternity.'

\* \* \*

Lawuan guarded his companion's quiet, walking near the cave and listening to silence. His footfalls were soft and measured, he was not spurring on his feelings or hurrying on the night. But today, for the first time since they started out from Nefenlief, it was full of anxiety. It seemed to be alert in the expectation of something, eager to whisper something important to the forestman. But the whisper was faint and abstruse, and Lawuan's heart alone could feel the advent of a great danger.

Suddenly, as if it had broken through the dense veil of silence, the night's whisper grew louder. The very air above Lawuan was shaken by that whispering surge and made Lawuan raise his head. Against the backdrop of a dull sky, he saw the outline of a huge winged creature hovering above him. It was a matter of a moment for him to load his bow and let an arrow loose. But the flyer evaded it as nimbly as only a rare bird might when shot by a forestman. In response, it quickly folded its wings, hit Lawuan and made him fall all of a heap. The strike was hard... When Lawuan came to, he felt over him the powerful hirsute body of the beast and its bloodthirsty snout: scaled eyes, dead or alive, but gimleting him nonetheless like bogeys, a sinewy hunk of meat with the ragged holes of nostrils that soughed as they devoured the air, and a wide, fangy fissure of the maw. All of that was bundled into a brown lump bespattered with blood, with two palms above that groped through the air. Lawuan remembered the sword... only to find his arms fettered with the beast's paws as they forced their way underneath to give him a lethal hug. It suddenly stirred and turned its head where its floppy ears called it, toward the Tawsus Cave—its lithe body went into motion; it arose, spread its wings and flew away into the dark. The forestman got up just as Tronort emerged from the cave.

'What's up, Lawuan?' he asked. 'I thought there was some noise.'

'So did I. It must've been the wind that made the trees groan. Catch some sleep, Tronort.'

'Yes, I will. I can feel sleep still has its grip on me, pulling me back. You, too, ought to catch some: you've been on watch throughout the nights.'

'I'm used to dozing on the go... when the road's docile. Sweet dreams, Tronort.'

Was it a gorhoon? thought Lawuan as soon as he had himself to himself. Can it be true?

Like many forestmen and villagers, Lawuan did not believe the rumor that circulated from time to time and originated in Natlief. A gorhoon that inhabited the inaccessible mountain caves, a winged beast, brown in color, wheeled at night in the skies over Natlief. It was not unlike a rat, only much larger, as big as a boar, in fact. Its webbed wingspan was twice that of a ferling. The snout was described thus: ugly, wall-eyed, with a bloody tinge and so wrathful when baring its fangs that it made even dyed-in-the-hide hunters flee in horror. Its floppy, all-hearing ears reportedly served as its eyes. And it was impossible to hide away

from them because they could hear not only the heart beat but also the blood flow in human veins. A gorhoon chose a lone man for its quarry and attacked suddenly dropping from the sky. It was strong and fierce, and it was impossible to overpower one. There was nothing but bare bones left after an attack. Some of the Natliefans seemed to have heard that the winged beast laughed a human laugh.

Thinking back to the fibs of the gorhoon's laughter suddenly embarrassed Lawuan and made him shed all thoughts save one. The one that was about to slay me wasn't laughing a human laugh or roaring a beastly roar. It merely soughed trying to get a taste of my terror. But the Natliefan didn't fancy laughter in the night, nor did he ascribe it to a gorhoon either by mistake or deliberately. It wasn't a fib... any more than what I saw was a twilight trick... laughing in the dark is the one that has tamed the cave monster; the one whose hand I saw for a moment: it was gripping a ring on the beast's neck—a collar... That means a human was astride it...

In the morning Lawuan told his companion about the unexpected night visit. Tronort's reaction stunned him: he merely roared with laughter, thoroughly enjoying the experience and said to preempt Lawuan's irritation:

'Sorry, guide. It's a good thing you're still alive. I'm truly happy.'

'You underestimate the danger in store for us on the way. The gorhoon and his rider will come back yet. The beast in order to slay me, the human to see what he failed to see the first time around—the horror in my eyes, in order to irk the night with the heinous laughter that fills people with fear. You must know, Tronort, that should you be nearby, the gorhoon won't spare you either. But that's not all the evil we might confront yet. The nearer we are to Natlief, the nearer we are to the Emptied Lake. The nutheads creep out of their lair to attack people more and more. So, wouldn't it be wiser to turn our horses back to Dorlief?'

'Why, Raff, the son of esteemed Faryraf, tells me that forestmen are the best warriors with not drop of fear in them. You seem to be ready to give the lie to this rumor of your brethren for the sake of a stranger?'

'So, where are we going?' asked Lawuan, barely able to contain his injured feelings.

'To the Emptied Lake,' said Tronort baring his teeth.

'There's something back of your hilarity, isn't there, Tronort?' asked the forestman without reserve.

'Right you are, Lawuan.'

'We're going to Natlief. On one condition, though: you hang behind me, at a distance. The moment I feel danger, I'll let you know with two horn calls. Once you hear them, ride full pelt to Dorlief. If you do, you'll save your life and give me leave to act according to my lights without looking back.'

'It's going to be dull, with me hanging behind, Lawuan.'

'I'll give you one for the road, too, Tronort: short is the distance in your soul between the charm you bestow on people and the ill feelings you dish out—I won't find it dull with you trailing me at a distance.'

. . . Lawuan's horn was silent during the daytime, with Lawuan, having driven his lugubrious thoughts away, saving his breath, then during the nighttime which the travelers spent in their saddles, frightened only by the screech of an owl... and delighted by it; then another day which made the dull distance shorter to the extent that made them thirsty for tattle.

'Are there many mushrooms in your parts, forestman?'

Lawuan smiled. That form of address was just right with no superciliousness in it.

'You sound like a compleat mushroom man.'

The comment filled Tronort with joy.

'I must admit I've never gone mushrooming, and only hiked in a forest once. A flaw a touch unfortunate in my self-portrait.'

'It calls for a simple answer then. There're many mushrooms in our forest, both edible and those you'd better keep off. Have you acquired a taste for mushrooms, or is it—'

'Oh yes, I love mushrooms. Slippery jacks! I have a weakness for pickled slippery jacks. I have a weakness for a lot of things. When you're irked or overworked, there's nothing like pickled slippery jacks. A sip of hard drink first, though, to wash down the irk and kill it before it gets you from inside. Then you stuff your mouth with the first jack, cold, slithery, inviting you to vent it on it. Which you do, biting on it once, twice, its keen taste taking you over... your irk quite gone. You swallow it along with the tidbits—no irk! Then more mushrooms, one after another; you delight in them until they set you hiccupping. And your nerves are safe and sound...'

Lawuan was listening to Tronort with curiosity. There was something childish in evidence in this man. No, not the words, the words were not those of a child—it was his eyes.

'Then, of course, fried porcini,' Tronort was going on. 'I love them with onion sauce. This is a dish that *melts in the mouth*. The impression ever is that you haven't had enough, it's that good. And then you feel bloated.'

'I see you know a thing or two about mushrooms, Tronort. When you're in Dorlief, stop by The Flying Ferling. There're several mushroom dishes there any day. Nowhere else will there be so many on offer.'

'And you, Lawuan, a scion of the woods, what mushrooms do you like? Or have you had your fill?'

'I love them, too. The forestmen like their milk-caps best—violet, black and white. The villagers use them salted down. While the forestmen use them in soup and fry them. They're the fleshiest of them all, last long and resist worms...'

\* \* \*

Lawuan's horn was silent another day, night and another day. The gathering twilight told that tittle-tattle was about over.

'Can you see the horses spooked, Tronort?'

The horses snorted, twirled their ears and faltered in their pace, as if someone invisible was hampering them.

'Do you have any idea what's back of it all?' asked Tronort.

'A pack of wolves may have arrived at the forest edge. They may have smelled the horses. They'll keep haunting them for some time.'

'And then let go?'

'Yes. They hardly ever attack people... On the other hand, they may be creatures more frightening than wolves, not armed with fangs.'

'What with?'

'Crossbows, longbows, swords, pole axes, and... ill will.'

'Nutheads?'

'I'd better go ahead: the horses sense trouble. Just tarry a while.'

'Wait, Lawuan. I need a drink of water and my canteen's run out.'

Lawuan unhitched his canteen and cast it to Tronort.

. . . Tronort was peering into the darkening distance, remarking nothing suspect. Lawuan kept his distance without displaying worry. But still, anxiety found its way into Tronort's soul. It's my weariness playing tricks on me, he thought. I'll catch up with Lawuan and we'll make camp. I wish I had some pickled slippery jacks... Some go for slippery jacks, some for milk-caps... violet, black and white... This forestman of mine has the best of both worlds: running around in the woods, eating milk-caps and having no quarrel with life.'

The moment Tronort spurred his horse on, there was a horn call.

'One-two... One-two... Two of them,' Tronort whispered.

He checked his horse's flight in an impulsive, clumsy movement. It was more than he could do to check the galloping of his heart... And he sent his horse galloping again.

Lawuan had spied the ambush before the nutheads could shoot. They were crouched left of the road behind some rocks amid bushes. Lawuan sprang off his horse, let it go and ran leftward for the forest. He signaled to Tronort on the run... He was a few paces shy of the refuge inaccessible for the brisk and fierce arrows of the nutheads. But, on seeing Tronort's advance, he rushed his way.

'Back off, Tronort!' he shouted waving his hand. 'There's an ambush. Back off! Go!'

Tronort stopped.

'Lawuan?' he shouted in reply, at a loss what to do for the best.

The nutheads emerged from behind the rocks and made for Lawuan, shooting. Tronort was stupefied. He put his hands around his head and let the rein go. He knew them. They had visited him in his dreams. They looked down from his canvases. They had always been dreadful. And frightening. But a moment before, he had forgotten all about them. He had forgotten all about their horror-striking faces. He was thinking of anything but them. Thinking of slippery jacks. Then, all of a sudden, they sprang off the canvases woven of the living filaments of time-space, alive and kicking, those freaks. Tronort's horse, carried on by momentum and the neighing of its fellow quadruped, excused by Lawuan, turned about to flee along with it, just as Tronort lost control of both himself and his charger, and came a cropper.

'Go back to Dorlief!' cried Lawuan.

Tronort got up to his knees.

'Go-go-go!' Lawuan suddenly stuttered (a sharp pain made him bate his breath), then managed in a constrained voice: 'Go!'

'Lawuan!' Tronort cried in despair.

He turned to the nutheads as he pulled a fiery arrow out of his back (it had entered below a shoulder blade) and put it in his bow.

'You lost this, freak. Just take it back!' He had put in these words a force that defied the pain and weakness. That was how he started his battle.

The nimblest of the nutheads croaked and fell to the ground all of a heap: the arrow had hit him in the throat. The next moment, Lawuan squatted and, unhitching his gneiss cape, shrugged it on. It took him three leaps to reach the rocks and get lost among them. He could still have gotten away from his pursuers, who had lost sight of him, but there was Tronort, unarmed and helpless. Another three arrows of Lawuan's, as though released by the rocks themselves, shot dead three of the approaching warriors.

'Aim at the rocks!' came a thick nutty voice. 'He's one of them.'

The nutheads hailed arrows at the offending rocks. But Lawuan had anticipated the return salvo, sprung up and spun like a gyro beating back the stings with the hem of his saving cape. Just one of them had hit his left arm before he turned into a lightning-shooting rock. Two more nutheads fell dead. Lawuan could see four of them (three with swords, one with a pole ax) nearing Tronort. Two last arrows swiftly snatched from the quiver cut short the advance of two of them. Lawuan unsheathed his curved dagger and dashed over to rescue Tronort.

'Make for the forest!' he shrieked.

But Tronort could not stir. He stood stock still repeating one word like an incantation, the word that sped to its target like an arrow:

'Zusuz... Zusuz... Zusuz...'

Lawuan let the pole ax cut the air just once: he evaded it, came close to the enemy and curved his hand like his dagger—what had been a whole, the pole ax, the body and the head fell apart asunder. The heavy sword of another nuthead fell on the forestman thrice and thrice tested the strength of his light dagger, but the sword proved too heavy to stand in time in the way of a return strike... Another four nutheads bared their swords and rushed at Lawuan. Before parting company with his dagger, he took it to his lips and whispered:

'There're three of them already.'

The dagger telescoped the time between his master and reality that spelled death for one of the four. Wasting no time, Lawuan snatched the sword of one of the enemies. Suddenly the air above his head stirred and whispered. Lawuan knew that whisper, raised his head... and fell to his knees as an arrow hit him. It was the arrow of one whose maneuver he had overlooked. It pierced him right under his right clavicle. The nutheads surrounded him and paused. Despite the pain Lawuan unslung his bow and pulled the arrow out: he realized he would die sooner than he was quite drained of blood. He found with his eyes the guilty party who had climbed up a tree. The tree knew that the unbidden villain had better crouch in the crown and wait rather than drawing out another arrow: he would have thus stayed alive, but its soul was with the forestman and did what it

could—shake a branch at him. Letting loose his last arrow, Lawuan intoned with pride:

‘Palerard.’

The gorhoon crushed Lawuan down and, having spread its wings like a shelter to shroud its dinner site from the hungry gazes of the nutheads who were dying to finish him off, started tearing at its prey. Tronort, like one berserk, rolled over the ground beating it with his fists and pulling out tufts of grass.

‘No, no, no!’ he was yelling.

A small humpbacked creature with an orange face sprang off the back of the winged rat and came up to Tronort.

‘You called Zusuz. Here I am. I remember you and I can feel you. But I don’t know your name. Give it to me.’

Thirty-three years (local time) after their first meeting, Tronort heard this powerful voice again. He neither raised his head nor replied: he was opposed to the will of the freak.

‘His name is Tronort, Lord,’ said one of the three nutheads nearby. ‘The fiery-haired called him that.’

‘Rein in your pity, Tronort,’ Zusuz’s voice crushed him. ‘You’re here to reign.’

Tronort raised his eyes only to look away again. Few are such as could look Zusuz in the eye. Their unassailability was either due to his facial relief or to the spirit his features were suffused with, or to both combined.

‘He was my guide. We’d been traveling ten days. We tried to understand one another. He protected me till the last... You said: reign? I’m the chosen one, not a killer.’

He suddenly recalled the guillotine knife that beheaded a tramp to glorify an artist named Felix Thornton, and cast down his eyes.

‘See? You can’t deceive yourself. The chosen one is to reign. To reign, one must shed blood over and over again. Your guide killed twelve of my men. He’s more like one who’s been warring all life long, or else been getting ready to war. Spare no man when war’s going on.’

Tronort was about to say something, but his lips had got congealed and his mouth was dry. He unhitched the canteen from his girdle and... suddenly wept, for it was Lawuan’s canteen. Zusuz removed a stick from his girdle.

‘Choose whose side you’re on, Tronort. Do it now that the air is suffused with the smell of your guide’s blood. If you’re not with me, I’ll let you go... for the last time. Know, however, that you and me are as one, the fire of Black Lightning is blazing in the two of us.’ Zusuz pushed the stick at Tronort’s breast. ‘Feel that.’

And Tronort did. Zusuz’s stick brought to life within him what Lawuan referred to as warp and Zusuz called the fire of Black Lightning, what had put the ominous words in his mouth: ‘New times are coming, forestman,’ what cooled his temper now. He cast aside the canteen which had only just supplied him with a drink of water, thus diluting the bitterness of the tears which were coursing down his cheeks to his lips.

‘How did I come by the fire, Zusuz?’ he asked with a smirk.

Zusuz hefted his stick, plunged it into the darkening air and inscribed the number forty-six, which dissolved outright, restored to memory.

'Forty-six years ago I succeeded in getting into the very heart of Mount Rafruth that towers on the Hidden Side. In the Roosh Cave there my curiosity was excited by a stone kept white-hot by an unknown force. I moved the stone and released the force. It confronted me as a fog condensed black. It was a cluster of fog. Its invisible force was felt by my stick, and me, through its agency. The cluster was slowly floating up to the vault of the cave. When it found no exit, it roared something awful and extended into a filament of Black Lightning in no time at all, like a snake headed for its quarry. Then it scattered in the shape of scores of fiery arrows. They pierced the walls of the crag and flew every which way to different Worlds. One of them zigzagged about the cave, with me in its way. Another found you. The fire of Black Lightning fired in us the thirst for reign.'

Tronort remembered the self-portrait which he painted—what was it?—thirty-six years ago... the mirror and the fracture in it...

'It wasn't a crack in the mirror,' he had to admit to himself something he had never admitted before. 'It was a warp in me... It was Black Lightning fire... You're right, Zusuz, we're as one, you and me.'

'I and you are as one. But there're two of us. When you think it no longer enough to be just Thornton and you reiterate that you are me and I am you, we'll become the same flesh, and the split fire in us one and the same fire. And emerging from the Roosh Cave in Mount Rafruth, once entered by Zusuz the Lord of the Hidden Side and Tronort the One Chosen by the Tear, will be the Lord of the Waking World and his name will be Trozuzort.'

The idea as declared by Zusuz overjoyed Tronort and he burst into rabid laughter, so much so that the gorhoon turned its head, ready to growl.

'Quiet, Sus, quiet,' Zusuz hushed his rat.

Then he came up to his nutheads waiting for their orders.

'Thank you, men!' he said and slew them with the crushing blows of his stick.

'Whatever for?' cried Tronort in puzzlement. 'They aren't... even wounded.'

'My men shouldn't see the weakness in their Lord,' said Zusuz turning his bleak face to Tronort. 'Your tear for them is worse than a hopeless wound. Mount the gorhoon. I'll show you the Emptied Lake—my property hereabouts.'

Tronort approached the bloodthirsty rat with apprehension.

'Sus, Sus, I'm here with your master, I'm... visiting him.'

Zusuz burst out laughing. And said:

'Get inside and subjugate. It's what I've stood upon ever since I got the stick of marshland bitubular, the very same. Commit those words to your memory. From now on, this is your motto as well.'

'Get inside and subjugate...' echoed Tronort. 'I'll symbolize our motto and have it engraved over their hearts on our warriors' armour, so they should carry forth the will of Trozuzort the Waking World Lord.'

'So you will. Now waste no time and get on, I'll be riding behind your back. Hold tight on to the collar. Home, Sus!'



Tronort felt the gorhoon's body tense: it took a few springy steps, leaned on the air with its wings and took off. Tronort was clutching the collar for dear life and pressing Sus's sides with his legs. He felt dizzy—the flight had gone to his head. A heady flight was just the thing at the moment, making him forget what had happened and what was coming. Only to come to in his studio, with Mo in his chair nearby, and put on canvas his dizziness rather than Zusuz's symbol of will. So long as the inebriated hands did not let go... of the collar.

. . . Tronort was scared as the gorhoon, along with him and the second rider, plummeted into the blind fog. It seemed to be endless. There seemed to be no way out...

'How soon will we get to the Emptied Lake, Zusuz?' asked Tronort in a loud voice and looked back if only to see him who was behind his back.

It was just the voice that the fog let through. First it was the familiar thick laughter, then the answer:

'It's below us. Sus knows where to alight. It won't err even where not a step can be taken without light. It's its ears that sense.'

'A-ah!' cried Tronort as he lost his balance and nearly came a cropper: Sus was coming in to land all of a sudden.

A picture was suddenly opened up to stun Tronort.

'Is this your property?' he exclaimed.

'Our property!' Zusuz's voice sounded tremulous for the first time: pride had taken the upper hand. 'We'll do a lap all around before we alight. Hear that, Sus?'

The hollow was a thousand fires, enormous, barely taken in by sight. Its depth took his breath away. The walls on the perimeter descended in terraces with stairs from the floor. There was life up and down. The entire hollow had not been cultivated, just a fourth of it. Hundreds of orderly holes in the walls at every level served as entryways into the warriors' man-made burrows where they lived. Torches were ablaze over the entryways. Many of the dwellings were lit from the inside by fires. Near some of them there were nuthead men, minus their armour, going about their chores. There were women, too, probably their wives.

'Are kids birthed here?' Tronort asked wondering at his question for some reason.

'Warriors are birthed here. It takes four years for the cute tadpoles to grow and become adults whose predestination is to be warriors. We'll soon have a regular army that not even forestmen can be the equal of.'

The upper terrace unfit for dwellings was paced by men armed with crossbows and pole axes. Any living creature (whether it be a beast or human) that intruded through the cottony fog was their target.

On the floor of the hollow, near the huge cauldrons with fires under them, several nuthead men and women flayed their kill and dressed it. Among the carcasses, Tronort could make out a human body. Its lot was the same as that of a deer—to provide food for these eerie human-like creatures. Further away, horses were resting in their stables. Even further away, on the lowest tier beyond the pale, there were two fire-breathing orifices.

'What are those fire-breathing maws down there?' Tronort asked pointing his hand at them.

'Those are blast furnaces with iron boiling in them. The smithy's nearby. It's silent now, to let the warriors sleep.'

The gorhoon neared a cylindrical silo towering over the hollow all the way through the lower edge of the fog. Its tip was not to be seen.

'Let's wheel about the tower, Sus. Let's show it to Lord Tronort.'

The gorhoon careened a bit and wheeled once humoring its master in a steep descent, then once more in a gentle ascent, then over and over again, higher and higher.

Down there was an entryway into the tower and two small lit windows. Stationed near the door was a nuthead with a pole ax. Nothing up there all the way to the upper tier save for bare stone—no window, no battlement. Except that under the natural overhang of the fog, there was a platform with railings. Opening onto the platform were three glazed doors equidistant from one another over the perimeter. The windows were lit.

What's that behind the doors, wondered Tronort as nothing occurred to him.

'You'll see everything with your own eyes,' said Zusuz as if reading his thoughts, and commanded: 'Up we go, Sus!'

They were plunged into cold impregnable foam as the night turned grey mist into... black mist.

'I wish it wasn't that long,' mouthed Tronort.

'Do you hate fog?' said Zusuz.

'I hate uncertainty.'

. . . They emerged from the fog into the night, a genuine night open to both soul and gaze, a night whose vault was a permutation of dull-blue waves that amassed light in order to lend it to the coming day. The top part of the tower surrounded with a platform similar to the one below the fog (with three doors with lit windows) seemed to be floating on a sea of mist, lost and ready to live a dream, same as its dweller. The gorhoon was wheeling around the platform.

'Which room will you choose for yourself, Tronort, one of the three covered in the fog, or one of the three that soar under heaven?'

Zusuz's unexpected question took Tronort unawares: he was not prepared for this simple and yet tricky riddle. Tronort thought and then said:

'May I ask first what room is yours?'

Zusuz laughed.

'We're equals, so I'll answer. My dwelling is where I can see the dwellings of my men. My dwelling's in the Emptied Lake, under the same roof as theirs, however gloomy or wet it might look. I'll move to a room floating on heaven when the lands around the Emptied Lake are mine. I'll move there to admire my lands, not just anybody's for all eternity.'

Tronort knew now what he would say to Zusuz.

'I'll choose one of the rooms under the skies to show my living faith in your objective's feasibility. May it soon come time when no enemy arrow, no enemy ferling upset the serenity of eternity around us.'

'Alight, Sus!' the humpback's words passed by Tronort like a whiff of the wind.

The gorhoon alit on the platform. Zusuz, followed by Tronort, dismounted.

'Have some rest, Sus.'

Sus flapped its wings several times and got onto the top of the tower under an overhang on several upright supports.

'Is its room even higher? Tronort said with a smirk.

'Yes, its nest is up there. That's where it rests and watches. It listens for the staircase inside, and he'll drop like a rock onto whoever ventures on it without my permission. Know: it's only me, Sapha the maid (she's got a room and a kitchen at her disposal; you've seen her two windows down there) and, from now on, you that can go up and down it.'

'What if Sus's out?' said Tronort: the fear inspired by the cute tadpoles taking four years to turn into the bloodthirsty freaks swarming in the hollow would not let him stay one-on-one with the question.

'Who'll watch the staircase if I let Sus go hunting? My stick's always with me. There're far too many steps for me not to heed its warning. So, you can rest assured. And we'll travel together,' Zusuz grinned. 'That's Lord Trozuzort's bidding.'

Guided by Zusuz, Tronort inspected the three rooms at the upper level. They were similar in every respect, though they overlooked different parts. Each had a table, two chairs, a bed and a cupboard with a few shelves behind a common door.

'I'll put up...' began Tronort, only to cut himself short. 'I'll take this one.'

Zusuz gave him a close look.

'Unless I'm much mistaken, this window overlooks Dorlief,' Tronort went on by way of explaining his choice. 'Many years ago this place captivated my soul. On top of that, there's a clock in the Dorlief square that I thought up. Whenever I look out the window, I'll imagine the place, the time and the chosen one converging, thus soothing my heart and my reason.'

'Food will be brought in by Sapha,' Zusuz cut in (there was irritation in his voice). 'What you do is pull the cord, and Sapha'll come up. Here's the key to you room; there isn't such another. It opens both doors: onto the outer platform and onto the inner one, to the stairs.'

Zusuz stepped toward the door and looked back.

'Ask for no pillows: there aren't any. If you can't have prophetic dreams without one, Sus'll kill a young ferling and Sapha'll pluck it for your pillow. Sweet dreams, Lord Tronort.'

'Sweet dreams, Zusuz.'

'Unlike mine, your lips fight shy of the word "Lord."'

'True enough, Lord Zusuz, but we're equals, aren't we?'

\* \* \*

Weariness made Tronort lie down without undressing. It flashed through his mind at some point that he had forgotten to lock the door. He got up heavily, reluctantly, picked up the key from the table and came up to the door. His eye

caught sight of the maid cord and he thought better of it. I'll summon the maid, he thought, wash my face and have a bite. What has she cooked for Zusuz today? Meat's out of question. I'll ask for some wine. The cellars under the tower must be full of wines... Life goes on. I'm here to live. Tronort pulled the cord, sat down in a chair and waited... There were some footfalls... He thought he knew this hasty gait. There was a knock on the door.

'It's unlocked,' said Tronort.

He jumped up to his feet in puzzlement and at a loss, for Timothy entered the room.

'Hi, Felix.' His eyes shone: he was overjoyed to see his friend again.

'How come you're here? Who let you in?'

'The door was unlocked, so I came in.'

'Good, good. It's a good thing you're here. I promised to show you a land where they don't betray childhood, my land. This is it. I'll do it right away. What a good thing you've found me. We'll fly Sus, and I'll show you my beloved place, Dorlief. I'll show you my clock. We'll alight right in the square.'

'Wait a bit, Felix,' Timothy interrupted him and gave him a strange, suspicious look. 'You... you're dead. You... cut off your head. Remember? I was at your funeral, remember?'

'No, no! It wasn't me! No, Timothy! Mo... Believe me, Mo. Do you? It was a different man... a tramp. He had no reason to live. Do you believe me, Mo?'

Timothy stood saying nothing—just looking at Felix. Then he said:

'I believe you, Lee. I can see it's you.'

'So, let's fly.'

'No, I can't.'

'Why not?' Felix's face was warped. 'Why not? Will you... let down your childhood? Let yourself down? And me? Will you let me down?'

'No, Felix. Not at all. I'm thankful to you for everything and I remember everything. But I can't stay here. You know Kathleen and Jenny are waiting for me... Kathleen and my little Jenny, my nearest and dearest.'

'You dreamt of this land. You're now betraying your dream. I give you another minute. Make up your mind whether you're a traitor or not.'

'I can't leave my wife and daughter. Sorry.' Timothy was at once resolute and atremble with fear.

'I feel awful, Mo. I'm all alone here,' Felix admitted. 'Mo—'

'No,' Timothy cast down his eyes.

Felix was dismayed: his appeal to pity had been declined. And he surprised himself by weeping... Timothy could see him weeping. Timothy had never seen his tears... Felix laughed in hysterics, snatched the stick from the table (it was Zusuz's stick) and hit Timothy over the head. The man held his head and backed toward the door to the outer platform. The door was flung open. Timothy staggered, had his back against the railing, and fell over it with ease, without resistance, deliberately.

Tronort somehow sensed—it might have been a draught (*Draught* being a childhood memory)—the draught told him there was someone behind him. He was frightened: a witness! He looked back: it was Zusuz.

'Surrender the stick,' he said.

Tronort complied. He wished he could hide. *Someone Hiding*, another caption to his childhood sketch flashed through his mind, with the sketch itself showing to his mind's eye next. It's me hiding, he thought. Hiding from myself. So... this room was drawn by me then.

'I mean, Zusuz, I'm weak. I'm weak... willing to be strong.'

Zusuz was waiting, silent.

'I can't...' went on Tronort. 'I can no longer be myself. I don't want to be myself. I want...'

'Speak.'

'I want... to be you.'

'Speak.'

'I and you are as one.'

'Whom do you crave?'

'Trozuzort... Lord Trozuzort.'

'Follow me, Tronort.'

Zusuz, followed by Tronort, emerged on the platform.

'Stop and stay put until I tell you to move. There, ahead of you, is the abyss!' the air was enunciating in Zusuz's deafening voice. 'In another moment confronting you will be fragments of the Worlds and faces of Life. Some of them will call to you, some will repel you. Some will beckon to you. You'll step the way I tell you. Or else you'll be lost in the abyss. Once you take that step, wait!'

'Where are we going?' Tronort could not help himself.

'To the Hidden Side. The Roosh Cave in Mount Rafruth. Whence Black Lightning emerged and where its lights blazing in us will reunite.'

Zusuz fell to cutting the air with his stick, opening up what was lurking in the dark beyond the side open to view, what lured and repelled when manifest, and what turned the uninitiated into nothingness.

'See that rock, Tronort?'

Tronort was at a loss: there were so many pictures in front of his eyes, it was impossible not to get lost.

'Tronort, look here while I hold the cave!' commanded Zusuz in a forbidding tone.

Tronort's eyes found the rock.

'I can see it,' he murmured, and thought his murmur was issuing from the cave.

'Come.'

Tronort and Zusuz stepped forth... Tronort bated his breath, drawn by uncertainty.

He opened his eyes and heaved a saving breath. If it had not been for the dream which had absorbed his tremulousness he would have been stunned for fear on waking up.

'I'm Sapha the maid, Lord Tronort,' a nuthead was enunciating in a hoary voice (the head was covered with a light-brown scarf). 'I knocked and knocked, but you wouldn't answer. I was called by Lord Zusuz. Lord Zusuz wanted to know if Lord Tronort wanted something.'

## Chapter Three

### 'Give me your name!'

Semimes stopped. It was a piece of good luck where Daniel and Matthew were concerned, for their bodies were groaning with fatigue, and they were happy with the shortest of stops.

'Have some tea and relax. But it wouldn't do to stop long,' said Semimes as he produced his stick and tapped the trail. 'The nutheads are in hot pursuit. They can't see us but follow in our tracks, even though I'm trying to confuse them, doing my best. They must be sniffing their way, much like a beast would. I've never known them to be this good in the mountains.'

'Are they near?' Daniel asked.

'Gaining on us bit by bit, Dan. More's the pity, even though they aren't near enough to frighten us with their arrows.'

Semimes fell to thinking.

'What is it, Semimes?' Daniel sounded nervous.

'It's a long way to the Druze,' Semimes went on reckoning out loud.

'Is it a river?' guessed Matthew. 'To put the nutheads off the scent?'

'It won't work, Mat: it's a long way to the Druze, and you're exhausted—we won't be able to have descended to the Kerdock Gorge and crossed the Druze undetected.'

Semimes felt the ground again with his stick and shook his head only to make an anxious Daniel repeat the question.

'What is it, Semimes?'

'On to your feet with you. We have to go. The trail will have something to suggest.'

Matthew got up and silently gave Daniel a hand.

. . . They could see their guide was somewhat nonplussed: he had not put his stick under his girdle and kept hitting it on the rocks and souging, never looking back to see if they were all right the way he had done theretofore. Semimes was eager to think of something... very much so, only to run into hard rock... Suddenly he cried out, giving his charges quite a turn and making them stop in their tracks, their faces glued to the air as if it might help them not to go down, ledge and all, if it were about to crash down. Nothing crashed, withstanding Semimes's cry. Their faces got unglued and restored to their places.

'Back! Back! We're going back! Turn about! We're going back!'

'What d'you mean, back?' Matthew, back in possession of his senses, was outraged. 'The nutheads are there!'

'Semimes?' exclaimed Daniel as he gave way to the feisty guy, and that exclamation made the same sense as Matthew's words.

'Follow me. Follow me. This is no time for empty words. Our salvation is there... unless Semimes is much mistaken.'

Matthew and Daniel had no time to as much as exchange glances in order to soft-pedal their puzzlement: Semimes had been that quick in turning them about and luring them along. He led the way murmuring something under his breath.

'No, no, Semimes wasn't mistaken, even though he might have been under the pressure of circumstances unless he'd thought of... Her. But when his eye spied that fissure, Semimes thought of Her. He didn't think of himself or his friends. He thought of Her. Semimes didn't reckon whether it was the right place for Her or not: there wasn't the time. He just remembered Her. So, he'd done the right thing.'

Semimes and his thoughts ran apace, leaving Daniel and Matthew behind. He sensed as much and looked back.

'On the double, my friends! It'll pay. Very much so.'

Matthew, followed by Daniel, both gasping for air and never trying to make their guide believe otherwise, came up to him. Taking advantage of his remembering them finally and pausing to wait for them, along with his erstwhile favor as spelled by his eyes, they plopped on the ground.

'No, no, this is much too early. Much too early. This is no time to relax. Get up, Mat. Get up, Dan. This isn't the moment for relaxation. Or else our maneuvering would all have been in vain.'

'What d'you mean, maneuvering? Are we going to negotiate things with the nutheads or is it that something's escaped me?' Matthew taunted Semimes hoping that he would tell them what he was up to.

Semimes laughed in reply. Then he said:

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that sometimes it's wiser to face danger in order to avert it.'

'Are you sure, Semimes, that this is the case?' asked Daniel who, like his friend, doubted the wisdom of confronting the nutheads.

In reply to which, the trickster whom they had to obey out of hopelessness uttered a phrase that was incomprehensible to them:

'I have this to say: you aren't fat enough to shake my confidence. Follow me and don't fall back.'

. . . The guys came up to the part of the mountain trail that had taken its toll not so long before. It was an upgrade at the time, and its steepness had given them hell. Now it was a bluffly downgrade.

'So, we shouldn't have clambered up, Semimes?'

'So, it wasn't in vain, since you've understood something.'

'No offence meant, Semimes, but Mat and I haven't understood a thing, save that we're going to meet the nutheads,' Daniel chimed in mimicking Matthew's reproach.

'You'll understand it all, my impatient friends, in just a minute. And that with a vengeance. What we've got to do is descend to that platform. We'll have to do it as speedily and silently as we can, for the nutheads are approaching it along a ledge down there. They can't see us because of the bend, nor can we them. Watch Semimes descend and follow suit. All right, down to business, Semimes.'

When the three of them were on the platform, Semimes said in undertones:

'Hug the wall, quick! There's another ten paces or so to meet them.'

Daniel leaned forward and looked from behind Semimes to see at last what was the saving something ahead: they had been there before and seen nothing special.

'Dan, didn't I tell you?' hissed Semimes. 'Hug the wall! Curiosity won't get you anywhere at this point.'

But it was too late: one of the nutheads had spied Daniel. There was a voice full of tension and threat, a voice not unlike the bark of a watchdog:

'I can see them. They're near. On the double! They won't escape.'

'At last!' hissed Semimes. 'Look, this is where we go.'

Daniel and Matthew saw a narrow, deep fissure in the crag.

'We aren't too fat to shake your confidence, are we, Semimes?' Daniel mimicked the tricky phrase of the guy who was anything but not disingenuous, having only just understood, or rather eyeballed its meaning.

'There, Dan. Just so. Mat, you go first. Dan, you follow. Me, too, if I don't get jammed.'

The friends had a hard time squeezing through the crack and inching their way. They heard the nutheads rush past the saving passage.

'They might come back, but not to worry: the crag won't let them in,' Semimes comforted the friends, hearing their tense progress and breathing.

'Be so kind as to ask your smart stick, Semimes, how long we are to squeeze our way like this,' moaned Daniel, rather cheerfully though.

'We can't see a thing here,' said Matthew. 'What's in store for us further on? Does anyone know?'

Daniel and Matthew heard the stick hit a rock.

'Someone does, Mat,' drawled Semimes. 'You must've forgotten my name. Semimes has taken you here—Semimes will take you out of here.'

'Thank you, Semimes. What would we do without Semimes?' Matthew made amends.

Daniel, Semimes and Matthew smiled at the dark that bonded them.

'It's just another forty paces or so. But it won't be an exit from the crag. I think we'll get into a cave. Once there, we'll strike flashes to look around. I haven't got a torch; I thought we would be back before nightfall.'

'Why didn't you strike a mat—a flash right away, Semimes?' asked Matthew's voice.

'A light would've attracted the nutheads. Their arrows would've put them out along with the lights inside us,' Semimes's screechy voice jammed in the crack seemed to be scratching bits of wisdom off the walls and feeding them right into Daniel's and Matthew's ears.

'What about now?' Daniel wondered what turn Semimes's mind would take this time.

It was not at once that the friends heard their guide. The pause was filled with a measured tapping of the stick.

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that in wild space, light bred fears on occasion that habitual darkness knew nothing about.'



'Do you mean our wild shadows that light will give rise to?' joked Matthew. 'In which case I agree to forty paces without light.'

'Not forty,' Daniel corrected him.

'Take care, Mat!' Semimes cried out suddenly. 'Grope about. There's a sharp right turn ahead and a cave. Once you're two paces inside, stop and wait. The same goes for you, too, Dan.'

'I'm in a cave, folks!' called Matthew in joy. 'There's breathing space. It'd take a light to make me quite happy.'

Semimes followed Daniel inside, groped for a box of flashes in his bag, struck one and handed it to Matthew.

'Here's your happiness!'

Matthew raised it in front of him and said in a soft voice:

'My tiny torch! You'll take us out of captivity, out of darkness!'

'It has a light ring, Mat,' was Daniel's comment. 'You've fired envy in me, I'm green with... light envy.'

With a head-shake and a grin, Semimes struck a flash for Daniel and another for himself.

'No room for envy now, with everyone looking for an exit. Get a move on: a flash is short-lived. You go along the right wall; I'll investigate the left one.'

Daniel and Matthew who involuntarily compared flashes with matches they had not forgotten yet found the flash's slow demise rather unusual... The cave was not large, and when the eyes of those progressing in opposite (along the same wall, as it happened) directions met, there was nothing but dismay in them.

'There's no other exit,' concluded Semimes. 'We have to rely on the same one.'

A silence fell... The flashes... had burnt out, and no one was clamoring for light... Some time later there was Semimes's soft voice with overtones of shame:

'Semimes thinks (he may be wrong again, but that's what he thinks) that the nutheads have gone down heading for their lair. If that's the case and the light of three of Semimes's flashes has proved in vain, Daniel and Matthew have to be asked what's to be done next.'

'Your implication was right—we can exit by the same fissure, Semimes,' Matthew encouraged him.

'Quite right,' corroborated Daniel. 'Lead on, friend.'

'Lead on, friend... Lead on, friend...' Semimes was reveling in the sweet words, unaware in the dark that he was not just mouthing the words but actually uttering them. The same darkness concealed the grins on the faces of his charges.

The moment the friends set out, there was a thud nearby that assailed their hearts as much as their ears. Alongside that from below, as if through the wall, a light snuck in and quivered. This sudden manifestation of life made Matthew and Daniel back up groping for support in each other. Semimes had not been taken aback: he pulled his stick from under his girdle and stepped forth to face uncertainty. In another moment, there was a hole in the wall: someone had shifted a rock on the other side. Then there was a quiet voice that held no threat:

'Don't be afraid, travelers: I'm no enemy. Through a passage down there you'll get into my dwelling.'

'Since your dwelling's hidden in a crag, it occurs to me that you fight shy of people. Why must we trust you?' asked Semimes gravely.

'One may fight shy of people while loving them with one's heart, but ashamed of at one time having shed a tear out of pity for one, and having let oneself stand above everyone,' said the man behind the wall, unembarrassed.

'Give me your name!' said Semimes.

'I'm the Loner. That's what scuttlebutt calls me. I know no other name.'

On hearing the stranger's name, Semimes tucked his stick behind his girdle and nimbly vanished down the hole. He swiftly got up on the other side and confronted the one he had tested with word.

'Greetings, Loner. I know you, I've met you before. It was two years ago in the Sadorn Forest. My father and I were mushrooming and you approached us.'

'I remember you. You're Semimes, son of Malam. Call your companion.'

'There're two of them,' said Semimes and called his friends: 'Matam, Danad, crawl here without hesitation. You'll meet with hospitality here.'

A few moments later, Mathew and Daniel found themselves in a habitable cave. Four torches on the walls lit it up. The wall with a hole was in fact a fireplace. The fire in it crackled its greetings—unreturned as usual.

'This is our host and friend. His name is Loner.' Both Semimes's eyes and voice were full of reverence. 'These are my friends, Mathew and Daniel. They're from afar and exhausted by the road.'

'Greetings, Mathew and...'

The Loner, on meeting Daniel's eyes, fell silent for some reason. He was looking at him and the moments added up to time. He looked long and closely, as if there was no one else there, as if he was seeing one who had no place in the present. He had recognized those features and was at a loss, betraying himself with his countenance and a greeting cut short.

Both Semimes and Mathew had remarked the strange hiatus, and Semimes, to revive the life that hung still in the air, stirred that air with word.

'His name's Danad, Loner.'

'Yes... Natan,' said the Loner, as if echoing the name uttered by Semimes.

'He's called... Danad,' screeched Semimes almost spelling the name.

'Danad. Greetings, Danad.' The Loner seemed to have finally come to his senses. 'Be my guests. Sit by the fire and get warm. Dinner will soon be ready.'

He stepped aside, took off his gneiss cape and hung it alongside his sword, bow and a prod leaning against the wall.

'Forestmen's gifts,' Semimes explained softly but with feeling to Mathew and Daniel. 'They are the ones that make them like this. The scabbard and quiver are inlaid with stones. Villagers never find such stones—only forestmen do.'

'I'd been to the mountains,' said the Loner, sitting down next to the guests. 'When I came back I heard faint voices behind the wall. Then there was a silence, and I decided to wait. When the cave talked again, I opened the hole... to let in three young travelers, whom I'm pleased to meet. But it wasn't just you that

entered through my secret hole, there was also the sign of a long path that fate decreed. For all of us...'

Daniel and Matthew could not understand what sign the Loner mentioned, and what path, but they felt they were already on it. Semimes's tenacious mind, however, snatched the word. The path. Semimes might come in handy on this path... he thought, unless he's got something wrong.

'Who drove you into that cave behind the wall?' the Loner asked.

'We were fleeing from nutheads. There were at least ten of them,' said Semimes. 'They're good mountain-climbers. We had to sneak into a narrow fissure I'd spied by chance. That was how we found ourselves in the cave. May we stay here until morning, Loner?'

'You can stay at my place as long as you wish,' answered the Loner. 'It's dinnertime. Wash your hands outside, to the right of the exit. Take some water and a canteen of tulis juice.'

Semimes opened the wooden door covered with a gneiss cape which made the door invisible from afar, for it blended with the crag. The cave overlooked a small platform with a bluff. To the right there was a narrow ledge which could only be used in hot flight. On the left, there was nothing but a series of tiny ledges. While over the platform...

'Can you see that, Mat?' Daniel lifted his head looking at the sky. 'In the daytime it opened up to us as light-green waves, remember?'

'I do, Dan.'

Now the sky above was intensely green, as if all the light in the world, all its particles had returned back to their cradle to relax after their light-giving work. They had clung to one another, shut their eyes and fallen asleep. Daniel and Matthew could not pull their wide, enchanted eyes away from this emerald ocean...

'It's time, my friends. Eternity's no stomach-filler, there's never enough of it,' said Semimes. 'Come and wash your hands. I'll pour some water for you.'

Daniel and Matthew, having washed away the traces of travel from their hands and faces, dabbed their palms with tulis, curious, following the example of Semimes. Daniel nudged Matthew when their mentor could not see them, winked and said:

'I hope the Loner will give us a glass of good wine. What d'you think, Mat?'

'I think he will, Dan, and more. We sure rate a coupla after all that hike.'

Semimes paused on hearing this and frowned looking gravely now at one, now... at the other.

'This is no Flying Ferling tavern for you, where the tongue can take its leave of the wits and the wits of thought.' He screeched pointedly.

'This here is a flying cave,' commented Daniel in good spirit.

'A joke like this goes, very much so,' said Semimes, with no frown this time. 'I can see you've perked up a good deal. All right then, let's wrestle. Two of you and two of us—me and my stick.'

Mathew and Daniel were nonplussed: they had not expected that of their sensible guide. They looked at each other, then at Semimes, then at the abyss

(that he had suddenly forgotten all about) at a loss what to say. Mathew was about to be taken over by his overweening pride. But Semimes anticipated it.

'That was my idea of a joke, my friends,' he said with gusto. 'You played the fool, and so did I. Truth to tell, no fool would pit against his friends on so small a platform. Come inside.'

'That was cool,' said Matthew shaking his head.

'The air may be cool, but it doesn't do to fight... friends.'

When he entered the cave, Semimes parked his stick next to the prod. The guests sat down on two wooden benches at the table which had waiting for them roast meat, huckleberries and shelled barynth nuts. The Loner was pouring into wooden bowls some herbal tisane (which smelled good).

. . . When it came to barynth nuts, Mathew and Daniel exchanged silent glances (thinking of the same) then looked involuntarily at Semimes, who, fortunately, missed their faux pas.

'Mat, was it you who asked me why the villains who chased us are called nutheads? Did you get an answer?'

'Yes, Semimes. The answer's in front of my eyes.'

'Just as I said: looking at a nut and thinking of the villains.'

(A barynth nut was so large that two of them would be hard to accommodate on the palm of an adult's hand. It was crooked, lumpy and rough with utter lack of symmetry as distinct from most other fruit. Its shells followed the outline of the growing kernel. Its growth was striking: the lure of each part of it was precisely its unlikeness; it flaunted itself as best it could, elbowing and nudging its neighbors and thus doing its best to outstrip the rest of them. The similarity of the Emptied Lake inhabitants to this crooked fruit inspired the name 'nuthead' for the villains.)

'It isn't fair,' said Daniel tasting a barynth nut.

'What isn't, Dan?' Semimes turned his gimlet eyes to him.

'I like barynth nuts. They taste good, but...'

'They seem to have been roasted, don't they, Dan?' chimed in Matthew. 'Which makes them all the more delicious.'

'No one roasted them,' said Semimes. 'They were merely shelled and placed on the table, so we could munch away, rather than shell them and make our mouths water.'

'It's true, barynth nuts aren't roasted. The taste (as you, Matthew, put it) is intrinsic,' the Loner explained. His eyes were smiling: he found this leisurely conversation satisfying; also, it let him have a good look at his visitors, particularly the one who had made his feelings and thoughts be here and elsewhere, in the distant past, and provide a link to the future.

'May I finish my idea?' Daniel addressed his friends.

'Yes, Danad, be so kind as to tell us what you meant,' said the Loner for the rest of them.

'I think it unfair to transfer the name of what gratifies to what gives us nothing but trouble and repels. I won't call these freaks nutheads,' Daniel said, somewhat agitated.

'The villains were likened to barynth nuts because of their countenance as assessed by the eye, while it's our palate that gives us joy,' Semimes countered Daniel's argument.

'That was quite a mouthful,' Matthew commented.

'Even so, Semimes,' said Daniel and reiterated firmly: 'From now on I won't call those freaks nutheads.'

'What will you call them, Dan,' said Matthew.

Daniel thought.

'I can't say off the cuff. Nothing occurs to me. I'd better have another nut... without ulterior thoughts.'

'Enjoy, Danad. You, too, Matam and Semimes, have some, they'll keep you fit.'

'Barkycrooks,' said Semimes, his head nearly pressed against the table. He seemed to have squeezed out a crooked thorn that had long been there. 'It's indicative of their looks, their essence—they're... crook-headed freaks. They're barkycrooks.'

Everybody looked at him as if he had only just appeared there with some valuable find he had unearthed somewhere. (He knew where.)

'That was apt, Semimes,' Daniel, who had started it all, was overjoyed. 'I know now what I'd call them—barkycrooks.'

'Frankly speaking, the former name did nothing to put me off barynth nuts. But I know one thing for sure: I'm with you, Dan. I say barkycrooks.'

'I'll follow suit, my young friends. I, too, say barkycrooks,' said the Loner.

Semimes rose from the table, Daniel and Matthew eyeing him.

'Thanks for the treat, Loner,' he said softly, looking at the floor, and made for the fireplace.

Daniel and Matthew, having landed barkycrooks, put away another barynth nut each and drank a cup of good herbal tisane. Then they, too, settled by the fireplace. The Loner took a few skins off the wall and spread them over the floor.

'I hope you'll sleep well, my friends. Me, I'll go listen to the mountains.'

'Are you all right, guide?' asked Matthew placing his hand on Semimes's shoulder.

'Father says: "Give your rue to fire and take somebody else's." Here I am, sitting and throwing my rue on the fire like wet firewood.'

'I'd been meaning to ask you something all the way, but never had a chance. May I now?'

'Why not, Mat? Try your guide.'

'What's that stick of yours? It stopped those—'

'Barkycrooks.'

'Yes, barkycrooks. It can see it all, hear it all, and manages to tell you something, besides. What's that stick? Dan and I have never seen its like.'

'Father made that stick for me. You may have heard of a plant called marshland bitubular... I see you haven't. That's what it's made of. Father has taught me to listen to it. It's an art both simple and complicated: you get used to it, and it to you. The main thing here is a sensitive hand and patience... of which latter I'm in short supply.'

'Did your father say you wanted patience?' Daniel ventured.

'No, Dan you guess wrong. Father never said that. But I know I do. Fetch the stick, will you, rather than indulge in guesswork.'

Daniel brought the stick.

'I never knew it was heavier down there, with its weight concentrated in the crook.'

'Let me have it, I'll show you. The crook is bitubular's root stripped of sprouts. There's another tube inside, but smaller. Hence its name. Hold it, look at it, and study it all you wish.'

Daniel took the stick. Semimes went on:

'The stick is as strong as a forestman's sword and crushes any stone.'

'And any head, even that of a barkycrook. Wouldn't you say so, Semimes?' said Daniel, eager to humor Semimes's pride.

'Study the stick, Dan, rather than asking questions that make the subject evade them.'

'But why?' There were injured feelings in Daniel's voice. Why should my questions make you evade it? What's so nasty about them?'

'I thought it was a regular question about the martial properties of the stick,' Matthew supported his friend.

'Oh, my friends Danad and Matam—'

'If we're friends, that calls for Dan and Mat, doesn't it, Semimes?' Matthew was picking holes.

'Very much so, Dan and Mat. Very much so... What's so nasty? I'll put it like this: don't ask the subject to taste the blood that both your soul and mine sidestep.'

'You're right, Semimes,' said Daniel... after a pause. (Matthew said nothing.)

Semimes hastened to resume the subject.

'There's no breaking or cutting this stick any more than that of Father which is no less than—'

'A thousand years,' Matthew obliged to smooth things.

'No less than a thousand years,' echoed Semimes with a smile.

Daniel alone felt out of sorts, and his soul still had tantrums.

'Well, Semimes, studying as best we can, aren't we?' There was a challenge in his tone. 'No ill feelings, though.'

'What d'you mean: no ill feelings?' said Semimes quietly. 'You did take offence. So, apply your offence in aid of the force when putting the stick to the test. The stick and I aren't going to feel offended.'

Daniel followed these words by hefting the stick and striking a stone hump on the wall over the fireplace for what he was worth to smash it flat... along with his ill feelings. What happened was incredible: his hands seemed to have heard the stick. It had said no to them. There was an irresistible force in that 'no.' The 'no' had warned Daniel of the fruitlessness of the move. Daniel hefted the stick, froze on hearing it and let the stick go. Matthew caught it.

'Are you quite convinced my stick's strong, Dan?' asked Semimes. (Matthew alone could not understand the question, for the stick never so much as touched the stone.)

'I'm convinced of the weight of your words, Semimes. And of your stick's strength,' said Daniel.

'Thank you, my friend,' said Semimes, pride in his eyes. But it was not the strength of his stick that he was proud of at the moment, nor of the weight of his words either. He was proud to have his friends by his side, Dan and Mat.

'I take it, Semimes, marshland bitubular is not exactly a stick yet?' asked Matthew turning and twisting it.

'Good guess, Mat? Bitubular doesn't turn into what you have in your hand all at once. First you have to pit yourself against mire. It isn't hard to find some—it's hard to reach it. Once you've reached it, it's the turn of the bitubular to assess your patience. With your arms elbow- or even shoulder-deep in the mire, you have to grope for the magic root—what you called a crook, Dan, and remove all the sprouts of which there's a terrific lot (some two or three dozen). It takes a knife and nimble fingers. The sprouts are very long and reach deep into the mire. They hold the root so hard, no force is sufficient to pull it out, so you have to peck the mire with your nose. The twigs are severed from the stalk in-situ. They are long and fine. Unless you cut them off right away, they'd make the way back unsupportable. They'd catch at anything on the way to stay behind where they belong. They'd catch at your arms and legs, just to stay behind where they belong. They'd lead you astray and make you lose the trail which is precarious... very much so over mire. When home, you shorten the stalk to the right length. The stalk and root are then polished. The stick's not trustworthy yet at that stage. You have to impregnate it with five juices in the right order and finally dry in an oven over smoldering embers.'

'Are you expert in this craft, Semimes?' Matthew asked.

'And we could start a stall for Semimes magic wands?' Daniel chimed in to pep himself up.

'No, I'm not. Father said once that there were two sticks in the neighborhood, his and mine.'

'That's strange,' said Daniel looking Semimes straight in the eye.

'Very strange...' Semimes agreed and was surprised to reflect that he had never thought of that, though proud of his possession. 'Once, when I was only five, Father left home for a few days... to come back with a present for me. You've got it in your hands, Mat. All that time Falafy and Lutul the Beanstalk had looked after me (you're to meet them yet). When I started mastering my stick it was twice as tall as me. But it'll stay unresponsive unless you master it as a kid. That's what Father said. Whatever I tell you of the stick I know because he told me... I'll tell you a secret, though: two years ago I went to the marshland to see what it was like, bitubular. What was held off by the marshland murk, I touched with my hands. I counted all the sprouts by touch, all of them—there were twenty-seven of them.'

'Did you own up to stirring the mud with your nose to your father, Semimes?' Daniel taunted.

'That I didn't,' said Semimes, content. 'While he never let on he'd guessed I'd been to the marshland. But I'm sure he had.'

To see the inside of the stick, Matthew put its upper—open—end against the torchlight. Then he felt for something with his fingers.

'Look inside, will you, Dan? What do you say?'

Daniel took the stick but did not look inside at once: something stopped him.

'Same as then?' he asked with tremor in his voice and a glistening in his eyes that didn't result in tears.

Matthew realized at once where the glistening came from and thought back to his childhood, with the globe, the microscope, and the place on the globe.

'Like that once... in your granddad's cave.'

'Does your granddad live in a village called Globe, same as you? Did I get that straight, Dan?' asked Semimes.

'He did. He died eight years ago.'

'Give your rue to fire,' Semimes said softly.

'Or else to Semimes,' said Matthew as he recalled the other part of the wisdom passed on to Semimes by his father.

Semimes shook his head.

'You have assumed Dan's rue and turned it into a joke. It's a done thing sometimes.'

Daniel looked inside the stick at last.

'Tell me, Semimes, is the inner tube connected to the root, and is this the only link with the outer one?'

'Was that your idea, too, Mat?' asked Semimes.

'It was, and I checked with my finger. The inner tube is connected neither with the root nor the outer tube. It sort of floats inside in some kind of a springy medium.'

On hearing the words he could hardly believe, Daniel, too, pushed the inner tube several times with his finger. His eyes betrayed puzzlement.

'Surprised, aren't you?' Semimes was pleased. 'I can see you are. A special unknown force keeps the inner tube in place. Father used to say that in its third year a bitubular, which hasn't as yet lived up to its name, develops filament-like sprouts. They grow and curl into rings all at once finally turning into an inner tube. A year later, still rotating, it severs the filaments that joined it to the outer one. It's always rotating. It is even now, but very slowly.'

Semimes fell silent. Mathew and Daniel went on scrutinizing the stick. Then Matthew said:

'A thorough job.'

'Yes, very thorough,' Semimes corroborated in a knowing manner, 'first by nature, then by man.'

'I'll lean it against the wall. Let it rest,' Daniel offered.

'Yes, do, Dan.' Semimes smiled. 'Let's go to bed: we could do with some rest.'



Before he fell asleep, Semimes, looking at Daniel and Matthew, who now disappeared in the iridescent dark of the eyelids, now reappeared in the flux of light inside the cave, screeched in a fading screech as he barely moved his lips:

'You can hardly tell one skin from another, friends Mat and Dan, nor have you ever spent a night on one... But then, I never knew why those barkycrooks took fright at the sight of my... stick...'

. . . Matthew's fancy kept twisting Semimes's stick this way and that trying to get to the bottom of the intricate connection between the root and the tubes. He then began unscrewing the crook (counterclockwise). But the thread proved to be stripped, and the rotation hard and useless. Then Matthew fell to screwing the inner tube out of the outer one, but as soon as his fingers released it, it swung back to its place like a spring...

. . . Daniel tried to shake off drowsiness as he thought back to something he had left behind in some nook in the confusion of the goings-on of the day, so he could pick it up later on. But what was this *it*... ?

## Chapter Four

### The Secret Word

While the host and the guide were engaged in a lively conversation in the cave (Semimes was trying to talk the Loner out of seeing them as far as the Sadorn Forest or even the Harshid foothills, whereas the Loner had his own wishes, too), the morning was dispelling Daniel's and Matthew's dreams. They were standing on the platform with the cave next to it on one side and a boundless panorama of the mountains floating in the mist on the other. The world was saturating light that was draping in its abundance whatever came to life, beginning with the tallest mountain tops, under its vast, lush upside-down meadow replete with the greenery...

'How are you, Dan?' asked Matthew thus breaking a long silence.

'When I came out of the cave to plunge into this crystal space... into this ever so alien space, I felt like calling out to you (my soul was pining so), I felt like fingering what we'd unearthed the day before, also alien, the way I see it, belonging to this space, and finding a way out in order to... find myself on familiar turf... I don't know why I didn't, any more than why I'm not doing it now. I don't know why. I don't know what holds me back.'

'Why, you do—it's your grandfather. He'd arrived in our World, *that* World from here. Something tells me we'll soon see his native place. You just have to ride it out, this alienness. You must be aware, Dan, that this sky suffused with green light is just as alien as the light of the globes made by your grandfather. It's both alien and not... not alien for you. Your blood, Dan, hails from here.'

'I didn't put it right, Mat. I know I'm linked to this World. But I'm not feeling it now, this very moment. I was, as late as yesterday; I'd been, lately. As for now... I haven't got that feeling. It left me this morning.'

'Then, what I say is this, Dan: I'd leave right now. But I won't because of you. If we leave now, the unanswered questions that you'll take away with you will assail you the rest of your life. And you'll never know where you are.'

'Dan, Mat, my friends,' came the cheery screech from the cave. 'Come and tuck into some boiled fish.'

After breakfast, the Loner gave the folks a small bag of barynth nuts and a canteen of rux tea each. He said:

'I was listening to the mountains at night. They're sparing of words. But yesterday they were troubled by such as had always been wary of them, giving them a wide berth. The mountains told me the barkycrooks had been as rash as they were daring—two of them will never be back in their lair again...'

'Which is only too fair,' Semimes put in a word.

The Loner went on:

'One fell to its death in the Kerdock Gorge, the other stepped on a phantom ledge. The barkycrooks had been pursuing you on their Lord's orders. I think he was waiting, and still is, for him who a Tear must call and take to these parts.'

'Did you say Tear?' Daniel asked, startled and... removed a bead from the pouch on his belt. 'So this is a Tear, isn't it?'

'This is it. It's a Tear. Do you remember? I told you about Tears of Shwarrawsh, with you disbelieving,' intoned Semimes, unsurprised at seeing a Tear in Daniel's hand (he had spied Her the day before, when they were setting out, by the bulge in his pouch which kept drawing his eyes to it).

'He's waiting for... me,' said Daniel. 'That's what's so frightening...'

Matthew realized his friend meant his grandfather.

'It isn't just the barkycrooks' Lord that's waiting, it's also such of the people as remember Faddaf's prophecy,' explained the Loner.

'I told you about Faddaf,' said Semimes.

'But all in good time, Danad,' said the Loner, put his hand on his shoulder and added: 'I remember Her.'

'Loner—' Daniel wanted to ask him something.

'All in good time, my boy,' the Loner headed off his question.

Both Matthew and Semimes were surprised to see him treat Daniel with such consideration, and they hung on his every word and look to get the hang of it.

'Now mark this,' the Loner continued. 'If ever you find in yourself the Word once imparted to you by him who the Tear bonds you with...'

Semimes's and Matthew's eyes became round.

'. . . pass it on to Falafy. Everyone knows her in Dorlief: she's a Keeper. The fates of many will hinge on it. And another thing: you and your friend Matam can trust your reliable guide's father, Malam, in every way.'

At these words, Semimes felt his face flushing and even fancied it was the color of carrots.

'Well, my young friends, Semimes, Danad, Matam, it's time you were setting out.'

'Loner, a question before we leave?'

'Go ahead, Matam.'

'A phantom ledge, what is it?'

'A phantom ledge? It's a swarm of flying ants. Stalking their quarry, they hover in the air right next to a crag, sort of adhering to it. A careless traveler can take such a swarm for a handy ledge and step on it. The ants fall to eating at the wretch, falling alongside him.'

'Do they attack?'

'No, Matam. They lure their prey (it can be any beast) with their smell, which appeals to it. Both their smell and their guise of something solid are their trap. They don't attack on their own; I don't know a single instance of that.'

'How can you tell a phantom ledge from an actual one?'

'A ghost betrays itself by a barely visible agitation. Unless your head is on cloud nine, it's sure to detect this agitation.'

'Testing a trail with a stick is another way,' added Semimes.

'That's right, Semimes. You can depend on your guide and his stick, Matam and Danad, and the trail will no longer be so treacherous and hard. Have a good trip, travelers.'

\* \* \*

From the platform the friends clambered up a steep wall on to the crag that covered the Loner's cave like a helmet. Semimes looked about and let loose a word, thus reminding them which of them was number one:

'You can see from here that yesterday we were going up rather than down. Today, it's a long descent down to the Harshid foothills. Follow me, my friends. And remember to step right where Semimes steps, grip what Semimes grips.'

'We've heard that before, haven't we, Mat?' Daniel taunted with a smirk.

'So we have, but I don't remember where,' said Matthew.

Semimes shook his head, sensitive to the rib.

'You'd better be serious about it, Danad and Matam: we're at the beginning, not the end of the way.'

. . . They walked on barely bantering, because the words of every one of them were directed inward, fired by the Loner's word. Unlike their way which was tortuous and forgetful of the sign step by step, those words were cycling, closing the beginning and end that came full circle in order to, having gained a head start, torment thought up to the end.

It wasn't plain folks you picked on the way, Semimes. It isn't plain folks you're now leading to Dorlief. They're friends between them. Both the eyes and reason know as much. It's clear, they have no secrets from one another; and what one of them keeps is safeguarded by the other. But the one who acts leader is made leader by what fills his pouch to capacity. She... fills his pouch to overflowing, and his hand was thinking back to... Her. Did he get Her the easy way? Is he worthy of Her? Come off it, Semimes! Come off! What are you? For Her... Well yes, for Her, all people are just people. For Her, all people are crooked. Any person's crooked. But even the crookedest of them all could become not just a man... He was like, 'All in good time, my boy.' The Loner knows more than he lets on. That's his predestination, knowing more than meets the eye. That's why he's the Loner. 'All in good time, my boy.' If you have Her in your

pouch, the word 'time' acquires a secret, a magic meaning... a crucial meaning. If you have Her in your pouch, they won't tell you to take the goats to their pen in the middle of tittle-tattle; they'll tell you: all in good time... The Loner and Danad have some bond. 'My boy.' Very much so. But neither Matam nor Danad himself knows it. Have no idea... But She's aware of it. She wouldn't be in his pouch if She wasn't. Just Her knowing it. She knows it all... Word... Word... Word... He was like, 'If you find in yourself the Word...' She alone knows it. It isn't plain folks you're taking to Dorlief, Semimes... He was like, 'The fate of many would hinge on it.' But some do find Tears and Words, while someone leads them out of trouble. Without you, Semimes, they'd have been easy prey for the nut—barkycrooks, along with their Tears and Words, along with their tears and words... These two jumping to your coinage, Semimes: barkycrooks... barkycrooks... And these two stealing a glance at you when it came to barynth nuts, only to look away. Barkycrooks... barkycrooks... And the way they looked at you when you coined 'barkycrooks.' They never looked away. You, Semimes, didn't know where to be lost best. Barkycrooks... You know how to coin words... and find Tears... No... No, Semimes, it isn't any guide that happens to pick up on a forest or mountain trail people who have in their pouches not just a stock of barynth nuts but Tears and Words in their breech pockets—Words that the fates of many depend on. It isn't any guide.

The chance idea of a breech pocket triggered a smile on Semimes's face but also made him look for a camping site.

Is She helping you, by any chance, Semimes? Perhaps the embarrassment these two caused you was timely enough? They didn't keep you out of the Tear's proximity. You only feared they would. Perhaps, She's helping you to lead the way (with these two trailing) on the path that's predestined, as the Loner put it, for all of us. To Her, all people are crooked. But even the crookedest of them all might be favored with Her patronage, which is right, quite right... I'll have to see to the pocket when camping. Unless Semimes is much mistaken, the pocket's indeed weighted with something. What can it be? If the word's weighty... if it's *the* Word that many fates will hinge on, it might well be weighting the pocket down. Very much so.

With Semimes's idea of Danad's pocket that had to be inspected at the earliest opportunity very much in the way and very importunate to bring that opportunity nearer, he was true to the arrangement with the Loner. The arrangement was like this; 'You'll only stop once for a rest and a bite in the mountains. You'll take refuge in the Invisible Niche. Mark how you find it...'

The Invisible Niche was near the trail, very much out of sight and ready to hide whoever found himself in it. Semimes had heard about the Niche from his father, but he had not chanced on it to put its secret properties to the test.

The Loner had taken into consideration everything: there would be a tiring descent after which untrained legs would only agree to go forth and would totter (because walking was out of question, anyway) on condition they were tempted with a near camp.

'Which of you is against camping, my friends?' asked Semimes after Daniel and Matthew had plopped down on a boulder and done their share of moaning

and cursing at the mountains which only let you choose between ascending and descending. 'There's a safe nook where we could chat and have tea without hindrance.'

'Walking somewhere again? What about staying here? Semimes? The barkycrooks are gone—whom else should we be afraid of?'

Come on, Danad.' Semimes shook his head.

'Your trusty stick will warn us, just in case. Sit down, Semimes.'

'Come off it, Matam... I'm sorry for you, friends. After yesterday's race in the mountains, you've no use of your arms and legs. That's always the case. And yet it's unwise to camp on the trail. The stick *will* warn but we'll have no time to hide away. Where are we to hide? No cave, no fissure of yesterday, no burrow—nothing. Bluffy crags all around and our trail along the wall,' Semimes was prevaricating a little bit. 'So, if I tell you the place is called... the Invisible Niche and it's within reach?'

Daniel and Matthew got up, for the unusual was more cogent than the rest of the guide's arguments.

'Follow me!'

Semimes, followed by Daniel and Matthew, ascended a low (half as tall as a human) but narrow (half a pace) ledge. They took about twenty paces, skirted the crag and turned left. The ledge grew wider there.

'Wait. I'll be back in no time,' said Semimes.

He slowly walked along the wall testing it with his eyes. After some fifteen steps, he returned to Matthew and Daniel.

'I have to admit there's nothing to be seen, just a wall.'

'What were you supposed to see, Semimes?' asked Matthew. 'You this, you that... What about us? Couldn't we come in handy?'

'I told you there's an invisible niche. That's what it's called—the Invisible Niche. I went to see if it was there. Well, it wasn't. My eye didn't pick out anything. I even doubted it was *the* wall. I've never been here before.'

'Let *us* have a go.' Daniel had brightened up.

'Do. Use nothing but your eyes.'

That's it, said Semimes to himself mutely. There's a folded exercise book in his pocket. The magic Word is sure to be there. The one that Dan's bonded to by the Tear is sure to have left it there... They're coming...

Semimes met Daniel and Matthew with an enigmatic smile: they'd found nothing, while he'd found something more important than the Invisible Niche.

'Shouldn't we use the stick?' ventured Matthew.

'Why the stick?' Semimes objected. 'We'll pat it with our hands. Follow me. The Loner said, "Count seven footfalls after you turn left." We'll count and pat the wall with our hands. One... two... three... four... five... six... seven...'

Both Daniel and Matthew were stunned and frozen in place as Semimes vanished under their eyes as easily as a disembodied shadow would.

'Can you see me or not? Answer me. Why are you gaping at me as if I were a talking rock?' the wall was teasing them in a screechy voice.

'You are a talking wall which has robbed us of our guide, where we're concerned,' answered Daniel.

'Just heed your guide. Put forth your hands and follow my voice one by one... Welcome to the Invisible Niche, Mat... You, too... Dan. Make yourselves comfortable.'

The Niche was deep enough and rather wider than the entryway. It was a small cave rather than a niche. There would be enough room in it for four people around a fire.

'Strangely enough, it's as light inside as outside. I can't understand it,' said Matthew scrutinizing the walls in wonder, only to become even more confused. 'Look, Dan, can you see that black spot? Where did it come from?'

Daniel raised his head and saw up there, on the wall opposite the entryway, what Matthew had spotted.

'I can't understand a thing. Is it in the wall or in mid-air? Its aspect is frightening: the blackness seems to be clinging to it, pawing it with its tentacles and trying to get inside the Niche. It looks alive, don't you think?'

'Stop frightening yourselves and each other, me, too. There isn't another living being here save for us. And no one knows about the Niche. As to the blackness,' Semimes looked suspiciously at the blackness among light, 'the Loner warned me: "Whatever you do, don't venture into the darkness that will draw your eyes, unless you want to get lost." Do you want to get lost, Dan and Mat?'

'We've got lost once—we don't feel like getting lost again,' Matthew blabbed out.

'What do you mean, got lost?' Semimes wanted to know. He looked closely at Matthew, then at Daniel.

'Mat means that we very nearly landed in an abyss... before we met you. We didn't have a guide,' Daniel gave him an evasive line. (But he thought on much the same lines as Matthew.)

'I could see you walking without a guide. It's no wonder you nearly landed there,' said Semimes but his eyes said he did not buy that line.

Daniel felt embarrassed by his fib (Semimes called them friends, same as they did him).

'Sorry, Semimes,' he said in a guilty tone. We can't tell you everything because...'

'You don't have to explain, Dan... You've said it all. We might overlook the main thing back of those superfluous words.'

'The main thing?' echoed Matthew, in the dark as to Semimes's drift.

'We might lose the main Word the Loner told you about, Dan, back of the superfluous words.'

'Oh, I see... I've been trying to find the Word in myself among the many that I'd heard from Gramps, but could find nothing. He may have held off to safeguard me.'

'That means the Tear binds you to your grandfather?'

'. . . Yes, Semimes. But I found the Tear... Mat and I found Her many years after his death, contrary to his wishes.'

'My friend,' Semimes addressed Daniel, 'you can't regard it because you keep sitting on it.'

'I got it,' exclaimed Matthew. 'I got it all!'

Daniel looked at him, puzzled.

'The journal, Dan! Your grandfather's journal! You showed it to me. You're looking for the Word—'

'And forgot all about the journal. What sort of fool am I?' exclaimed Daniel holding his head with his hands. Then he hastened to pull Danby Bushtunts's diary out of his jeans breech pocket (and was clumsy about it). He opened it to the page with the enigmatic entry.

'I'll go look around, my friends,' screeched Semimes hiding his eyes (and suppressing his overweening desire to guide them over the pages of the coveted book) and left

Daniel shook as he mouthed two lines of text and the signature beneath it:

*Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning  
To ashes wordcircle's burning.  
Natan*

The letters fluttered as if come to life, fluttered for the happiness or dread of appearing in this World. Daniel could not make head or tail of it. He read the lines over and over again... Matthew could see Daniel's agitation and dared not intrude... At some point, Daniel's countenance brightened up, as if he had discovered something meaningful. He read the text out loud (his voice was atremble like himself):

'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning  
To ashes wordcircle's burning.'

He looked up at Matthew.

'Did you get it?'

Matthew shook his head.

'You didn't? Listen!' he almost hollered and read the eerie rhyme again.

Matthew still looked puzzled.

'Read it on your own.' Daniel passed the book to Matthew.

He began reading... Then he looked at his friend the same way as Daniel had looked at him a few moments before.

'I got it,' said Matthew under his breath for some reason. 'We're reading what we couldn't at home.'

'We're reading what was written in the language... of this World! We're speaking the language of this World!' There was triumph in Daniel's voice. I say this aware that our mother tongue is somewhere deep in our consciousness. Like a foreign tongue you know but aren't speaking at the moment. Try to feel this. Think back to it. Try to recall it. Now, can you?'

'I can, Dan! It's in my head.'

'Something preposterous has occurred to me. Remember me telling you how Christine was frightened by this text?'

'I do.'

"There's an abyss in these words," she told me at the time. She'd captured the sense behind what we thought were mere scribbles... because this language of this World is there, in her subconscious, too. I'm sure it's there in the

subconscious of every person of our World... because our World's got hidden strings that go to this World.'

'Passages. Invisible passages,' Matthew elaborated.

'Unknown passages,' added Daniel.

They bent over the book again.

'Natan is your grandfather's real name,' said Matthew.

'Two names: he was called Danby Bushtunts in our World and Natan in this.'

'Natan was what the Loner called you. Did you remark that? Yesterday, when he saw you first? It means he used to know your grandfather. You're his spitting image, that's why he knew him in you.'

'That means he was aware who I am. And he wanted to give me a message. But only said, "All in good time."'

"My boy."

'What?'

"All in good time, my boy," said the Loner.'

'I wish I could ask him about Natan.'

'All in good time, my boy.' Matthew grinned.

'We've quite forgotten the other guy, Mat. I'll go call him.'

'I'll keep you company.'

Semimes was sitting on a ledge not far from the Niche. He had his ears stopped with his hands, ostensibly not to hear what Daniel and Matthew were saying. Also, he was mumbling something... to further hinder his keen ear. Daniel approached Semimes who did not let on he was aware though he had spied him. Daniel sat down beside him. Matthew came up and sat down as well. Semimes, quite content with his consideration (which had been well remarked), stopped mumbling, removed his hands from his ears and faced Daniel and Matthew.

'Haul ass, let's go to the Niche: it's time for a bite,' he said with a conscious effort not to look at the book in Daniel's hand.

When everyone was back in the Niche, Daniel held out the book to Semimes.

'Read this. It looks like the Word the Loner spoke about.'

Semimes turned up his palms to receive the book as he might do a Tear, should fate be gracious enough. Then he sat by the wall holding the book with great care, and read the rhyme. He shook his head without a word. Then read it several more times.

'I'm not privileged enough to make out the words, my friends. But I could sense the trouble that's nigh and the fear in my gut as I read my way. Your grandfather, Dan, who was called—' Semimes cast a glance at the signature, 'Natan, held you off the Tear and the Word for a good reason. I know now why the Loner said to me: "Be twice your vigilant self on the way to Dorlief, Semimes." I can merely tell you this, my friends: we'll have no hand in what happens today, and yet a lot will depend on us, for we must take the Word to Dorlief... Hide the book away, Dan. Better still, in the same pocket, so you shouldn't be muddled in your head. No, wait! I'm forgetting: we should learn the rhyme by heart, just in case.'



Daniel and Matthew mouthed the lines to make sure.

'It's imprinted on our memory,' said Matthew.

'I think I won't forget it either: I've read the lines a hundred times,' said Daniel.

'Good. Semimes will keep the Word... same as the Tear.' He seemed to be deep in thought...

'Have you got a Tear?' asked an unsuspecting Daniel.

Semimes started.

'What— did you say?' The question was in fact a correction on the cry that burst out of his mouth: 'What have you done!' as if Daniel had done some wrong upon which a great lot depended. 'What— Come again!'

Daniel was at a loss, too: their guide's countenance had every feature and outline of a nut (which he had inherited from anyone but his mother).

'I merely asked if you had a Tear.'

'I— just don't remember—' Semimes swallowed the lump in his throat. 'I don't remember if I've told you, Dan and Mat... Mat and Dan, that Tears were only in possession of the Dorliefan Keepers. Whichever of the Dorliefans happens to find a Tear must pass Her on to one of the Keepers. Their heart will tell which. I don't remember if I've told you that.'

'You've made your point, Semimes. You've explained it all to our satisfaction,' said Daniel who was quick enough to realize that he had asked out of turn. 'It isn't all that important whether you've told us or not.'

'Yes, it was very apt,' corroborated Matthew who was as unwilling as Daniel to press the issue, for he was aware something was wrong... either in Daniel's question or in what followed.

'You can put away the book, Dan... Let's have a bite,' Semimes suggested. 'Rux tea, of course, isn't as good as parate tea, but quite fragrant and good to drink. I should give the Loner a taste of parate tea when I get the chance and a supply of parate leaves; let him brew. From now on, I'll take along a bag of its leaves whenever I take to the mountains. Expressly for him. Rux tea day in day out—it's boring. Very much so.'

'You speak right, Semimes. You treated us to some parate tea yesterday—it's rux tea now. It's a good idea to treat the Loner to some,' chimed in Matthew, tongue in cheek, looking away from Semimes.

'Sitting in his cave and drinking rux tea, nothing but rux,' agreed Daniel.

'Nothing but rux,' echoed Semimes with a gentle smile. But his eyes filled with anguish as he glanced from Matthew to Daniel. He had had a hard time fighting off the ire that took possession of him at such short notice when he unexpectedly rushed to defend a Tear that might have been his... And why not his? What was wrong with Her resting in his girdle pouch or else hidden away in his bag couched in the velvet he had taken along yesterday just in case?

. . . They were a short way down the slope to the Harshid foothills where Daniel and Matthew had met their guide, when Semimes stopped and said in surprise:

'Father?'

A man was sitting on a rock some two hundred paces away.

'No, it isn't Father: he's never had a black cape. Have I ever seen him in a black cape? It can't be Father.'

The man whom Semimes had taken for his father was clad in a cape with a hood covering his head.

'A humpback,' said Daniel, 'and a shorty.'

'My father is also humpbacked and short, hence my mistake,' explained Semimes. 'Let's come up to him and find out what brings him here.'

'Can it be a child? With a bag of barynth nuts underneath the cape?' Matthew suggested (his tone frivolous).

'This is no child. Cut out your frivolity, Mat. Don't forget what we're taking to Dorlief,' said Semimes.

The shorter the distance to the stranger, the more anxious the travelers became (it was unaccountable). He should hear their footsteps; they were so near, while he still sat sideways without moving his head or stirring... Then the three of them, even Semimes, stopped short when they heard his voice... a voice that seemed to be capable of upsetting the rocks around him (it was not resoundingly loud... but capable of upsetting the rocks around):

'Where does your wanderlust urge you, travelers?'

He turned his face to the boys and threw back the hood. Because of the deep furrows, his face seemed to be made of thick swatches of frayed orange fabric. The long beak of a nose, like a hooked finger, told the eyes where to direct what was in them. While the black strands of hair made his eyes even blacker—a blackness that was a fragment of the hidden darkness. Not the visible darkness which interplays with light, but darkness invisible, hidden from human eyes, such as kills light.

One would have thought that nothing could confuse Matthew and Daniel with its aspect after barkycrooks. But what they confronted got them at a loss for a moment. The humpback's gaze robbed them of their selves for a moment, the gaze of those black eyes that not even the blindness of night could have saved from... Matthew and Daniel gained some composure only when Semimes spoke to the stranger. Clutching his stick until his fingers ached, he channeled his gaze-drawn weakness away and said:

'We're on our way to Dorlief past the rock you're seated on. We've no use for the rock and we have no quarrel with you. But once you've asked that question, stranger, you should be able to answer what you're looking for in these forsaken parts.'

The humpback laughed resoundingly.

'So I am. Right you are, I'm looking for something,' he said looking up and down Semimes's two companions, and addressed Daniel: 'I've found it. I knew you'd be walking this way. But the Path that has taken you here is not yours. It's Hers. And mine, not yours. You've assumed the onus out of a passion that I call inside look. But that's not the whole story. The onus is more than you can support. Rid yourself of it and give me what is mine by rights.'

'Do you mean it belongs to you? By what right?' Matthew was outraged (he had come to his senses and was ready to defend his friend, this impulse having filled his fists with lead).

'The chosen one can only be one!' enunciated the humpback, got up from the rock and produced from under his cape a stick (it was similar to Semimes's but shorter). 'Put the Tear on the rock, and there'll be no more quarrel with you. You'll be able to go on your way that passes by this rock.'

'What if I don't? If I don't surrender the Tear to you?' asked Daniel (he felt he should counter this force and resisted it the best he could).

'Then I'll take it by force. That would cut your way short,' said the humpback, and it was clear he was not going to waste any more words.

Semimes stepped forth and said in a forbidding manner:

'Semimes stands between you and the Tear!'

And all at once the air resounded like... an echo. Matthew's and Daniel's hair stood on end, roused by that fierce echo.

—Semimes stands between you and the Tear!

'He won't spare you,' Semimes was sending forth his ire-fired words to him that confronted him

—He won't spare you, the fiery echo was tormenting the souls.

'Have a taste of Semimes!'

—Have a taste of Semimes!

Semimes and the hunchback prodded the ground with their sticks at once and stood stock still... The air about them stilled and froze... Suddenly both Matthew and Daniel felt the ground underfoot shake. They were scared like anyone would be at this threatening earth tremor. The friends joined hands before they knew what they were doing... A few moments later, the earth could stand it no longer and developed a crack. Another few moments later, the humpback lifted his stick for some reason and hid it under his cape. Then Semimes lifted his and relaxed somewhat.

'Did Malam make this stick for you?' asked the humpback.

Semimes did not answer.

'I know it's Malam. When you see him, tell him you met on the way an old chum of his. Tell him he's a good teacher. And another thing: tell him he's worthy of a better lot, but had chosen the wrong motto and embarked on the wrong path.'

Semimes did not say a word in reply. The humpback threw on his hood and left.

'Let's go hence, my friends,' said Semimes (his voice suggested he was a spent force). 'We have to get a breath of fresh air to flush out our spite.'

But Daniel did not heed him. His eyes were on the crack in the earth and could not negotiate it. It had not vanished with the humpback's retreat. It gawped at him calling: 'Come, look inside. I won't let you go. I'm your abyss.' Abyss. The word 'abyss' came to life and swirled in his head. He thought the crack was a sign of the abyss Chris had fancied when she saw the lines in Bushtunts's journal. He thought his grandfather was trying to hold him off the abyss. He thought that in much the same way as the crack had captivated him he would be drawn into it. These cracks, these wounds would now crop up wherever he was. And one of them would open its gaping maw and swallow him... He had brought here the Word they were all waiting for. He was to pass on the Word...

and get lost in the abyss Chris had cried out about. It meant he was doomed to get lost... In the Invisible Niche he had passed on the Word to Semimes and there it was—a crack, the sign of an abyss... But he had passed the Word on to Semimes ('Semimes would keep the Word') and now he had to flee... away from the crack... away from the abyss... before it was too late. The Tear would help to flee. Take Matthew along and flee...

'Dan, Dan, wake up!' Matthew was shaking him by the shoulder. 'Semimes says we've got to get away. Let's go, Dan.'

'We've got to flee for our lives,' whispered Daniel, because another idea had flashed across his mind—flee... from flight.

Matthew and Semimes looked at him wondering what was wrong and what he wanted.

'Flee... I want to flee... Let's flee... Mat, Semimes, race me to the forest.'

Semimes's eyes shone the way they always did when he had to run.

'Race me to the forest,' he screeched, contentedly.

'Race me,' Matthew echoed. 'Go!'

Daniel and Matthew rushed off for what they were worth. After what had happened, their souls were asking for something else. And this race, this fierce race became this something else. At first they hardly noticed that Semimes had stayed put (he had to look around: circumspection called for that)... Neither Daniel nor Matthew would budge. But Daniel was so eager to flee his weakness, and the swallows he took of the strength lavished by the Sadorn Forest were so greedy that he started to leave Matthew behind. Unable to hear Semimes breathing, he looked back only to see him still standing where he had been. He called:

'On the double, Mat! Let's give him the slip. Hide behind the trees.'

Matthew looked back on the run and made a special effort.

'Hide, will you? The cheek of it!' Semimes muttered under his breath and suddenly saw what he had been apprehensive about all along and what urged him on: 'There's time yet.'

When he outstripped first Matthew and then Daniel, those two, one by one, could not believe their eyes: to have drawn on them so fast, having abridged a distance of two hundred paces, was something only a borzoi hound could have done. Semimes had outdone them, faced about and cried with his arms spread:

'Stay! We're in danger. Look there!'

Daniel and Matthew realized right away that the creature approaching them from the Harshid was not a bird, even though it had wings and it was flying.

'What's that, Semimes?' said Daniel, his breathing ragged after the race.

'It's the gorhoon, a flying rat. I'd only heard of it before, but never seen. Look: riding him is the one that wants Dan's Tear.'

'Is it the forest?' suggested Matthew.

'You won't make it,' said Semimes and produced his stick. 'Stand behind me. When the gorhoon attacks me, run for the forest for all you're worth and further on that way. Remember: the Word will have to be delivered to Dorlief and passed on to Falafy.'

The friends could not pull their eyes away from the dreadful creature, an enormous rat, sort of galloping on the air. They were looking at the snout that looked as if it had just been smeared with blood, their blood, they thought. They were looking at those eyes as if deliberately closed with scales and the question 'What's behind them?' grew flesh in despair. It was preposterous, looking at that ugly snout... but it drew their blood. It was preposterous, looking at those blind eyes... but the eyes did see, pierce the scales and call them...

Suddenly Daniel saw that the scales on the gorhoon's eyes opened. And a cry burst out of his bosom:

'No! No!'

He hollered and dashed to meet the gorhoon (he had chosen the abyss at that point) so unexpectedly that it was all Semimes and Matthew could do to start. The next moment they followed him. It would have been a matter of a moment for the gorhoon to flap its wings and make for Daniel's head, and of a couple of paces for Semimes to catch him up and protect, but the rat suddenly banked, wheeled left and flew to the Emptied Lake, with just the humpback's laughter trailing them for some time in the air... Daniel fell to the ground and made rasping sounds as if resisting something:

'No! No! I won't have that. No! Never!'

Matthew and Semimes bent over him.

'Danad, it's blown over: the hunchback with his rat's gone,' said Semimes with some pride. 'We can now proceed in peace.'

Daniel sat up. He was pale, with despair in his eyes.

'. . . Yes... in just a minute... I'm all right.'

'Dan—' Matthew was about to ask something but changed his mind.

'You want to ask something, Mat? But I can't... Sorry, Mat, I can't say anything... I didn't know that... and I didn't know I couldn't tell you...' Daniel seemed to be talking to himself without looking at Matthew. It was hard to say where he was looking.

'Calm down, Dan. Don't talk if you can't. I won't feel offended.'

'You, too... Pardon me, Semimes,' Daniel went on without looking at Semimes. 'There's nothing I can say... nothing to say to my best friends.'

'Don't eat your heart out, Dan,' screeched Semimes softly. 'You can't let on at the moment. But you won't swerve from the trail you've been treading with us, will you, friend?'

'I won't,' said Daniel.

'All of us are treading the path decreed by fate,' Semimes went on. 'These aren't mere words... those we utter and those we're afraid to let loose.'

'Were Semimes a whole man... right?' Daniel said.

'Yes, Dan: and those we hide behind,' Semimes said ruefully and made for the forest. He said another important word without turning his head: 'The book.'

Daniel patted his breech and called after him:

'It's there, Semimes.'

'Let's go, Dan,' said Matthew helping him to his feet. 'It was a good idea racing us to the forest. You make for the goal and all your doubts are left

behind... Semimes... He has quite a few tricks up his sleeve. There's something preternatural about his swiftness...'

After a dozen paces or so, Daniel stopped. So did Matthew and looked questioningly at him.

'Mat...'

Daniel was too jittery to speak. 'Sorry, Mat... I won't let that happen. Sorry...'

Matthew looked at him without understanding what made him suffer so much. Daniel waved his hands indicating that Matthew should walk on

'I won't have that,' Daniel muttered, tears coursing down his cheeks and refusing to be held back.

He was trailing Semimes and Matthew. He had to go on. He would not have something in store for them on the way happening, and the tears were coursing down and down his cheeks and refusing to be held back.

## Chapter Five

### 'What does forest smell of?'

Daniel heaved an audible sigh.

'What does forest smell of, Semimes?' he asked, having captured his answer along with the aromas that assailed his nose and his soul.

Semimes shook his head and grinned (something Daniel and Matthew had got used to) and countered the question with his own:

'Dan, what do... huckleberries smell of?'

'I'm ready for you: they smell of huckleberries.'

'Sure thing, huckleberries. What else? They can't smell of strawberries, can they?' Semimes grinned again. 'No two things about it. Well, as to forest... it smells of forest.'

'It smells of childhood where I'm concerned,' Daniel admitted. 'What's this forest— Sadorn, is it?'

'Sadorn,' Semimes corroborated.

'The moment I caught a breath of Sadorn, I saw myself walking down a forest trail with Mat. That's that.'

'Cunning you, Dan,' said Semimes shaking his head. 'What does forest smell of?'

'Bull's eye, Semimes: Dan's cunning, very cunning.' Matthew gave a laugh.

'Well, look, my friends. Here's a barynth tree!' Semimes was overjoyed and hastened his pace. He came up to it and stroked its trunk. 'That's what it's like... a barynth tree.'

Matthew and Daniel approached the tree, too.

'I spied it from afar but never knew it was a barynth tree,' said Matthew.

'You never knew because you saw no nuts. Wait a mo!' he said giving the friends a sly look.

Matthew and Daniel raised their heads looking for nuts...

'I can see some,' Matthew exclaimed. 'Look, Dan! Can you?'

'I can't.'

'Look harder. My hand's pointing at one... Can you see it?'

Daniel, his cheek against Matthew's hand, was screwing an eye.

'I can't'

'Can you, Semimes? This way. Can you?'

'I can, Mat. I can see your nut. It's sure to be one. I've spied two myself,' Semimes boasted (he reveled in the hard time he was giving his friends).

'I've lost it,' cried Matthew. 'I've lost it and can't find it.'

'I wish I could see one once... I won't budge until I see one.'

'What would you, Mat and Dan? A barynth tree's good at hiding its nuts. It has a lot of tricks to cheat their lover, so much so that he'd get dizzy, unable to tell a nut from a non-nut, before he spots one.'

'That's right,' said Matthew.

'You can catch sight of one, only to lose it right away, as is the case with Mat.'

'It wasn't right away,' Matthew objected.

'You can climb to get one—here it is, all yours, then get distracted and see it hidden. Is that right, Mat?'

Don't Mat me! Say something about Dan.'

'What is there to say about him if he hasn't spotted any?'

'Find one, I don't think,' said Daniel reproachfully and went on in somebody's screechy voice: 'If all the nuts have been picked by smart alecks.'

'True enough, laddie (you're called Semimes, aren't you),' Semimes played along, with no ill feelings. 'At year's end, nuts are harder to find. The smart alecks of Dorlief come to get their nuts here. The trails have all been made by forestmen, not the Dorlief smart guys. The smart forestmen and squirrels don't have to travel far. They can still be found at year's end if you look smartly.'

'What do you mean, smartly?' asked Matthew.

'Look taking your time without getting distracted by trifles.'

'I see,' said Matthew gravely.

'There's a better way, though, my friends,' Semimes screeched softly, as if afraid to be overheard.

Daniel and Matthew guessed outright that they were about to learn a way of spotting nuts that their guide had discovered and shared with no other smart alecks as yet (whether Dorliefan or otherwise).

'Don't be so long about it, Semimes, I've got to see one,' said Daniel (urged on by injured feelings rather than curiosity).

'You'll see in just a moment,' said Semimes (he sounded confident it would be the case). 'Lie down with your head to the trunk. That's right. Now track your gaze from the trunk to the edge of the crown without wandering off from side to side. And take your time.'

(The trunk of a barynth tree—protected with rough dark-brown bark—that you could just about hug with your arms did not grow in a straight line, but curved now this way, now that, now another, as if in doubt throughout if it was doing right. It forked as it reached about twice the height of a human. There were so many boughs and they were so crooked and so entwined that the eye could

not quite trace the beginning and end. While its numerous lush greenish-brown leaves, half a palm in size, distracted the eye and did not let it concentrate and make out a nut.)

When Daniel settled under a tree as bidden by Semimes it remained its old self but still something had changed.

'You have genius, Semimes!' Daniel exclaimed. 'I can see one. I can see a nut. A real barynth nut. And another... And another... Come to think of it, it isn't. But still, I've found two.'

Matthew, too, lay under the tree and went voluble in no time.

'I won't be counting mine, not to embarrass you. But you take my word for it—it works.'

'Just so. Very much so,' mumbled Semimes delighting in his friends' good luck.

'Semimes?'

'What is it, Dan?'

'Something makes me think you haven't revealed every secret of nut-hunting.'

'We aren't nut-hunting today,' Semimes said frowning (to hide behind it or, more properly, to banish the complacency that was pervading his countenance), as if he had suddenly remembered there was more important business than mere nutting. 'All of us should take things rather more seriously. Very much so.'

When the boys were getting up, he checked at a glance if Daniel's book was still there. Paper's in love with the Word, he thought. And velvet loves a Tear, flashed through his mind as his glance dwelled on Daniel's leather pouch. Paper shares the Word, while velvet... hides away the Tear, he construed to gladden his heart.

As he was getting up, Matthew tried to keep sight of the nut and succeeded.

'I'd take that one as keepsake,' he said, his eyes glued to the nut. 'What a specimen! Nuts like this are few and far between. A king of nuts! And crooked! Rough as they come and looking at me like...'

Daniel nudged Matthew, and he piped down wising up to it. But it was too late: Semimes's eyes filled with rage. It was all he could do to stop his face turning into a simulacrum of the nut lauded to the skies by Matthew. He made a tremendous effort to stop the force inside him crushing the nutshell that was enveloping him at the moment. He vented that force to his stick hurling it into the barynth tree crown. Matthew's broken nut and Semimes's stick dropped down.

'Take your crooked freak and have fun,' Semimes screeched shakily, hoarsely, picked up his stick and marched off.

'Much do I want it!' Matthew kicked the nut in despair and cried after Semimes: 'Sorry! I repent.'

'Take it easy, Mat: our Semimes will be back. Come,' said Daniel.

'I know, Dan. He was so overjoyed, and I—'

. . . For an hour or so the friends walked along trails known to Semimes at a good pace without digressing much over 'trifles' and amusing the Sadorn Forest with 'empty talk.'



'Burrow! Look! Someone's just peeped out of it. Peeped and withdrew.'

'What's so special about a burrow? There's always someone peeping out of one. That's what burrows are for...'

'Is this a rock? Such a huge rock in the middle of the forest! How did it get here?'

'Nothing easier: it strikes some as huge while Shwarrawsh would treat it as a grain of sand...'

'Another barynth tree. Will we put the method to another test?'

'Smart heads think of methods for business, not for fun...'

'Mushrooms! What are these mushrooms? Do we pick some?'

'There're mushrooms, berries and nuts galore in the woods... parate... and other greens, too. Nothing special, just milk-caps. I filled a bagful of them yesterday. We'll leave them to forestmen—they like milk-caps. It's common knowledge that mushroom and berry gathering's an express expedition, not a sideline, with them kicked and uprooted.'

'Aren't these beauties? Two porcini: father and son,' Daniel was trying hard to make up for Matthew's faux pas and used any excuse to soap Semimes up.

Semimes came up and squatted. Then he shook his head and smacked his lips (he must have liked the porcini), but said nothing. Once away from where Daniel found them, he said again:

'Nothing special, just porcini. We'll leave them to Dorliefans...'

Father and son... A mushroom of a father, and a nut of a son, he thought. I won't take you to the Mirror Pool, my porcini, Mat and Dan: this is no time for mirrors. Just a short cut through the ravine...

'Matam, Danad! There's a ravine on the way. Step in Semimes's footsteps. Beware of stinggrass. If it stings you, you go blistery and complaining. But not to worry: Semimes will blaze the trail.' Semimes left verbal notches on the air.

Semimes hefted his stick only when he was in the stinging maw of the ravine. He would not wave it in vain thinking that he had scared the life out of his friends when he had 'killed' the king of nuts that Matthew wanted as a keepsake. Now, in the ravine, where stinggrass as tall as a man ran riot, he could not do without it. As soon as he prodded the ground with it to feel the thicket, he heard along with its anxious shriek the cries of Matthew and Daniel, much like those that catch life nodding and scare it. It's too late, the thought flashed through his mind. At the same moment he made himself flat like a lizard and tensed his feelings to the utmost. He saw the six barkycrooks' legs protected with leggings and the sword of the one who was standing behind, and then Daniel struck down prone with an arrow to the chest, and Matthew writhing with an arrow to his abdomen. Two of them are sure to have bows ready to shoot, he thought. Lizard-like, Semimes slid among the stinggrass to the legs of the archers and emerged out of nowhere. ('Should there be more enemies than one, sonny, split your attention and force to suffice each,' Malam used to say when Semimes and his stick were getting used to each other.) The heads of two barkycrooks were smashed before they knew what hit them. Semimes's third blow only made the stinggrass in his way shriek. The barkycrook sprang aside to crouch in the dense grass. Semimes's stick would have stopped it, too, if Semimes's thought had not

caught it in mid-blow: 'Mat and Dan! The Tear! The Word!' He was back with the friends in no time, kneeling.

'Mat... Mat... How are you?'

Matthew did not answer. The stick whispered to Semimes's fingers that his friend's life was about to end.

'Don't be in too much of a hurry to die, Mat. Semimes hasn't yet given you a box of forestmen's flashes to make you quite happy. They inlay the box with stones found by them alone. And to make you even happier, Semimes will give you a casket also made by forestmen, with a barynth nut in it, even crookeder than the king of nuts... Don't be in a hurry to die.' Semimes touched Matthew's cold cheek...

'Dan,' he next addressed Daniel after he had talked to the friend whom he had caused an even greater offence.

'The Word,' croaked Daniel. 'Take the Word to Dorlief.'

'Hold on, Dan.'

'The Tear,' croaked Daniel. 'Take it. It's now yours.'

'No,' said Semimes, even though he had held his breath and his words. How had he managed to squeeze that no out of his mouth?

Daniel had a coughing fit—drops of blood pierced the air and spattered the greenery.

'Hold on, Dan. You haven't seen Dorlief yet, while the Dorliefans haven't seen the man who had brought them the Word on which many fates would depend...'

Daniel's face was suddenly contorted and his eyes were filled with horror as if Semimes had turned into a nut king all of a sudden, who was about to finish off him and Matthew to take possession of the Tear and the Word. Semimes divined Daniel's mute cry and was quick enough to do... what saved him and his friends: while still kneeling, he leaned aside and cut the air above him—the sneaky barkycrook's shattered arm let the sword go, and the freak fled for his life through the stinggrass, with an enraged Semimes in hot pursuit. His strides were springy as he crushed the space in front of him with his stick...

Through the swishing of the grass, ragged and fierce, Semimes's ear caught sounds that something in him was used to responding to, even though they were not all that important:

'Semimes! Semimes!'

He cut the pursuit short and strained his ears. The swishing stopped. The footfalls died down.

'Semimes! Semimes!'

They live! The porcini live! Semimes's soul cried, and he looked back.

Matthew and Daniel stood on the ravine edge looking at him in wonderment. Semimes looked at them dubiously: was it them? Of course, it was them, his friends, Mat and Dan. But how could they, hit by barkycrooks' arrows, all but breathless, who had laid their onus on him in the face of death, stand like that, nothing daunted, at the edge of the ravine, wave their arms, call him and gawp... like the radiant sluisy-tree? He climbed up the slope to them.

'Semimes, Mat and I stayed here...' Daniel faltered. 'You walked... somehow not across the ravine... not even down it, but somehow...'

And you were waving your stick in a bizarre fashion,' added Matthew.

'To put it in a nutshell, we thought it best to wait...'

'Until you had quite scythed down the stinggrass,' Matthew completed Daniel's thought. 'Better look for yourself.'

'Yes, do.'

That was what Semimes did. On the ravine's inspection, he could draw three conclusions, but would not give them voice. The stinggrass had indeed been 'scythed' down, a lot of it, a terrific lot, serve it right, too! The swath went all the way down the ravine floor and could be called a trek, given goodwill. But the trek went this way and that, as if chasing hares only to get lost in the stinggrass, Semimes shook his head in a knowing fashion.

'Sorry, my friends, Mat and Dan. I got carried away a bit.'

Daniel and Matthew exchanged glances in a knowing fashion.

Some little bit, thought Matthew.

Some little bit, flashed through Daniel's head.

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that trails were there to go after your dreams rather than daydreams,' said Semimes and, on spying on his maze trek something else, added: 'We ought, all of us, to take things with a pinch of salt. Very much so.'

Crossing the ravine, Semimes blazed the trail without ostensible belligerence (mindful of his pinch of salt) but with assiduity. Now and then, he would call out to Matthew and Daniel, also mindful of his daydreaming.

'How are you doing, Dan?'

'All right, Semimes. You're doing just fine—it's a regular trek.'

'You keeping pace, Mat? Does stinggrass sting?'

'No to both these questions. Shouldn't Dan and I take a cudgel each and relieve you?'

'No to both these questions. It takes a nimble hand to fell stinggrass without being stung. Me, I went to gather some parate the other day. I looked for it elsewhere (no parate in the ravine, though it has a way of hiding behind stinggrass; nor in yesterday's place that's to the right from here—it's at the Mirror Pool, much to the left) and got carried away a little bit. My hands and arms went blistery.'

'Did it hurt?' asked Daniel.

'When it snapped at me—' Semimes faltered, then chose another tack: 'If you want to drown out another pain which assails your soul, just hug stinggrass with your bare hands: it helps.'

'Ouch!' Daniel moaned unexpectedly.

Semimes and Matthew surrounded him. Daniel had pulled his hands out of the stinggrass and was pressing them to his chest to ease the pain. Semimes and Matthew exchanged glances and continued their way without a word...

'We never turned aside to the Mirror Pool, but it's as nothing,' said Semimes as if fishing for an excuse, when the three of them emerged from the ravine. 'I'll show it to you given half a chance. You'll inspect your aspects to your

heart's content. It would've been very handy today, for the trail has changed your faces. But it didn't work that way today. We ought, all of us, take things with a pinch of salt. Very much so.'

The way he spoke glancing here and there and everywhere, it was clearly not just an excuse—he was up to something.

'Good woods all around,' he said and tucked his stick under the girdle. 'You can think back to the trails of your childhood. That was a good idea, Dan, to wonder what forest smelt of. Hmm, what does forest smell of?'

'It wasn't my idea—it's the way it is.'

Soon enough, Semimes's idea materialized. He swerved aside from the trail that according to him led directly to Dorlief, without warning.

'What was that sudden change of direction, Semimes?' said Matthew.

Semimes stopped to wait for his friends.

'It will make the trail longer and us gentler,' he said softly and tenderly as if it were a secret, and ran on.

Matthew glanced at Daniel, shrugged and said mimicking Semimes:

'This—'

Semimes waved his arm meaning: follow me, then took a finger to his lips to suggest they should walk in silence not to spook someone. There was nothing for it but for the boys to walk on in enigmatic uncertainty whose outcome was known only to their guide. They traversed a parcel of fir trees glued together of a variety of prickly fronds that caught at their hands and legs, their body and even their heads in an attempt to either divine a secret or warn them of something. Warn, no doubt. But Matthew and Daniel could hardly guess. And when they emerged from it... (There exists on any World something whose sole property is to make those it meets on their way pause in wonderment at a loss for everything, even for words.)

Matthew and Daniel stood, or rather hung, in space, because they were not aware of the legs under them, and looked... looked unable to believe the evidence of their eyes, not daring... and unable to step ahead—for there, ahead of them, was heaven, a part of it, a celestial meadow... When memory was restored to them they started now involuntarily raising their eyes toward heaven which was still above, now admiring the celestial meadow it had accidentally shed... Two light-green skies only different from all the rest, including what was colored heaven-like, in that they only lived in this World as light, as waves of light that a bird could fly through with ease, or else a butterfly might, or an arrow, without shedding a drop of blood. The two light-green skies were only different from the rest in that all the rest could be easily touched (save stinggrass); as for them... one had to experience an ineffable tremor in order to touch them.' These are celestaires—celestial blooms,' Semimes shattered with his voice the pause of delight.

Daniel and Matthew seemed to be rousing from sleep, with the celestial meadow transcending sleep into reality.

'You can't get better than that!' said Matthew (his soul was eager to say more, but he could no longer transcend the borderline between mute adulation and the word yet unborn).

'Mat! Semimes! Friends! I've just experienced happiness,' said Daniel. 'For a second time in my life. And it's a sky again. The first time was when I swung up in Bushtunts's swing. You can't get better than that, indeed.'

Semimes squatted, dipped his hand into the light over the earth and stroked with care the green curly blooms that could only be seen under the blanket of light.

'These blooms are called celestaires—they are always a celestial color, the color of the sky.'

'Emerald,' Daniel mouthed his thought.

'What was that, Dan?' said Semimes.

'Will they be emerald tonight?'

'Yes, tonight, in the latter part of tittle-tattle—their green becomes denser, and they look even better.'

'What about this celestial meadow?'

Semimes grinned.

'Well, you know, it's the light radiated by celestaires. You guess right, Mat, we call the meadow precisely that—Celestial Meadow... Sit down, friends. Touch the blooms. They're as tender... as velvet.'

Daniel and Matthew also squatted and touched the celestaire blooms.

'Know what I thought, Dan?'

Daniel captured a hint of embarrassment in his friend's look.

'I guess you were going to give a bunch of celestaires to Chris.'

'That's right. At the moment, I wish I could see Chris and give her these blooms.'

'You're in for a disappointment, Mat: these flowers don't travel,' said Semimes. 'Should you pick one, the light it radiates will vanish. The bloom itself will be the color of the sky, but not for long: it'll wilt under your very eyes. And joy will be replaced by rue... Celestaires are not presentable, remember that.'

'That we will, Semimes. If ever Mat were to present them, he'll do it by the meadowful. Right, isn't it, Mat?'

'You know, Dan, I won't voice what I've just promised myself.'

'Don't, Mat,' there was sadness in Daniel's voice: he recalled what he had recently seen in the eyes of the flying rat.

'You make me laugh, Dan and Mat, Mat and Dan. All right, I'll have to call time: we've got to be going. There's something else I want to show you. Let's skirt the Meadow on the right. It's all right to walk on it, though. But no one does.'

Matthew and Daniel kept looking back at the Celestial Meadow until it was lost to sight.

'Have you had your fill?' asked Semimes, though it was not so much a question as contentment with having pleased his friends.

'One can never have one's fill with such a marvel,' said Matthew.

'Matthew and I are sure going to come back and settle right next to the Celestial Meadow, with you visiting us. Once we've had our fill, we'll move to Dorlief.'

Semimes laughed. Then he said:

'Marvel it is. What do you think the Celestial Meadow will be like in three... nay, two days, less today? What will it be like? What color?'

'What, Semimes?' Matthew bounced the question back to the guide.

'I won't tell. Nor anyone ever will. Because no one knows or can know what color sky, meaning the blooms, meaning the Celestial Meadow, it will be next year. We'll only learn on New Light Night. I have this to tell you, my friends: You've come from afar but you've come on the dot, for you'll see the New Light celebrations. It only happens once a year.'

'Hear that, Mat? It's a regular marvel! It's New Year's Day. You'll be seeing in the New Year in two days and a half, Semimes, won't you?' Daniel was speaking with a gusto befitting a great discovery.

'Yes, Dan. What makes you so agitated?'

'And no one knows what color sky it will be next year. What color the Celestial Meadow will be... No one knows what light will fill this World. Mat, we're going to see New Light!'

Semimes did not quite understand Daniel's joy, but was happy for him... and for himself: the coming New Light will be different for him, too. Quite a lot of things were jostling for priority in his head in those moments, but he had no time to grab one and dream along... and revel in the dream.

'We are there. Meet the sluisy-tree. Hello, sluisy.'

Daniel and Matthew had been too busy babbling and were confronted by the tree before they knew they were. Semimes had introduced it as if it were a person. It looked like a fir in structure, but in structure only: it was light, its trunk and boughs were beige. It had innumerable butterflies for the needles that normally cover coniferous trees. It seemed that all those butterflies had settled on it at once, folded their green wings and forgotten themselves.

'Hello, sluisy-tree. We're Semimes's friends. I'm Dan, and that there's Mat.'

'Aren't the leaves teeny!' Matthew exclaimed in wonderment. 'So tall and ramified a tree and such teeny leaves! Everything about it is make-believe. It seems to have come from a different World.'

'Mat!' Daniel interrupted him as good as saying: "This is a different World, Mat."

'I meant it's straight from 'Toys'R'us,' explained Matthew.

'Toys'R'us,' echoed Semimes with gusto. 'It's been quite a festive joy, Mat. Very much so. 'Toys'R'us.' Very much to the point. Come closer, friends. Shake sluisy by the hand. Can't you see it's reaching out to you?'

Matthew and Daniel took hold of some branches and shook them gently.

'They feel like the palm of a hand: soft, warm and responsive,' Daniel shared his perceptions.

'They *are* responsive. A sluisy responds to you,' Semimes corroborated the statement. 'No tree's as responsive as a sluisy. The most responsive of them all provides joy and merriment to people on New Light Day. Come and see what made me turn aside and lengthen our way.'

'Wasn't it the Celestial Meadow?' said Matthew.

'No, it wasn't the Celestial Meadow. I mean, it was... too, of course. But it wasn't the Celestial Meadow.'

'Nor was it the sluisy-tree?' Daniel was puzzled.

Spurred on by his friends' curiosity, Semimes hastened his pace and ended on the double.

'Make haste, get a move on! It's quite near... The short cut is through letrique bushes. Never fear: this is no stinggrass. Letrique is pliable. Stay! Close your eyes.'

Matthew and Daniel exchanged glances.

'Don't be scared,' Semimes persisted. 'If you close your eyes, you'll feel as if you were walking through the water along a river or lake bed. I always do. Have a go.'

'Sounds inviting,' said Daniel. 'Shall we?'

Matthew and Daniel closed their eyes and dashed... into the gentle embraces of the dense and fluffy letrique growth.

'That's cool, Dan! I seemed to have been submerged nape-deep in a river and progressing upstream... I fall with the current holding me up!'

'Where are you, Semimes? Say the word!' Daniel was crying and countering the oncoming flow, barely able to hear his own voice. 'Where do we swim?'

'Semimes is here,' Semimes responded gaily. 'Swim toward Semimes's voice.'

The flow was suddenly cut off and the boys fell into the grass. Semimes was standing about ten paces from them next to a tree. He was looking at them. He was eager to see their eyes. In another moment his face shone with pleasure.

'That there—'

'It's the radiant sluisy-tree,' he interrupted Daniel. He was speaking with such vivacity and tensivity as if he were afraid it would steal a march on him and take the words out of his mouth. 'This is my sluisy, my radiant sluisy-tree.'

It was indeed a sluisy-tree. But they would have found it hard to realize that without Semimes's prompt. It was radiant with myriads of minute playful rainbows in hundreds of tinges. It seemed to have been festooned for a feast.

'I've waited for a full three years and there you are at last!' he was saying and admiring his sluisy-tree.

'Waited for what, Semimes?' asked Daniel in a shy undertone.

'Waited for my sluisy to become radiant... It might not have. It's a rare sluisy that becomes radiant, very rare. But I could feel my sluisy would respond,' Semimes's eyes opened to twice their size, 'and open up.'

'Open up?' said Matthew.

'Open up for the feast. For the New Light celebrations... Just look at each other. Do you see your eyes shine? Your souls rejoice? This is the joy my sluisy has given you.'

'Right you are, Semimes,' said Matthew.

But Semimes was aware his friends did not quite understand. The word 'open' had confused them.

'Sluisy is a rare species in these parts. Finding a radiant sluisy at year's end amounts to thousands and thousands of paces down forest trails and through trailless thickets. It's a matter of luck on occasion.'

'So you struck it lucky with your sluisy?' said Matthew.

'Yes, I did, to come across a sluisy-tree. But it wasn't year's end, and my sluisy wasn't radiant. It was only five days ago (three years after I had come across it) that I realized I'd struck it lucky. All those years I'd dreamed of my sluisy becoming radiant one day... and taking the place of honor in the Dorlief square... across the way from the glorious Dorlief clock. In that case the tree Semimes had discovered would be Dorlief's New Light Tree... Yes... And then floating in the air of Dorlief would be the name of—'

'Semimes?' Daniel called out to him, seeing that he was withdrawing into himself.

'What is it?' Semimes started. 'What is it, Dan?'

'So now your sluisy will become a New Light Tree towering over Dorlief?'

'No!' Semimes exclaimed, unexpectedly for his own self, it seemed, only to realize he was standing next to his sluisy. He said almost in a whisper to correct the mistake (in a rather strange way, though): 'Hush! Don't cry! Don't frighten sluisy. It isn't used to shouts.'

Daniel and Matthew fell silent as if on cue, not to cause offence.

'Five days ago I discovered my sluisy was radiant. I made for Dorlief without another thought, to announce the event. But the way to Dorlief isn't all that short for doubts not to ingratiate their way into your soul, unless your soul's a permanent fixture like that beer-belly of Spaps at the crossroads of the Flying Ferling. I didn't go to the Governing Council. I...' Semimes faltered again, 'I decided to wait— A day later, Spaps, the grandnephew of Fraraf, the Flying Ferling's landlord, found a radiant sluisy-tree. Not mine, a different one. So everything was settled of its own accord, and the onus of doubt was lifted from my chest.'

'It doesn't have to be trimmed, it's so beautiful,' said Daniel.

'I wouldn't trim it given half a chance,' said Matthew. 'A fir's a different matter—you festoon it to make a New Light Tree.'

Matthew's words amused Semimes. He laughed shaking his head.

'Why trim a fir? What kind of New Light Tree would a fir make? The idea! A fir tree wouldn't open. No other tree would, except a sluisy. The idea—trimming a fir tree, indeed! I wouldn't festoon a sluisy, a radiant sluisy, either. Nor would I... my sluisy, since it's changed to its New Light best... Others enjoy decorating them. Each New Light Tree in Dorlief is fine. Father used to say it's the best in the neighborhood. He has his favorite globes in the New Light Tree—a dark-lilac and an orange one with tears all over. I'll point them out to you, you bet. Attractive globes. Very much so. You'll see for yourselves.'

'When will they set up the New Light Tree, Semimes? You said there's three days to go,' Matthew said. 'Or have they?'

'I told you: it's been settled. It's there, in the square, the sluisy that the lucky Spaps stumbled upon. The sluisy was delivered to Dorlief the same day and installed in the square that night. That's the way it's done: people can't be indifferent to a sluisy opening up. I'll have to correct you, though, Mat: it's not a New Light Tree they install, it's a sluisy-tree, a radiant sluisy; it's when it towers over Dorlief, when it's been festooned that it comes to be called a New Light Tree. But people call it this and that in their impatience.'



'How many days before the festivities does it get trimmed? What's the done thing?' asked Matthew.

'On the last day of the year, neither earlier nor later. By New Light's Night. The festooning crew of Sufus and Safasy does it. They're smart; they turn the event into a regular pageant. You can say that that's when the celebrations begin. The kids are sent into ecstasies by the show.'

'Sufus and Safasy...' Daniel intoned with feeling. There's something to the names—Sufus and Safasy... It's occurred to me... but I'm afraid to elaborate. What if it's all wrong? What if it's not the done thing here?'

'Out with it, Dan!' Semimes demanded with ostensible jocularly (he was genuinely curious because of Daniel's eyes).

Daniel hesitated and then said:

'I'd better show it first.'

'Don't hesitate, Dan, we're friends,' Matthew teased him, though it was one of those rare cases when they thought on different lines.

'Okay, friends.' With these words, Daniel opened his belt pouch, produced the Tear and raised it in front of their eyes. The Tear on his palm went turquoise and green in waves. 'Sufus and Safasy... I'd call Her that... I don't know why.'

'Bravo!' cried Matthew.

Semimes had reflected for half a moment, long enough for the *bra-* as uttered by Matthew. The second half that coincided with the *-vo* was sufficient for him to sit, or rather plop down, stunned.

'Semimes!' The two voices on cue tried to keep him upright but failed.

'I— was merely tripped up... by a hammock,' mumbled Semimes falteringly without even looking for the offending hammock to give it a kick.

The friends gave him a hand and restored him to the upright posture.

'Dan, hide away the Tear first thing in your pouch,' Semimes screeched in excitement. 'She'll be much safer there than— in this draught.'

'What draught? There's no wind, Semimes,' said Matthew with a shrug.

Semimes cast him a stern look, and words to suit:

'There're draughts and draughts, Mat. An unseen look could get to the very heart.'

'So it could, Semimes,' Daniel agreed and put the Tear away. 'I did warn that—'

'No, no, my friend. There's nothing wrong with the idea that crossed your mind. Naming a Tear—' Semimes seemed to have choked on an emotion and could not go on.

'I'm glad there's nothing wrong with my idea.'

'Wait, Dan, wait! Stop toing and froing between me and my thought before it gets lost never to come back and leave us in confusion.' Semimes held his head in his hands to regain composure. 'Naming a Tear is the right thing to do, very much so. But there's something I've got to tell you: it isn't the done thing in Dorlief for some reason... I think, Dan—'

Daniel and Matthew stood stock still waiting: they were not about to stand between Semimes and Semimes's thought.

'I think, Dan—' It occurred to Semimes at that point that somebody's Tear could be given... a velvety name, just like Her home. It would be a cozy velvet home for a Tear with a velvety name, very much so. 'I think, Dan, that you can call your Tear... Sufus and Safasy... Sufus and Safasy... Why not? Siblings. Wonderful people. On New Light Day they land all Dorlifans and guests in a regular fairy tale. It's not for nothing that people have returned them to the Governing Council, very much so. While the fair Leely has passed on to them her priceless find, a Tear of Shwarrawsh, thus consummating her heart's bond and laying the onus of Keeper on them. That, despite the fact that her own granddad Faryraf, also a member of the Governing Council and a celebrity, to boot, as the creator of the Dorlif clock... But not a Keeper.'

'Got you,' said Matthew.

'No, Mat, you can't have got it... You can't have got it... Faryraf was father figure for Leely, cared for her the way few take care of their own, and protected her thrice as well... after his son Rafar, Leely's father, along with her mother (I forget her name) stepped on a phantom ledge... Why care? He still does. And his wife Rablbary cares for her granddaughter. Leely was eight when her parents died. I was seven, but it was stamped on my memory... stamped as something that confused Dorlifan souls, and hallmarked enigma... I can't get it...'

Semimes fell silent. Because of the silence, the three turned their eyes to the radiant sluisy tree...

'Father must've resigned himself to the idea that I've got lost. Let's go home. Say a silent goodbye to my sluisy and let's start on our way.'

Semimes pressed his cheek against the branches of his sluisy bedecked with crystal butterflies, whispered something and stepped aside. Both Daniel and Matthew said something to sluisy in parting...

'Now... which way do we go? I think I've got utterly confused,' Daniel admitted.

Matthew looked around and said with confidence:

'Dorlif's that way.'

'There! Three cheers for Mat!' Semimes produced a high-pitched screech. 'Should something happen to me, Dan, this smart guy can act as a guide. What I say to you is this: you've shown your worth, but it doesn't change a thing.'

'Doesn't change a thing?' echoed Matthew, puzzled.

'Nothing at all, Mat, as long as the guide here is Semimes.'

Daniel and Matthew exchanged glances looking for a clue in each other's eyes.

'I meant it as a joke, my friends,' Semimes hastened to explain, seeing that his charges were confused. 'Well done, Mat, level-headed in a new forest! It takes a very special hunch not to get lost in a new forest. You've got it. One thing, though: don't venture into the Wild Woods beyond Dorlif. No hunch is much help there. Not even forestmen venture there. The Wild Woods is unfathomable and weird—there's no getting along with it. That's the way we've lived for hundreds of years: Dorlif by itself and the Wild Woods by itself. Side by side, but well apart. I don't know whether what they say about Faddaf is an honest-to-goodness truth. Legend has it that the Wild Woods let him go. It hasn't either before or afterward:

not a single daredevil, not a single fool. I asked Father once about the legend. What he said was: "Time will show, Sonny," and cast down his eyes. He's holding something off. Even from me. Some sort of knowledge... Well, time we were going. Follow Semimes.'

The travelers were three dozen paces off when Semimes heard his name spoken behind his back falteringly by Matthew.

'Semimes—'

'Shoot. That's what you called me for, isn't it?' said Semimes without stopping or looking back.

'You guess right. But tell me what I'm going to ask you about.'

'The radiant sluisy,' said Semimes without hesitation.

'Right! How did you know, guide?'

'Just a hunch,' said Daniel instead of the guide.

'Not so much a hunch as my eyes and ears. All right, listen. I started telling it but the fair Leuely led me astray.'

'She must be really fair to have led astray a robust guide like you,' said Daniel.

'So she is. You'll see her yet, Dan, and decide for yourself whether she's as fair as all that, to rate a second look. Right. Like all trees, a sluisy holds its leaves three hundred twenty days a year, only to shed them all on New Year Night to give way to new ones. It's a rare sluisy that doesn't. It sheds on New Light's Night not the leaves but their green color which flutters with hundreds of shades in the dark that are dissolved in the air. The leaves look like crystals. That's how a sluisy opens up. Is that what you wanted to know, Mat?'

'That's right, Semimes.'

'Opens up?' Semimes mimicked Matthew's recent surprise.

'That's right, Semimes.'

'The sluisy opens up and light spruces them up with festive attire. It's only on the seventh or eighth day of New Light that they shed their crystal leaves... But at the end of next year my sluisy won't be radiant any longer. Perhaps never again. It'll be such as I met it three years ago... No one has ever seen a sluisy open up twice.'

But the way to Dorlief isn't all that short for doubts not to ingratiate their way into your soul, unless your soul's a permanent fixture like that beer-belly of Spaps at the crossroads of the Flying Ferling... The friends, one of whom had recently dropped that sentiment, were walking down the trail from that radiant sluisy-tree to Dorlief, first through a growth of letrique all around the sluisy, then down a curving passage amid a thicket that only Semimes could discern, and finally down a path that had unmistakably been trodden by human feet.

Semimes walked briskly, somewhat estranged, either souging or mumbling something under his breath, with trailing sibilants now catching at the branches now letting them go, these sss's and fff's, sss's and fff's putting Daniel and Matthew in mind of something they had heard before.

Sufus and Safasy. It isn't just any old folks you're taking to Dorlief, Semimes. These glorious names, once they assailed the ears of one of these arrivals trailing you, proved to be inside his pouch. The best of the best finds its

way into it, everything that's right. The Tear... contrary to his granddad's—his late granddad's—wishes, is now couched in that hideaway of things right. Is She restful there with these arrivals knowing not where they are headed? Or do they? The Word... that many fates hinge on dropped from another tongue (that one's name was... Natan, not Danad, not Daniel, sure), dropped into his... pocket. One right thing rests in his pouch—what's the difference? Not much difference... Sufus and Safasy there. He was like, 'Sufus and Safasy... There's something to it.' There *is*, sure enough. Sure enough, there's something right, very much so. He was like, 'It's occurred to me... but I'm afraid to elaborate. What if it's all wrong? What if it's not the done thing here?' Sufus and Safasy... If it wasn't right, he wouldn't have snuck the way he did. If it wasn't right, he wouldn't have put it in that hideaway. He was like, 'Sufus and Safasy... I'd call it that... I don't know why.' You do know, chum. And the second arrival... He was like, 'Br—' 'Br—' I don't remember what he snapped in reply, but the way he shone and realized what was to lie where. You have your hunches, all right, guy... Sufus and Safasy... It's not any old folks you're taking to Dorlief, Semimes. You'd better watch your step lest all the right things you love end up in that hideaway. Lest they rob you of your glory.

Suddenly Semimes was burned by the word, that absurd word.

What are you on to? What are you talking about, Semimes? Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself. What right things? What glory? Is it long since you fled the Mirror Pool? You're on the sidelines! You're on the sidelines! You're crooked! The right things are not for the crooked! A festooned sluisys for the right ones in the square! Your sluisys in the thicket! You're on the sidelines! Sufus and Safasy... Why didn't you, Semimes, say that a Tear ought to have a name? It's just right to have a name. You've got a name, Semimes the son of Malam. You're crooked. Crooked... Sufus and Safasy... Sufus and Safasy... What makes you fidget crook—? What makes you fidget? Don't sting yourself like stinggrass gone amok! There was nothing the alien thought of. It was you who said: Sufus and Safasy. He merely captured the similarity. He merely captured the similarity of one beauty to another, the similarity of the way the colors play in a Tear to the beauty of the modulation of two names, Sufus and Safasy... But another Tear may have a home that's made of velvet, lilac velvet, rather than leather. Another Tear may have another interplay. The Beauty of Her interplay may be like the modulation of another name. What you do is capture the similarity, the way the alien did. And then one beauty will complement another... to speak for another... For the name speaks and coddles the ear, while the Tear's play of colors coddles the eye. What you do is capture... Sufus and Safasy... Where to capture, where to hear that velvety name? What was the word that scuttled among your other words, Semimes? You were about to capture it and what?—and got frightened. Got it! G-g— Don't be afraid, Semimes! Don't be afraid—say it. G-glory. What is it? What is it, Semimes? You're on the sidelines, sidelines! What sort of glory would a crooked one win? Sufus and Safasy... Glory... Sufus and Safasy... is the name of the alien's Tear. Glory... like a name, like the name of a name. You were... Semimes the Crooked—you've become Semimes the Glorious. Where?

Where does one capture this name? Capture... Capture... Sufus and Safasy... Oh! I so wish...

The air was suddenly cut by the familiar screech:

'Oh! Were Semimes a whole man, he would say one wouldn't be different unless one were different.'

No one knew whether Semimes had floated one very right idea once he roused himself and recalled his friends, or it had felt pent up among his other reflections and let itself loose. This time, playing their hunches, Matthew and Daniel did not exchange glances. Had they done it, they'd have rollicked with laughter (because they would have seen in each other's eyes the irresistible desire to rollick with laughter) and caused mortal offence. Had they done that, they would have hurt their guide and won a sworn enemy for a time or forever, so powerful were his sufferings, so passionate his doubts. But something held them off. Each of the two tried to distract himself from this heart-rending axiom as best he could. A few moments later, they fortunately saw an opening, something they had seen a lot of times in their previous existence—the forest was falling away. The Sadorn Forest was about to be left behind... In a little while it would be left behind... What lay ahead... ?

## Chapter Six

### Dorlief

. . . The travelers stood looking ahead. There were meadows and hills in front of them, with the power of the sky over it all. That power was felt at every intervening moment of time, the green of the meadows and hills sensitive to the serene play of the green celestial waves. The green of the meadows and hills was agitated: it filled with color, was drained of color, played with color. Now it washed into the forest, filling Daniel and Matthew with the fear that it would overwhelm them, now it receded to the horizon. Like an artist who never had his fill, with just one paint at his disposal, the skies kept tormenting their hills and meadows and consummating their creation, craving perfection...

'Semimes,' Daniel addressed the guide, 'look at us.'

Semimes gawped at Daniel.

'You haven't lost anything, have you, Dan?' he asked him gravely.

'Well, no, I haven't lost what you're thinking about. I mean something else. Just look at us.'

'I can see that you're Danad and you're Matam. What's the big idea?'

'You're aware that we come from afar—that's the big idea.'

'Very much so.'

'Very much so,' Matthew corroborated.

Daniel went on:

'We seem to be pestering you with questions. But, you know—'

'Cut it out, Danad. You, too, Mat, don't be silly, echoing your friend's ideas.'

A silence fell. It did not last long, for Semimes would not let it become an understatement.

'I have this to tell you: trying are the questions you ask and answer yourself without sharing with anyone... even if you do find the answers. Don't hesitate to ask yours, Dan.'

No one knew whether the brief silence had swallowed the question Dan had cautiously prefaced or he had reverted to it:

'With the advent of New Light, the meadows and hills around—do they remain green?'

Semimes grinned.

'I can see anxiety in your eyes: you seem to have got used to green grass. So have I, so has Mat. This is no Celestial Meadow. Nor does celestaire grow in these fields. The green grass is here to stay. As for the skies... no one knows what it'll be like. Last year it was blue. This year it's green. What will it be like?'

'Semimes,' said Matthew, anxiety in his voice, 'there're people coming out of the forest there. I think they're armed.'

'We're safe, my friends,' said Semimes, looking at the people emerging one by one from the forest. 'These are forestmen. It's their unit. Don't bother counting, Mat, they're always twenty-four in number. They'll split three and three and keep watch around Dorlief.'

'Fiery heads, aren't they?' said Matthew with a smirk, nodding at the forestmen.

'They can be referred to like that on occasion. But the common name is forestmen.'

'Do Dorlifans keep watch?' asked Daniel.

'Dorlifans? I told you about that yesterday. Some of them join the forestmen, the adventurous kind. At daybreak the forestmen return to the forest, while the adventure-seekers go to the Flying Ferling to splurge the ferlings earned overnight on dainties (there's nothing but dainties at the Flying Ferling) and bandy stories back and forth over a goblet of good Hoglief wine.'

'Ferlings,' echoed Daniel softly under his breath and looked stunned at the same moment.

'Do you frequent the Flying Ferling,' asked Matthew disregarding his friend's reaction.

'Father and I do go there from time to time. Not quite as often as the lucky Spaps, but we do. The family of Frarf, mine host, does know how to cater to the tastes of any customer, lodgers too.'

'Semimes!' The voice came from one of the forestmen. 'Greetings!'

'Greetings, Ewnar!' returned Semimes.

'You need our help?'

'Thanks, Ewnar, but no,' cried Semimes and turned back to the boys. 'The forestmen are always ready to help, mark that... Oh, shame on you, Semimes! I've just discovered I've no parate or mushrooms on me. I gathered and stashed them yesterday. Well, it's too late for that now. I'll dash over and fetch them first thing tomorrow morning.'

Daniel had not quite composed himself and Semimes noted that but put his own construction on it: he had heard Daniel echo the word 'ferlings' after him in confusion.

(Neither Semimes nor Matthew could guess that at the mention of the ferlings adventure-seekers spend in the Flying Ferling, a fragment of thought flashed across Daniels' mind about the coin allegedly found by Felix Thornton during the notorious expedition and subsequently sold to a collector at a profit.)

'I can quite understand what puzzled you, Dan. But it's as simple as this: the ferling is the domestic bird of choice with the Dorliefans. It's neither a chicken nor a duck. It isn't edible. When one rushes an enraged wolf for your sake, you come to love it as a bosom friend, because it *is* a devoted friend.'

'Do you have a ferling?' Matthew asked.

'Father and I have a goat, but let me comfort Dan. A ferling is a friend, but it's also a coin... that's a favorite with quite a lot.' Semimes smiled. 'Because it has a likeness of a ferling on it. Father and I have ferlings like this. As concerns the Flying Ferling, you know all about it.'

'Thanks, Semimes.' Daniel put his hand upon the guide's shoulder. 'You've comforted me somewhat. Mat and I'll join a watch unit and befriend the Flying Ferling.'

'I think Ewnar will issue us with a bow and arrows each; perchance he'll throw in a sword, too,' Matthew chipped in to sustain a 'serious' note.

Semimes lowered his head and screeched mournfully:

'Barkycrooks slew Ewnar's kid brother. His name was Lawuan. He was a guide same as me. His bones were discovered near Natlief. Ewnar knew him by the charm he was wearing. A dozen barkycrooks or so killed by him were also found there.'

'Sorry, Semimes, it was out of turn again.'

Semimes looked around.

'The forestmen are on their way. So must we be. It's going on for mid-tittle-tattle; we'll make Dorlief at twilight.'

Gulping down their rux, the friends went on their way. The forestmen were following a path some three hundred paces to the left; they were making such good pace that they soon were out of sight.

'Hurrying to their stations, the fiery heads are,' remarked Matthew.

'They aren't showing off: it's their gait, light and brisk. We won't be able to keep pace; we're tired.'

'I wish we had such a gait. I'm dying to see Dorlief... before dark, Semimes. To see it all loud and clear,' there were both frustration and hope in Daniel's voice.

'There... see that mound? The one on the right? Let's make for it. It's the vantage spot. You'll have Dorlief loud and clear... Don't run, Dan: it isn't all that near.'

'Did you say it's going on for mid-tittle-tattle?' asked Matthew as they progressed

'So I did.'

'Will you explain?'

'It means it's about four hours into the tittle-tattle,' said Semimes and on seeing wonderment in their countenances (something he had expected to see), went on: 'It's the small hours.'

'Well, I don't doubt that,' remarked Daniel.

The guide looked gravely at him.

'Are you listening or making fun?'

Daniel stopped his mouth with his palm, and Semimes continued:

'It's the small hours. By the Dorlief clock, it's zero to eight in the morning. Then there's daytime. It's zero to eight hours until tittle-tattle. Then there's tittle-tattle. It's zero to eight at night.'

'I'm clueless. Zero to eight this, zero to eight that,' Daniel spread his hands quite at a loss.

Semimes laughed shaking his head.

'What about the third "zero to eight hours," you smart aleck, you? It's day and night contesting these third eight hours. Hence, tittle-tattle is first light, almost as day, and then dark.'

'I think I've got it,' said Matthew. 'By your clock—'

'Wait a bit, Mat, you'll confuse Dan,' cried Semimes, stopped and pulled his stick briskly.

'I merely wanted to prove I'd got it,' Matthew persisted.

'I can see that. But you'll confuse Dan, because... you haven't got a stick.'

'What's your stick to do with it all, Semimes? Waving it like that!'

'I'm going to draw a clock. Look, Dan... You, too, Mat: you haven't seen the Dorlief clock, I have a thousand times.'

Matthew had to come to terms with his lot as the guide's charge, while Semimes, having found and cleared a flat, well-trodden bald patch with his foot, started drawing and muttering.

'This here is a dial. See?'

'Sure thing, an hour dial, what else?' Dan agreed. 'Isn't it, Mat?'

'It is.'

'The zero's down there. A goose egg like this with the figure eight inside. This is our figure eight,' Semimes went on with gusto (he seemed to be identifying with the Dorlief clock).

Then Semimes drew an arrow starting at the center and pointing to zero.

'Let's follow the circle along with the arrow leftward.'

'Along with the arrow,' echoed Matthew Semimes's words, thus making a point of it (as witnessed by his upright index finger), and looked at Daniel.

'Along with the arrow,' Daniel repeated, alert to Matthew's meaning: an 'arrow,' not the habitual 'pointer.'

'What's wrong?' asked Semimes, without a frown this time.

'Just one... arrow?' Matthew surmised after some hesitation.

Semimes laughed.

'This isn't a quiver, it's a clock. Since I'm on quivers, I'll tell you this (the recall was very much to the point). The clock was made by forestmen: Faryraf had asked them expressly. He had because of his reverence for these people. The clock was all the better for it: the forestmen engineered this great thing and



supplied it with a very special stone, a luminous stone. The stone is reported to be very rare. The craftsmen fixed it over the dial. The stone isn't luminous in the daytime: it stores light only to give it off at night. The darker it is all around, the more luminous it is. Thanks to the stone, you can always tell the time.'

'Valuables stay to keep the fakers at bay,' Matthew thought back to his stepfather Roy Shelton's adage he had heard thousands of times.

'Are you on ferlings, Mat?' guessed Semimes.

'I wish I knew,' said Matthew, sadness in his voice (and in his eyes which he hastened to cast down).

'Forestmen don't charge their fees, nor did they charge any this time.'

'Don't they, ever?' Daniel said.

'Never—neither guides, nor those keeping watch on Dorlief every night, nor craftsmen. They might accept a gift on occasion. But as often as not, *they* are the givers. The best gift for a forestman is a goat.'

'Good guys,' said Matthew, his eyes smiling at another good goat master.

'Were I to live in a forest, I'd keep a goat. Would you, Dan?'

Daniel pretended he was reflecting on it... and said:

'One can't do without a goat in the woods. So long as there's someone to leave it with when you and I are away keeping watch over Dorlief, and then splurging at the Flying Ferling.'

Unlike Daniel, Semimes did reflect on it, then said:

'I wish I could see the way the forestmen live. No one, over the hundreds of years, has ever stumbled over their dwellings... Not once... Not even Father has seen them.'

'Sounds strange,' Matthew summed up and looked at Daniel.

'Sounds strange,' Daniel agreed, his face grave.

'The Dorliefans have discovered how best to pay the forestmen back,' said Semimes in a loud voice to interrupt the friends' brown study. 'They've decided to have the clock face the Sadorn forest.'

'A neat idea,' said Matthew.

'Back to the clock run, my friends.' Semimes traced the circle, the zero and the eight inside with his stick once again. 'There... We proceed up from the zero: one... two... three... four. Four is both midday and midnight, and mid-tittle-tattle. It's very nearly mid-tittle-tattle at the moment: the light is no longer what it was in the daytime, but there's enough of it. What say you, smart aleck?'

'I got the hang of it long ago,' said Daniel in an off-hand fashion.

'Long ago, you say? All right, let's proceed...'

'Down the dial,' Matthew proceeded for Semimes.

'No, not down the dial,' Semimes sounded his injury and wiped away his unfinished and unexplained sketch. 'Everyone got the hang of it long ago. Let's mount the mound to see Dorlief before it's quite dark.'

Daniel felt sorry for him.

'Is that all there is to the clock, Semimes? The clock story fascinated Mat and me. It did, indeed,' he said gently and was about to put his hand on his shoulder but thought better of it.

Semimes was off without a reply. After a few paces, he said in his fashion, without turning:

'It isn't, half.'

Matthew and Daniel caught him up and walked by his side, Matthew on his right, Daniel on his left.

'It isn't, half. Between the digit marks for the hours, there are smaller marks without digits: they halve each hour and stand for half an hour, and halve each half for quarters.'

'It isn't, half,' echoed Matthew, reproach in his voice, same as what Semimes had sounded. 'You were about to hold off on us.'

The grimace Semimes could not help let on that the remark was after his own heart. He went on with gusto:

'It isn't, half. Standing over the hour dial is a silvery ferling. A likeness of Rur, Lutul's finest and strongest ferling. It was hit off to the life. When you look at him, you think he's ready to rush to protect the clock and the luminous stone. At night, the ferling's head is within the fiery light of the stone below. A word of warning, though: when looking at the dial at night to see the time, avoid his gaze.'

'Well, I say!' drawled Daniel with feeling.

'Well, I say! Yet another ferling,' there were different notes in Matthew's voice.

'Well, I say! That's the clock we've got in Dorlief,' screeched Semimes with gusto... 'Well, I say! A good story makes an ascent easy. It's just another two hundred paces to the top of our mound.'

The words seemed to urge Daniel on—he ran up to see what had lately seemed a mere phantom that kept luring him. Matthew was swept by the same impulse and rushed after him, but stopped before he could make a few steps... because his soul brimful with Daniel had told him to leave Daniel alone with his own self. Matthew waited for the guide to catch him up.

'Fall behind, did you?' asked Semimes when he had gained on him. 'That was some sprint, wasn't it?'

Matthew thought it best not to shrug it off with a joke, saying softly just two words that were very nearly the truth:

'That's the best way.'

Both of them could not pull their eyes away from Daniel: there was something to his pace and motions that held their gazes. They saw him get to the top and stop stock still—there was a bluff ahead. He stood like that for some time and then cupped his head and dropped to his knees.

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that not every new arrival's an alien,' Semimes said and added: 'He might have returned as grandchild of the son in quest of the Word.'

Matthew was struck by the perspicacity of the guy walking by his side and said in reply:

'If your words carried as far as Dan, he'd think that not every guide is wise, but he knows one wizard among the guides. Mat would agree with him, you bet.'

On nearing Daniel, they saw he was crying... Another few moments later, Matthew realized what had made his friend give rein to feeling. Far off was the place that had no place on Bushtunts's globe and it was floating over Our Lake. It was now on solid land that they had reached from a village called Globe, a land that was far away from Globe or near it... so near it was reachable without wheels. The place had now acquired a name. Sprawled in front of them was Dorlief. It was an orange-green township, orange rather, drowned in the greenery of the orchards, front gardens, avenues and just shrubbery and trees, with the idea of being a hermit or a loner after their own heart. Its isolated particles, huts that made up its streets were the color orange: from a paleface runt of a carrot to an earthenware jug which had been avidly licked by fire. The huts were exactly what Daniel and Matthew had seen through the eyepiece of the microscope. They were somewhat eerie. The boys had ascribed the bizarre shapes to Bushtunts's fancy at the time. It was obvious now, however, that they were not a figment of his imagination. The huts' walls formed a circle over the perimeter, with the roofs dome-like, now steep, now gently sloping. Matthew's eye could not detect a single one that flaunted its height over the rest. They were one-story: those that sprawled and those that were content with less space. All of them were shrouded in a gentle but visible rainbow mist (what was it?)... Sparkling in the square amid the township was a huge inexhaustible Roman candle... Well, it was no Raman candle, it was, of course, a sluisy-tree, the one the lucky... the lucky Spaps had found. Further away and half its height, upon a bluish-grey pillar over a white hour dial was the silvery ferling.

Matthew shut his eyes... opened them again, made sure of something and asked:

'That air over the huts... what's that, Semimes?'

'Yes, what?' Daniel chimed in approaching them. 'Has Dorlief captured a rainbow and split it among the huts?'

'Dorlief has let in the light of heaven. In time of yore, light got inside huts through windows. But then a wise man bethought himself to let it in through the roofs. The man's name was Norron. He suggested they make roofs of the most useless plant in the world—measureless, of its silly leaves. If they were to be soaked in very hot water, they could be stretched until they were fine and transparent enough to be spread over the roof latticework. The very first roof was a success: transparent, lightweight and as sturdy as forestmen's capes. The neighbors make fun of it saying the Dorliefans have the sky for a roof. However, some of them, particularly Natliefans, have replaced their roofs of tuffer bark with those of measureless.'

'Got you,' said Matthew.

'Doing things out of turn again, aren't you? What is it you've got? Share with Dan and me.'

'It's because of the roofs, because of measureless. Veins, irregularities—these make the light twinkle. Measureless is sure to have veins, isn't it?'

'Sure enough, it does.'

'With rainbow gauze between the sky and the Dorliefan dwellings,' Daniel chipped in.

'Yes, rainbow gauze,' Semimes repeated the word he liked.

'Should we go on our way?' suggested Daniel.

'We should,' Matthew and Semimes said on cue.

It was plain sailing from then on... because they were walking downhill, because there was Dorlief ahead.

'There are rocks galore in these parts. Is it Shwarrawsh's doing?' asked Matthew.

'Shwarrawsh,' drawled Semimes, only to add sadly after a time: 'Shwarrawsh took him away.'

'The one who thought of measureless roofs?'

'Yes, Mat, Norron. His wife, too. And three of his sons. He's survived only by his kid daughter Falafy.'

'Falafy?' Daniel echoed.

'Falafy the Keeper. That's her. She named her sons after her dead brothers. There... Novon, Ratytar and—'

Semimes suddenly held his breath and stopped. Matthew and Daniel followed suit.

'What's up, Semimes?' asked Daniel.

'Just a mo, friends... Unless Semimes has got something wrong... a most unexpected coincidence has taken place... A mo, a mo... Yes, Keeper Falafy named her sons after her dead brothers: Novon, Ratytar and... Semimes stopped short again.

'Speak up, Semimes!' cried Matthew impatiently.

'Natan?' asked Daniel, even though he had no doubt it was.

'What? Where?' said Matthew who could not believe his ears.

'Natan,' Semimes could finally let the name loose. 'Falafy's younger brother was called Natan. So her kid son's called Natan.'

'And my granddad Natan!' blurted out Daniel as if in debate with Semimes.

'What was I on?'

'An unexpected coincidence,' said Matthew.

'An unexpected coincidence... But not another word on that!' the guide ordered.

'Why not?' said Daniel in puzzlement.

'Why not? I'll tell you why not, my friends: you'll have to get used to keeping that secret to yourselves. When it comes to talking, listen more, talk less... and look out. Particularly look out.'

'Why look out in particular?' asked Daniel (mostly for the sake of argument).

'Why not? Words are mostly left unsaid or they confuse the listener. It's hard to cheat the eye,' said Semimes looking sullenly at his charges as if testing on them the veracity of his words.

But his words made them look rather closer. Both Matthew and Daniel recalled as they looked at their guide (recalled with their eyes) that he was the one who had called nutheads barkycrooks in the Loner's cave, squeezing out the word, who had buried his face in the table, and thought (thought with their eyes) that he had found it less hard than they to unearth the word from the bottom of

his heart than to utter it out loud. If there had been the Mirror Pool for the table, he would have choked on that word... Semimes, Matthew and Daniel looked away all at once.

'That's right,' Matthew agreed with the guide.

'I agree: not another word on the unexpected coincidence,' said Daniel.

'Dan, my friend, just show Falafy the Word you're taking to Dorlief.'

'I'll first show the book to your father...'

Semimes slightly turned his head toward Daniel and strained whatever you strain when divining a man: his eyes, his eyes, his gut sense.

'... We'll stop by your place, anyway,' Daniel went on, 'and you'll put us up for the night, won't you? Will there be room enough for two guests?'

Semimes's face was the first to answer Daniel's question: the eyes, the mouth, the ear lobes (the ears are a giveaway, so much so that they should be regarded as complementary to a grimace). The eyes, the mouth, the ear lobes and even his gait were expressive of the happiness he experienced, much against their desire to be caught in the act. (Semimes had long considered luring these extraordinary people into his hut, each time the imagination picturing Dorlief, the alleyways, the porches and the windows thereof whispering comments: 'This is Semimes, son of Malam... he's not alone... Who's with him? It isn't any old people he's taking with him... They're heading for the Semimes and Malam place... They're staying with Semimes... They're from afar, very much so... It's no accident he's taken them to Dorlief...')

After Semimes's countenance answered Daniel's question, he was finally roused and answered on his own:

'Dan, Mat, my friends, Father and I would be happy to entertain you in our home. You can stay with us as long as you wish. We've got,' Semimes paused for some reason, 'two spare rooms... If you, Dan, want to show the Word to Father, I agree.'

'Thanks, friend,' said Matthew and added in an undertone as if to himself, nodding his head: 'As many as two!'

'I'm glad, Semimes... It's so generous of you,' said Daniel on seeing the guide's spiritual tremor. The guide had turned up the day before for some good reason, it seemed.

What a pity our house is on the outskirts, flashed through Semimes's mind.

'Fortunately, our house is on the outskirts of the village,' said Semimes. 'Our onus makes us be very careful... very much so. It would be unwise to rent a room from Frarf at the Flying Ferling. We've no use for strange eyes and ears, much less those of alien lodgers.'

'How many rooms are there at the Flying Ferling?' asked Matthew to quite get rid of awkwardness that was out of place.

'Eight: three singles, three doubles and two for four persons. Frarf and his multi-handed family have got a big inn. Just as big an inn, if not bigger, is there only in Hogleif. They've got stables for the horses twice as large. They come to Hogleif for flour from all over the area... For wines, too: there're berries galore there... However, Dorlief is the hub—with all roads converging on it... And the New Light Tree here is the best one of all...'

As the friends were nearing Dorlief, celestial light, weary, was languidly leaving it. The Dorlief rainbows had been swallowed by the twilight, and its roofs had faded. Not for long, though...

'Dan, Mat, look!'

'Fantastic!' Daniel said softly in delight and asked: 'Are these candles?'

Yes, Dorliefans light candles. You see, the roofs one by one are filled with light, and rainbow gauze hovers over the huts again. Nocturnal this time.'

'It's even finer in the twilight! There's a mystery in candlelight,' remarked Daniel.

'Yes, some sort of mystery,' echoed Semimes.

'Is yours to be seen from here?' Matthew asked him.

Semimes grinned.

'No. The linden trees are in the way. We'll skirt the coppice on the right, and you'll see our light. It'll be seen from afar. Father used to say that there had been no coppice here before. The linden saplings grew along with the rest of Dorlief... after Shwarrawsh had razed the erstwhile one. I love to walk in the coppice and think a bit of this and that, and munch linden nuts. It's good to think of things munching on linden nuts... Hmm... I wonder what Father's got for dinner... What would you like to have at the moment?'

'My tummy's been pestering me with the question for the past hour or so and rumbling like anything,' Matthew ventured.

'Munch on some linden nuts,' Daniel suggested.

'I think I should.'

'Linden nuts are no substitute for food,' Semimes remarked. 'They're food for thought, not for the stomach. Barynth nuts are just right for the stomach. But you'd better forget them for the moment.'

'I'd—' began Matthew again. 'However late a dinner, I'd have some fried fish and some boiled potatoes, very hot, straight from the fire. You put it in your mouth and roll it about with your tongue and teeth not to get scalded.'

'I wouldn't mind fish, either,' Daniel agreed. 'I'd manage a skilletful and there'd be no room for potatoes, I'm afraid. And some wine... What did you call it, Semimes? The place they take flour and wine from?'

'Hogrief.'

'A skilletful of fish and some Hogrief wine. It's been my dream of a lifetime to have a skilletful of fried fish.'

'I like my fish with a side-dish of potatoes,' Matthew persisted. 'Less the potatoes... I'd feel there's something wanting... both in the taste and in the soul—given potatoes, the taste's just right.'

'Well, I like my potatoes, too. I'm all for potatoes... with some herring. But the taste of fried fish shouldn't be ruined with anything.'

Semimes listened contentedly, nodding his head.

'What makes you so silent, guide?' asked Matthew. 'Out with your secrets.'

Semimes took a few paces and replied with gravity:

'Now that you mention fish, I wouldn't mind having some, either. Very much so, I would. Except that it shouldn't be fried but boiled: there's more genuine taste in boiled fish. When fried, it acquires all sorts of other tastes. It's

savory, all right, but savory in a different way. Father likes his fish boiled with veg: carrots, potatoes and onions. He would boil it in goat's milk, sure thing... And then mushrooms... I'd love some... I left some behind in Sadorn. Father and I mostly have them stewed, stewed in goat's milk.'

'Sure thing,' said Matthew well in turn. 'I wish I could try some.'

'That you will,' Semimes said with gusto. 'You'll get your fill of that.'

Weary though they were, the friends quickened the pace, skirted the linden grove and saw the welcoming light. Welcoming, was it... ?

. . . The nearer Daniel and Matthew got to Semimes's home, the more they experienced an emotion new to them, caused ('Can your secret be seen from here?') by something emanated by the hut that the luring light had graduated to in the dark. The careless air they had been gassing with that had made them quicken the pace and joke was no longer there, and they were no longer sure they wanted to cross that threshold. There was something about it (something that goes by the name of secrecy) that... only the light was aware of. It was hallmarked secrecy. It was reserved and wary and more: it was probably afraid of something... It filled the dome of the squat house and proliferated over the small space it dominated, surrounded on all sides by the dark and uncertainty or, perchance, surrounded by nothing at all, with everything else gone—at least that might be the impression of the travelers at that hour. And that nothing beyond the rim of light, breathing everywhere, would let the two friends look back, or consider looking back. As to what was ahead... What was it, looking at them so furtively as if it was not looking at all? Those were not so much windows as eyes (the boys could only see two of them). And semi-light in them (meaning semi-darkness). And some thought in them. Welcome? Or... The eyes of the windows were watching them furtively as aliens come out of this twilight or out of this nothingness... To the hut's left, overlooking Dorlief if it was still there, there was an emerald curly linden tree. And another two or three behind it. Towering to the right was a turquoise willow-tree. And another two or three behind it. The light of the dome touched them off in a masterly fashion. It seemed to be making sure it was still there, it had not been spirited off by the creeping darkness... or by the secret which haunted the hut. They dropped their shadows in response, to say it had not happened.

Semimes walked alongside Matthew and Daniel. They had got used to him as a gift of the hills they had descended, as a guide who had led them down wild trails. But the hills and the trails had been left behind and erased by the dark. What was he now? What side was he on now? Theirs? Or was he looking at them out one of the windows as aliens? Why was he silent... ? Why was he silent... ?

## Part Four

### The Eight-Petal Flower

#### Chapter One

##### A Ball of Yarn and Plain Flat Cakes

Matthew recoiled to the left, Daniel stopped short, backed off and nearly fell when something took off from the nearby willow and rushed at them. It was not a dog, even though the first thing that flashed through their minds, their hearts in their mouths, was the shadow of a watchdog. It proved to be a small spry humpback with a round face, straw-colored curls on his head and a silly stick in his hand, a stick that had forgotten it was to support him when walking, and with a rasping, though resounding, voice quite in line with his cordial manner. The appearance of the creature and the ring of the voice put the two friends at ease, as if their nervousness had never been there.

'Greetings, travelers! I've been looking forward to seeing you. I was yesterday, I was today. My calculations,' he looked intently at his stick that was much like Semimes, only shorter, and came up nearer to them, 'suggested there should be three of you... Which is the case.'

'Good evening—' Daniel faltered: he meant to address the host by name but could not recall it.

'Malam's my name.'

'Good evening, Malam,' said Matthew and Daniel in unison and followed it with a forced nod and even a bow. The clumsiness was occasioned either by his short stature or their reverence for his age, which was hard to forget: a thousand years is something (unless Semimes had got it wrong, because the oldie looked sixty-odd at most), or because something had to be done, whether it be, say, nodding or bowing, when confronted (they could now see him much clearer) by a manikin that at first blush looked like a human... but a human with a difference: a carrot-colored face, neck, and hands of the same color, with a face rather round than oval (which is sometimes the case, of course) that seemed to peep out of a burrow (which is very rarely the case), and a hump that did not affect his stature in any way, it rather looked like the habitual and very useful backpack of one who enjoyed hiking, though hidden under a loose shirt for some reason.

'Meet my friends, Father: this is Matam, and this is Danad.'

'I hope, sonny, the trail has taught you to understand one another. I hear,' Malam looked at his stick again, 'the trail you trod yesterday was very unnerving, the reason being the stomping tread of those that made you turn back to the mountains again.'

'Those were barkycrooks, Father. They pursued us all the way to the Kerdock Gorge.'

'Barkycrooks?' Malam furrowed his brow.

Semimes's friends noticed that Malam's face and voice had beneficence and sternness in equal measure.



Semimes cast down his eyes.

'That's what we call nutheads,' said Matthew. 'Semimes thought it up.'

'We all liked it,' Daniel added.

'All of you?' Malam looked from one to the other questioningly.

'We found ourselves in the Loner's cave and spent the night there,' Semimes explained.

'*Barkycrooks* hits them off to the life, those freaks, sonny... Take your friends in. We'll eat and talk to our hearts' content.'

Saying this, he was the first to mount a low porch and open the door but thought better of it on reflection.

'Show them to the water-and-soap room and the needful. I'll go rustle up something in the kitchen.'

'Will do, Father.'

The Carrotty pushed the door, stepped over the threshold, and stepped over it again.

'Don't loiter in the living room overlong, sonny, go to the dining room. I've set the table, it's just the hot dishes that need serving.'

'Will I lend you a hand?' said Semimes.

'Give a hand to the company... Light the candles in the living room and leave them going—there'll be light all over the house,' said Malam and hurried to the kitchen.

'Yes, Father,' said Semimes and addressed the guests: 'Matam, Danad, come in.'

The boys found themselves in a spacious, well-lit hallway. Hanging from a hook on the left wall was a small grey cloak with a travel bag nearby. Below, on the floor was a pair of kid's leather boots. On the right wall there was a gneiss cape and a light-brown coat with a pair of top boots jammed close to each other, and two pairs of shoes below. It was clear at a glance which wall was whose.

The smell of fried fish that suffused the air in the hallway was unmistakable.

'It looks like our wishes are about to be granted,' said Daniel gaily.

Semimes sniffed and screeched contentedly:

'Fried, with onions and tomatoes.'

'With onions and tomatoes—it's just what the doctor's ordered,' said Matthew smacking his lips.

Semimes sniffed again.

'And boiled with veg. Father's got it just right.'

'Of all that's wonderful, Semimes!' Matthew teased. 'You've got quite a nose for things! What about potatoes?'

Semimes treated the task with gravity. He sniffed in the air several times, a short sniff and a long sniff.

'The fish drowns out all the other smells,' he complained, closed his eyes and did the same thing again with his nose. 'I got it—there'll be potatoes, all right, baked in the embers in the fireplace.'

'Hurrah!' exclaimed Matthew. 'They're even better when baked.'

'I won't mind baked potatoes either,' said Daniel and asked: 'Do we go left or right? Where's the place where wishes are granted?'

The hallway terminated in a corridor that forked off in two circular arms right and left to reunite on the opposite side of the house.

Semimes shook his head and said:

'We go right. Let me lead the way—I'll light the candles in the needful and the water-and-soap rooms.'

Matthew's attention was drawn to the candle-holders on the wall across from the hallway. Each of the two was shaped as a hand holding a glass globe. Both candles inside the globes blazed, lighting the hallway and part of the corridor.

'Your candle-holders are quite a curiosity, Semimes.'

'Forestmen's gift to Father. They stop by him very often. We have lamps like these in every room. They say no one's in Dorlief has their like.'

'Tears of Shwarrawsh,' intoned Daniel, taking both Matthew and Semimes by surprise

They gave him surprised but different looks.

'What's all this gawping, Mat and Semimes, my friends? A globe on a palm is a symbol. And I'm sure it's symbolic of the Tear.'

Suddenly Semimes neared one of the lamps and blew the candle out without warning the friends, then stepped over to the next one and angrily blew again. In the semi-light (the light reached the corridor through the space between the low wall of the kitchen and the dome of the roof) he could be seen to sit on the floor and bite his hand.

'What's wrong, Semimes? What ails you?' asked Daniel.

Semimes arose in silence, struck a flash and lit the candles. The boys would not pester him with questions any more.

'Just let me go, guests... let me go,' Semimes faltered.

It could be seen from the way Semimes faltered out the words that he was at odds with himself, and he was still biting at himself and his soul.

The light came on in the needful room and then in the water-and-soap room.

'Just wash your hands while I light... the Tears in the living room. Then go straight to the living room. It's the door on the left, I'll leave it open.'

'Where're you going?' asked Daniel.

'I'll check on Nuruny. That's our goat. I've got to say a word to her.'

. . . Semimes rushed out of the house to the willow farthest from the house. There was a stone near it. Semimes liked sitting on it with his back to the trunk. He would look long toward Lake Werent, lost in thought. He was not going to sit dreaming this time, though, for his friends Mat and Dan were waiting for him. Something made him kneel near the stone... and murmur very softly:

'He was like, "Where's the place where wishes are granted?" That depends, Dan, that depends... Home at last. Everything's ready. Been ready and waiting for a long time. Home. I must be going... going. Until morning.'

He did stop by Nuruny's pen on his way back to be honest with himself and his friends. Nuruny was chewing her cud as usual. He came up to her and stroked her back and sides.

'I'm back, Nuruny. Back, with company. You'll see those guys yet. You don't have to be afraid of them, Nuruny: they are all right, unlike that fool Kipik. They won't worry you with a stick or pelt you with stones. Well, I'll be going.'

Semimes ran into the house, hung his bag from a peg and went to wash his hands.

'Oh, you still here?'

'Your father brought us some towels,' said Daniel. 'He told us to go to the dining room.'

Matthew poked his finger at the transparent ceiling (he'd checked it in Semimes's absence) and said:

'It's strong; it won't budge. Is that measureless?'

'It is,' said Semimes and made the water flow by pushing the stopper. 'You keep wondering at things, Mat. If the roof's made of measureless, the ceiling is sure to be, too, sure thing. How else would light get through? But they are only over the rooms on the outside of the corridor. You'll know why if you think.'

'I know why,' Matthew boasted.

When the boys emerged from the water-and-soap room, Semimes suggested:

'Let's go by way of the living room: it communicates with the dining room.'

'Wait a bit, Semimes.'

'What is it, Dan?'

'It'll bother me if I don't ask right away,' said Daniel, with no exaggeration in his words, for he felt queasy at the sight of a huge padlock on a door across the way from the living room. He might have thought back to the ever closed door to Bushtunts's laboratory that introduced him to yet another door, the secret, invisible door Matthew and he had entered the day before. And here was... another locked door. Where did it lead?

'Go ahead.'

Daniel merely pointed at the padlock.

'Oh! This is the locked room,' Semimes said in undertones. 'I don't know what's inside: Father wouldn't say. I got there, though, but saw nothing but a ceiling made of tuffer planks, same as the walls, not measureless. No window there. It's... a dark room.'

Matthew and Daniel exchanged glances.

'I wonder,' said Matthew.

'So do I, sure thing,' Semimes said, only to add: 'We shouldn't go there. I did ask Father about it but he said: "There're places where one shouldn't venture."'

'It put me in mind of something,' Matthew said.

'Same here,' Daniel said.

""Don't venture into the darkness in the Niche, however it lured you, unless you want to get lost"" is what it put you in mind of, friends.'

The boys entered the living room. It, too, had its secrets. They were hard to divine, even though they were not under lock and key. There were two easy chairs at the fireplace which had nothing to do with secrets but comforted the friends no end.

'Bags this one's mine!' said Daniel. 'I'll sit in it near the fire right after dinner, and wild horses wouldn't pull me away.'

'Take the other, Mat,' screeched Semimes, eager to please. 'You'll have to have a good rest today, very much so.'

But Matthew's attention was called to something else. He turned his head left and right. To the left was a round table with four chairs around it. To the right, near the wall, was a sofa. But he hardly regarded them, these trifles.

'Dan, look... Not that way.'

Daniel started turning his head, as if he had caught the tic from Matthew. Only Semimes did not stir: he looked at his guests waiting for their reaction. The walls on the left and on the right were different but equally attractive, even more so than the pervasive and importunate aromas from the kitchen.

Crowding the left wall was a disorderly assortment of small shelves covered with mushrooms made presumably of wood. There were dozens of them at a glance. They differed, as mushrooms would, in size, and the color of their stems and caps. Some were as small as your pinky, with a button cap; others had a stem so large it could only be hugged with two palms, and the weighty cap of a gigantic porcino. This strange mushroom exhibition boasted a detail that made Matthew and Daniel feel something imperceptible to intelligence and therefore indescribable with words. The detail was a small ladder leaning against each mushroom.

The right wall was reserved for horses, or, rather, one wooden black horse that occupied each of the dozen shelves. It was galloping, that upsurge of the imagination, uncaught, untamed, but inspired by feeling and arguably made by human hand... galloping... galloping. Galloping somewhere. It was a horse forever at a gallop. Or else it would have stopped on one of the shelves. Or bucked on one. But it kept galloping... The black horse was marked with a drop of blood shed by an arrowhead. The arrow had been flying to meet the horse, only to be stopped where the rider should have been (it was fixed to the horse's flowing mane). But there was more to it. Something about the horse kept teasing Matthew and Daniel and evoked a feeling in contrast to the ladders next to the mushrooms on the wall to the left of the living room door. It gave Matthew and Daniel the creeps when they came closer and saw they had no eyes... The black horse had no eyes for some reason...

This time it was impossible to tell which wall was whose (as distinct from the hallway with the cloaks and boots). Daniel and Matthew would have asked their questions if the door to the dining room had not opened and admitted the voice of the Carrotty which chased away all passions except one.

'Semimes, Daniel and Matthew, dinner's ready and served, and it whispered to me that it would not wait a minute longer. Come and tuck in.'

Moments later, the friends, having wished one another nice hunger, were in the grip of fish dishes (well, not only fish) and convivial chat which was gaining

momentum as the wishes struck a balance between what was carnal and spiritual.

\* \* \*

There was a knock on the door of Nadidan's house in the village famous for its flour and wines. Both Nadidan and his wife Taraty started, for the sound seemed to be proceeding from underground and assailing their hearts. Nothing worried their seven-year-old son Sordros, though, who was sleeping the sleep of the just. He knew nothing of what had happened seven years before, when he was yet a sparkle in his father's eye, and he had not been told the horror tale. If he had, the knock which had run the length of the staircase over the entire floor, would have intruded into his dream, because living in his soul would have been the fear which was crouched in the souls of his father and mother expecting the knock.

Seven years ago, Nadidan had stood on his knees on the trail that lay from Lake Solef to Hogleif asking for mercy. Few were the words as spoken, but they held Nadidan's fate, his whole life from that moment on.

'I, the son of Nafan, beseech you, Lord of Darkness, to slay me alone. I beseech you not to touch this woman and the one whose life is inchoate in her.'

He whom the villager called the Lord of Darkness signed to his men to take away their pole axes from the prisoners and said:

'I'll let you go, Nadidan, and grant life to your wife and the one she carries in her womb, provided you pay back the debt with two lives when I claim them.'

Nadidan turned his eyes to Taraty but saw she was in no position to answer. She had lost the gift of the gab for horror. She hollered, with her eyes popping out and her face a grimace, hollered in a way that no sounds could—and no sounds issued. Horror made her grow old under his very eyes. Her arms hugging her belly were petrified. (She would have the gift of the gab and the life juices restored to her the moment her infant's cry intruded the Waking World, because at the moment she would be forgetful of her muteness.)

'I swear,' said Nadidan, downcast.

So, there was a knock on Nadidan and Taraty's door seven years later. No neighbor ever knocked like that. No traveler ever did. That was the knock of fate. One gets sick to one's stomach from a knock like that.

Nadidan's and Taraty's eyes met.

'Get it,' she said sensing doom, 'before Sordros wakes up.'

Nadidan realized she was thinking not of her son's peace alone, and replied:

'I'm mindful of Sordros... and of you.'

Then he took a candle, went to the hallway, opened the door... and was stunned.

'Don't you know me?'

Nadidan knew the voice: he had never heard such another that went to the heart quite the same way this one did. But the countenance was both the same and different. The gaze was the same, but the face was different: the nose... the mouth... were the erstwhile features but distorted... Everything seemed warped.

'Rest assured: I'm the one you met seven years ago near Lake Solef, the one you chose to call the Lord of Darkness, the one you promised. I'm here to claim the debt.'

'My son's asleep. I'm afraid we'll wake him up.'

'You don't have to fear for your son and wife for the time being.'

'I remember the promise and I'll be as good as my word.'

'Put out the candle and step forth.'

Nadidan blew out the candle and left it on the porch.

When they were out of earshot, he asked:

'What is your pleasure, Lord of Darkness? I'd like to get rid of the onus that would not let me breathe these past years.'

'I'll give you three names. I don't doubt you've heard of these people. Before New Light Day, you'll meet each of them and give them my message. Some of them will be made short shrift of, some warrant a longer time and more cordial. All three of them live in Dorlief and enjoy Dorliefans' love.'

'Two days won't be enough to get there,' said Nadidan.

'Not to worry. I'll help you get to the ones I need. Now for the thing upon which your son and wife's life will depend.'

'You won't touch them! You promised!' Nadidan cried throwing caution to the winds.

'You are forgetting yourself. We're talking of your promise.'

Nadidan was downcast. The guest who lorded it over him produced something from under the hem of his cape and held it out to him.

'Does your hand have command of this object?' he asked.

Following his hands which had lost touch and did not know where to apply themselves, and now that they had the object in them were recalling the hang of it, Nadidan livened up.

'Yes, I hail from Parlied. My father's a hunter to the manner born. He used to take me hunting when I wasn't yet ten. He knew it all and taught me a lot of tricks. He taught me how to overwhelm a bear with a prod and flay it. Yes, my hand has command of this thing,' he said feeling important, only to be aware that the feeling had got the upper hand of both fear and shame, and falter... 'But why should I need it to talk to those three?'

'Take it easy. You don't know yet why you'll need it. I'll tell you.'

Nadidan was suddenly stunned: he felt something untoward was happening to him.

'I can't see it! My hand's holding it, my fingers are sensing it, but I can't see it! I can see everything, night permitting. I can see you, Lord of Darkness. But I can't see *it*.' He unclasped his fingers and was ready to get rid of what irritated him with its mutability.

'Hold it. Hold it tight,' the guest ordered, 'lest you lose it.'

Nadidan clasped his fingers again.

'Why can't I see it? Tell me.'

'It's a phantom.'

'Why can my fingers feel it?'

'It attracts the blood running in your veins.'

'But I saw it when I received it from your hands.'

'That's because it's in my power and I wanted you to see it. Here's its brother, take it.'

'Another one?' Nadidan was at a loss but accepted it obediently.

In a few moments, the other object, in no way different, became invisible.

'You have little time, Nadidan, but your hands must have command of them. Even more importantly, your soul shouldn't oppose them and your heart should not be atremble when the hour of the chat with the people I told you about comes. You'll help the phantom brothers, and they'll help you.'

'In what way?' Nadidan asked in a whisper for some reason.

'In what way? I'll tell you. On New Light Day's eve, there'll be all sorts of people in Dorlief, Nadidan of Hoglief among them. He shouldn't have to hide or feel shy. He'll arrive there as a guest. He will remember that his son and wife are waiting for him at home, and he will enjoy the celebration. He'll spy those he needs, whose names I'll tell him before he starts out.'

'What if I don't know them by sight?'

'Believe me, Nadidan, many looks will be directed at them on that day, their names will be spoken by many, and it won't be an effort to know them. When you find them, you'll recall your assistants. One assistant per person, one of the phantom brothers. You'll point out the person to the assistant unseen in your hand in much the same way as you point out a roe to an arrow, unclasp your fingers and leave it hanging in the air. And you'll point out the other person to its brother. You'll meet the third and talk to him. Go, Nadidan. I'll soon come to see you.'

Nadidan could not help asking:

'Will you let us go if I...'

'You'll pay back the debt, and we'll get along all right.'

Nadidan hid away the objects he had been clasping in his hands under the girdle behind his back, as if someone might see and press charges... of his connection with darkness. It lightened the burden somewhat and it occurred to him that his job was nothing much—just to point out. Before opening the door of his house where his wife was waiting for him, he thought that pointing out... was the price of Sordros's and Taraty's lives.

\* \* \*

'. . . When we came down from the mountains we saw a man in a black cape. He sat on a rock waiting for us. It was later on we realized that,' Daniel went on with the story of the adventures Matthew, Semimes and himself had had. The Carroty was listening with compassion.

After dinner the story was continued in the living room. Daniel and Matthew entrusted their bodies to the chairs they had secured for themselves as soon as they saw them. Malam and Semimes made themselves comfortable on the sofa.

'He was waiting for Dan, Father,' Semimes pointed out. 'He wanted Dan's Tear.'

'How did he know about the Tear?' Matthew wondered aloud. 'We only arrived yesterday.'

'And there were just the mountains to see and listen to us,' added Daniel.

'He wanted your Tear,' repeated Semimes.

'He did, no doubt about it. But how did he know about the Tear?' Daniel was still wondering.

'How did he know about the Tear?' Malam echoed, questioning himself.

There was concentration on Semimes's face: he was trying to recall something.

'The man said, turning to Dan... turning to you, Dan: "I knew you'd come."'

'That's right, Semimes, that was what he said,' Matthew corroborated.

"But the Path that took you here," said Semimes thinking hard, "was Her Path, not yours. My Path but not yours."

'Did you say *Path*?' Malam frowned and shook his head, then added: 'It's strange... Where did he come from? Whence did his Path begin?'

'It *is* strange,' Semimes echoed after his father and looked at Daniel and Matthew as if they were suspect of denial.

'What was he like, that man?' asked Malam.

Matthew and Daniel looked at one another in some confusion. They did not know how to break the most conspicuous feature of his appearance. Then Daniel made up his mind.

'He's short and—'

'He's humpbacked like you, Father,' Semimes helped him out. 'I took him for you from afar. But his black cape made me think better of it.'

Malam was startled: some conjecture made him sit up and fidget.

'And he's also—' Daniel was about to add, but the Carroty stole a march on him.

'Orange like me?' he blurted out.

'Yes, Father.'

Malam got up from the sofa.

'It's... Zusuz,' he said with utmost gravity and paced the room, pausing now and then to recall something.

'His hair is crinkly and yellow?' He raised his hand to twist it near his head, touching his hair slightly.

'No!' said Matthew and Daniel in unison.

'His hair is black and anything but crinkly,' said Daniel. 'And reaches all the way to the shoulders.'

'It isn't Zusuz,' Malam reversed his judgment and sat down on the sofa again.

'He's got a stick same as yours.'

'Same as mine?' Malam was incredulous. 'Are you sure, sonny?'

'Exactly like yours. I had a good look.'

'Not only a good look, did you, Semimes?' said Matthew to add weight to the words of the one who had protected him and Daniel from the dreadful stick.

'Yes,' screeched Semimes in an undertone, glancing at his father in apprehension, and explained: 'I pitted my stick against his—it was as strong as yours.'



'Zusuz,' Malam made up his mind. 'There're two such sticks this side, three, counting his.'

'This side?' asked Matthew anticipating Daniel who had the same question at the tip of his tongue.

'Did I say: this side?' the Carroty winced... 'I did say: this side. I somehow said: this side.'

'Because he's against us,' Semimes hastened to help his father out, even though the same question haunted him.

'He's got a very long hooked nose,' said Matthew, returning everyone to this side from the one beyond.

Malam looked at him in surprise.

'Like one sewn on and smeared with clay—to frighten the kids,' Daniel added a few touches to the very long hooked nose.

'Not Zusuz,' the Carroty was undecided. 'Who's he then? Looking like Zusuz... Looking unlike Zusuz... Who's he then?'

'Father, blocking our way was the one you call Zusuz,' Semimes cast down his eyes and screeched out the words which had been haunting him ever since the encounter: 'He said he was your old chum and wanted you to know you're worthy of a better lot but had chosen the wrong motto and you were walking the wrong path. Father?'

'It's Zusuz, sonny. I've no doubts left. It's true: different mottoes are leading us on our paths. The paths have long been different. I can see the time will come when they cross.'

Semimes decided against pumping his father for further information—the resolution he had seen in his eyes and heard in his voice was enough.

'Malam?' Daniel said in a higher pitched tone than usual and paused.

'What is it, Danad? What confused your ear? Was it our chat or the words you heard inside?' Malam asked him.

Daniel was stunned by the Carroty's hunch, and his words helped him along.

'After we met the humpback— sorry, Malam—'

'Out with it as it comes. You met a humpback, so say: humpback.'

'After the encounter,' Daniel continued, 'I tried... to make sense of it all, but it wouldn't work: something kept eluding me, and there were other things, besides. Well, now I seem to have...'

'Why pause? Let the word come to terms with the idea and convey it to us,' said Malam.

'Okay, Dan, let's have it,' Matthew helped his friend the best he could.

'Shoot, Dan,' Semimes chimed in.

'I recognized the thoughts and words in those of the man... I'm afraid to make a mistake,' said Daniel and paused again.

'Words as said, however mistaken, draw us nearer the truth, while those unsaid push it back,' said Malam and urged him: 'Be so kind as to speak up, Danad.'

""You've assumed the onus out of the passion which I call an inside look..." An inside look is the passion of an artist, name of Thornton. He's guilty of my

granddad's death. Like the humpback, he wanted to take possession of the Tear that has brought Mat and me here. Only he knew of the Tear... The other day, I heard the words from a different man. "There can't be another chosen one" was what Thornton said.'

But, Dan, it was what was said today by—' Matthew began.

'Zusuz,' blurted out Semimes who had been careful to take in every sound, let alone word, said by Daniel.

'Zusuz,' echoed Matthew.

'I can see, Danad, it's a weight off your chest. But there's something else you wish to say.'

Malam was right. Over the brief moments, Daniel had been unburdened of the weight that had been accreting all day long. He went on:

'You spoke about ferlings, Semimes...'

'Yes, Dan.'

'It put me in mind of a coin Thornton had brought back from one expedition. It was long ago, some thirty years. It's hard to believe it, but he had been here, in your parts, perhaps in Dorlief. No, he was sure to have been in Dorlief. One of his pictures is that of Dorlief.'

'Yes, Dan, I can remember your embarrassment. I know now what it was.'

'He's back here! I'm sure. And the humpback's words are his words. And his thirst for a Tear is his thirst,' Daniel blurted out and fell silent as he bent his head and cupped it with his hands as if he had done something wrong.

Semimes was up on his feet.

'I won't be a moment, Father.'

He went to his room by way of the dining room and the corridor. He picked up a leather pouch from a small table near the window, removed something from it and, casting down the pouch, walked back the same way at a brisk pace.

Malam came up to Daniel and tousled his hair.

'We're near the truth and the truth is disappointing,' he said and shook his head again. 'So, Zusuz has made it to the Roosh Cave.'

Matthew and Daniel started while Semimes paused in the doorway on his way back, for he had also heard his father's last words. What will his father say next? But the Carrot made for the mushroom wall without a word. He stopped half a pace from one of the shelves in brown study, looking at the wooden mushrooms.

Semimes joined his friends.

'Here,' he held out a silvery coin. 'Look at it.'

Daniel took the coin and scrutinized it with Matthew. One side had a likeness of a ferling against some hills in the background. Both the ferling and the hills could be felt with the fingers. The flip side had the figure five over a field covered in dots like grains of sand.

'Chris and I have seen a picture of a similar coin,' said Daniel. 'The only difference being fifty instead of the five.'

'I haven't got a fifty-ferling coin, but my father has. I can ask,' Semimes suggested, but it could be seen he would be reluctant to bother a withdrawn Malam.

'Don't, Semimes,' said Daniel. 'It's crystal-clear: Thornton has been here.'

'Are there other denominations?' Matthew asked nodding at the coin.

'Ten, fifty and one hundred,' said Semimes and added: 'One ferling, too, sure thing, you can't do without one.'

Daniel gave back the coin to him. Semimes left the living room again, and, when back, came up to the friends and gave them a five-ferling coin each in silence.

'Thanks, friend,' said Matthew with gayety in his eyes. 'Something to splurge at the Flying Ferling.'

'Yes, we're rich now,' said Daniel.

Not exactly,' Semimes smirked. 'But enough for a meal. Very much so.'

'No matter how keen the eye and instinct, no matter how persistent one is in one's quest and barred from other things, one won't find a loophole in the Rafruth walls, for there isn't any; and one would find it impossible to shake or breathe in the still air of the Roosh Cave,' Malam intoned without turning to the guests, in an estranged voice, the words that spelled vanity, as if he had learned them by heart, so they would remind one of their meaning.

Should he have turned to them at the moment, they would have recognized in his orange countenance the anguish of lugubrious thoughts and presentiment.

'However, Zusuz made his way to the hidden abode of evil force and, circumventing the red-hot stone, released Black Lightning,' Malam continued.

Daniel and Matthew held their breath listening to the voice that had taken possession of them; they somehow thought that the voice was coming out of the mushroom realm, and it was no longer clear whether it belonged to the Carroty or to one of the mushrooms that come to life. Puzzlement touched the very soul of Semimes. Never before had his father spoken like that when his gaze was arrested by the mushroom wall. At the moment, it seemed to have taken possession of him, with no chance of sharing. Never before had Semimes seen his father withhold the expression of his eyes, whether he was talking to a villager, forestman or traveler... It meant he was talking to himself or one of those who, unseen, went up or down those ladders leaning against the mushrooms.

Malam, as if sensitive to his son and guests' confusion, faced them.

'It wasn't Zusuz or the artist, with a name that's foreign to my ear, Thornton, that you met today,' the voice of the Carroty had again become that of the Carroty. 'The two fires of Black Lightning have found each other and fused in the Roosh Cave. And the one who had assumed the black force of the two confronted you on the way—Zusuz and Thornton.'

'How can that be?' exclaimed Matthew who could no longer contain what his reason defied.

Malam looked him and then Daniel closely in the eye and said:

'Danad will tell you.'

Matthew, surprise in his eyes, looked at his friend who replied calmly:

'Right you are, Mat, it can't be. Any more than the rest of what's happened to us. We can't be here now.'

'But we're here, aren't we, Dan?' said Matthew directing the question inward, and answered: 'Yes, we are here.'

'Yes, you are here, Matam and Danad, and so is he. It isn't the flying rat gorhoon that frightens with its laughter the people of Natlief and their neighbors of Cradlief and Hoglief at night. It's the one astride it—the one that Zusuz has turned into, the Lord of the Evil Forces that have infested the Emptied Lake.'

'The Lord of barkycrooks, Father' added Semimes.

'Right you are, sonny,'

'He was riding the gorhoon today,' said Matthew. 'The gorhoon flew up so close that we could make out its ugly snout.'

'I wish I hadn't seen... those sinister eyes,' whispered Daniel and hid his with his hands to fend them off like a picture shown to him again.

'What was that?' said Matthew who could not quite hear his words.

'Nothing,' said Daniel.

Malam came up to Daniel and said:

'Show me what you had promised to at dinner.'

Daniel produced from his pocket Bushtunts's journal, opened it to one of the eight pages with the rhyme and held it out to the Carroty, who intoned the rhyme and the name underneath:

'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning

To ashes wordcircle's burning.

Natan.'

He handed the journal back to Daniel and said:

'Few are the things that leave the mysterious World of Dreams and that can be accessed in the Waking World. This Word is one of the few. I can see the prophecy of the Dorliefan named Faddaf coming true. Almost a thousand years ago he foresaw the advent of the magic Word. I can see: this is the Word that man spirited out of the World of Dreams that hasn't got lost in the Non-world, defying the Spirit World. It's to help us out of trouble. But the Word will help us if we help It. We must preserve It the way the Keepers do the Tears of Shwarrawsh. You, Danad, have to preserve It... for you are the extension of the one the World of Dreams Lord entrusted the Word to. You, too, Matam, as Danad's best friend, for the Spirit World regards you as one, having allowed you to traverse the Path along with him... You, too, Semimes, as a son of Dorlief whom fate has made to meet... the Word Keepers and tested through choice. You chose to protect them though you could have been infected by the stones with the cold of an outsider.'

'Father?' Semimes faltered but could not contain himself on hearing the words that moved him more than any other words.

'What is it, sonny?'

'Father... does that mean Dan, Mat and Semimes are the Word Keepers?'

'Yes, sonny. However, you should have said I, not Semimes, in order not to pass the burden from who you are actually onto who you are in your dreams.'

'Yes, Father. I... Word Keeper.'

Daniel was shivering despite the fireplace that was sharing its warmth with him as well as with Matthew.

'Must we just keep the Word, Malam?' he asked fighting the irresolution that assailed him for some reason.

'Just keep It,' said the Carroty bestowing on Daniel a gentle look. 'Follow It and keep It.'

'Follow?' said Matthew.

'Yes, Matam. We don't know the Word's further Path as yet. We can only guess, but we haven't been introduced to its hidden meaning.'

'Who has been? How are we to understand something if we have learned the Word by heart without understanding?' asked Matthew, much excited.

'Yes, Father, we've learnt the Word by heart,' said Semimes.

'Patience, Matam,' said Malam as he wended his way across the living room from the black horse wall to the mushroom wall and back.

'You've been called upon to preserve the Word,' he said stopping by their side. 'But there'll be some to whom the secret Word will say more than to us, to whom the Word will point the way.'

Malam closed his eyes. He was mouthing something, and from the way he was mouthing it and the few sounds that dropped, it was clear he was reciting the rhyme. He said after the silence:

'War's coming. And time's too short to tarry.'

'Where are you going, Father?' asked Semimes when he saw his father resolutely make for the door to the corridor, not the dining room.

'I've got to see Falafy, sonny,' said the Carroty (with anxiety on his face). Take the stick from the hallway and keep it to hand. And heed it. The Lord of Darkness has seen you today. He's considering the issue, same as us.'

Semimes saw his father to the exit and returned to his friends, slick in hand. He came up to the black horse wall and, with his back to the guests, indulged in what he had missed most:

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that fate was a ball of yarn.'

'What's this horse's fate? Gallop along from shelf to shelf, Semimes?' Daniel asked attuned to the moment. 'It's no human, but still?'

Semimes did not face the company or say anything. He stroked the horse's mane with the tips of his fingers.

'Is it a horse for real? They all look like the same horse. It's no accident, is it?' Daniel kept pestering Semimes with questions.

'Did *you* carve it or your father?' asked Matthew after he got no reply.

The silence seemed to be extending from the horse wall to fill the entire space of the living room. Daniel and Matthew glanced at each other as if inviting the other to dispel it.

'Why hasn't it got eyes, Semimes?' said Matthew borrowing his question from each of the shelves.

'. . . I find it in my dreams,' Semimes said finally... in a soft, sad screech that scratched at the soul (the screech made Matthew and Daniel bate their breath). 'I scramble up a crag, forgetful of everything. When suddenly...'

Matthew and Daniel waited for a continuation. Waited without pestering him with questions. Semimes sat down on the sofa gazing at the floor and continued:

'I hardly know what brings me to him. I clamber up a wall in front of me, only to suddenly find myself next to it. I don't know whether I find it or it finds

me. There's nothing to be seen around. And it's black as night. But I see it, hug it and stroke it.'

Semimes raised his eyes and the friends saw wonderment in them.

'It keeps galloping, it always does. It never stops.'

'How do you get to it?' said Matthew. 'Do you catch it up, the way you did us today, when we were racing?'

'No, I don't. I did say: I clamber up a wall only to find myself next to it. It gallops without gaining on me. And it's no bother, him galloping.'

'What about the eyes?' said Daniel.

'I think he hasn't got any because it doesn't know where to gallop,' said Semimes.

The reply struck Matthew as confusing and he tried to correct Semimes:

'Perhaps, it knows where it's galloping, hence no eyes?'

'No, Mat. It's got no eyes because it doesn't know where it's galloping,' said Semimes firmly.

'You know best,' Matthew conceded, for the dream was Semimes's.

Semimes went on:

'It's galloping in place, marking time, nothing daunted... It has no eyes, but it senses me.'

'How?'

'Mat...' Semimes screwed up his eyes to find the answer to this 'why.' 'It's all atremble when I approach it. And presses its face against my cheek... I know it wants me to mount it and rein it.'

'What about you?' Matthew was at it again.

'I've tried to... Each dream I try to jump onto it. Only to wake up.'

'Some dream, isn't it, Dan?'

'It's no dream. It's fate,' said Daniel.

'I think so, too, Dan,' Semimes brightened up.

'It's your fate,' Daniel repeated. 'Unfortunately, we are in no position to divine dreams. But this horse will wind laps and laps over your ball of yarn.'

Semimes face shone with happiness.

'What's so unfortunate about it, Dan?' said Matthew. 'Do you want to know what's to come? Frankly speaking, I'd find life dull if I knew what's to happen.'

'No, I don't!' Daniel said sharply (he very nearly hollered). 'It's frightening. No more about it!'

'Are you all right?' said Matthew surprised at his friend's reaction.

'You're tired, Mat and Dan, my friends. But we'll have to wait for Father. Would you like some tea and flat cakes? You haven't tried their like yet: Father didn't offer any. You tried some huckleberry and cream flat cakes from Darrad and Plilp's bakery. These are different.'

'How different?' asked Matthew with a smirk on seeing his hesitation.

'Sorry, Mat,' said Daniel. 'Here's an offer of flat cakes, and me hollering for no good reason.'

'I've forgotten, Dan.'

'Well, different... With no dope. Just plain flat cakes. A bit salty. Father forgot to go to the baker's once and made some. He'd never done that before,

but they were very good. I've preferred his with my tea since. I'll fetch some. Stay put. Make yourselves warm by the fireside in your chairs,' said Semimes and added, mindful of a recent event: 'Porcini.'

He was soon back with a wicker breadbasket in hands full of unprepossessing-looking flat cakes.

'Hold the basket, Mat. I'll fetch the tea.'

Semimes brought a teapot (whose spout released the hot parate fragrance) and three cups. He put everything on the table. Then took a chair to the fireplace. He poured out the tea and passed the cups to the friends. He took the third cup to the chair next to them.

'I'll have some, too. I want to have some home-made ones, even though I'm not hungry yet.'

'I've never had flat cakes this right in my life,' said Matthew after he had stuffed himself with a whole Malam flat cake in two bites. 'I'll have some more.'

'You've never had anything like them because they're plain, with no dope. That's what makes them so right,' Daniel explained in Semimes's words. 'Particularly if you indulge in the temptation before sleep.'

'Particularly after a skilletful of fried fish,' Matthew commented gaily.

'And after huckleberry and cream flat cakes from a bakery...' Daniel could not recall the bakers' names. '. . . of those guys whatever their names are.'

'Daad and Pip's,' said Semimes corrupting the names of Darrad and Plilp because the flat cake in his mouth would not let him pronounce them correctly.

The friends were amused...

After Semimes took the twice emptied cups and a third of the basketful to the kitchen, he found Matthew and Daniel next to the mushroom shelves.

'Scrutinizing mushrooms, aren't you? Weary of sitting?'

'Looking for a place in the field as porcini,' said Daniel.

'So you are, porcini.'

'Who carved them, Semimes?' Matthew wanted to know.

'Father. He uses linden wood. Linden's soft and tractable: it readily yields to the knife. This one's made of tuffer; some call tuffer orange-colored, because the wood under the bark is orange. All the walls in Dorlief are made of tuffer boards, in other villages, too.'

'When I looked at Dorlief from the mound, I thought the houses were made of brick,' said Matthew.

'That's because of the color. Touch the wall with your hands.'

Matthew did... and knocked on it.

'That's right—orange tuffer.'

Semimes smiled and said with a nod:

'Smart aleck.'

'The mushroom idea's not bad either,' said Daniel.

'My horse is not an idea... it's a dream,' Semimes screeched, injured.

'No, no, Semimes. I meant the idea of a mushroom field was a success, same as your horse. It was a good idea to make a living room lively.'

'That's right,' Matthew seconded Daniel not to let his injured feelings take the upper hand.

'At first the mushrooms were on the table in his room,' the host relented. 'I asked him to take them to the living room, for I liked it that way. I had worked it all out, shelves and things, in my mind and liked the result. But it proved even better when accomplished. Father, in his turn, talked me into shelving the other wall with my horse over the sofa.'

'What living things are these ladders for?' asked Semimes.

Semimes shook his head.

'Well, I don't know, Dan. I've been racking my brains over it. I even asked Father about that when I arrived at nothing. He said, "If you can't see the dwellers, it's their choice to be invisible." He's silent when standing in front of his mushrooms... I think, if he's silent he doesn't want to be heard.'

'That's right, Semimes,' Matthew chipped in. 'It doesn't do to impose on people.'

'It doesn't do to force things on people,' said Daniel.

'What about forcing a shut room?' Matthew smirked.

The three exchanged glances.

'I don't know,' admitted Daniel, contrary to his statement.

'Neither do I,' screeched Semimes.

. . . The guests turned the chairs to face the fire. Semimes put the chair where it belonged and squatted on the floor next to them.

'I like to rough it at a fire, whether it is a fireplace or a bonfire,' he said and put a few logs into its mouth.

Matthew took the poker and banked up the fire.

The mute gesture-driven wizardry got the better of even the cold stone and charmed the boys... tempting each of them where the fire, unseen, turns into pure passion... where thoughts grow brittle and fragment into shards... where the images born of estrangement are no longer linked to objects and sense... where everything is confused and defies reverie or, if it does not, one lives that reverie and nothing but it the rest of one's life, unaware of reality. The wizardry that was enacted in the womb of the fireplace lured each of them wherever the Waking World was closest to the World of Dreams, where they are a pace apart, where the Waking World is no more and where the World of Dreams is not there yet...

## **Chapter Two**

### **A Candle, a Feather and an Eiril Pencil**

'Dan, Mat, rouse! Do! Father's coming!'

The boys came to, started and got up.

'I very nearly nodded off,' said Daniel drowsily.

'Me, too,' Matthew drawled with a yawn.

'Me, too,' admitted Semimes. 'The stick heard people coming and let me know. Father's not alone: there're many footfalls. You hear? Could it be Falafy?'

The boys listened for the footfalls—they were coming... The door opened sooner than they expected. A woman entered the living room, followed by Malam.



Daniel was petrified to see what he did. It flashed through his consciousness that he might be dreaming... Those eyes! There was no confusing them with any others. They were two pools, no less, with a clear light-lilac sky—the eyes of Bushtunts! The woman, too, was agitated: she had met the eyes... she had not met since the day Shwarrawsh crashed on Dorlief.

'Hello, Falafy,' the welcoming notes prevailed over the screech in Semimes's voice.

'Hello, dearest Semimes. How's your foot? It isn't hurting, is it?'

'I've quite forgotten I have one,' Semimes was so full of feeling he had said not what he had meant (thus making the atmosphere in the living room, though still agitated, rather more on the light and smiling note).

'Falafy, dear, meet our guests I told you about. This is Matam, this is Danad.'

The boys bowed to her. Unlike Daniel, Matthew found the right words, never at a loss.

'We're happy to meet you, Keeper Falafy. The man we put up with yesterday, name of Loner, said that Dan was to pass on to you the Word he's brought,' he said facilely elbowing Daniel who needed a nudge.

The latter responded neither to the words nor the elbow.

Falafy neared Daniel and took his hands in hers. There were tears in her eyes... which coursed down her cheeks. His eyes saw the droplets, repositories of the past, and very nearly caught the bug.

'You have no call to be sad. These are not the tears that see the nearest and dearest off on a long and unknown journey; they are such as meet one after an infinite separation. These tears are tears of happiness,' intoned Falafy. 'You're back instead of Natan, your gramps and my kid brother... I'd known all along I'd see the eyes with the skies of Dorlief, his and yours.'

'Yours, too, Falafy,' whispered Daniel. 'I knew them right away.'

He thought it a bit strange that his grandfather's older sister looked only fifty. But it was a momentary surprise. In these moments, he was swept by a variety of feelings whose concatenation was that he was a Dorliefan. Daniel was frightened by that new feeling. He wished he could hide away from it... better still from them all... He wished he could get to the padlocked room... Bushtunts's journal was his salvation.

'I've got Natan's diary on me. You'll find it gratifying to touch it, take it.'

Falafy opened the book and leafed through it with care.

'Here's the rhyme... I know kid brother's hand,' she said, mentally transported to her childhood. '. . . The votary Word...'

'Hanging on which will be the fates of many,' screeched Semimes softly but distinctly to show to the dear guest his belonging with the Word.

'It's reiterated on eight pages,' said Daniel.

'Falafy dear, Matam, Danad, do sit down at the table: this conversation should not progress any old how. I'll get you some parate tea.' The Carrotty dashed over to the door to the dining room.

'Nothing but the tea, Malam dear. I must admit I haven't had parate tea for ever so long. I'll enjoy my cuppa. Nothing else, though.'

'Well, the boys will enjoy their flat cakes.'

'I've let Mat and Dan have some home-made flat cakes.'

'The flat cakes were yummy,' said Daniel.

'Were is the word,' Matthew grinned.

'Well, then tea with nothing,' Malam conceded.

Falafy, Daniel and Matthew sat around the table. Semimes stood at the back of the fourth chair, reluctant to take it, even though nothing was more important to him than sitting at this table.

'Why stand, sonny? Take your place,' said Malam, back with the tea.

'What about you?' Semimes looked at his father out of a corner of his eye.

'My thought is best rushed by the legs. This is no exception.'

Falafy read the rhyme several times under her breath. Then she found the other seven pages and verified them against the first one. She lifted her hands, palms down, above the rhyme and moved them slowly as she would when healing people. Her eyelids dropped slowly.

'The words come to rest on the palms one by one... in a cycle... "Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning to ashes wordcircle's burning." Which means one thing only—the rhyme is the wordcircle in question,' Falafy was saying levelly in a level tone not to upset the link between her hands and the Word.

Everyone was closely following her every motion and word, with Semimes mouthing after her for good measure.

'It does burn the palms!' Falafy exclaimed and opened her eyes. 'It was like touching embers. Pass me a candle, Semimes dear.'

Semimes fetched a candle from the kitchen.

'Will I light it, Falafy?' he asked.

'Not just yet. I can't quite get to the bottom of the fire in my palms.'

'May I try?' asked Daniel.

'Do, Danad. I'll have my tea in the meantime. Your tea's just wonderful, Malam.'

Daniel's hands froze over the page, expecting a miracle.

'I can't feel a thing,' he said with a smirk.

'Feeling is not the same as carrying it about in a pocket,' said Semimes.

'Agreed.'

'All of us will have to take it seriously, very much so, won't we, Semimes?' said Matthew to be greeted with Falafy's smile who had recognized Semimes's way of saying things.

'It's all right to digress, Semimes,' she said. 'My hands are now somewhat rested. Just step back a pace or two and light the candle. Then put it on the table. We'll see what fire has to tell us.'

Semimes stepped back to the fireplace and lit the candle from the flames.

'Take your time nearing us, sonny,' said Malam for some reason (no one saw him putting the end of his stick to the table leg).

Semimes had caught the warning in his father's voice and stepped forth ever so slowly looking at the fire. Daniel and Matthew, too, were looking at the candle. As soon as it was above the edge of the table and an invisible wave of fire swept over Bushtunts's journal, its pages stirred, rustling, and reached for the

flame with some violence as if in response to its call. Daniel recoiled and nearly toppled over, chair and all. Matthew sprang up to his feet. Semimes cried,

'Will I blow it out, Falafy?'

'Just hold on,' Falafy said calmly. 'We've got to solve the riddle.'

'Hold it the way you do, sonny,' Malam echoed firmly.

A shadow burst out of the journal, reached the flame... and blew up instantaneously, as the journal flapped its fine pages like a bird about to take off. And another...

'Could you see that?' exclaimed Semimes excitedly in a whisper.

'Yes!' answered Daniel in as excited a whisper.

'My eyes can see and my hands can hear: it's not the fire lording it over the Word, but the Word reaching for the fire and appealing for help,' said Falafy.

'What help, Falafy?' Matthew could not contain himself.

'Heed the flame—the Word's in it, its trace is. The Word opens up to the fire and passes its secret force to it. The fire will hold it to help the Word. Help it with what? I can't see... I can't see, Matam.'

When the shadows of all the eight pages burnt up over the candle, the diary came to rest and the fire burned levelly as before. Falafy blew out the candle. Semimes breathed out his strain, remembered his chair and sat down on it.

'I think, the Word and fire are in collusion,' said Malam.

'Alas, Malam, a collusion known to them alone,' said Falafy. 'The Word hasn't revealed its every secret. But we've seen: each page with the Word in it made fire flare up in excitement.'

'What does that mean?' asked Matthew.

'It means that it isn't just the Word that's valuable to us, but each of the eight pages, for, once consumed, the Word leaves its trace to fire. The fire died down only when all the eight pages had burnt up,' Falafy said.

But the pages are intact,' Mathew said.

'The shadows of the pages burnt in front of our eyes. For the Word's bidding to be done, the pages themselves must burn. Not all the pages, but the ones marked by the hand of the World of Dreams Lord's chosen, the one that had the Word come to him in a dream.'

'Natan's hand,' Semimes screeched.

'Yes, Semimes. It means that not just the Word, but each of the eight pages will have to be kept and safeguarded. It means that carrying the Word about in a pocket is more dangerous than feeling it.' Falafy smiled at him.

Semimes looked downcast... only to brighten up in a few moments because of a sweet idea that he hastened to float.

'We'll be the ones to safeguard each of the eight pages—Dan, Mat and Se—' Semimes faltered and looked at his father. 'And I.'

'Yes, my dear, you'll keep and safeguard the Word until you've done your predestination,' said Falafy. 'You, because fate has chosen you. As well as those elected by the Governing Council.'

'We have no need of helpers,' Semimes screeched indignantly. 'We'll manage, all right.'

'That we will,' said Daniel and added: 'More people would only make matters worse.'

'It wasn't for nothing that the Loner said we could have trust only in you and Malam,' Matthew argued in favor of the three Word Keepers.

'The Loner,' said Falafy in pensive sadness and addressed Daniel: 'He knew Natan in you, didn't he?'

Daniel was embarrassed.

'He did,' answered Matthew instead of him. 'He even called him Natan.'

'Falafy?'

'I know your drift, my boy.'

Semimes and Matthew exchanged glances on hearing what they had heard in the Loner's cave: 'My boy.' It had so familiar a ring that they could not help exchanging glances.

'The Loner used to know Natan,' Falafy continued. 'Knew as no one else. But his secret is his secret.'

Everyone was silent for some time... perhaps because they had roused a mystery that was best left to rest... Then Falafy said:

'You're right, dear Semimes, Danad and Matam. Many people shouldn't know about the Word; there mustn't be too many Word Keepers. But we know from Faddaf's prophecy that the Word is capable of putting the trouble to rest, the trouble that will beset Dorlief and that patience, hard work and goodness will not be enough to cope with. Which means that a dangerous path is in store for the Word and the Word Keepers... There're three of you—too many or too few? Only one of you can protect the Word, weapons in hand—is that many or few? Only one of you knows the forests and hills around Dorlief, their secrets and trails—is that too many or too few?'

'Sure enough, too few,' said Semimes. 'I alone can be guide. Not even Mat can as yet. What if I—'

'Semimes!' the Carroty cut his son's somber thought short.

'Too few,' said Daniel to Falafy. 'Semimes is the one who can protect the Tear from those armed with pole axes, swords and arrows with his stick.'

'Too few,' said Matthew, his eyes smiling. 'Semimes is the one to know when to face danger in order to avert it.'

'Remember, don't you?' Semimes screeched with pleasure.

'Too few,' said Falafy. 'The Governing Council will decide who will protect the Word besides you. I'll call for a session after the New Light celebrations. You'll have to appear before it.'

'Falafy, what about showing the Word to the man who predicted its advent?' asked Matthew.

'Faddaf,' said Semimes.

'Yes, Faddaf. He may point to the path in store for the Word and its Keepers?'

'Is he living?' asked Daniel, tempted by the idea.

'Almost a thousand years ago, Faddaf chose the life of a hermit. No one has seen him since. Rumor has it that he got lost in the Dark Waters of the Wild Woods,' said Falafy.

'More's the pity.'

'Chin up, Dan,' Semimes screeched, a touch of sadness in his screech. 'Something will turn up. Wait a bit. We'll have to wait, all of us, very much so.'

'I don't want to wait,' Matthew said impatiently. 'Should trouble come, we'd have to do something rather than wait and ride out our wait.'

'If the cause calls for a wait, you'll have to wait, Word Keeper!' Semimes lodged a firm objection: he would have no one irritate Falafy. 'Waiting is all eyes, while hurry can't keep stock of its own tracks.'

'Is it your own sentiment, or did Semimes suggest it?' Matthew taunted Semimes.

Semimes appreciated the joke with a glance and a screechy laugh, but would not let it go without a reply:

'A smart aleck was in such a hurry that he dropped it and never knew he had.'

Malam commanded with a gesture that Semimes stop, and said in a calm voice that set them at their ease:

'I hear, my friends—it was the other day, forty years ago, in fact—that Faddaf had been seen in the mountains, I forget which.'

'Wait!' Daniel cried unexpectedly and cupped his head with his hands... Then he said with the air of one lost: 'No, nothing...'

Malam went on, nothing daunted:

'All sorts of rumors are floating. Some of them clash on a narrow path and will not let go. However, my stick told me the day the Crossroads let Sawas, Faddaf's son, go—told me the distance between father and son is shortening.'

'I can't understand a thing,' Matthew shrugged. 'Sorry, Malam, I couldn't understand a thing.'

'Enlighten us, Malam,' asked Daniel.

'Faddaf hasn't left the Waking World, that's the upshot. And what you say is right: the Natan journal will have to be taken to Faddaf.'

'That's easier said than done, dear Malam: the mountains and forests have too many hideaways to set out clueless in quest of him,' said Falafy.

'What about Faddaf's son? He may have a clue. We've got to meet him and ask about his father,' Matthew kept on stirring everybody.

Malam shook his head.

'You're doing right to give it voice, Matam, and stirring our collective thought. I have this to say about Sawas: he was ten when his mother Lolean and her brother Lebeard took him to the Crossroads. He roused himself ten years ago; he's twenty now. But the Waking World had lived nearly a thousand years while he had lain unconscious, more dead than alive. I don't think he knows more about his father than those who had not left the Waking World.'

'His name is Sawasard now. He lives with the forestmen, because his mother hailed from the woods,' said Semimes who was ever so eager to tell Mat and Dan about Sawasard. 'Ewnar told me that none of the forestmen can wield his weapons quite as well as he can. When he has two short swords in his hands, no three threesomes of forestmen can defeat him. Forestmen keep exercising,

and Ewnar knows what he's talking about. It's a pity he's never shown up in Dorlief.'

'He may have come, with you none the wiser,' said Matthew for no good reason.

'Ewnar knows what he's talking about,' Semimes looked askance at him. 'And Semimes knows, too.'

'The memory of what happened won't let him visit his childhood places,' explained Malam.

'I wish I could see him and the glorious swords Faddaf left him,' said Semimes and added mentally: 'I wish I could pit my strength against his: he with his swords, me with my stick.'

'Only word of his Faddaf could bring him, sonny,' said Malam.

'Which brings us to square one,' muttered Matthew under his breath.

'What's up, Falafy?' asked Daniel in response to her wistful look.

'Danad dear,' Falafy placed her hand on his, 'I've just given way to weariness. But I'm happy now that you've joined our family. You and Matam, and Semimes, of course, must visit us. Come tomorrow. It's just Natan, my kid son, living with us, me and Lutul, my husband. His older brothers have families of their own. Natan's your age, and I'm sure he'll be happy to meet you.'

'You'll see silvery ferlings. Lutul's are the finest of them all in the neighborhood,' said Semimes, his eyes shining, the way they always did at the thought of Lutul's ferlings.

'So you will,' said Falafy with a smile.

'We'll sure come, Falafy,' said Daniel.

'Danad!' Falafy's countenance suddenly changed, as if she were afraid of something. 'Danad, my boy—'

'Falafy?' Daniel was at a loss because of the suddenness of it all. 'What's wrong?'

'Danad, I... could feel something... my hand did,' Falafy was completely in the power of her hand. 'There's something lurking in you... hidden away from you... that wants to stay hidden from us.'

Everyone looked at Daniel: Semimes with mistrust, Matthew with puzzlement, Malam with alertness.

'I know. It ails me,' Daniel admitted, meeting now one pair of eyes, now another. 'When Malam said that Faddaf had been seen in the mountains, it momentarily showed up only to hide away again. I wanted to grab and hold it... I nearly cried out in dismay, because it's something very important.'

'You did cry out,' said Matthew.

'Don't let it embarrass you,' Falafy went on, 'but it's something alien... and at once close to you. Find the close thing, and the alien will betray itself.'

'I wish I could have a guess. It was as good as nonexistent, but it did flash up, no mistake about it...'

'You did say it ails you. You did say it flashed up,' Semimes screeched. 'Was it alien or close?'

Falafy smoothed Semimes's suspicious tone out with a smile and said gently listening with her hand to Daniel's hand:

'The close is ever with you, Danad, I can feel it.'

'I know one thing for sure: I'm with you,' Matthew resorted to his old standby. 'But it has nothing to do with that.'

Daniel sprang up from his chair.

'Again, Mat!' he exclaimed. 'Say that again.'

'You're welcome to it, if that's what will further the cause,' said Matthew with a twinkle in his eyes. 'I'm proud of it. I know one thing for sure: I'm with you.'

'You've proved it yet again, feather... The way you did on Our Lake. And in my dream.'

Everyone was looking at Daniel without understanding a thing.

'There was always a feather to my rescue,' he went on in delight. 'The feather's you, Mat.'

Matthew shrugged.

'I'm glad.'

'The alien in me is Thornton. He's in me. Each of his pictures's in me. He burst into my life with his pictures. But at first he wasn't alien to me,' said Daniel and was lost in thought.

'It's the artist I told you about, dear Falafy,' Malam said softly. 'The fire of Black Lightning had made him alien to goodness. In collusion with the Lord of Darkness, he has doubled its and his thirst for power.'

'We met the Lord of Darkness in the Harshid foothills. He's dreadful and strong,' screeched Semimes.

'Don't be silent, speak up, Dan,' said Matthew in impatience.

'I don't know... One picture flashed up in my conscience when Malam mentioned the mountains where Faddaf was reported to have been seen. Not the picture proper—rather it was what Chris felt about it. It was an abyss. She called it abyss... The picture was that of a feather, Mat.'

'You mean I was there?'

'No, Mat. I merely remembered the feather that turned into you.'

'You said: abyss, Danad. That was what I felt with my hand,' said Falafy. 'What else was there in the picture?'

'Death. People were dying a dreadful death... as if an act of God had caught them unawares, with not a chance of salvation.'

'Shwarrawsh?' ventured Malam.

Daniel shrugged and continued:

'And there was a mountain. And a singularly lilac sky I'd never seen before.'

'Not Shwarrawsh: Shwarrawsh devours the sky leaving darkness,' Malam objected to his own statement.

'Towering over that mountain was another mountain, upside down, like its mirror image. But it wasn't a mirror surface that divided them, it was a lowering thundercloud.'

Malam suddenly had a fit of coughing, as if he'd choked on something and fell to pacing the living room again.

'Soaring over it all was a feather,' Daniel went on. 'Thornton was enraged to see it in his picture. He cried out: "Where's my brush?" He had seen a brush instead of the feather, but brushed in a feather instead.'

'How could one draw a horse when one sees a goat?' Semimes shook his head in disagreement. 'Oh, no, there's something wrong there—brushing in a horse and getting a goat.'

'One could, Semimes, I know it from my own experience,' said Matthew. 'The reverse is rather more difficult: drawing a goat and getting a horse. A goat could lend itself to a dog, rather than a horse.'

'With you, Mat, any creature would lend itself to a dog,' Semimes screeched.

'Why so?'

'Because whatever comes out would be good enough to be a dog.'

'Well, you've hit the nail right on the head.'

'As often as not, Thornton would make his pictures in semi-oblivion,' Daniel explained. 'Does it happen to you when you carve one of your black horses?'

'It does, when you get carried away,' Semimes admitted. 'But what made him hate feathers so, that artist?'

'It wasn't feathers that man hated, Semimes, but what he hated the guts of, what not only his brush (read: his will) had power over the painting, but the Word of penmanship,' said Falafy.

'You got it solved, Falafy!' cried Daniel. 'Mat, Semimes, the feather is the sign of the Word! Our Word! The Word of Natan. I know it now.'

'I've told you: waiting is all eyes,' Semimes screeched, but realized that he was not the only one who got a horse when carving one, added: 'We should have just waited for Falafy to see the truth.'

'It's a long way to the truth, Semimes dear,' said Falafy.

'It is. Mount Tusul is the destination,' intoned Malam's voice (they'd lost sight of him somehow).

Everybody looked his way, toward the fireplace, but Malam was not there.

'Mount Tusul's the destination,' the voice seemed to be issuing from the mouth of the fireplace, with the words charred, rough, croaky coming one by one. 'It's there that Faddaf's tracks could be found.'

Following the words that puzzled the round table, the Carroty's yellow-crinkly head appeared from behind the chair back.

'I nodded off a bit,' he said, rising and groaning.

'Why Tusul of all places, Father?' asked Semimes.

'The upside-down mountain shrouded in a dark mist has told me that,' said Malam and came up to the table. 'Bring some paper and the pencil, sonny. The one Ewnar gave to you. I've a mind to write to Sawasard and send it with one of the forestmen on the watch today, send it immediately. If you don't mind, I'll appeal for his help to our three Word Keepers.'

'Wise of you, dear Malam. I think, not only I but all the rest of the Governing Council members would approve of the choice,' Falafy endorsed Malam's idea. 'So long as fate has decreed that the Word be forwarded to Faddaf and we've been prompted where to look for him, I won't put off the important



conversation and ask the Council members to get together at midday tomorrow, at four sharp, to be on the way after the celebrations.'

On hearing this, Semimes sprang up from his chair to get the most important things of the moment.

'Sawasard... Sawasard...' he whispered as he ran to his room.

'Sawasard... Sawasard...' he could hear the words in the air as he ran back.

'Here you are, Father.' He put on the table in front of the Carroty who had taken his place a sheet of white paper and a black-blue stick pointed at one end.

Matthew's eye guessed that the pencil had been engineered as a whole out of some stone. He decided to verify this and asked Semimes (who was standing nearby) in a whisper, not to distract Malam's thoughts as they were penned on paper:

'Made of stone?'

Yes, of eiril. It's a stone, Ewnar said. Forestmen know a thing or two about stones, very much so. It's good for a hundred years of drawing and writing.'

'What a neat idea,' said Daniel. 'It's quite a present!'

'Ewnar gave it to me last New Light Day.'

'Does it stain your fingers?' asked Matthew.

'Not at all,' Semimes showed the boys his open palm to prove the point. 'It's the tip or tail that do. Hush now: Father's begun writing.'

Obedient to the Carroty's voice the pencil strutted along the paper. Malam was writing aloud: It's a common cause, he thought, so the letter must be open to the eyes and ears of whoever was nearby at this hour.

'My dear Sawasard, Nine hundred ninety-three years ago three people stopped by my hut on the outskirts of Natlief: Faddaf, the glorious son of Dorlief; Lebeard, his trusty companion from a land near and far; and the young fiery-haired Dorliefan by the name of Sawas. When it came time to say the important words: "Have a nice hunger, my friends," Sawas said to me: "Have a nice hunger, Malam." I read in his eyes: "Will you be my friend?" I think he understood what my eyes said in reply. Sawasard, my friend, I want to tell you to have a nice hunger again tomorrow morning at my table in my hut on the outskirts of Dorlief. Malam.'

Malam put the pencil to one side and arose.

'Start the fireplace going first thing tomorrow morning,' he began prioritizing the most important things he was to do to entertain his old friend as best he could (even though those chores the day before and two days before were as habitual as habit itself), 'get fresh bread at the bakery, remember the flat cakes and doughnuts, and make strong parate tea.'

Falafy rose too.

'That's settled then. I'll expect you all and Sawasard in the Governing Council house. It's time I was going, my dears.'

'I'll see you home, Falafy dear, find Ewnar and give him the letter.' Malam took the letter and folded it. 'Don't wait for me, boys—go to bed.'

Semimes, Matthew and Daniel said goodbye to Falafy. She hugged Daniel and kissed him on the forehead.

'How good to have you with us,' she said. 'What was lost has come back to us. Gone is the anxiety. I'll go share my joy with Lutul and Natan.'

Daniel was afraid to ruin his feelings with words and said nothing.

Falafy paused as she exited the living room.

'Oh, I'm forgetting,' she said. 'Semimes dear, it's a very apt name you coined for those evil freaks of the Emptied Lake—barkycrooks. I think, it'll go the rounds of Dorlief in a matter of one day. And barynth trees will soon forget their injured feelings.'

There was not a single happier man in the whole of Dorlief, whether sleeping or wakeful, than Semimes. His whole body suddenly shook, he backed up to the table, ran into a chair, turned back and snatched the pencil.

'I'll... take back the pencil... lest it get lost,' he tinkled and quickly left the living room through another door, the one to the dining room...

\* \* \*

'Bags this one's mine!' Daniel hastened to announce, when Semimes stopped at the room next door to the padlocked one.

'Bags it's yours!' Matthew teased him looking askance at the padlock that inspired a vague feeling in between curiosity and apprehension.

'The next room is no different from this one, Mat and Dan—so, you both win with no "bags,"' said Semimes.

'Who's my neighbor on the other side?' asked Matthew.

'Semimes,' Semimes screeched gaily. 'Next door to mine is that of Father.'

'Will the smart stick be with you?'

'You've heard what Father said, Mat,' Semimes shook his head. 'Now that we've become Word Keepers, it'll always be with me.'

'Then we'll all feel safe,' said Matthew grimacing again at both the padlock and Daniel, for good measure.

'Sweet dreams, my friends,' said Semimes.

'Sweet dreams, guide,' said Matthew and Daniel in unison. And a content Semimes went on his way.

'I thought we'd chat, but I'm exhausted. I'll go to my room.'

'Sweet dreams, Mat. Thanks for everything—this is what my chat's about mainly.'

Alone with his thoughts, Semimes made three rounds of the corridor, before entering his room... A few moments later he was clambering the sheer crag, blazing his face and deafening himself with his hot breath. He would now see his black one...

\* \* \*

Almost eleven years had passed since Nawan, Tlanalt's son, and the forestman Valear set off on their long way at the request of Dorlief's Governing Council and Ozuard, the Lord of forestmen. They were to trek across the Harshid Mountains, cross the Sadorn Forest encircling them, pass the Mratuk Mountain ridge—untrodden by villager and forestman alike—that towered over the farther arm of Sadorn and then the Solnush Forest to reach the city of Pasetflen neither

spoke about. There Nawan and Valear were to secure the services of the warlord, name of Ramar, in their appeal for the Lord of Pasetflen's military assistance. The reason was the growing threat from the Emptied Lake. The assignment was a secret, and only six members of the Governing Council, the Lord Ozuard, the Natlief Keeper Ragogar and the two envoys knew about it. The hope of success was ephemeral.

Ninety-eight years before, Tlanalt had found a traveler in the Kerdock Gorge who had been cut by the sharp rocks and who had all but lost the thread linking him to the Waking World. On regaining consciousness four days later in a cave by a fire that was draining his veins of the cold and seeing Tlanalt, he whispered his name—Ramar. And another four days later, leaving on the way back, he said to his savior:

'My friend, if ever you or your people need help, myself and two thousand of my men will traverse the way from Pasetflen to Dorlief that I now know. Remember: these words will live as long as I do.'

The hope for success was ephemeral: were Ramar's words still alive? It is not just years that separate the two moments—the one they were said and the one they were recalled at, but also Shwarrawsh...

Two hundred forty-three times had the arrow of the Dorlief clock touched with its head each of the points that marked time's footfalls, when Nawan and Valear stepped on Pasetflen's soil. But only time itself knew about it in Dorlief. The alert look of the very first citizen they met was changed the moment Nawan uttered the name 'Ramar' to be replaced with a fire that flared from the aura of glory about his name. Three days later, an armed cavalry detachment of two thousand blessed by Daltlad, the Lord of Pasetflen, left the city for Dorlief. It was supposed to deploy at Natlief, rather than Dorlief, for it was on the borderline between the World of people and darkness. Half of the men were to be stationed in the village, the other half, in the Natlief fortress. Heading the column were three men: Nawan riding a white horse, Valear riding a bay, and Ramar astride a black one...

The way was shortened by the springy tread of the horses conditioned to marches and charges and their light, tenacious and sturdy shoes that defied the hard nature of one rock and the slithery nature of another. What made the way longer was detouring: the trails safeguarded the forest thickets and rugged mountains in their forced inhospitality and disguised their belligerence, thus making the latter lower and whisper in anger. But it was not the crags alone that the clip-clop of the hooves taunted and it was not the crags it threatened—it was the one whose troops were not ready yet for the great war...

. . . After passing the farther arm of the Sadorn Forest, Ramar's detachment approached at last the Harshid foothills. The tittle-tattle had finally been defeated by darkness. Ramar reined in his horse, turned to his men and shouted the word that should not have been the last word of a warlord who had covered himself with glory in battle:

'Make camp.'

The arrow let loose from inside the crag by the bloodiest hand of the Emptied Lake pierced his throat and prevented a life from being ended on a

different, bright word. Valear who had sensed the flight of yet another lethal arrow spurred his bay to stand between it and Nawan's heart. He died in the hope that he was saving his friend with the word 'Palerard' on his lips.

'Crag! Hug the crag!' cried the night with the voice of Nawan who hung dead the next moment from the white mane of his charger.

The men caught hold of Ramar, Valear and Nawan and, having shot a random salvo at the Harshid carapace, made for the crag. The black horse, true to its habit, was in the lead. Neither the men nor their horses knew or sensed that they were landing themselves in a trap. They approached the crag but could not stop: they had lost control only to lend themselves to an irresistible power. It seemed to have emerged from the very core of the Harshid, enveloped them all and sucked them into the eternal cold blackness right through the stone... never to release them to the Waking World.

After wheeling over the place that had been thought a refuge of thousands of lives and was now desolate and dead, the gorhoon shot upwards and flew home to the Emptied Lake. Astride it were two: in the front, one whose eye—peeping as if from beneath the knobby shell of a barynth nut—had pointed the way to the three heartless birds that had got used to leaving their nest in as bleak a fashion as bleeding their quarry white; in the back, the one who had joined his magic power with the latent power of Shwarrawsh's shadow, one of the shadows that had withdrawn from daylight into the innards inaccessible to light and defeated the two-thousand-strong troops.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **'We have company'**

Daniel opened his eyes. What had suddenly intruded upon his dream and ruined it was still going on. His eyes, ears and whole body told him as much: his body was shaking for some reason. It was not a morbid, feverish shaking. The shaking originated with the bed: it seemed to be dragged over cobblestones.

'No, it's not a dream. It's Dorlief. It's Malam's house,' he muttered.

Shaking was not just the bed. Everything around was jumping and bouncing: the table and chair, the candleholder and taper with a frightened flame, the bedside table, the shelf on the wall and evidently the wall itself. The entire house seemed to be shaking. Even the shadows and light were jostling each other in a panic.

'What a good thing I forgot to blow out the taper.'

The series of convulsions was accompanied by a sinister buzz. It originated from somewhere near, in the hidden veins of space. Daniel looked at the wall that separated his room from the padlocked one (his bed was at the opposite wall).

'Perhaps... it's there?' he said and frightened himself with a momentary suggestion that there was someone there, an alien.

He fisted his hand and was about to knock on the wall with Matthew behind it but surmised that the knock would be as nothing in comparison to the buzz. The door suddenly opened and Matthew came in.

'You're just in time as usual, Mat,' he was overjoyed.

'Get up, Dan. I think it's an earthquake. We'd better get out and be quick about it,' Matthew's words crowded one another, but there was no panic in his voice. 'Remember the book and the Tear. And a candle. I didn't take mine.'

The boys went out into the corridor. Their legs would not obey: the floor was aflutter making them lose purchase and stumble on it convulsively. Mat staggered and hit his shoulder on the wall.

'Careful, Dan. Hug the wall!' he cried.

'Are you all right?'

'Still in one piece.'

They had hardly made three steps toward the hall when they froze—to the extent they could do so on a shaky surface.

'Mat! Mat!' Daniel called as he found himself right in front of... (It can't be true! he could not believe his eyes.). 'Did you see it?'

Matthew gawped at him in wonder.

'You did. You saw it all,' he answered his own question to supplement the reply of the crazed eyes in front of him.

But it was not the eyes, it was his friend's muteness (Mat may have left his gift of the gab behind, crying like him) that frightened him, and he shattered the air with another cry:

'Mat, don't be silent. Don't. Don't!'

'I'm... not silent, Dan,' Matthew replied at last in composure. 'I'm here.'

'Was it a mushroom?' asked Daniel.

'Yes. It was huge... Huge. It emerged and vanished.'

'Or else?'

'Or else we... emerged there and came back.'

'Emerged where?'

'Where the mushroom is, Dan.'

'Just a mushroom, Mat? Did you see just a mushroom?'

'Did you see them, too?'

'Yes, I saw them. They were coming down the ladder... at the stem,' Daniel was whispering agitatedly with his face close to Matthew's. 'There were two of them.'

'Two, that's right. So, I wasn't seeing things—you saw them too.'

'Looks like you weren't.'

The boys suddenly heard the front door open with a bang and somebody burst in.

'Who's that?' cried Daniel anxiously.

'Hush!' Mat took him firmly by the hand. 'Stay put! He ran to the left of the front door.'

'What do we do?'

'I don't know. Let's listen.'

Whoever had burst into the house seemed to be opening one door after another and searching for something with a great noise.

'What's he looking for, Mat?'

'The Tear? Or is it the journal?'

'What about Semimes? Malam? Where are they?'

A few moments later, the footfalls were nearing them from the other side. It sounded like a mighty and resolute beast that cared little for the shaky floor, the bouncing walls or the unknown buzz in the semi-darkness. The boys turned sharply toward the footfalls. Matthew took the candle from Daniel's hand and thrust it forth to protect himself from the beast... In another moment, they saw an enraged Semimes, stick in hand, not the beast.

'There's an alien in the house!' he screeched abruptly and snatched Matthew's candle with his free hand. 'I've looked near the house. When it all started, I jumped out the window and skirted the house. He's crouched here. Fol—'

Daniel and Matthew were supposed to hear the customary 'Follow me,' but something made Semimes falter.

'Stay!' he said anxiously.

The boys looked where Semimes had directed his tense gaze—at the padlocked door.

'The padlock's gone!' said Matthew as he caught on.

'The alien's there,' said Semimes and hove his shoulder against the door without hesitation. It did not budge. 'It's propped up from the inside—I can't open it.'

'Do we try all together?' Daniel suggested.

'Hush!' Matthew said in a loud whisper and pointed at the door.

They listened.

'Get out! Get out quick!' a hollow voice came from the room.

'I am... Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' said a boisterous, hoarse and strained voice.

'To the rescue, my ass! This club forces you down. Let me have it.'

'Don't say that: it's a slur.'

'All right then. Hold out your hand. Get a move on!'

'It won't work. I'd sooner pull you back into the hole than you'll pull me out.'

The noises and the shaking now died down, now intensified.

'It looks like there're two of them there, Semimes,' Daniel surmised.

'Sure thing, two,' said Matthew.

'Heave it!' came from the door.

'Let me catch my breath. Such trips aren't my cup of tea.'

'You'll catch it when we smother the current... All right, let it go.'

'I am... I am, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'Shut it tight.'

The buzz and the shaking subsided. Matthew and Daniel backed off from the door, just in case.

'Welcome to my side, to Dorlief!' came the familiar voice.

'It's Father,' said Semimes, and the hostility for the door propped up inside vanished. 'We'd better get gone. It's all over, and a good thing, too, very much so.'

'Well, I'd rather take Father for an alien than an alien for Father.'

Semimes looked at Matthew closely with some sort of distrust, but found nothing in him to support his idea. And then added without an ulterior motive:

'Alien in the house, Mat. Truth to say, this alien isn't much of an alien. But we'd better get gone. And not a word of us having been here tomorrow.'

Semimes gave the candle back to Matthew, and Matthew to Daniel.

The boys went their several ways. Semimes soon fell asleep in the belief that consulting the pillow was the best thing he could do. Matthew's and Daniel's thoughts were in the corridor again and found each other. It was long before the closed cycle filled with darkness let them go. They leaned against each other and, dumb with fear, reflected, as they crept slowly along, in an effort to understand something. The corridor receded, frightening them not only with the darkness but also with its infinity. From time to time it teased the thoughts, showing something, only to hold it off, and it was hard to make out what appeared in it only to vanish behind one of the doors, one of the numerous padlocked doors... There was the Carroty, stick in hand. He came down one of the ladders from a gigantic mushroom and beckoned the thoughts to follow him. But in another moment he was gone, and so was the mushroom, as if they had never been there. And only the voice behind the wall of the humpback that looked both like and unlike a man commanded: 'Get out. Heave it. Shut it.' The corridor receded and called over and over again...

\* \* \*

There was a lot of light all around when Matthew heard a tap on the door and opened his eyes. The tap was followed by a voice:

'It's Semimes. Can I come in?'

'Yes, Semimes... Good morning.'

'Good afternoon, Mat. Rise and shine. We'll be late for the Council.'

'I won't be a minute.'

'Hurry up; it doesn't do to let Falafy down. I'll go wake up Dan.'

Daniel had to be slightly nudged to wake up.

'You sleepyhead, Dan. You'll sleep off your head.'

'I've only just nodded off: the night affair wouldn't let me sleep.'

'It'll soon be midday. Put on your clothes, quick,' Semimes screeched heading for the door.

'Semimes,' Daniel called to him... and asked with a smile, 'What's this over my head, a ceiling or a roof?'

'We, Dorliefans, have a sky for a roof,' Semimes said, all smiles.

'We, Dorliefans, have a sky for a roof,' echoed Daniel appreciatively.

Semimes waited for the boys in the corridor.

'Good morning, Mat.'

'Semimes says it's afternoon. Good afternoon, Dorliefan Dan. Sleep well in a strange place?'

'I dreamed something about that room over there.'

'Believe it or not, I did, too.'

'Dan, Mat, this is no time to tell tales, very much so. When you're ready,' Semimes nodded at the water-and-soap room, 'come to the living room. We have company. Groyorg, Father's old friend, arrived at night.'

'Is it the alien that roared like a bear in the padlocked room?' asked Matthew. 'I wonder how he got there.'

'The same and different,' Semimes looked grave. 'Remember: there was no bear in the padlocked room.'

'Dan and I have got the message: mum's the word. Our lips are sealed... like the padlocked room.'

'Mat,' Semimes shook his head, 'Stop harping on the padlocked room. I also have to tell you that Sawasard arrived this morning.'

'Sawasard?'

'Yes, Dan, Sawasard. All right. Get a move on. We're expecting you in the living room.'

. . . Before opening the door to the room where people known and unknown were expecting them, Matthew asked, noting Daniel's anxiety:

'Ready?'

'I've always been nervous when on my points, and still am. Okay, let's go.'

'Here're your boys, Malam,' a loud hoarse voice shook the living room.

A man sprang off the sofa, making toward Matthew and Daniel, whose appearance was strange (even stranger than that of their host). That his huge nose and cheeks were bright-orange while his yellow bushy brows sought to hide his eyes was a small matter; as was his stature, much shorter than that of the Carroty, which made him spring off seats and spring on again; as was the hump on his back, like a drowsy rider, that was larger than that of Malam without making him look frail, stooping, ugly or pathetic; as was the thick silvery straw curled by the winds into tousled crinkly strands on his head and half his face (his mouth was invisible under his mustache, while his beard reached nearly all the way to his tummy)—there was something about him that could not but make one pause when confronting him, to wit: he was square (no exaggeration about it). He looked about fifty, which suggested nothing to Matthew and Daniel about his actual age. The loose beige shirt reaching down nearly to his knees was covered in metal spiders, each of which was surrounded by a web of fine silvery filaments (to match the highlights in his beard). From the way the spiders invaded the different parts of his shirt, they liked his sleeves best. Hanging from the wide leather girdle were eight sheathed daggers, to say nothing of two more, tucked into the uppers of his top boots. Which made ten of them. At first blush, Daniel and Matthew might have thought there were fewer or more than that, rather more than that, but there were ten in all.

'It's time we met. Let's. I'm Groyorg, Malam's old friend,' he offered Daniel his hand.

'Dan. It's a pleasure.'

'Dan the Sorrowful,' Groyorg muttered under his breath and extended his hand to Matthew. 'I'm Groyorg.'



'Mat, Dan's old friend.'

'Mat the Vital,' Groyorg grinned and patted him on the shoulder.

Matthew could hardly stand his ground at this friendly gesture, so heavy a hand their new acquaintance had.

'You have to eat a lot,' Groyorg said, commenting on Matthew's lack of stability, and made for the young man who had got up to his feet when Matthew and Daniel entered the room. 'Sawasard, man, come here and be introduced to my friends.'

Sawasard left Malam and Semimes to approach them.

He was slim and easy of motion. The look in his turquoise eyes was unclouded by suspicion or cunning any more than by an air of superciliousness. The flimsy shirt the color of a daylight sky over Dorlief lent clarity to his eyes, while his long wavy hair shone brightly as if the sun had shared its inexhaustible fire with it... the sun that was not there in the Dorlief sky.

'This is Dan the Sorrowful,' croaked Groyorg. 'This here is Mat the Vital.'

'I'm Sawasard, son of Faddaf. I'm happy to make your acquaintance. Malam and Semimes have told us about you and what brings you here to Dorlief. I find it gratifying that you've brought people the Word of hope that my father had told about in his prophecy.'

Daniel produced the book and opened it to the page with the rhyme and held it out to Sawasard (he enjoyed doing it).

'Here's the Word. You can read it.'

'Thank you, Dan.'

'I wouldn't mind glancing at what made me go through this Wild Whirlpool that—' He stood on tiptoe to do what he was saying.

But Malam suddenly sprang to his feet and called to him in a tone that was normally used to call people to order (the reason being not Groyorg's curiosity but verbosity):

'Groyorg!'

Groyorg cast a quick glance at Malam, captured his eloquent gesture and faltered, trying to smooth over his faux pas:

'I meant: to look at what I've made such a hard hike for, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.

'Groyorg!'

'. . . which transpired later on, though I... was merely going to visit my old friend.'

Daniel and Matthew glanced at one another, thinking back to the nighttime tumult. Malam hastened to step between them and Groyorg.

'Matam, Danad, come, I'll rustle up a meal for you. The other guests have had their breakfast and are busy exercising their tongues,' he looked askance at Groyorg.

'That's right,' he croaked. 'That's what happens when the tongue hasn't done one of its two things. Breakfast isn't the best time for a good chat, particularly when driven by a secret council.'

'Groyorg!' Malam had to tell his square friend where he came off.

'Lunch is different. Dinner's best of all. That's when you can eat and talk to your heart's content, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'Groyorg—'

'Yes?' croaked Groyorg (it was not unlike a roar) and made both Matthew and Daniel start.

'Groyorg the Square,' Matthew let drop, rather unhinged by this shake-scene's impulsiveness.

Groyorg laughed in reply and concluded:

'I like these boys, Lil'un-to-the-rescue! What did you want to ask, Mat the Vital? Shoot! Your frown's unbecoming.'

'Who's this Lil'un that keeps rescuing you?' asked Matthew.

'Oh, it's there, resting on the sofa. I'll show you in just a minute.'

Groyorg came up to the sofa and removed from a leather sleeve (with some sort of bands attached) a club the way one would unsheathe a sword.

'Is this marshland bitubular?' Matthew was surprised, for the club was too thick as compared to Semimes's and Malam's sticks, although the barely visible crook gave the provenance away.

'That's it.'

'Can it be like this?' Daniel could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. (Had Malam or Semimes said it, it would have been easier to believe).

'Can the like of Groyorg, your Groyorg the Square, be, Lil'un-to-the-rescue?' Groyorg chose to reply with a question, and Matthew and Daniel were more than convinced.

'Come and tuck in, my friends,' Malam called the boys again.

'We'll be going then?' Daniel said, as if in apology, to Sawasard who stood a pace away watching; he realized that Sawasard wanted a word with him and Matthew.

'Have a nice hunger, Dan and Mat,' he said.

'Have a nice hunger,' croaked Groyorg.

'You'd better make haste lest we be late for the Council,' screeched Semimes who had been utterly left out (at least, the idea was floating over the table: 'left out').

As Malam was treating Daniel and Matthew to bread fresh from Darrad and Plilp's bakery and parate tea with home-made huckleberry jam, the rest were left to their own devices, indulging their souls, for better or for worse.

Groyorg lay down on the sofa and dozed off immediately: the Wild Whirlpool he nearly let on about had quite drained him. In fact, he liked his forty winks under any circumstances. And he dreamt of very huge mushrooms...

Semimes ran off to his rock next to the willow tree. He bent over it, intent on lifting it, but thought better of it and sat down near it.

'I'll stay with You for a while. But I won't bother you. I'll just sit near and talk to You... We have company today—my father has. One of them is Groyorg. He's quite a character and strong, something you can see right away... He's a kind soul though... No make-believe about him... But then... he said one thing. Why should he say that? You ask what it was he said? I'll be frank with You. I can only be frank with You. Semimes the Conqueror. He said Semimes the

Conqueror. I felt like... I felt like fighting him. Why did he say that? To ingratiate himself with Father? I'm no longer angry at him: he's not to blame, he's all wrong. All people are all wrong. All people are barkycrooks. But the crookedest of them all can't be a conqueror. Things like that shouldn't be said to the crookedest of them all... You know who else we're entertaining? It's Sawasard. He left his girdle with two swords in the hall, left it hanging next to my cape. He's all right. But he's one of the forestmen. He's stood the test of the Crossroads. He's the best and I must fight him. Given half a chance. Very much so... Then the intruders woke up. I was the first to meet them with a kind word. But when they were in the living room they never so much as noticed their guide, as if he wasn't there at all... But they were all eyes for Groyorg's club of marshland bitubular. He was like: "Can it be like this?" As if he'd crawled about in the mire and knew a thing or two about bitubular. No, they had no eyes for their guide. But they were all eyes for the right forestman. He to him, was like: "Here's the Word. You can read it." As if he were giving away trifles on New Light Day... Once you are called Word Keeper, well, keep it, don't flaunt it—either the Word or your office... He to him, was like: "We'll be going then?" You're going for a meal, not war. Why that air of impending doom? No, they never noticed Semimes, as if he were a barynth nut on the table that they'd had too much of. All right then, all right... Should Falafy forget Semimes, he'd forget everyone... he'd go. With no "We'll be going then." He'll be gone in silence. He... I... I'll only tell You that Semimes needs help with that... What? What do you say? Yes. Yes, the intruder said those words to me. He asked, "Semimes, is that the ceiling or the sky above me?" So what? What of that?'

Sawasard was sitting on a bench under a linden. There was a notebook on his lap. The sought-out Word had not revealed to him its main secret. But he felt on having read it what the others had not felt when they partook of the Word. They had guessed a great force in it, and now they were to probe for its secret meaning, their last best hope being Falafy. Sawasard had divined not only the Word's strength but its weakness, too. He had captured the boundary between the great strength that scared feelings and the weakness that crouched back of it that no feeling could reach out to. He had managed it because he had been between these two entities, these two Worlds, the Waking World and the Spirit World, for nearly a thousand years. He had felt nothing there, no space, no time, not even himself. But he had acquired a sense of boundary there, a boundary unfelt by other people. When he had come to, he knew nothing of it, but it was already inside him.

The weakness of the Word was that it was not safeguarded against the eyes of Darkness. And therefore, the Word, once bestowed on a good man by the name of Natan by the World of Dreams Lord, had to look to him for protection, and look to other people for it on its Path. The Word has called me to Dorlief, thought Sawasard, it marshals other people around it; it's brought Dan and Mat to Dorlief. And that Carrot's kinsman, Groyorg, has come to his place thanks to the Word. I who had dreaded to stir up the past in me and forgotten Dorlief was tempted by the Word, too, as voiced by Malam. The Word claims whoever had brought word of it as its last resort... whoever can divine it. It will then perform

its predestination and conquer darkness. We need the Word and are prepared to safeguard it, in order to conquer darkness with its help. The Word needs our protection and marshals us around it, fearful of getting into the hands of the Lord of Darkness and lending its force to him, to be further used against people...

Sawasard was looking at Dorlief, his childhood place of very long ago.

\* \* \*

'Sawas!'

Sawas heard his name—his soul cringed, for the very sounds of it were permeated with fury and despair. Looking for salvation, he turned to his father only to meet in his eyes the thirst to discontinue life... with the space between him and father filled with lethal arrows. And his life was discontinued. Blackness came. Desires were replaced with emptiness. For Sawas it was just a moment (that had embraced almost a thousand years). There was nothing at the moment... but a sense of boundary apart from his consciousness. The next moment the blackness came to life because Sawas felt he was opening his eyes. He got up. In the blackness that was near and far and everywhere with nothing to be seen, he distinctly saw his mother. She only appeared for a few moments. She was lying motionless in space. Then she was dissolved in the blackness again. 'Mother,' he managed to say before his voice was devoured by the blackness, too, and he could not hear it any longer. He felt drawn by something beyond reason, sight or hearing to where... (he hunched) the blackness would be no more, where there would be light, there would be a new beginning...

Light came on as suddenly as the blackness receded. There were forestmen all around him. Their eyes were full of goodness and joy.

'My name's Ewnar. This is my brother Lawuan. He'll take you to our Lord Ozuard.'

Lawuan took Sawas by the hand.

'Fear nothing,' he said. 'You're among friends. Come, Ozuard will tell you about your parents.'

Sawas's first day of a new life was like a wonderful dream. Never before had he heard from his mother how forestmen lived, only to see suddenly everything with his own eyes and to be surprised... Would he have accepted these new things, unless... ?

'Oh, at last! Greetings, dear Sawas. We've been looking forward to this meeting ever so much,' said the Lord, overjoyed, as soon as Lawuan told him the name of the boy. 'Efriard, Estean, come here! We have company.'

A boy and a girl answered his summons (from all appearances, Ozuard's children). They were several years Sawas's junior. On seeing the guest, they stopped... and looked at their father.

'Guess who's come with Lawuan,' he told them.

'It's the boy who's been at the Crossroads for ever so many years,' guessed Estean.

'It's Sawas!' Efriard exclaimed.

'It's Sawas! Sawas!' Estean echoed.

'Meet him,' said Ozuard.

The children neared and named themselves.

'And you're Sawas?' Estean hastened to be proved right in her guess, much hindered by Sawas's eyes full of wonder.

'I'm Sawas,' he said in reply and thus rendered Estean joyous (she even hopped, overwhelmed by her feelings), and he felt at ease.

'Do you hail from Dorlief?' asked Efriard.

'Yes, my home's there.'

'We've been to Dorlief. On New Light Day. We trimmed the New Light Tree. It was very, very—' Estean screwed up her eyes, 'jolly! And we didn't feel like leaving. We'll always go to Dorlief for New Light celebrations. Will you go with us?'

Sawas merely shrugged his shoulders.

Meanwhile Lawuan retired by the forestmen's Lord leave.

'Children, you'll still have time to question one another about everything,' Ozuard interfered. 'For now, Estean, Efriard, bring in the dishes and treat your dear guest. He must be ravenous after the thousand years.'

Estean and Efriard laughed and ran off. It was strange for Sawas to hear about the thousand years that should have made him ravenous. But he was hungry... Estean and Efriard fetched one dish after another, put them near Sawas and asked him to help himself. They exchanged glances, giggled and said something to each other about Sawas, what they had spotted or thought they had. They were small and funny, and Sawas took no offence. They, too, soon were at the table helping themselves. Then their mother appeared. The children ran up to her, crying that they had Sawas for company. She came up to him, placed a basket of huckleberries on the table and stroked his head.

'You're home now, Sawas. My name's Lefeat. I'm these two kids' mother.'

'You're home now, Sawas,' Estean echoed her mother's words and stroked his head, too. 'I've been gathering huckleberries in Sadorn today. Help yourselves.'

Then Ozuard suggested that they walk. Sawas guessed that he wanted to talk to him.

'You were surprised to hear me say you'd got ravenous over the thousand years?'

'I was.'

'You've spent nine hundred eighty-three years at the Crossroads. Do you remember what happened before your senses left you?'

Sawas never mentioned his father's eyes, and the arrows his father had let fly at him.

'Yes. We were stalking the stone humpback in the Kaduhar Mountains,' he said, 'my father, Lebeard and I.'

'Tell me about it.'

'We were following its spoor down the Guiss River in the Wedolick Gorge. Then we saw it and started pursuing it. The humpback would not flee or hide. There's a sharp right bend there, and we lost sight of it. We ran to catch it up. But the humpback never considered hiding. It had crossed the Guiss and was waiting for us. It wanted to rush us. I shot and hit it. Lebeard finished it off to

spare it the torment. Father let me go near the humpback and I did... Then I was scared a great deal...'

'You remember it all very well, Sawas. On his return, Lebeard told us about what had happened. We kept the story extant and waited for you. Do you want to know what happened next?'

Sawas cast down his eyes but could not say no: his father's eyes, and the arrows his father had shot seemed to be only a day distant; they made him cry out the short word 'no' but his soul craved the hope that it was not the case. But what was?

'Yes!' Sawas's soul cried out.

'The stone humpback you stalked and shot was not hiding or fleeing because it was luring you into a trap. You guessed as much, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'But you failed to see the other humpbacks at the time. They blended in with the crag. When you came up to the dead beast, they attacked you.'

Faddaf and Lebeard shot the arrows that didn't let them tear you to pieces.'

Sawas could hardly contain himself, for his soul rejoiced.

'Your father rescued you but he couldn't bring you back to life.'

'Where are they, father and Lebeard?'

'You know now how much time has intervened. Woe-stricken, your father left Dorlief. We don't know what's happened to him or where he is. Your mother and Lebeard took you to the Crossroads on Malam's bidding. Do you remember Malam?'

'I remember the Carroty very well. We spent the night with him before going to the hills,' said Sawas and added: 'I thought it was only three days ago... What about Lebeard? Is he here? Can I see him?'

'Lebeard's long since not with us. He lived to be one hundred eighty-three years, and his soul went to the Spirit World,' said Ozuard.

'Did he die in action?' asked Sawas.

Ozuard realized that someone had to explain things to him.

'I see Lelean didn't tell you about it...'

'About what, Ozuard?'

'Things are a lot different here than in Dorlief. You've seen something. Something has confused you or even made you wonder. You are yet to learn a lot. Unlike Dorlief, old age here is linked not only to the distance from the moment of birth but to the advent of death, too. Few of us live to be two hundred years old. I'm not speaking of people who had somehow hitched their fate to one of the Dorliefans and stayed there for good and ever.'

What about mother? I saw her where I came to today.'

'To be with you, she'd surrendered herself to the power of the Crossroads. No one knows what will happen to her: whether she'll come back or pass on to the Spirit World, but we all hope the Crossroads will let her go the way it had you.'

Ozuard and Sawas walked in silence for a while...

'I don't feel like going to Dorlief,' said Sawas suddenly. 'Everyone I had as friends and played with have long since become grownups... Can I stay here?'

'It's your choice, and you have time yet to consider everything. Look and listen—your heart will tell you. But should you stay here, I'd like you to live with my family. Lefeat and the kids will be only too glad, I know... And another thing: your father's swords are in safekeeping with us. When you learn martial arts, you might yet choose them for your principal weapons.'

Sawas's eyes shone: he remembered putting on the girdle with two swords in the not too distant past, exactly like his father's but made of orange tuffer, and running off to play outdoors with Werew and Garurag... But the fire in his eyes soon went out, after it had burned for nine hundred eighty-three years in a matter of a moment.

## Chapter Four

### The Secret Council

Malam returned Dorliefan greetings a score of times or so on the way to the Governing Council house with his friends. None of them was surprised at the mixed company, let alone suspected that the six were headed for a secret chat. Whatever the question that might bother somebody's head, the answer was in the air—New Light Day was coming. In the run-up to the celebrations there were many people of different kinds in the streets of Dorlief, and almost all rooms at the Flying Ferling, the Sky for the Roof and the small inn with an unprepossessing name 'Three Rooms and Board' were occupied. And yet... and yet there was a knowing eye that spotted something in the marching six, and the moment it did, the distance between them and the eye reduced with every step...

'Your Dorlief's a beauty... it sure is,' croaked Groyorg addressing Malam. 'Except the houses in your fields are somewhat off.'

'What do you mean, off?' a voice behind the square man asked and made him start, exclaiming:

'Oh!'

The six paused and looked back.

'And what fields, by your leave?' the voice that had hatched out of the air took on pop eyes and the rest of it to stun Groyorg.

'I didn't mean anything,' he faltered. 'No praise, no slur.'

'Why oh, if you didn't mean anything... ?' the voice kept pestering.

Groyorg realized finally he did not like it one bit and launched an offensive.

'Why are you here, rather than where they're looking for you, Lil'un-to-the-rescue?'

The stranger was puzzled and started looking around, then asked in a pacifying tone:

'Who's looking? Dorrody? Where's she? Tell me, goodie. I'll give her a wide berth.'

Malam interceded, for he knew what a pain in the ass the cove could be who was pestering Groyorg.

'Greetings, Ruptapur. You don't seem to have noted me?'

'Malam? Indeed, I didn't. You don't stand an earthly next to this square,' Ruptatpur snapped back, poking his finger at Groyorg.

'Ruptatpur! Come off it, Ruptatpur! This is my friend Groyorg. Can't you see he's little? Don't offend him.'

Groyorg laughed hoarsely.

'Can't you see I'm little, Lil'un-to-the-rescue?'

Everyone found it funny except... Ruptatpur.

'Who can tell whose friends they are... and what they're up to... and what's wrong with our houses,' he mumbled and made himself scarce.

'Ruptatpur! Tell Dorrody to come and get her parate for tea. Tell her Malam's dried some fresh parate,' the Carrotly called after him.

'We'll be the talk of all Dorlief next through his agency,' said Groyorg. 'I know his kind.'

'He does like to tell tales, that's true enough, but he won't tell tales out of school,' Malam said. 'Unless he has Dorrody for an audience, to whisper it to her. Now, Dorrody's a wise woman.'

A fellow was sitting on a bench by the side of the Governing Council.

'It's Natan, Falafy's kid son,' said Semimes and addressed him: 'Good afternoon, Natan.'

'Afternoon,' said the boy getting up. 'How's your leg?'

'Which of the two?' said Semimes, and that was reply enough.

'Well done, Wolfdog,' said Natan appreciatively.

His voice, firm and relaxed, never seeking to hide behind a tone, the look in his eyes, open and somewhat challenging, and his majestic stature suggested the boy was not used to doubting. He looked not unlike Daniel and could easily be taken for his brother. He was a bit taller than Daniel but broader of shoulder.

Daniel and Matthew glanced at each other, surprised by the unexpected 'Wolfdog.'

\* \* \*

Semimes never, not even if he was asked about it, mentioned the incident which attached the flattering nickname to him. The startling truth was known only to his father. Semimes himself knew only part of it, the part that his eyes had seen. The rest of the Dorliefans took the mistake for the truth.

Two years before, five boys had gone to Tanuth to try its impregnability and leave the overflow of passion there... They ran into a pack of black wolves in a cave. The beasts whose turf law prevailed over everything were not to be kept at bay by the fire in the hands of the bipeds, for the old one must have guessed that in the fire's dance there was more of the shaking limbs than biting lunges and led the pack in an attack at the intruders. The wolves hissed fiercely as if they were not wolves, they bared their teeth with such ferocity that their eyes became bloodshot, and they hugged the floor with their bellies as they slowly advanced at the boys on bent legs. The boys backed off waving away the fear... that had filled the cave... with their torches... Semimes pulled out his stick, leaped forth, struck it on a stone underfoot informing it with all the fury and might of the leap that had gone to his head along with inhuman blood that flowed in his veins and



rushed the beasts with a beastly roar. The one that was ahead evaded a second blow of the stick and they vanished into the depth of their lair. Semimes sat on the rock where he had stopped. He peered into the blackness gone beyond the pale of light. He would have none but the blackness see his face. He could feel his face and thought that at the moment it was as unlike a human one as the wolves' snouts wolves' faces. He could neither hear the cries of his friends urging him to flee nor see them leaving the cave... Then he heard Natan's voice (who had returned to fetch him):

'We're leaving for home. You'll have to catch us up, Wolfdog.'

Semimes was silent at home evading his father's questioning glances. And asked him several days later about one thing... that had kept tormenting him all along.

'Father, the black wolves that inhabit the Tanuth caves, what are they like?'

'It's in their name: they're as black as the entrails of the cave and a bit smaller than their grey forest congeners.'

'Just that?' Semimes had expected from his father what was to be expected in vain.

'Well, what else... ? What else?' Malam thought and recalled something: 'Their front paws have six toes.'

'Why six?'

'It's their hard lot to live and hunt in the hills, and it has been made for by an extra toe with very hard claws. They need it to climb up a slithery crag, which always sides with the ibex... Was your hike interrupted by black wolves, sonny?'

'Dunno, Father.'

'Why not?'

'Four of my companions saw black wolves in the cave we got to. But I don't know what I saw... Do black wolves have a red snout? Is their tail like a long, springy snake? Do they hiss like a cornered mountain cat?'

Malam frowned and grew somber. His strenuous thoughtfulness frightened Semimes and he was sorry he had said that.

'I could be mistaken, Father,' he screeched guiltily.

Malam went to the hallway without a word... and came back wearing a cape with a travel bag in one hand and his stick in the other... He put some bread wrapped in some cloth and some shelled barynth nuts in his bag... filled one canteen with parate tea and another with tulis juice, put them in their sleeves and hung them from his girdle.

'Do you want me to accompany you, Father?' said Semimes, not quite sure he could hear him.

'Stay at home, sonny. And take care of Nuruny. Don't look for me soon.'

For the first time in his life, Semimes felt fearful for his father. The eleven days he waited for him seemed unending, each of them... The father was back on the eleventh day late in the tittle-tattle, exhausted and ragged (the cape, the shirt and the trousers hung down in rags) and blood-stained... but happy... Before going to bed he found it in him to say a few words to Semimes.

'You were right, sonny: those were not wolves but hungs, underground rats. For man, they're worse than rats, for they know very well what humans

taste like. But they've also got a taste of the stick from marshland bitubular. Let your companions believe they were right. Hungs must not injure either this earth or the hearts of the villagers... Nor will they, sonny.'

With his reputation as a wolfdog, Semimes came upon more respectful looks of Dorliefans... and experienced suspicious looks out of their windows.

\* \* \*

'Greetings to you, Malam, and to you, good visitors to Dorlief,' said Natan.

'Hello, dear Natan. Are you waiting for us?' asked the Carroty, all shines.

'Something tells me I am, but I see six, rather than the five named, unless I discount the guy who's as good as two,' Natan answered nodding at Groyorg gaily.

'What about as good as three, nervy boy? You've disregarded the one across my back, Lil'un-to-the-rescue!' Groyorg flared up (he had left the girdle with the daggers at home at Malam's request, not to put off the Dorliefans, but would not part from his club, which was only too fair, for Malam also had his stick to support him on top of his two legs, while Semimes had his tucked under his girdle). 'I'm here with my friend. Here he is, nervy boy. His name's Malam. He said to me, "Groyorg, disregard whatever other business you have, for you may come in handy,"' and I said, "Come, Lil'un-to-the-rescue." So here I am. I see you're here to count us. What I say is though, account for your presence to us, nervy boy.'

'Groyorg, this is the son of Keeper Falafy: if he's here, business calls for it,' said Malam in a voice which he used when addressing Groyorg.

'Oh no, let him account,' Groyorg would not budge.

Natan grinned without resentment.

'Thanks, Malam, but I'll reply to Groyorg if he's so persistent. Mother told me yesterday before I retired to get my forty winks, "Natan, it's time you were as good as your name after my brother. The Word is over his name, and the Word's been penned for people's salvation. It's been delivered to Dorlief, and your duty is to join those who will guard it." I'll join you, good folks, if you're willing and unless the Council says no.'

'Well that puts another complexion on it,' said Groyorg and came up to Natan with his hand extended. 'You are to know that from now on Groyorg's your friend.'

'Groyorg the Square,' Matthew suggested.

'Oh yes, Groyorg the Square,' the square man echoed, and it could be seen that the nickname was just right where he was concerned.

'I could see you're too broad to be a single one,' said Natan.

'Broad... broad is the word, Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' Groyorg agreed and addressed the rest, 'What are you standing around for, friends? Natan the Nervy is one of us. Come and shake his hand.'

Groyorg's appeal was answered: everyone came up to Natan to shake his hand, with Groyorg introducing the friends he had met only that morning. Semimes was the first to come up. Natan and he knew each other only too well, but Semimes felt that the handshake had a very special meaning.

'This is the son of my friend, Semimes the Conqueror.'

'I'd assault any crag and venture into any cave with you, Wolfdog,' said Natan patting him on the shoulder with his free hand.

'There's something rather more sinister than crags and caves,' screeched Semimes in reply, 'very much so.'

'This is Mat the Vital,' Groyorg went on.

'One can see at a glance that you and Dan are next of kin,' said Matthew.

'One can see at a glance that you and Dan are from the Non-world.'

'From the Non-world?' Matthew was surprised at the unexpected word that Natan had let fly, and, at a loss for reply, looked at Daniel.

Daniel held out his hand to Natan and said:

'Mat and I have always felt that we exist. You can feel it with your hand.'

'This is Dan the Sorrowful,' croaked the Square, thus upsetting the soundless space between Daniel and Natan.

Natan gave Daniel a firm handshake.

'I can feel it... and it makes me happy... life's dull otherwise,' he said... in word and in deed.

'This is Sawasard the Bright. He's one whose strands have been touched by a singular fire.'

'Greetings to you, Natan.'

'I'm glad to see you, Sawasard the Bright. After the Crossroads, it's your first at Dorlief, not word of you, though. I hear you're endowed with a special perception. What is it you perceive that I don't?' asked Natan without releasing Sawasard's hand.

'The heat of cold and the cold of heat, light in the darkness and the blindness of light... I've heard word of you, too, Natan. Your mentor and my friend Retowal has said that shots like you, who don't take half a jiffy to aim in order to shoot a bird in flight, are rarer than sluisy trees among other trees.'

'You don't have to aim, Natan the Nervy?' cried Groyorg. 'How's that? Even I take aim before letting my Lil'un-to-the-rescue go.'

'Groyorg's a punster, to boot,' Daniel said.

'Let just the Square stay, lest I come to believe there're two of me.' Groyorg winked at Natan.

'Who's so loud here?'

Falafy's voice made everyone look at the porch.

'Meet my friend Groyorg, Mother.'

'Greetings to you, esteemed Falafy. My gullet's to blame: something makes it croak and holler. I'm one of Malam's kind. I mean I—' Groyorg faltered.

'I see your point, Groyorg. I'm glad to make your acquaintance,' said Falafy and looked over the rest. 'I'm also glad to see you in Dorlief, Sawasard, son of Faddaf. Thanks for coming at the earliest convenience.'

'Greetings to you, esteemed Falafy.'

Malam hastened to join Falafy.

'Good afternoon, dear Falafy. I'll be brief: I've made bold to invite Groyorg. Anxiety assailed me in my night hours. There're few Word Keepers, they're young and inexperienced. Who else was to share the onus of safekeeping with them?'

There's no more anxiety in me today: this guy's voice has rid me of it. I can depend on Groyorg the way I can on myself.'

'Good, Malam. I trust you in every way: I've brought my son. I think, his fate's in his name. True, this hasn't rid me of anxiety. All right, friends, come on in—you're being expected.'

Falafy, followed by the rest, entered a spacious, light room. There was a big round table in the middle with chairs next to it and along the walls (one could say there were two walls: one curved left of the door all the way to the fireplace, the other, right). The five seated at the table got to their feet.

'Dear friends, I'll begin by introducing to you all the members of the Governing Council,' Falafy said and indicated a skinny old man with a stoop. 'Gordrog...'

Two details won the attention of whoever looked at this man: intelligent gimlet light-grey eyes with nothing bleary about them despite his old age, and the perfect symmetry of his grey hair parted on the top, a vertical furrow on his forehead, a dimple over his upper lip and finally a single black brush of hair under his lower lip.

'... Tlanalt,' Falafy called another name.

This man, too, was far from young but upright of body and young of face. Most importantly, his eyes exuded kindness and made one like him (when in need of help, one would choose those eyes among others).

'I'll tell those of you who don't know,' Falafy continued, 'what makes our Dorlief a whole is due to these two people. The former has thought up and implemented the underground part of it, its vessels interconnected with earth and water. The latter's responsible for Dorlief's look.'

'Falafy, allow me to interrupt and correct you a bit,' Tlanalt said gently. 'Dorlief owes its look to Falafy's father, Norron, my friends. It's his roofs that share the light of the skies without stinting. And another thing, dears, Falafy's loved by Dorliefans for her healing powers due to her kindness of heart.'

'Thank you, Tlanalt; I'll go on introducing the members of the Council to our visitors. This is Faryraf: he's made Dorlief famous for its clock that towers over its square.'

Faryraf was much younger than Gordrog and Tlanalt. He was severe and cold to look at. He was estranged, sort of. His hair was dark-brown, his eyes dark-grey. It was hard to guess anything in him at first blush.

'These are Sufus and Safasy, the siblings. The Dorlief you'll see tomorrow and on New Light Night will tell you more than any words.'

On hearing the familiar names, Sufus and Safasy, Matthew nudged Daniel slightly with his elbow and Daniel replied in kind: understood!

Sufus was tall and lean. His long blond hair fell over his shoulders. His indigo eyes were wide with wonder and delight. His wide mouth with its corners turned up had a perpetual shadow of a smile. His long thin nose added a few touches to his countenance that said: Sufus was given to seeing what surprised and delighted him.

Safasy was as slender as her brother. The blond locks of her hair fell over her shoulders in a frothy cascade and ran on in sparkling creeks. Her huge indigo

eyes surprised and delighted one. Her lips parted a crack... seemed to be listening to you, eager to reply with a smile or a shadow of sadness, while her long thin nose added to her countenance what suggested that Safasy was as brittle as the beauty she found to give to people.

Sufus and Safasy, echoed Daniel to himself, and thought back to his Tear.

'I must now introduce to the Council our dear visitors, Word Keepers,' saying this, Falafy came up to Daniel and Matthew.

'These are Danad and—'

'Not yet Keepers, esteemed Falafy,' Faryraf interrupted her, his sonorous voice full of confidence or superciliousness, 'that's up to us to decide now.'

'I've made up my mind on that, esteemed Faryraf,' said Falafy and began again: 'These are Danad and his friend Matam. They've brought the Word to Dorlief that you know of through Faddaf's prophecy and you realize they've trekked the Path.'

'So, they come from Net—'

Falafy did not let Gordrog finish, gesturing him to stop.

'I've said and I'll repeat it again that Danad is the grandson of my lost brother Natan. It was given to Natan to see, record and preserve the Word. It is now given to Danad to take it down the Path. It isn't an alien that's come to us, but one in whom the blood of one of our people's sons flows.'

'I'm here with my friend without whose agency I wouldn't have coped on the Path. Mat is no alien to me, any more than you, Falafy, or you, esteemed Council members,' said Daniel, surprising everyone with his statement.

'We thank you, Danad, and you, Matam,' said Tlanalt.

'Once I mentioned Faddaf, I'll next introduce to you his son,' Falafy went on. 'This is Sawasard. Each of you has heard of him from our friends, the forestmen... Now... I can't see Semimes. Where's he?'

'He's always been with us,' said Matthew. 'I never knew—'

'Some Word Keepers you are: lost one of your own,' said Faryraf in a false joking tone, and added on an altogether different note: 'It's time you grew up with such an onus assumed. It's a cause that calls for seriousness. And patience. Let's reserve our thanks until later on, esteemed Tlanalt.'

'I'll call my son,' said Malam softly and stepped toward the door.

'Stay, Malam dear. I'll fetch him.'

Falafy left the house and looked about. Semimes was nowhere to be seen.

'Semimes?' she called. 'Semimes!'

He did not respond and she decided to walk around the house, just in case...

Meanwhile, Tlanalt called on everyone to be seated, and the Council members with those invited sat around the table... Sufus's voice would not let the silence last too long.

'No, Faryraf, I don't feel like growing up. I was sixteen and Safasy fourteen when first we offered to be in charge of Dorlief's New Light celebrations. We were so eager to do everything the new way, our way. The Governing Council had faith in us. I think it's a good thing we haven't grown up at our thirty-nine and thirty-seven to frown in seriousness. Or else our celebrations would have turned into a

grave onus for us. It's not a matter of perspective. But the cause calls for brio, not adulthood.'

'Sufus! My friends!' Safasy cut in. 'I've thought of a way to pacify both adulthood and brio that are in disagreement. Let's join the Word Keepers, brother. When they're short of adulthood, we'll go the roundabout way. Should brio leave someone, we'll take them to the abyss and make them jump across it. I think the Council will let us go. We'll do some archery, besides.'

'Safasy dear, of the two of us, you've always been the one for ideas. It's a deal.'

'I'm all for it,' Matthew could not contain himself. 'Are you, Dan?'

'I'm all for it, too, Sufus and Safasy.'

'One could scale mountains with the likes of them, Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

'I'm delighted, my friends,' Sawasard said.

'Safasy, Sufus, you're my friends and I love you. I'm for it,' said Natan.

'I won't be in the way, esteemed Sufus and Safasy, unless it's a flare-up in the run-up to New Light festivities,' said Faryraf and addressed the guests: 'As concerns you, my dear non-aliens, we haven't arrived at a decision yet.'

Semimes was sitting on the grass, his back to the wall. Falafy came up to him.

'Semimes dear, let's join the Council. Everyone's waiting for you.'

Semimes got up and they went off in silence. Before opening the door, Falafy said to him:

'Fate had chosen Semimes—you've got to believe in him too.'

He said nothing but thought: Were Semimes a whole man... I'd have faith in him.

The moment Falafy and Semimes entered the room, she said, to anticipate questions to him:

'Here's the one who rescued Danad and Matam yesterday and helped them get to Dorlief.'

The words flew into Semimes's head and boiled, as if they had got into a kettle over fire, rather than a head. They boiled, bubbled and ran the length of his body as a tremor. His lips stirred mouthing after his stirred soul: 'Falafy... Falafy... Alafy... Alay... Alay...' His eyes shone reflecting the light of a new idea: 'I'll call her Alay... I'll call her Alay...'

'Sit down at the table, Semimes, and so will I,' said Falafy. 'Are there any of the guests I haven't introduced to the Council yet?'

'I'm here,' croaked Groyorg despite his efforts not to croak.

'This is Groyorg. I never said a word about him before because I saw him first when I came out to meet the guests. I have this to say, though: the intelligence and heart of our dear Malam whom I've invited to the Council have chosen him out of the many. It's up us to decide now whether Groyorg and the others of those presented to the Council are to be Word Keepers. Let's talk. Our words are to be between us...'

'My friends, I must admit that doubts have found their way into my mind, the reason being not the young years of those we are about to entrust the Word

to, but the fact that only one of them is a Dorliefan—your son, I mean, Falafy,’ said Gordrog as he eyed the Council members.

‘You’re forgetting Semimes, son of Malam,’ said Falafy.

‘Oh! Sorry, Semimes. You’re not the one I doubt: I’ve long been considering the other guests in your absence.’

‘But I’m here,’ Semimes screeched in a barely audible voice, with his eyes cast down.

‘What about our Sufus and Safasy,’ Tlanalt asked Gordrog.

‘No, no... It’s just that they’ve got to consider it at greater length,’ said Gordrog.

Falafy looked at Tlanalt and Gordrog in surprise, and then questioningly at Sufus and Safasy.

‘Brother and I have made up our minds and are not going to change them,’ Safasy said in reply to her glance. ‘You’ll second us, won’t you?’

‘. . . I’m in two minds, but knowing you, Safasy, I say yes to Safasy and yes to Sufus.’

‘Well done, Mom!’ Natan exclaimed.

‘I’m sure you won’t let us down, any more than when you were sixteen and fourteen, and I also say yes to you both,’ said Tlanalt.

‘My anxiety would grow less if I say yes, and even less than that if I add to it another yes,’ said Gordrog.

‘What will you say, Faryraf?’ asked Falafy.

‘I’ve spoken my word: it’s yes.’

‘Good. Back to our guests.’ She got to her feet. ‘Tell me, Gordrog, what’s more important for the Word... what’s more important for Dorliefans? Is it where a Keeper is from or how he’s connected with the Word? Each of the Council members will please answer the question.’

There was a silence and it meant that she was to speak further, which she did:

‘Natan and Danad... Natan and Natan... Faddaf and Sawasard... Fate has linked these people to the Word, directly or through their souls’ interconnection. What will you say?’

‘I say yes to Danad, his friend Matam, Natan and Sawasard,’ said Tlanalt firmly, only to add a few moments later: ‘And another yes to the one who saved the first two of them, Semimes.’

Sufus and Safasy had a quiet talk. Then Safasy said:

‘Eyes are like ornaments in a New Light Tree, each having its shine and smile. But one of them draws you the moment you glance at it... draws you so hard, you can hardly pull your eyes away from it. It’s because its shine and smile are after your own heart. The shine and smile in the eyes of those we have to say yes or no to are after our hearts, my brother’s and mine. We say yes to all of them. To Groyorg, too, even though we’ve had to get to his through a growth of letrique.’

Daniel, Matthew and Semimes exchanged merry glances as they remembered the recent bath of letrique.

‘Lil’un-to-the-rescue!’ roughed the air over the table.

'Groyorg, my friend, who do you keep referring to?' asked Sufus.

'Him,' said Groyorg indicating the club across his back, and then decided to add; 'He's dozed off, though... Let him—'

'I'd like to take a look,' Faryraf interrupted him, 'at the Word, not the wood. You've got it on you, haven't you, Danad? Falafy prefaced our meeting with a story about you and your companion Matam and recited the Word from memory. But one thing is hearing, and quite another seeing with your own eyes what Faddaf had spoken about almost a millennium before. I believe the rest of the members would like to see it, too.'

'Faryraf's right,' Gordrog agreed. 'It's one of those cases when open eyes help thought along.'

Danad passed the book on to Faryraf. Faryraf leafed through it, found the rhyme and fell to reading it... He then passed the book on to Gordrog.

'Be so kind as to read it aloud,' Tlanalt asked him.

Gordrog recited the rhyme and the signature under it:

'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning  
To ashes wordcircle's burning.

Natan.'

He passed the book back to Faryraf who addressed Daniel again:

'My young friend, how can you prove before the Council that you've trekked the Path?'

'Do you have your doubts, Faryraf?' asked Tlanalt. 'Gordrog and I used to know Norron and his family. We also remember his kid son Natan.'

'I rather doubt you knew the boy's hand,' said Faryraf.

'You're forgetting yourself, Faryraf. I remember my brother's handwriting, and I've already said that the rhyme is in his hand,' said Falafy firmly.

'If it's the Word that was prophesied by Faddaf it should have followed the Path!' Faryraf flared up. 'As a member of the Council, I insist on Danad disclosing the truth!'

'Show him, Danad,' said Matthew softly.

Daniel produced from the pouch the Tear and put it in front of him. Faryraf shuddered at the same moment, as if it was not a Tear but a ton of bricks had come crushing down. He sprang up and backed with Daniel's book in his hand.

'Are you all right?' said Gordrog in excitement.

'What got into you, Faryraf?' asked Sufus, aware that Faryraf would not own up to it, but would confirm with his reply his chance guess: Faryraf had seen the turquoise Tear before...

Faryraf's face was pale, his hands were shaking. He plonked heavily in his chair and looked at Sufus as if he had caught him in the act, then smirked and said:

'Beauty's... to blame.'

'Beauty attracts, not repels,' said Sufus.

'Take the Tear away, Danad,' Falafy said gently, 'so it should not inebriate anyone.'



'Danad!' Faryraf's word thus stopped her hand that held the Tear. 'Danad, my friend, do you know that the Dorlief law stipulates that your Tear is to be surrendered to one of the Council members?'

'Tarry a while, Faryraf,' his words were countered by those of Falafy. 'Danad needs time for his mind and heart to choose who to entrust with the Tear in accordance with the law.'

'Falafy, I'm quite prepared to surrender the Tear.' Daniel rose and held the Tear out to Safasy. 'It's yours, Safasy, and yours, Sufus.'

'We thank you, Danad,' said Safasy. 'But keep Her for the time being.'

'But why? I want it this way: my mind and heart have made their choice.'

Danad's words made everyone look at Safasy.

'Because the Word needs the Tear,' came Malam's voice unexpectedly. 'The Tear is the last best hope to save the Word. Every one of you must understand it.'

'Sorry, Malam, but your words are meager and the idea escapes me,' Gordrog complained.

Malam looked at Falafy.

'Speak up, Malam,' she said. 'There are no outsiders here, and the cause calls for it.'

'The turquoise Tear you've seen opens up the Path to a World known only to Danad and Matam. The turquoise Tear or the Word can't be passed on until the Word has again helped to overcome the forces of Darkness,' enunciated Malam and paused. His eyes found those of Sawasard, asked them something and got a tacit reply. Then Malam continued: 'Danad's World is the Word's last resort. It will have to abandon our World unless the Word Keepers can use it in a no-win situation.'

'Otherwise the forces of Darkness would use it against people,' Sawasard added, mindful of the Word's weakness.

'But Faddaf said nothing in his prophecy about the Word siding with Darkness,' Gordrog said.

'I felt it when I read the rhyme. The Word is initially drawn to goodness to serve it. It is drawn to whoever has brought word of it. But if the Lord of Darkness captures and divines it, the Word's secret force will pass on to him, and the power will be directed against humans,' Sawasard explained.

'You'd better keep the Tear until better things arrive, Danad,' said Malam in a tone reserved for company at home.

'Thank you, dear Malam, you're wiser than me. I only felt that Danad ought not to part from his Tear. You've dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's,' said Safasy.

'Now answer me in so many words, Danad: when and how did you find Matam in tow?' Faryraf asked sternly, a picture of matter-of-factness.

'You seem to be over-suspicious today, Faryraf,' was Tlanalt's comment.

'It isn't every day that we elect Word Keepers... The Word that so much hinges upon. I'm all ears, Danad.'

Danad was rather incommoded by Faryraf's dubiety, and he was very nearly replying with a slur. But he checked himself, fearful of harming Matthew,

and cupped his face with his hands. He rather thought in the terms of Gordrog, altering them for his purpose: It's when closed eyes help thought along... His reflections made everyone hold their breath...

'Granny told her grandchild, Teddy Dan, that he was not to dice with death, small though he was. But, unfortunately, Teddy Dan had, and death would have nothing of that, and he was to see it have the punsters laugh on the wrong side of their mouths; he floundered gulping in its ruthless laughter until he who was in his and his grandfather's tow on the lake threw himself into the water and rescued him. Teddy Dan came to and saw the eyes of his new friend... the friend of a lifetime... Try to guess, esteemed Faryraf, the name of the one who rescued Teddy Dan.'

'I kept thinking back to our childhood, with you doing the story-telling and me the listening,' Matthew said softly to Daniel.

Faryraf got up, came up to Daniel and said:

'To Dan and his rescuer Mat, my yes. To Semimes, Natan and Sawasard, my yes.'

He resumed his seat, lifted Daniel's book, which was still with him, and addressed Groyorg to ask:

'It's now your turn to answer my question, esteemed Malam's friend. What binds you to the Word?'

'I'm not bound to the Word, not yet, with all respect. It's just that Malam has asked me to take care of the boys and the Word, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'We are here to elect Word Keepers. How are you to keep it?'

'It would be a pity, if Groyorg the Square was not with us,' Matthew whispered into Daniel's ear.

'So it would. But it looks likely to be the case.'

'I like this man. Can we have him elected?' Safasy asked her brother.

'If Faryraf says no to him, Groyorg will leave us: it's the law,' said Sufus.

Groyorg sprang off his chair and made for the door.

'Groyorg!' Malam called out, under the impression, like everybody else, that this tacit leave-taking was his reply.

'Wait a bit!' Groyorg croaked waving Malam away, then, still with his back to Faryraf, asked: 'You sure you want to know how I'd keep the Word?'

'I'm not going to talk you into it, stranger.'

The moment Faryraf said the word, Groyorg faced the table, pulled his club from across his back, thus putting everyone on the ball: What was the Square up to? What was the Lil'un-to-the-rescue capable of? But contrary to expectations, Groyorg gave them a cunning smile and croaked:

'He's awake now. My friends, meet Lil'un... to-the-rescue. We'll have some fun, him and me. Don't judge us too hard.'

Malam shook his head but did not call him to order with the customary 'Groyorg!' For what was there for his friend to do unless he released his Lil'un?

Groyorg poked the club into the air and described with a firm motion a vast invisible circle that circumscribed everyone present like a window. He then described a curve inside the circle, caught it with the crook of his club like a wiggling snake, threw it out the window, where wonder itself was gawping. What

happened next was a matter of moments, barely enough to take a few steps. The few steps were enough for the wonder to give way to fright and petrification: the space outside the Groyorg's window warped in time with the wiggling of the snake. And everyone saw everything distorted: the faces, the bodies, the objects... Then everything was distorted beyond recognition... There were no faces, no bodies, no objects... Formless clusters floated in front of their eyes instead... And suddenly everything was restored... Those at the table could see familiar faces again, restored to themselves again. There was only one thing wanting...

'Where's the Word?' Faryraf cried. 'What's so funny?'

Groyorg stood by the door, nothing daunted, with the Lil'un-to-the-rescue across his back and his hands behind. He looked right at Faryraf without saying anything.

'I wonder where the book is,' said Safasy with a look askance at Faryraf and a smirk.

'Unless Semimes is far wrong, it was on the table right in front of esteemed Faryraf,' Semimes screeched.

'I didn't take it,' said Matthew with a silly face and arms spread.

Faryraf, awake to the absurdity of his resentment, tried to laugh. The laugh was a failure. Then he said:

'My yes to Groyorg.'

Groyorg came up to Daniel and, having shown everyone the book he had been hiding behind his broad back, said:

'Here you are, Dan the Sorrowful. We'll keep the Word all together, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'Yes, Groyorg the Square,' replied Daniel.

Safasy and the rest after her got up and clapped their hands saying their yes to Groyorg the Square.

'My yes to Groyorg,' Tlanalt said loudly.

'My yes to Groyorg and his friends,' said Gordrog.

'My yes to Danad, Matam, Semimes, Sawasard, Groyorg, Natan, Sufus and Safasy,' said Falafy. 'From now on, you're Word Keepers.'

'Eight-petal flower!' exclaimed Safasy. 'We are the petals on one stalk to be fed with Dorlief's earthly juices, the light over Dorlief and Dorliefan hopes.'

'Eight-petal flower,' closing his eyes and as if alone with himself, said Semimes in an audible whisper and, having enjoyed what had entered his soul along with the words, added (the first half to himself and the other out loud): 'He'd... say that a beginning is always better...'

The words frightened Safasy for some reason and she asked:

'Who'd say that, Semimes, my friend? Who's... he?'

'Just a man,' Semimes said, his eyes downcast.

'Sit down, my friends,' Falafy suggested. 'We are at the beginning of the Path, Word Keepers, and rue mustn't lead you on it.'

'Eight-petal flower,' Semimes whispered again without hearing Falafy, but listening to the sounds of his feelings in response to the 'eight-petal flower.'

Falafy went on:

'Malam believes that the Word Keepers should go to Mount Tusul and look for Faddaf there.'

'Why Tusul of all places?' Gordrog wanted to know.

'The picture Danad once saw and described to us in words told me of it. It contains signs,' replied Malam.

'What if Faddaf's not there? What if he is no more? May Sawasard forgive me my words.'

'I'll put it like this, Faryraf: if you have your doubts about one sign, look for another. If it yields the same answer, cast away your doubts. I had a sign ten years ago—ten years ago Faddaf was alive.'

'All right, Malam. What remains for us is hope, and we'll send the Word Keepers on their way with that hope,' Faryraf agreed.

'I think they should leave Dorlief on the night after the New Light one,' suggested Tlanalt.

Right you are, Tlanalt,' Falafy agreed. 'Sufus and Safasy's absence from the celebrations would cause Dorliefans anxiety and give rise to questions we have no right to answer yet.'

'Dan and I wouldn't mind witnessing the celebrations in Dorlief among our friends.'

'Danad, Matam, this New Light Night is yours!' cried Safasy. 'Each of us has had New Light Nights. It's the first one... with you, isn't it?'

'It is,' said Matthew.

'My brother and I give this feast to you. Do we, Sufus?'

'Look for the signs in the New Light Tree,' said Sufus.

'That's settled then: we set out after the festivities,' said Falafy. 'We'll now consider the route that the Keepers will follow.'

\* \* \*

Lutul was busy pottering about the yard in front of the windows of his house with a huge log (four paces long and two arms' wrap and more around). He had barked one half of the log, and the orange of the tuffer wood, fresh and rich, gladdened his eye and soul.

'Good folks all, you'll have quite a present for New Light Day,' he mumbled getting at the edge of the bark with his tongs. 'Your old feeder's been beaked all holes and scratches. Rur and I will hollow out a new one for you... Will we, now, Rur? Will we hollow out a new feeder?'

Silvery ferlings were walking about a lawn nearby. They could hear what Lutul was saying, of course, and even looked his way from time to time. But the log which was still a log was none of their concern. Well, when it became a regular feeder, it would be a different matter... They were attracted at the moment with what could amuse or be of use to them. Sasy, for one, was busy looking for a large emerald button, the one she had unearthed and played with for a long time. The button was smooth and even slippery. She caught it with her beak and pressed it that way until it flew up into the air. Then Sasy tried to catch it in flight. During one of such attempts she heard Falafy: her mistress called the ferlings to dinner. Sasy left her toy in the grass in her hurry... Tat had been

exercising with a long stick, catching it with his beak at one end and progressing along its length as he caught it now with the upper hook of his beak, now the lower one, trying to get to its other end without letting it fall... The rest of the ferlings, too, had found an occupation after their heart.

But Rur's disposition was too grave for such fledgling pastime, and he was helping his master as usual. He was as good as his master at the job they were doing at the moment: his beak was stronger and nimbler than the bits of iron in his master's hands, while his persistence was twice his master's.

'All right, Rur, let's handle it between the two of us.'

At the mention of his name, Rur was quick enough to catch on what his master wanted, and pulled at an end of the brown leathery bark baring the log.

'Well-done, Rur! Rur's quite an artisan!' Lutul lavished his praises.

What other words would he find for his helper when it came to the main thing—hollowing out? Hollowing out was Rur's favorite job in carpentering. The last time around, Lutul had found the words for him, and Rur had memorized them: 'It's a nimble chisel you've got, Rur. I wish I had one like it.'

Suddenly Klowolk who was lying nearby sprang to his paws, pointed his snout upward and barked. The ferlings stirred up too and began crying.

'What makes you so mad, Klowolk? Whom did you smell?' asked Lutul turning to him, and got it right away: 'Geg's flying! He's smelled Geg. Meet Geg, my good folks. He's bringing a message from Natlief.'

Twenty years before, Ragogar had come to Dorlief with a secret message. The message wasn't just about the Keeper Falafy, but also Lutul. It's a good thing, thought Ragogar, that Lutul was Falafy's husband, and Falafy Lutul's wife. They sat into the small hours, those three plus one ('We'll be helped by a friend who has lived long in Natlief and whose wise word has helped us out on many occasions,' said Falafy) at the table, bent over a sketch that Ragogar's stepson Brarb had made, who had had a flair for drawing since he was a kid. The sketch was a map with Natlief and environs, Cradlief, Hoglef and Dorlief on it. On top of all that was readily recognizable (the lakes, rivers, woods, hills, roads and trails), there were marks in the sketch for the sake of which Ragogar had come to his friends. He had made the marks himself, and they were rather a sorry sight. A crenulated rectangle was a fortress which, to his mind, was to defend the approaches to Natlief from the Emptied Lake. On Malam's insistence, the rectangle had to be moved elsewhere. His argumentation had been sparse and shrouded with mystery, but his tone cogent:

'It isn't just strong walls as put up by artisans that can save lives, but also ways invisible to the eye but bestowed on us by nature.'

The black blots (there were over a dozen) stood for sites where remains had been found of slain and torn men whose lives had made the Waking World a multi-colored pattern... There were also three lines in the sketch that connected Natlief with Dorlief.

'These aren't roads?' said Lutul, puzzled.

'Yes, they are, Lutul,' Ragogar replied with confidence, thus surprising not just Lutul but also those who were listening, because they were supposed to have used or at least heard of them between Natlief and Dorlief.

'These are the roads for the winged messenger,' Ragogar explained (Lutul's eyes shone, while Falafy and Malam shook their heads: they should have known better). 'And I ask you, Lutul, to choose a bright ferling among the young and train it in taking messages between Natlief and Dorlief, from me to Falafy and you. You know what times we've fallen on, so messages can be secret.'

Lutul took it seriously, as seriously, in fact, as he took whatever had to do with ferlings, even more so. He had not only traveled between Natlief and Dorlief, but also lived with Ragogar and Teoety, after leaving his charges in the care of Falafy, Novon and Ratytar.

Geg was beautiful, but that was not the main thing, for all Lutul's ferlings were. His eyes were bright with thought, but he was not too curious or too pushful. It was Lutul's doing that his thought was channeled to what he was engaged in at the moment, and nothing could lead him astray. He was also patient and threw few tantrums. Nature had not endowed him with malice so valued in a hunter ferling, and he had none of the short temper that a hunter ferling could not do without either on occasion. But these values in a hunter could be a flaw in a messenger. Geg was light of bone and loved flying, the skies tiring him less than his congeners.

Geg wheeled over the familiar house and alit some ten paces from Lutul. All ferlings rushed to him with greetings: Ee-oo, ee-oo! Even Rur left work along with his master to 'hug' him. But Geg disregarded his congeners and made a beeline for Lutul. He walked with his head and neck bent to show he had a wallet attached to his collar.

Good boy Geg! We haven't seen each other for ever so long.' He stroked him on the head, opened the wallet, and pulled out a sheet of paper folded on itself. 'Attaboy! A letter from Ragogar! Go now, good boy, say hello to your chums and tell them the news. Can't you see how pleased they are to see you?'

At last, Geg, with an easy mind and a triumphant 'Ee-oo' rushed to be embraced by his friends.

Lutul read the letter. The words flown from Natlief seemed to alight on his eyebrows, make them heavy and closer to the nose, giving his placid face a frowning concentration...

\* \* \*

Lutul knocked on the door of the Governing Council to be met by Faryraf.

'Greetings to you, Lutul. I can see from your eyes that you've come on business, not to say you miss Falafy.'

'Good day, esteemed Faryraf. It's not so much missing as seeing her: I've an express mail for her from Natlief.'

Falafy emerged on hearing her husband's voice. Faryraf left them.

'Geg's back, and I hastened here. Here's something from Ragogar. They've fallen on hard times,' Lutul said, though it could be seen from his face that it was bad news.

Falafy ran her eyes over the message.

'It's good you didn't wait at home for me: the business is urgent. Well, thanks. Go and don't let it depress you. We'll decide what we can do to help Natlief.'

Falafy returned to the Council. She took her place and, glancing through the letter again, began:

'What I have to say also concerns the Word Keepers. Something tells me that the events at Natlief have to do with the arrival of Danad and Matam.'

'The arrival of the Word, dear Falafy,' said Malam.

'That's right, Malam, the arrival of the sacred Word. It isn't for nothing that the master of the Emptied Lake has stirred. I'm sure he knows about Faddaf's prophecy and is afraid of the Word. This is what Ragogar has to say: last night nutheads attacked the fortress—'

Falafy suddenly felt somebody's intent look, more intent than the rest. She raised her eyes and saw it was Semimes. She went on:

' . . . nutheads we now call barkycrooks.'

'It's only too fair, Semimes,' Tlanalt said, 'to say you called them that, as Falafy has already told us. Right: it's a slur for the barynth nut to be compared to them. Go on, Falafy.'

Ragogar says there were at least a thousand of them. He believes the attack had as its objective an assessment of the fortress. The three-hundred-strong forestman unit stationed there beat it off. The barkycrooks retreated and attacked no more. But Ragogar is sure it was just the beginning and asks Dorlief and forestmen for reinforcements.'

Tlanalt rose to his feet.

Ragogar and I fought humpbacks shoulder to shoulder, and I'll be the first to speak. I think, Dorlief is in a position to send eight hundred men. I'll personally lead them. Let Dorliefans see in New Light Day in peace: we'll set out on the third day of the festivities.'

'Is it a good idea to leave Dorlief without those who can best defend it?' Faryraf objected. 'I move we equip and send half a thousand men. Ozuard will send some more. It'll be reinforcement enough for Ragogar, and Dorlief could then stand its ground, should trouble come our way. And another thing: would it be wise for you, Tlanalt, Tlanalt the Keeper, to abandon Dorlief at a time of trouble?'

'If the Darkness of the Emptied Lake splashed out and proliferated, not only the fate of Natlief would be settled in Natlief. Eight hundred Dorlief men—you have my word for it,' said Gordrog, 'also horses and foodstuffs from us for the forestmen. Should Tlanalt head the troops? It's for him to decide without our hindrance. I remind you: Faryraf is the only one to have headed troops against humpbacks and still be there; the rest are dead.'

Sufus got up and said:

'The Natlief fortress is the only obstacle on the way to Dorlief, Cradlief, Hoglef and further on to Parlief and Nefenlief for the barkycrooks. Everybody must help Natlief. Eight hundred men is our contribution to the common cause.'

'I also voice my yes to Tlanalt's move,' said Safasy.

'Eight hundred men will set out to Natlief on the third day after New Light if you, too, say your yes, Faryraf. You've asked if it is wise but you haven't said no. Answer the way you would if you were in the Natlief fortress.'

'I am not, dear Falafy. But I'm ready to be one of the men and set out there at any moment. The heart of a warrior hastens to say yes, not to have the reason of a Council member say no.'

'Thank you, Faryraf,' said Falafy and addressed Tlanalt: 'Tlanalt dear, I can't have you leave Dorlief. You're a Keeper and have two Tears. They mustn't find themselves in the hands of the Lord of Darkness, for anything can happen in war, you know that better than I do.'

'But I'm within my rights to transfer the Tears to any of the Council members, which I will do right now.'

Tlanalt unlocked the chain over his neck and produced from under his shirt two velvet bags, one red and the other the color of raspberries, that hung from it on his chest. He removed them from the chain and said:

'From now on and until I come back from Natlief and claim the Tears, you, Gordrog, and you, Faryraf, are to be Dorlief Keepers.'

Gordrog got the black bag, Faryraf the raspberry-colored one. Both Gordrog and Faryraf undid the bags and produced to show everybody the Tears of Shwarrawsh, black and raspberry-colored.

'Thank you, Tlanalt,' said Gordrog (with excitement in his voice).

'I believe the Tear I am to keep next to my heart will see you back, Tlanalt,' said Faryraf.

'So be it,' said Falafy with sadness in her eyes.

Sufus got up again.

Then we, too, sister and I, will pass on our Tear: we must not take chances. No one knows what is in store for us on the way.'

'But let's do it on New Light Night, Sufus,' Safasy suggested.

'Let's,' said Sufus.

'I can guess why you want to transfer your Tear on New Light Night, dear Safasy' said Faryraf not in his habitual tone of master but in one of benignity

'Yes, esteemed Faryraf, that's why,' said Safasy.

'Why?' Daniel could not contain himself. '. . . If I can ask?'

'You sure can,' said Safasy and looked again at Faryraf thus passing the question on to him (she realized that he wanted to answer it).

'Yes, you can, dear Word Keeper. It's all because of my granddaughter Leely. Once walking her dog in a field she saw a bud she'd never seen before which was about to bloom—white with a violet tinge. It was a Tear. There were several days to New Light Day, and it gave Leely a beautiful idea (she was even better pleased with it than with the Tear proper): she wanted to give it away as a New Light present,' Faryraf smirked, 'but not to her grandfather—to our maverick entertainers... So, Safasy has wished to do the same as my granddaughter.'

'So I have, Faryraf,' said Safasy.

'So be it,' Falafy had to say again. Then she turned to Sawasard: 'Sawasard, be so kind as to tell Ozuard that Natlief is in need of reinforcements. Let him know: the men of Dorlief will set out at daybreak on the third day after



New Light Night. And let him know that Dorlief is giving forestmen horses and foodstuffs.'

'Esteemed Falafy, I'm on my way,' said Sawasard. 'See you, friends.'

'Dear Sawasard,' Safasy made him pause, 'we're expecting you on New Light Night along with all the forestmen at New Light in Dorlief.'

'I'll be here. With Efriard and Estean, my foster brother and sister.'

'My friends,' Falafy addressed all Council members, 'we've settled what we are here to do. I declare this session closed. Let the New Light Tree next gather us together. See you, dears.'

Everyone went outdoors.

'Semimes, Groyorg and I will go home,' said Malam.

'I see, Father. I'll keep the boys company and show them around Dorlief. Will you see to Nuruny? I'm afraid Kipik will worry her.'

'Not to worry, sonny: I'll see to Nuruny and get dinner ready.'

'We'll eat at the Flying Ferling if the boys don't mind.' Semimes nodded at Daniel and Matthew.

'We don't mind,' said Matthew boisterously. 'We say our yes, Dan and I, don't we, Dan?'

'Yes.'

'I also say yes to the Flying Ferling,' Natan supported his friends and their merry tones.

## Chapter Five

### Leely

The four young people making for the Flying Ferling walked in silence. Each of them was putting off what was at the tip of their tongues until they were settled in comfort around a convivial table which will sit them opposite one another, offer dishes and a bottle of light Hoglief wine while whispering in each of the four ears: 'It's time!' That's what tables in a tavern are for—to let tongues loose. For the moment, though, the boys walked sidestepping their own words.

At first it occurred to Matthew to ask why Natan called Semimes Wolfdog. But that question sounded silly to him, for a wolfdog is a wolfdog. Then he was haunted by the smart question: why they had not run into forestmen dwellings the day before in the Sadorn Forest—let alone dwellings, not even a trace of such. But a question like this was to ride the Flying Ferling and go some place to alight. Then he wanted to find out what his companions thought of the Lil'un trick as pulled by Groyorg the Square at the Council. Only to get back to the silly one about the Wolfdog...

Natan could not wait to ask Mat and Dan about the Non-world. But would one touch cursorily upon what had had your soul drawn to all your life? Won't the Flying Ferling open up the hidden door?

Semimes, Word Keeper Semimes, wished he could say today in the tavern that 'sitting at the next table is a man, a visitor to Dorlief, who has ulterior

thoughts in his eyes,' but he would suppress the thought: 'Were Semimes a whole man, he would say that the shadow of Darkness will darken the coming New Light Day.' But at this point he was merely enjoying the tidbits of happiness: whoever passed him and greeted him and his friends made him a little happier; whoever saw him and his friends without passing by but followed them with their eyes made him even happier; and even the windows of Dorlief contributed toward that happiness...

Daniel... Daniel wanted to be alone, to feel he was awake, not dreaming. And his silence and the silence of his friends afforded the opportunity to be alone...

'Leoely,' Semimes screeched softly nodding in the direction they were to look, and then added the words that suggested continuation: 'Look for yourselves.'

Walking on the other side of the street was a girl... light of step (her motions were so light she did not seem to make an effort to move)... her cornflower-colored gown (it was merely a cloud, perhaps, helping her to float over the earth). Her blond hair, meeting the whiffs of greenish-orange air, flowed both over the air and the cornflower cloud. A huge white dog was trotting a bit ahead of her. It kept stopping and looking back, only to go on trotting as soon as Leoely caught it up.

'Good day, Semimes, Natan,' Leoely's voice crossed the street unashamedly the moment she was aware of several pairs of eyes calling her.

'Good day, Leoely,' said Semimes.

'Good day,' Natan replied... and asked when she neared them: 'Been gathering cornflowers, have you?'

'That isn't much of a guess. As you can see, I've got a gownful of petals,' Leoely said and looked at Daniel with her green eyes.

'These are my friends. Meet Danad and Matam,' Semimes screeched softly catching the expression in her eyes.

'I'm Leoely. And this is my trusty friend Rodor.'

'Greetings, Leoely, greetings, Rodor,' said Matthew stretching his hand to stroke the dog.

Rodor gave a low warning growl—Matthew hastened to pull back his hand.

'Did it say "good day" or "get thee gone"?''

'He said: "Don't stroke me." You're a stranger for him.'

'You do have a brisk pace, Leoely,' said Semimes.

'Rodor's trot is brisk; I have to keep pace.'

'I, too, can jog briskly,' blabbed Daniel and thought before she replied that it was silly.

'Then race us,' said Leoely and either marched or floated lightly and briskly like a cornflower cloud.

Daniel stood like one lost for a few moments.

'Then race us,' Matthew mimicked Leoely and nudged his shoulder.

'I'll join you later on, folks,' cried Daniel on the jog.

He caught up with Leoely and walked by her side.

'Have you put up with your brother?'

'Brother?'

'Aren't you brothers, Natan and you? There's a semblance.'

'Oh... Falafy is my gramps' sister. So Natan is... my granduncle. Considering the age, my kid uncle.'

Leuely smirked.

'And we put up with Semimes, Mat and I.'

'Put up?' Leuely smirked again. 'Have you come all the way from Nefenlief? To see in New Light Night?'

'You guess wrong. Not from Nefenlief.'

'Parlief, then?'

'Another miss.'

Leuely stopped short (so did Daniel) and looked intently at him... There was some magic about her, some sort of enchantment blended with the greenery. It rendered her face a singularity to suggest that there was another face lurking behind that, a pleasant one, a face one could not see, and the eyes belonged to that other face—to a greater extent.

'Where are you from, then?'

Daniel would not answer: what else would occur to her?

'Is it the far off city of Pasetflen? We've had a man from there once in Dorlief. He'd lost his way and found himself in trouble. He would've died if Keeper Tlanalt hadn't chanced on him... Are you and your friend from Pasetflen? Why are you silent? Have I guessed right?'

'We aren't from Pasetflen, nor are we lost—we've found our way...' Daniel hesitated.

'What is it? Speak up. You want to, don't you?'

'I'm from the Non-world, and so is Mat,' Daniel admitted to the eyes that tested him.

'Forward, Rodor,' Leuely ordered looking away sharply.

'Stay, Leuely!'

Leuely neither looked back nor replied.

'"Then race us!" Are those your words? Or was it another green-eyes lurking in you?' Leuely stopped.

'What did you say? Repeat it.'

'Nothing but the truth. There's a green-eyed witch lurking in you.'

Leuely burst out laughing. Then said gravely:

'I didn't mean that. Say again where you're from.'

'From the Non-world.'

'All right, come with us. But speak no more of what you have no idea about,' said Leuely unwilling to admit what she had almost come to believe.

'Is the necklace your grandfather's present?'

'Necklace?' Leuely touched the parti-colored stones around her neck, mostly emeralds. 'It's Efriad's present.'

'I seem to have heard the name.'

'He's a forestman. Forestmen give everyone presents on New Light Night.'

'Did Efriad give it to you on New Light Night?'

'I don't remember.'

'You do. I can see you do... It's beautiful.'

'I don't feel like lying... And I don't feel like talking about it any more.'

'Will you show me the famous Dorlief clock?'

'I'll take Rodor home, and then we'll go to the square... My house is over there.'

'Do you keep ferlings?'

'No. We've got no one but Rodor. Faryraf likes dogs—always has.'

Daniel noted that his companion called her grandfather by the name, with a touch of coldness.

'Why Faryraf?' asked Daniel, only to be stunned by the reply.

'Clocks are everything for him. You see? Everything!'

'Perhaps, I do. If you don't feel like going to the square...'

'No, let's. The clock is worth it... In fact, it has to be looked at not to lose track of time... Would you care to stop by our place?'

'Wouldn't Rodor mind? I'm a stranger to him, same as Mat.'

'You no longer are. Rodor, go where you belong. Come on in, Danad.'

Clocks are everything for him, Daniel repeated mentally as he found himself in the hall where the candleholders caught his eye. They were fixed to the left and right walls of the hallway, as well as to the wall of the corridor across from the entryway. They were candleholders made of grey-and-blues stone and shaped like a clock, *the* clock. There were silvery ferlings over their dead dials. The part of the luminous stone Semimes had told them about was played by the candles, but they were not alight at the moment. Daniel touched a holder and the ferling's head.

'Are they beautiful to look at at night?' he asked.

'They are... and dreadful. Come to the living room.'

As they walked down the corridor, two more ferlings guarding stilled time met Daniel and saw him off... Clocks are everything for him, he thought again as he stepped into the living room filled with the light of the sky. There were drawings and sketches of clocks on the wall across the door, above the fireplace, their dials and their movements inside. Each sketch (there were at least ten) was framed in silver... and candleholders all around the living room...

'One, two, three...' Daniel started counting.

'Twelve, Danad. Don't count: you'll feel dizzy in no time,' said Leuely. 'Stay here. I'll fetch Granny. She's either in the kitchen or in her room.'

Daniel came up closer to the fireplace to see the sketches... soon enough, he felt queasy for some reason. He thought the sketches started mutating, with the filaments and patterns left by the pencil come to life. They're speaking, he thought, they want to say something to me. Daniel scrutinized now one, now another of the sketches in an attempt to understand what they were saying. With each moment, he was drained of force... Daniel opened his eyes: bending over him was... the granny of my witch?

'Good day,' he said in a weak voice.

'It isn't as good as all that if your legs can't support you,' said the woman with huge green eyes (Yes, my witch's granny) and blue-black eyes. Sip some grappian infusion, here, Leuely's brought some.'

Daniel sat up and sipped the cool bitter drink and felt a fiery force run down his veins at once. A few moments later, his palms and soles flared up.

'Cool!' Daniel said getting up. 'I'm Dan.'

'I'm Rablbary, Leuely's grandmother.'

'A beautiful name and a beautiful face. Or, rather, a beautiful face and a beautiful name,' he let fly off his tongue before he knew what he was doing. 'And eyes filled with sadness. Why are Rablbary's eyes so sad?'

'Won't you take a seat, Dan?' Leuely indicated a chair.

'No, Leuely, there's no reason why I should... Leuely?' Daniel glanced at her, then at Rablbary, then at her again.

'I dye my hair. With flower and wood infusions,' said Leuely in response to his wonder, 'in order to be what you call a witch.'

'A green-eyes? She's lurking in you, isn't she?'

'The other day I saw her in the mirror.'

'What's she like?'

'You'll come to know it... if you feel like it.'

Rablbary shook her head in wonderment at the chat her granddaughter and her guest were engaged in.

'Danad, Leuely, let me bring you some tea and cheesecake.'

Leuely looked at Daniel.

'Thanks, Rablbary, I wouldn't mind some cheesecake,' he said.

'In this case, lay the table for us in the dining room, Granny.'

When Rablbary left the room, Leuely asked Daniel:

'You have falling sickness, don't you?'

'Me? Oh no, I haven't. I just felt dizzy. You said I would.'

'I did in a manner of speaking... I meant the candleholders: they're all around giving you a spin.'

'What if they aren't as treacherous as all that? What if it was your green-eyes doing that? No offence meant. Are you hurt? I didn't mean it.'

'I know, but you did faint. You ought to see Falafy: she's good at healing all sorts of things.'

'I'm not sick, Leuely, I mean it... But the sketches are somewhat... It was because of them,' Daniel smirked, 'I had falling sickness.'

'This is no joking matter, Dan.'

'You're like Granny: No dicing with death!'

'Did you say the sketches made you faint?'

Daniel noted that Leuely was up to something.

'I'm sure it was the sketches,' he said. 'You'll think it hard to believe... no offence meant...'

'I don't take any. Let Faryraf do. So what was it?'

'They... No, I won't...'

'All right, don't. But let's put it to the test: come near to them and see what happens. Let's both of us do.'

Daniel hove a great sigh and stepped to the fireplace.

'Wait!' Leuely stopped him. 'Have your tea first.'

'Did it occur to you?'

'Yes, it did.'

'It shouldn't. It isn't hunger—Malam would have none of that. Let's leave the pleasant thing until afterwards.'

The door to the dining room opened.

'Danad, Leuely, come and have your tea.'

'Coming, Gran. We'll wash our hands first,' said Leuely and then to Daniel: 'It's settled of its own accord, what comes first, what comes next.'

Faryraf's house was almost no different from the one Semimes and his father lived in. It was larger, roomier and better appointed. And Daniel was already aware that there was no getting lost in that corridor, and guessed where this or that door led...

Rablrary's cheesecake was so good Daniel, set on a small piece, managed three.

'No sketch can unsettle the guy from the Non-world now,' he said when they found themselves in the living room again.

'You said it wasn't hunger,' Leuely came up to the sketch wall. 'Stand by my side.'

'Afraid I'll fall down again?'

Leuely said nothing in reply. Daniel stood next to her, and they started scrutinizing with a light heart what had turned at one point into the famous Dorlief clock...

'Can you see?' Daniel suddenly asked under his breath.

'I can't. I can't see anything to make me speak under my breath.'

'They can feel me, they come to life! They say something! But I can't hear them, I can't.'

'Who comes to life, Dan? Do the digits come to life and try to talk to you?' Leuely's voice was distrustful. 'Or is it the arrow gotten off its nest to go off flying like a ferling to chat with a guy from the Non-world?'

The patterns... in all the sketches,' said Daniel in a weak voice. 'Someone's drawing them... and they want to tell me...'

'Where? Where? Show me! Poke your finger!' said Leuely in irritation and turned her head to his. 'Dan, you're white as milk! You'll be falling next!'

Daniel staggered—Leuely caught him under his arms and helped him into a chair. He plopped down as if he had no legs.

'You frighten me, Dan! Let me call Gran, and fetch Faryraf.'

Daniel wagged his head in refusal. Then he pulled up his legs which had been stretched between the floor and the chair, and said:

'No, Leuely, there's no need to call your gran, either of them. I'm feeling better. Strength is flowing back into me. You see, the legs are where they belong.'

'Then don't look at those sketches again!'

'I don't... But why are these patterns draining my strength? Why?'

'No! It's your fancy! I don't like Faryraf! But the sketches have nothing to do with it! But you still have to see Falafy!'

'Will we?' Daniel pretended to had given way to her entreaty.

'Let's.'

'Go to the square to take a look at the clock,' Daniel smirked.

. . . Daniel and Leely stood beneath the clock. They had saved the clock until the end of their first day. Before that, there had been the luminous sluisy tree, before that there had been the orange-green streets of Dorlief... They had put off meeting the clock until twilight... to see the luminous stone filled to the brim with the light of the sky start giving it off to the space gone blind... to see the time, contained by the circle of the dial, shrouded with mystery born of the interplay of light and shade... to see the gaze of the silvery ferling—on guard over the measured march of life—placid in the daylight, make light the color of blood and call to life belligerence and Fury...

'Is there a dedicated man to wind up the clock?' asked Daniel.

'You might have guessed who that dedicated man is.'

'I have.'

'Each night, at the most desolate hour, about four, Faryraf takes a ladder and Rodor and makes for the square.'

'It's hard to lug that ladder there and back,' Daniel said.

I think there's no greater happiness for him than those nightly meetings with his brainchild,' Leely said looking hurt. 'As to the ladder, it's an extensible lightweight ladder as engineered for him by forestmen... same as the clock... One night he woke me up and asked me to accompany him. I carried the ladder and wound up the clock. Faryraf gave me the key and talked me into getting up the ladder. I did what he told me to do: opened the door on the other side of the pillar and turned the windup wheel right all the way until it went no more... When I came down, Faryraf said that should something befall him, I would have to wind up the clock... But I won't: I don't want to be subjugated to Faryraf's will... Have you had your fill? Not dizzy, are you?'

'I am,' Daniel said: he wanted to be asked what he would rather say, but did not quite know how to go about it.

Leely looked closely at him...

'Liar.'

'I am not. I haven't been this dizzy in a long time.'

'Take care not to have a great fall.'

'I will... I've only just taken off... And I'm headed for an unknown on-high.'

'Have you never been this high before?'

'Never.'

Leely's heart suddenly answered to an undecipherable call, lost its rhythm and took off at a fast pace, its pace so deafening that it gave her a fright... To save her life, she said something she had never expected herself to:

'Would the sun not let you go?'

Daniel turned his head to Leely and gave her a strange look.

'Where is... the sun?' he asked. 'Where's your sun?'

Leely, on having only just heard her own words, fidgeted, stopped her mouth with her hand and fled... Daniel followed her. He quickly caught her up and clutched her arm—she stopped, gasping with agitation rather than her flight, and whispered:

'You'll tell no one, will you?'

Daniel, in his hurry, as if something depended on it, produced his Tear and showed it to her (intent on helping her out of the embarrassment of the rash word).

'Nor you, of this,' he said.

Leely took the Tear.

'You weren't joking,' she said softly. 'I know now you weren't joking.'

'I wasn't.'

'It's beautiful. Take Her back. Let's not talk about it any more.'

Daniel took the Tear away.

'I only just thought...'

'What?'

'I thought I might tell Mat about it.'

'All right. You may tell Mat... See me home, will you?'

For some time, Daniel and Leely walked in silence. Then Leely began telling.

'Nine years ago...' Leely was lost in thought and then continued: 'It was a happy day. I will remember it the rest of my life. I didn't know at the time that there would never be another day like that... Myself, father and mother (I hadn't befriended the green-eyed witch yet) were picnicking on Lake Werent. Have you been to the lake?'

'No,'

'Would you like to go there after the celebrations?'

'Yes,' Daniel answered: he could not hurt her with the truth.

'We went boating, swimming, playing... I was happy. When we came back, mother went inside. Father and I sat on the porch steps: I was eager to have the day and its feelings go on, I would not have the door shut on it. (When you shut the door, part of you is on its other side). We were sitting on the steps when voices came from the garden: one was that of Faryraf, the other... I didn't know it right away. But father would not leave at once: something held him back, something in their conversation, Faryraf and that other man's. Father was on the ball: he put his finger to his lips, and I sat still. I didn't understand what they were talking about, but remembered something nonetheless... The conversation grew tense. Faryraf hollered for some reason. His resentment was louder than his voice, that much I was aware of. He spoke the word 'Pasetflen' several times. The other one wasn't hollering—he was laughing. His voice had more power than grandfather's anguished hollering. The other one said he was sure the prisoner would return, and then everyone would know the truth... At first I didn't think much of it, the words and the conversation as a whole my father and I had heard, even though it did cause some anxiety. The night spent with granny, her questioning about the lake and my prattle drove that anxiety away. I fell asleep at once but soon woke up because of an awful nightmare. I went out into the corridor to call mother and heard the voices in the living room: father fighting Faryraf... Somehow I think the death of father and mother had to do with those two conversations in the garden and in the living room. That's why I don't like Faryraf... Dan? You did know my parents are dead, didn't you?'

'Yes.'



'Did Semimes tell you?'

'Yes.'

'We're there, did you notice?'

'Yes.'

'I must be going.'

Daniel was silent.

'I thought you'd say yes again.'

'I'm sorry,' said Daniel.

'What are you sorry about, Dan?'

'I'm sorry to see this day go, quite as much as you were sorry to say goodbye to that day of yours.'

'Come tomorrow to trim the New Light Tree. I'll be there... What makes you silent? Thank you, Dan.'

Daniel looked questioningly at Leely.

'For detecting her in me. See you tomorrow,' she said and ran off toward her house.

Daniel walked down the street without any sense of direction...

'Good man!' Daniel called to the Dorliefan passerby who had covered some ten paces ahead of him.

He looked back and stopped. Daniel came up to him.

'Good man,' he repeated, 'how do I find the house of Falafy? I'm a stranger to these parts; it's my first day here in Dorlief.'

'I can see as much—one of ours wouldn't have asked how to find Falafy's house: everyone knows it. Is it an ailment or what?'

'I've been dizzy this whole day,' Daniel both lied and did not.

'Well, it may be no ailment—a dizzy head. However, do see Falafy: her hands would be sure to tell whether it's an ailment or not. Go the way you're going. The fourth house on your left will be hers. Will you manage on your own?'

'Thanks, I will.'

'Right. Then, take care... And don't rue.'

Dan the Sorrowful, Daniel recalled the nickname Groyorg had given him and grinned.

Busy with a long piece of wood against the light in the window was a hefty man... the piece did not look like a boat... more like a feeder... and so it was, a ferling feeder (toing and froing nearby was a silvery ferling who stopped every now and then to test the product with its beak). The mutt, close by, growled without getting up, ostensibly to warn the stranger that it could see and hear everything.

Recalling Falafy's husband's name, Daniel said softly:

'Good evening, Lutul.'

The man did not hear him, too engrossed in his work. Daniel thought it was all for the best: he had Leely on his mind and could not be entertained as a good guest in that house. He stood for a while next to a wild rose bush looking at Lutul and his helper...

As he approached Malam's house, Daniel heard the voices of his friends and made for them.

'Greetings, Dan the Sorrowful. Long time no see!' Matthew cried on seeing him, in an effusion of high spirits. 'The lamb stew was so good, I won't say a word, not to tease you.'

'Which you are,' Semimes screeched. 'Good evening, Dan. We all missed you over a board for four, and the unoccupied chair was waiting for you.'

'I think Dan has something in reply to Mat,' Natan said. 'Am I right, chum?'

'I won't hold forth on cheesecake in Leely's company, chummy Mat,' said Daniel.

'In the company of the fair Leely,' said Semimes enunciating every word with gusto, and asked Daniel: 'Which would you choose, Mat, the wonderful lamb stew in the company of light Hoglief wine or granny-made cheesecake in the company of the fair Leely, Dan?'

'Granny-made,' Daniel agreed.

'It was Leely's choice—I got the light Hoglief wine,' Matthew ruefully kept up the put-on act.

'I think Dan wins the day, Mat the Vital,' Natan chimed in.

'Okay, we're quits,' said Matthew waving his hand, despite the lightweight word and others in the same category aired by the friends: he suddenly thought back to Christine and their date in the Left Right where Daniel's place at the table was vacant, too, and felt sad.

'What is it, Mat?' asked Daniel as he noted it.

'Everything's okey-doke, Dan. Let's go to Malam's tavern. We'll sit around, talk and forget our troubles,' said Matthew in an effort to look cheerful, then looked at Semimes and corrected himself: 'Let's go to Malam and Semimes's tavern. Is it, Semimes?'

'It is,' said Semimes, satisfied, and added, sniffing: 'We've mushrooms in sour cream today.'

'I must be going, friends. See you tomorrow,' said Natan, turned left and strode down the path.

Suddenly Semimes's face, so mobile, echoing every word, benign and gratified, was petrified... imprinted on it was resentment. His immobile look was directed at Daniel.

'Danad,' he screeched hoarsely, as if neither the juicy lamb stew nor the Hoglief light wine had done anything to unburden his soul or gullet. 'Is there nothing you have to say to Semimes and Mat?'

Daniel shrugged, stunned by the development.

'No, you have nothing to say to us, because you've lost yourself today... you've forgotten who you are...'

'What's up, Semimes? Make your point,' hollered Matthew, eager to defend his friend.

'Skin your peepers, Matam, instead of hollering,' Semimes responded in a threatening voice, pointing at Daniel's pouch—it was undone and no longer bulged the way it had while the Tear had been in it.

Daniel fumbled in his pouch.

'Mat, it looks like I've lost the Tear,' said Daniel, crestfallen.

'See if the book is in place, Word Keeper.'

'It is.'

'Where did you boast your Tear?' questioned Semimes in the same resentful tone.

'Pipe down, Semimes! Do sound human,' said Matthew.

But the last word he said could not but injure Semimes's soul, and it responded in anguish and fury.

'Never again say that word to Semimes, son of Malam... to Semimes, born of a Dorliefan,' he screeched, gripping the stick under his girdle.

Matthew got wise to his faux pas.

'Okay, Semimes, I'm sorry. I admit it was a faux pas. I didn't mean it.'

'Shut up!' Semimes hissed.

'I think I know where I could have dropped the Tear,' Daniel hastened to help his friend out as soon as he could compose himself.

'Speak up, Danad, redeem yourself,' said Semimes trying in vain to contain the tone of the sounds squeezed in the vice of his stony face.

'In the square. We stood in front of the clock, some ten paces from it. Then Leoely ran off... Then... I mean I could have dropped the Tear when I was putting it back in the pouch. I must've missed the pouch and never knew it. It was not far from the clock, left of it.'

Semimes did not screech another word as he got to his feet and vanished.

'Will we run?' Matthew suggested...

What Matthew and Daniel saw on arrival in the square made them back off and swallow the word 'Semimes,' the name 'Semimes.'

Malam's son, born of a Dorliefan, was on his fours turning this way and that over the area, like a hunter dog that had sniffed a beast in its burrow and was looking for an access to it. He disregarded the boys, greedily inhaling the air and snorting... He whinged and growled... He followed a momentary smell that kept teasing and eluding him: he lost it, returned to the original place to see if he had not missed what he had let loose from his, Semimes's veins, the creature born of a barkycrook. The souging and growling became frightful and unbearable as he upturned the trampled earth with his bare hands, only to bury a stone he had taken for the Tear. And this wild despair was unending because his importunate thirst had the better of his nose.

Daniel and Matthew dared not come closer to him whom they called their friend. They stood apart in the grip of repugnance and pity... As they stood, the repugnance took leave... while the pity... waited for Semimes without explanations...

Suddenly Semimes sprang up as if bitten by a viper and, pressing his flaming hand to his chest, made for the clock. Under it, he soaked his hand in light and unfisted it.

'I've found Her! I've found Her!' There was a screech full of happy weeping.

Daniel and Matthew ran up to Semimes.

'Dan! Mat! My friends! I've found Her! Here She is!' Semimes kept on exclaiming, and his face shone with happiness. 'I've found your Tear, Dan. Take Her.'

'Thanks, friend,' said Daniel accepting the Tear (he had the creeps when his hands, joined boat-like, were touched by Semimes's cold and shaking hand).

'Thank you, guide,' said Matthew. 'You've helped us out again.'

Semimes watched Daniel put away the Tear in the pouch, paused as he weighed up the words of thanks he had heard, and then said:

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd... be silent... And so I will be... because everyone knows anyway that Semimes has helped everyone out.'

Halfway to Malam's home, Matthew was the first to break the silence that weighed on the three of them.

'Semimes?'

'Shoot.'

'D'you think Groyorg the Square will leave some mushrooms for us, or... ?'

'I think Groyorg the Square and Father will wait dinner for us, Mat the Vital.'

Which was the case. Groyorg was waiting for the boys on the porch, and gave way to his words the moment they appeared:

'My friends, I'm happy to see you back home. We'll now sit down at the table and partake of the dainties and chat. There's nothing like these two things when taken together.'

. . . After the household on the outskirts of Dorlief had gone their several ways to their rooms (Groyorg had appropriated the sofa in the living room) and each of the rooms was filled with thoughts of things past and dreams unlike those in the neighboring rooms, one of the doors let in a quiet tap.

'Come in, unless you're a foe.'

'Can't sleep?'

'I did lie down, only to find I couldn't sleep. Sit down and let's talk... All the talking we've done has been... every which way.'

'I won't sit down, I'll just pace the room the way our wise Malam does: I might think of something.'

'You must've thought of something. Isn't that what brings you here? Pace on... Dorliefan.'

'You guess right: I've thought of something.'

'I didn't have to guess—your eyes are a giveaway.'

'I've an unpleasant thing to say... a rascally thing, perhaps, treacherous.'

'It must be the fireplace, set your brain aboil.'

'The fireplace has nothing to do with it.'

'It doesn't. What does?'

'You have to go back home.'

'You mean the Non-world?'

'I'm not joking.'

'It's impossible, and you know it.'

'I do. But do you know how Chris feels about it?'

'Go on.'

'D'you know what'll happen to us? To you?'

'Do you?'

'I do.'

'How?'  
 'I saw it in the gorhoon's eyes.'  
 'D'you mean it? Why didn't you say so?'  
 'I don't feel like believing it, that's why.'  
 'I don't feel like being a traitor, nor will I be one. I'm a Keeper, same as you.'  
 'But this isn't your fate—it's mine... my past and future. You've done your stint helping me along. Pray, go back now.'  
 'You must be crazy. Put Her away not to lose Her again. You've got to catch some sleep.'  
 'Catch some sleep?'  
 'Catch some sleep.'  
 'Then I'll go and catch some.'  
 'Stay... Guess what struck Natan most in the Non-world?'  
 'The sun.'  
 'How did you know?'  
 'I just said the first thing that occurred to me... Know why it did? There's a person in Dorlief who's seen the sun. Guess who that person is.'  
 'Malam... ? Falafy... ? Have you stopped by Falafy?'  
 'I have, but I didn't venture in... It's Leuely.'  
 'Leuely? Where could she see the sun? What did she say?'  
 'She said nothing. She just blabbed it out and took fright. I'm sure she has.'  
 'Oh, I say!'  
 'What about Semimes? What struck him as unusual in the Non-world?'  
 'I don't know. He just kept shaking his head. As concerns the sun? He says it's no good to depend on one candle, however large.'  
 'Right he is, too. You're right, too: I must be crazy indeed. I'll go and catch some sleep.'  
 'Hey, crazy?'  
 'What is it?'  
 'I'm still there for you.'  
 'It means we're both crazy... Oh, yes, Leuely asked that I breathe no word of her having seen the sun.'  
 'Why did you tell me if she'd asked?'  
 'You're crazy—you may know. Sweet dreams if you can manage any sleep now.'  
 'I *am* asleep—and dreaming.'  
 'Quite. It's nothing but a dream.'  
 The door let out the dream and closed...

## Chapter Six

### New Light Thinks

The midday eve of New Light was coming. Daniel and Matthew had woken and got up as late as the day before, had a hasty breakfast and were about to go to the Dorlief square. Malam entered the living room.

'Sonny, here's twenty-five ferlings.'

'Don't, Father, I've saved some.'

'Take it. It'll come in handy. Midday, tittle-tattle and night ahead. I don't think you'll be back before the small hours.'

Semimes took the money reluctantly.

'Matam, here's your twenty-five ferlings.' Malam was counting the coins one at a time and put into Matthew's hand five five-ferling coins. 'Splurge it without another thought.'

'I'll try to spend it before the small hours,' said Matthew with a wink at Semimes.

'And you'll do right: he who stints will find it stinks,' said Malam and came up to Daniel who was standing at the mushroom wall. 'Yours are the ones left. Let's have your palm ready.'

'Thanks, Malam.'

'Don't put them in your pouch,' Semimes screeched, 'lest you drop the Tear when your hand is aflame to drop some ferlings.'

'I've been taught a lesson,' Daniel said.

'Danad dear, I can give you another pouch to hang from your girdle on the other side,' Malam offered.

'Don't! I'm all pockets.'

'All right then, go. Groyorg and I will come to the square later... to have a look at the New Light Tree. We'll be there at mid-tittle-tattle, I think.'

'Where's he?' asked Matthew. 'Dan and I haven't seen him today.'

'It's an early bird that catches the worm,' Semimes said.

'Yes, he's an early bird: he had his breakfast, snatched a log and went off to practice his dagger work,' said Malam. 'Do listen to your stick from time to time.'

'I will, Father.'

'Spend the money without another thought.'

'I will.'

As he descended from the porch, Semimes turned his head to the right to look at something in the crown of the linden tree. He did it to draw Daniel's and Matthew's attention to this object. And it worked: his friends lifted their heads all at once to see a huge round violet lantern hanging from a branch. The candle in it wasn't alight: it wasn't time yet. Conforming to the law of symmetry, the boys turned to the right: the willow there had such another lantern peeping from under its crown.

'Great! The lanterns tell us we're about to start a very special day, that of pre-New Light,' said Daniel. 'Aren't we, Semimes?'

Semimes shone like yet another lantern, with its candle lit.

'We are, Dan, that's right, very much so.'

'Which is whose?' asked Matthew.

'This one is Father's. The one in the willow's mine. This time around, we were like-minded about the color, for Father said, "Let mine be violet, like the eyes of one of our guests." I, too, was won over by violet,' said Semimes but would not elaborate.

'So, you've set traps for light, haven't you?'

'You scamp, Mat, you! Let's go. I'll tell you all about it on the way. What an idea, traps indeed! You'll see lanterns at every house. On New Light Eve, they're hung from trees, like Father's and mine, or from supports with hooks on them. Each chooses the color to paint his lantern. If you think the sky will glow green, you'll paint your lantern green, or buy a green one, to save you the trouble of painting. Father painted ours first thing in the morning, and I hung them. I said green as an example. I don't remember the sky being twice the same color.'

'So your father and you expect the sky to be violet?' said Daniel.

'We do... Father on his own, and me, on my own. That fool of a Kipik alone has hung up a yellow lantern. His house is over there, with, next to it, a yellow lantern from a rowan tree. Can you see? He chooses yellow every year. May he be lucky: it'd stop him worrying dogs and goats.'

'The house next door has two: blue and pink, both from poles,' said Daniel.

'I've told you: these are supports, not poles: they aren't driven into the earth—very convenient.'

'I rather like this lantern idea,' said Matthew.

'You said traps.'

'I merely did it for fun.'

'It was Sufus and Safasy's idea. Everybody likes their ideas. Even detractors.'

'A classy idea,' Matthew agreed.

'Just wait till the night, my friends. It'll be fun, come night, with everybody lighting up the lanterns and waiting to see what color the sky will respond with.'

'Good day, Wolfdog,' called a cubby pink-cheeked face out the window they were passing by to Semimes. 'Is your father at home?'

'Good day, Defilifed. He is, at the moment.'

'I'll go get some milk while he's in.'

'And a good thing, too, very much so. Go right away.'

'I'll just get the jug.'

When the boys passed Defilifed's house, Semimes screeched with a grin:

'Ferlings go, ferlings come.'

Matthew and Daniel exchanged glances.

'I meant as legal tender,' Semimes explained.

'We thought as much,' said Daniel.

'Kipik alone knows nothing about legal tender.'

'Doesn't he, now?' Daniel was incongruous.

'He doesn't. But goes shopping nonetheless. His mother gives him the right amount—he goes and exchanges his ferlings for bread. The shop-keeper knows who he is and what to put in his bag.'

'It takes all sorts...' Matthew shook his head.

'Did you remark what lantern Defilified had hung up?' asked Semimes and grinned in response to something that occurred to him.

'Is it white?'

'That's right, Mat, the white of goat's milk. Must have been dreaming of a milky sky and thinking it would fill his jugs and save his ferlings, rather than giving them to Malam.'

Semimes was different on this pre-New Light Day. He indulged in merrymaking banter and talked without reserve, rather enjoying it. And yet this easy flow was a touch catty.

'It takes all sorts,' said Matthew again.

'Get a load of this! There's our hero Spaps. You can see from afar what a mouthful his vain thoughts are about his sluisy tree. Look: he's prepared. We'll get an earful in just a moment. All right, dear, see it doesn't blow you apart.'

Approaching them at a brisk pace, as if, indeed, urged on by an idea, was a hefty guy.

'Greetings to you, Semimes... and to you, dear guests. Are you taking them to see the New Light Tree? They are busy trimming it. I wish they'd have the ornaments for it: it's a huge tree I found,' Spaps was rattling along nineteen to the dozen like an old broad, not letting Semimes put in a word edgeways. 'Have you got ornaments with you? I wish there'd be more. All right, I'll be going.'

When Spaps was gone out of earshot, Semimes said with a smirk:

'What did I say to you? Had a miscarriage ten paces from the ward like a silly one with a bun in the oven! He was like: "Taking your guests to see the New Light Tree?" I follow my eyes. Would you like a pocketful of ferlings for the privilege? You're fat as it is... He was like, "I wish there'd be the ornaments for the tree." How do you like that for a laughing stock? You'd wish your gift of the gab was on the ball to carry the great news to all and sundry—who had got the best sluisy tree ever in his dragnet.'

'Semimes!'

The space was suddenly scratched by an old-wife voice that embarrassed Semimes and even more his friends. There was something frightening about it, something that kept whispering, 'I'm after your souls.' And the boys, all at once, heard, without wishing to, the words: 'I'm after your souls.'

An old wife had emerged from under a willow tree, ancient, dried-up, stooped. She was wearing grey rags, a patched blouse and a furrowed old skirt, with a nightcap over her head and eyes down to her nose, a cap not unlike a carryall. The old wife was leaning on a stick as crooked as herself... as if she couldn't have found a straight one. She beckoned the boys without lifting her head. Semimes overcame some obscure repulsive presentiment and stepped her way, followed by Daniel and Matthew.

'What can we do for you, oldie?' screeched Semimes with reserve.

She scratched the earth with her stick and spoke in recitative. Her very opening words gave the boys the creeps. There was nothing left around but those words which wound their way about their reason:

Thou, feisty brat, son of Malam,  
Heed, Semimes, and better keep mum.



I lured was into a mirrory room:  
Word Keepers are in for a sinister doom.  
They'll step off the limit oh, one by one,  
With none but their faith to vouch for one.  
Two won't be there to see in the day,  
Their eyes clad with violet pending the fray.  
The traitor'll upset the eight's narrow and straight  
To put time's pace forth well ahead of their fate.  
The lake drained by Shwarrawsh will also surge  
To yield the whirlpools of the darkness's urge.  
The whirlpool will prove stronger than the cluster  
Of dreams, to shed a lake of tears and disaster.  
The old wife stopped whining, paused for a few moments filled with stupor,  
then waved her stick at the boys and cried out:

'Go thy ways!'

The invisible fetters fell off their legs, and the legs, full of life once again, walked on, but their thoughts, more dreadful than the words, kept stirring their minds... After some time (lost in the whirlpool of the thoughts) Semimes looked back and said into nothingness:

'You go thy ways, you mean old hag... The witch!'

'Is she a witch?' said Daniel clutching at the word. 'Whence is she?'

'I don't know whether she is or not... I've heard of a prophetic old wife. She's reported to be living in Parlief. Is she the one? If it's her, she isn't a witch.'

'It doesn't make things any better,' said Matthew.

'They say, the Parlief looking-glass prophet has prophetic dreams.'

'"I lured was into a mirrory room,"' Daniel quoted softly a line from the sinister stanza.

'I don't care,' Semimes screeched indignantly.

'What d'you mean you don't care?' said Matthew.

'I don't care: what will be will be,' said Semimes. 'We've known all along it's a hard Path.'

'Right, guide, we've guessed as much,' Matthew agreed.

'Very much so... Well, so much for it—stepping forth with the minds stepping backward. You never knew we were in the square. Just look at the lanterns all around the square. And all those people! Take heart, my friends.'

'While there's still a heart to take,' Matthew said rather out of turn, and made up for it: 'Joking.'

'Some jokes are hard to take.' Semimes shook his head.

At the approach to the square, there were supports with lanterns attached all around. The lanterns were different from those the boys had seen next to Dorliefan houses. All of them were conical with silver engraving that made them shine like sluisy trees.

'These are not of measureless, like ours: they are made of glass,' Semimes explained. 'They've been made by forestmen. You won't be able to pull your eyes off them, they'll be so beautiful.'

There were increasingly more people in the square as they watched. Some came to enjoy; others, to join business to joy; still others, to join joy to business. The entrepreneurs were setting up stalls right under the lanterns, with some of them having spread their wares: ornaments for trimming the New Light Tree, souvenirs, lanterns, big and small, and a variety of dainties.

'Semimes, what are all those people queuing for?' asked Matthew.

'With no one to attend to the stall,' said Daniel.

Semimes grinned.

'It doesn't have to be attended to: there's no selling or buying. Let's come closer, you'll see for yourselves... You see?'

Dorliefans, mostly kids, came up to a multi-colored trunk and dropped folded sheets of paper into a slot.

'Sufus and Safasy have thought it up,' Semimes said. 'What you do is have a think as to what color the sky will be. You jot your think down on paper, subscribe it and drop down the slot. If you guess right, you're entitled to any ornament in the New Light Tree as a keepsake. The lucky ones will be announced at midday tomorrow.'

'I rather like the idea,' said Daniel. 'I'll drop my think down the trunk.'

'That you will, only nearer tittle-tattle: the line's too long, what's the point of waiting? There is a point, of course... You can borrow pencil and paper from that table near the clock—it's there for the purpose.'

'Dan, Semimes, get a load of that.'

'That's Sufus and Safasy's crew: they're setting up merry-go-rounds. There'll be a dozen or so set up in the square.'

'We'll cop a ride and resume our childhood,' said Daniel wistfully.

'Sure thing, we will,' said Semimes. 'You resume your childhood over the festivities willy-nilly, and you don't have to be wistful about it, Dan the Sorrowful.'

'It's bitter-sweet,' Daniel both agreed and disagreed. 'Like what you said yesterday: It's the beginning that matters.'

'So it does, Dan... You'll be wistful tomorrow about what makes you merry today.'

'Okay, enjoy your bitter-sweet experiences all you like. I'll go give them a hand with the merry-go-rounds: my hands are itchy,' said Matthew.

'No, Mat, they'll be sweet all along today. And your hands will be very much in demand after the hike,' said Semimes. 'I'll join you anyway to introduce you to the folks. What about you, Dan?'

'Go! I'll look for Leoely: she must be somewhere here.'

Semimes swept a look around and said:

'You won't have to look for her—there she is, festooning the sluisy with Safasy. She's spotted you and waving her hand.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Run off, but see you don't drop the Tear.'

'Come off it, guide, stop pestering him,' said Matthew.

Daniel approached Leoely. She was removing New Light Tree ornaments from a box and spreading them over the table.

'Hi, Leuely! Good day, Safasy.'

'Greetings to you, Danad,' said Safasy and made for the Tree with a bunch of parti-colored globes to hand them to the boy who would briskly get up a ladder and pass them on to Sufus (who was perched next to its very top).

'Hi, Dan!' Leuely replied. 'Give me a hand. You see, it's all I can do to keep pace. Open that box over there and put the larger globes here, the smaller ones there, the beads and bunches on this side, and separate the paper ornaments.'

Kids came up to the table, made their choice, and took it to the bigger kids who looked for the right place for each item. There were four very tall step-ladders, with the boldest and spryest boys of the Sufus and Safasy crew climbing up and down them... The luminous sluisy tree was thus turning into a New Light Tree.

'It's a regular formicary you've got here, with each ant knowing its place,' Daniel commented.

'That's as it should be. They know their business, not their place.'

'That's as it should be,' Daniel mimicked Leuely.

'I could see you arrive with your friends.'

'Mat and Semimes have joined another formicary.'

'Which one?'

'The merry-go-round artists. Mat's been fascinated with machines since he was a kid.'

'What about you?'

'I love riding merry-go-rounds and dreaming.'

'That's what everyone loves.'

'We'll take a ride today. Will we?'

'We sure will. Can you talk and work? The ornaments on the table are all gone.'

'An orange one with tears all around,' said Daniel as he removed from the box a big globe that made him think of the Caroty.

'What was that?' said Leuely. 'Oh, you love it, don't you?'

'Semimes says that orange ones with tears are his father's favorite globes. This looks like one of them. I'll go look for the right branch for it. Will you let me go?'

Leuely smiled saying nothing. Daniel stayed put for some reason, looking at her.

'Why don't you go?'

'I want to ask you.'

'You do nothing and upset my rhythm. All right, shoot.'

'What color sky is your think?'

'What about you?'

'Orange... with tears.'

Leuely laughed.

'It doesn't come like that, ever,' she said, and made her choice, resting her eyes on Daniel (perchance, a new one): 'I opt for violet.'

'I'll go hang the orange one with tears while there're still vacant twigs...'

'Ouch!' The sudden shriek had pierced the talk and laughter of the kids and made Leely and Daniel start. They looked toward it: it proved to be the voice of Safasy. She was bowed marking time. Her hands were shaking impotently and it was all she could do to hold them on her bosom. Her face, pale and deathly, her eyes, bleary and lost, her uncontrolled motions, feeble and clumsy, suggested that death was on her.

Daniel put the globe on the table and hastened to Safasy—there was cold all around her. His hands and face could feel it. It was an alien cold, not alive. It was proceeding not from Safasy but from the invisible thing that was killing her.

'Safasy dear, are you all right?' he asked across the veil of cold.

'Su— Su-fus,' she said in a barely audible quavering voice.

Daniel raised his head and cried:

'Sufus! Come here. Quick! Safasy's unwell.'

Other voice also called Sufus. He hastened down the ladder, his eyes glued to his sister. He took three paces in her direction, cried out and recoiled, as if someone invisible had pushed him. He groaned hollowly and tried to walk on in spite of the pain that disabled him... His legs gave way and he fell down to his knees.

'Sa-fa-sy,' he whispered and willed his hand to rise and extend to her.

Safasy stepped toward her brother and staggered. Daniel caught her in his arms and helped her walk. She managed the two steps, knelt and held out her hand to her brother. He took it in his two.

'Su-fus.' The air took up her feeble sounds and passed them on to Sufus.

'Sa-fa-sy,' he said and stroked her blond locks.

'Bro-ther dear... think... of the sky.' There was a glimpse of life in her eyes.

'Your... eyes,' he said. 'Now... you...'

'Dan's eyes: he's... here... for... a reason.'

'Yes,' whispered Sufus.

His fingers suddenly convulsed.

'Sa-f—' he started saying his sister's name again, but was drained of life.

A tear rolled down Safasy's cheek—it was her last drop of life.

Daniel bowed over them and wept...

'Run for the healer, boy!' somebody's voice said right above him.

He looked at the man who had said a word of hope. Falafy, flashed in his head, she'll save them. Spurred by the idea, he dashed over to the house he knew. (Had he been at the Flying Ferling the night before, he would have recognized in the man the one in whose eyes Semimes had divined dark thoughts)...

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The Dorlief square was weeping and wailing in hundreds of voices, those confused and mournful voices not just urging Daniel and Falafy on but also summoning every Dorliefan... Semimes, Matthew and Natan helped two villagers lay Sufus and Safasy right (it was Semimes's idea): side by side, their faces to the skies. Then Matthew and Natan stood next to the breathless bodies of their friends. Like everybody else, they were waiting for a miracle, waiting for Falafy.

The miracle had not come about yet while lifelessness was there to be seen, the wail replacing the New Light run-up in Dorlief... Life for Matthew and Natan at the moment, too, meant wailing for Sufus and Safasy: Matthew did not try to hold back the tears, Natan's heart was crying...

Semimes left the mournful square to run for his father. He broke the news to him and Groyorg and left for his willow. He sank to the earth near the rock, pressed his cheek to it, hugged it and curled up. He kept a stiff upper lip a little longer and then burst into tears. Choking on the hot tears, he started to tell his tale of woe to the one he could share it with:

'Sufus and Safasy... Sufus and Safasy... Those were the siblings, brother and sister... my dear friends... It's all over... Sufus and Safasy are no more! Those in the square are still hopeful they'll be brought back to life... that Falafy will bring them back to life. No one, not a single person can help them, not even Falafy. They've been slain. It's all over. No more New Light! It's all over. No more eight-petal flower... She was like, "Eight-petal flower!" No more eight-petal flower. She was like, "We're petals on the same stalk." Only Safasy could put it like this... It's all over. No more petals called Sufus and Safasy... Eight-petal flower... It's a beginning. It was a beginning. Now... She was to me like, "Who would put it like this, Semimes, my friend?" "A man," I said... The man who isn't there in actual fact. There would be one; I might be one, if I were whole... Sufus and Safasy were like this. They were all right... It's all over... It's all over...'

The crowd parted in front of Falafy. She came up to Sufus and Safasy and knelt and lifted her hands, palms down...

'Their souls have left the Waking World, and I haven't the power to return them to life,' she said looking around the Dorliefans.

Another wave of wailing swept over the square that had been still for a moment.

'What was it put them to death?' a voice from the crowd asked.

Falafy made hand passes over the bodies of Sufus and Safasy and suddenly pulled her hands back, as if frightened.

'I heard something alien. It's in their bodies.'

'Speak up, Falafy! Louder!'

Falafy rose and said:

'There's something alien in the bodies of Sufus and Safasy! It took their lives away.'

'What is it, Falafy?'

'We can't see a thing!'

Malam stepped out of the crowd and gestured everybody to be still. Then he addressed Falafy:

'Falafy dear, let me tell you the name of what you felt with your hands but is hidden from our gazes.'

'Do, dear Malam.'

Malam lowered his stick onto the ground between Sufus and Safasy, and concentrated on his hand. He shook his head as he spoke:

'The phantom daggers have stabbed our Sufus and Safasy. Let me now open them up to your gazes.'

'Let's support Malam: he knows what he's talking about,' Falafy said to the Dorliefans.

'Show them to us, Malam.'

'We want to see them.'

'We want to know the truth. Who killed them?'

Malam carefully touched with his stick the invisible thing that had stopped the current of life in Sufus—and everyone gasped: they could see the haft of a dagger that had pierced his chest. Malam pulled out the dagger and gave it to Falafy. He then opened to Dorliefan gazes the dagger that had slain Safasy and gave it to Tlanalt who was in the forefront. Tlanalt lifted it over his head for everyone to see.

'Who slew them?' It was a question that had not been answered.

Both Falafy and Tlanalt, and all the rest who could see the little Carroty turned their gazes to him. And he said:

'The phantom daggers had been put into the hand of a coward by the Lord of Darkness. He means to show us on New Light Eve that he will rob us of the light the way he robbed Sufus and Safasy of it, the people who gave us light. This murder on New Light Eve is war on people by the barkycrooks, the monsters that crawl on the Emptied Lake.

There was a buzz over the square... Falafy asked for silence and, when the voices of indignation died down, she said:

'Sufus and Safasy have died. But we live on. Sufus and Safasy wanted us to see in New Light. The Lord of Darkness, on the contrary, wants to rob us of it. And we will see it in according to the cherished desire of Sufus's and Safasy's hearts. Then we'll go to war.'

'Yes! Right!' There were hundreds of Dorliefan voices.

'Let today be a day of mirth,' Falafy continued. 'But we will assemble in the square, each with his own think as usual and see in New Light. And he whose think proves right will tomorrow choose their ornaments in the New Light Tree as keepsakes in memory of Sufus and Safasy. And now we must calm down and give way to mournful silence.'

'Stay! Don't disperse!' came a voice from the crowd. 'I'll talk to you.'

Faryraf was let through. He came up to the bodies of Sufus and Safasy, knelt and said into the silence that was eagerly waiting:

'Sorry, my dear friends. I'm sorry I'm alive and you're dead... I wish the murderer had spirited my life off first.'

The people exchanged whispers. Faryraf got up to his feet, neared Falafy and asked her under his breath:

'You know already that the Tear that Sufus and Safasy were Keepers of was stolen by the murderer?'

'No, Faryraf,' said Falafy nervously in some confusion (she had no thought of the Tear when she was trying to sense with her hands the least breath of life in the bodies of the people dear to her).

'Falafy dear,' Malam interfered, 'it's true: neither Sufus nor Safasy has the Tear. I saw as much when I pulled out the daggers, but waited for the people to disperse before telling it to you.'

'We've lost too much time, to discover the murderer now and get the Tear back,' said Tlanalt in dismay.

'That means trouble,' Falafy breathed out in anxiety.

'Wait, Falafy! One trouble is plenty,' said Faryraf and addressed the hundreds of those assembled without explaining anything to her: 'Dorliefans, you know me well and have faith in me.'

'We do, Faryraf, have no doubt.'

'What brings you here, tell us!'

'What do you know, Faryraf?'

'Know what I know! They wanted to kill not just Sufus and Safasy but also me!'

The crowd gasped. Faryraf went on:

'But I overpowered him. The murderer of Sufus and Safasy is in my garden. He's dead and will take no more lives.'

Many people took off, impatient to see with their own eyes the murderer. But Faryraf stopped them with a cry:

'Stay! Stay! I'll take the Council members there myself, and several of able-bodied people to collect the body.'

'Who's the monster?' asked one of the Dorliefans.

'I don't know his name. I'd never seen him before. But he's not a Dorliefan. I know mine as well as you do.'

'Faryraf?' came the voice of Ruptatpur, and everyone realized that Faryraf would not be spared a tricky searching question. 'How did you know that the stranger in your garden is the murderer? Did he tell you as much before you rid him of the opportunity?'

'You've always been thorough, old Ruptatpur, which is only right. I'll put it like this: we had no time for a chat...'

The crowd was supportive of Faryraf with appreciative nods and simpers.

'... We fought not for fun—to the death. This is what fell out of his shirt pocket.' He raised, to show everyone, a white Tear tinted violet.

The agitation in the square tripled: everyone knew Sufus and Safasy's Tear.

'Faryraf for Keeper!' called a voice from the crowd.

'Hear, hear! He's saved the Tear. Let him keep Her.'

'He's worthy of being a Keeper.'

'Thank you, Keeper Faryraf.'

Falafy raised a hand and took the floor.

'Dorliefans, dears! The Tear that used to be kept by Sufus and Safasy hereby goes to Faryraf.'

'Thank you, friends!' exclaimed Faryraf. 'I will go on serving Dorlief with honor. For now, as Falafy's said, may mournful silence replace the agitation. I must leave you now. But I'll be back at tittle-tattle to see in New Light, all of us will.'

'Thank you, Keeper Faryraf,' Dorliefans replied.

Faryraf saw Leely and came up to her. Her face was tear-stained. He stroked her head and said:

'I know how you feel at this hour. You loved Sufus and Safasy most of all. Keep a stiff upper lip, granddaughter.'

'How's Gran?'

'Frightened out of her wits. And worried about you. Stop by home when you can.'

'I will. As soon as we've trimmed the sluisy.'

'See how it is with the Tear? Your Tear's come back to you.'

'She isn't mine, and She hasn't come back to me. I want nothing of this. Go comfort Gran.'

'I've got something for you, Leoely, for your new date.'

'What is it?' Leoely was surprised.

'You'll see it when you come home.'

\* \* \*

By the latter tittle-tattle, the streets and square of Dorlief came to life again. The twilight had barely rendered its undertints to the air while New Light lanterns were ablaze, flaunting their thinks. The New Light Tree was flourishing its lanterns, meeting people with their myriad merry smiles and... smiles with a touch of sadness. Dorliefan names flared up here and there along with the best wishes passed. Hundreds of kids' and adults' eyes sparkled as presents were handed by the forestmen. The merry-go-rounds span strewing the space with the kids' smiling sparkles of voices. While in the sky over Dorlief parti-colored balloons were floating as they saw out the old and in the new... It was exactly as before at New Light celebrations. But everyone was a bit more subdued than before: merrymaking was not a riot in the streets and square of Dorlief...

Leoely strolled by the New Light Tree, her eyes looking for Dan. Suddenly someone called to her and she turned to face the voice: Efriard and Estean were waving their arms to her. She stopped to wait for them. He had a light-emerald shirt on, she an emerald gown with slanting threads of rain.

'Hello, Leoely,' said Efriard. 'Long time no see.'

'Hello, darling,' said Estean. 'I've missed you.'

'Good evening, darlings,' said Leoely and cast down her eyes.

'We know all about your rue.' Estean took her by the hand. 'But you were right: pre-New Light Night is still welcome.'

'Happy New Light to you,' said Estean. 'Here's a present for you from Estean and me.'

Leoely accepted a minute casket the color of emerald inlaid with ruby drops.

'Isn't it a beauty! Thank you, darlings,' she said as the tears made their way to her eyes (rue and joy thus coexisted in her).

'Here's the key for it.' Estean put into her friend's hand a red key. 'Open it right now.'

Leoely opened the casket: resting on black velvet in it was a ring with an iridescent violet stone shaped as a blooming bud, the ring formed by two emerald leaves curled downward.

'Oh, what a beauty! How did you know?'



'Know what, Leuely?' asked Estean.

'My color! It was my think this afternoon. And this bloom! Thank you, friends. Happy New Light to you!'

Leuely gave a hug to Estean, then to Efriard and burst into tears... and through her tears saw Lutul. He had come up to them.

'Happy New Light to you, dear Leuely! Happy New Light to you, our dear neighbors!'

'Happy New Light to you!' said the three of them in unison.

He lifted the basket, flung off the cover and held it out to Leuely and her friends.

'Have some of my cookies. I baked them myself.'

'As is usual at New Light: the first one met gets the tidbits?' Leuely said and took some cookies.

Estean and Efriard helped themselves, too.

'As is usual at New Light,' said Lutul. 'Thank you.'

'We owe you thanks, dear Lutul. It's delicious.'

'Yes, the cookies are yummy,' said Estean with feeling.

Leuely looked around.

Waiting for someone?' asked Estean.

'I am. My new—' Leuely faltered.

'What makes you silent? Is it a secret?' Estean ribbed her.

'Estean!' her brother cut her short and said to Leuely: 'Don't if it's a secret.'

'Why, no, Efriard! I've no secrets from you. It's just that I didn't feel like referring to Dan as an acquaintance. I think we've become friends, even though we've only known each other for a day. I'll have him meet you by all means.'

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Two Sackfuls of Presents**

Meanwhile, final preparations were under way in Malam's house for a secret march.

The murder of Sufus and Safasy had made Falafy convene the Governing Council members and Word Keepers once again for an urgent debate. It had been decided that the Word Keepers would march out that day at twilight, while the eight hundred Dorlief men and the forestmen would set out for Natlief not on the third day after New Light Night but on the night after. Right after the brief session, Falafy had asked a forestman she knew, who had arrived for the celebrations, to urgently go back and tell Sawasard the one word 'today.' As early as mid-tittle-tattle, Sawasard had arrived at Malam's house with unusual New Light presents that Ewnar had helped to deliver. Ewnar had then gone to see Falafy. He had good news for her: Ozuard, the forestmen Lord, had decided to apportion in aid of Natlief four thousand men, with him as head.

Semimes and Matthew had brought two backpacks into the living room and were impatiently waiting for Sawasard to undo them. Natan, Malam and Groyorg

were by their side, drawn to the bags. Daniel, who was alone in his room, on hearing Matthew's 'Dan, the forest presents have arrived,' hastened to the living room right away.

Sawasard produced from a bag a leather girdle with three leather pouches for travel necessities.

'Happy New Light, dear Malam. It's a present from us for you.'

'Ah, so you could see mine was frayed!' the Carroty cried. 'Thank you, my dear friend... Oh, it's got sheathes! This one is just right for my canteen. This one is good enough for a box of flashes. Thank you, Sawasard: you've done quite right by me.'

'This, Groyorg the Square, is a reinforcement for the warriors that hang from you girdle,' said Sawasard handing him a dagger in its scabbard (the black haft had orange lettering and an orange stone on its end, while the scabbard was festooned with ornamental tracery). 'It'll come in handy on the march.'

'So it will... So it will, Lil'un-to-the-rescue! Thank you, Sawasard the Bright!' Groyorg unsheathed the dagger. 'I'd be sorry to wield this beauty—all right, as a last resort!'

'Natan, my friend, accept this from me.'

'Well, well, well, some present!' Semimes could not contain his delight on seeing a quiver full of battle arrows.

'Thank you, Sawasard,' said Natan, took the quiver to his lips and whispered to the arrows: 'I love you, but hate those in your way.'

'This dagger is also for you.'

'It's as good as yours, Groyorg the Square,' Natan boasted.

'But no better, Natan the Nervy,' Groyorg croaked in reply. 'It's the hand that makes one better.'

'I've a feeling that I'm no match for you in this respect,' Natan admitted.

'No one is a match for this guy at dagger work,' said Malam.

'Lil'un-to-the-rescue!' said Groyorg with pleasure on being lauded to the skies by his old friend, instead of the severe 'Groyorg!'

'But I've got yet another helper, taller and broader-shouldered,' said Natan, nodding at his sword.

'Well, I've got a helper who just hits with no regard for tallness or breadth of shoulders, Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' Groyorg had a standby ready.

'Semimes, my good friend, accept a present from me, too. Happy New Light!'

Semimes breathed out his wonderment that, couched in sounds, produced a long screechy 'A-ah-ah!' He had expected nothing like that, for it was a black horse carved out of stone. Its black body polished until it shone had a reddish glow, as if it were galloping through flames, with them reflected in it. As distinct from Semimes's black horse, this one had eyes that could see and whose gaze was directed forward. Semimes came up to the horse wall and put the stone horse on the upper shelf.

'Semimes the Conqueror has to sit this horse,' said Groyorg.

Somehow the words did not hurt Semimes the way they had previously, and he did not feel like fighting Groyorg. For a moment, he imagined he was

Semimes the Conqueror sitting this sighted black horse, him, Semimes, Semimes the Conqueror enjoying... power. Alay, flashed through his mind, and he came to... He turned to his friends, to Sawasard, and said:

'Sawasard— Sawasard, my friend, I'll always remember this, as long as I live... as long as—'

'Thank you for your kind words, dear Semimes,' Sawasard replied and added as he handed him another present: 'May this dagger serve you in the coming march.'

Semimes took the dagger to his lips, turned his eyes to Natan and asked him:

'Natan, could I borrow your words?'

'What a question to ask, Wolfdog! Shoot!'

'I love you but hate those in your way,' Semimes whispered to his dagger.

'Danad, Matam, you aren't warriors, but you could do with your daggers. Don't be scared of them, and then they'll stand you in good stead.'

'Thank you, Sawasard! Dan and I won't be afraid: a knife's handy in any household,' Matthew joked.

Semimes shook his head in disapproval.

'Oh, Mat, of all that's stupid: mentioning a kitchen knife in the same breath as a dagger.'

'Why not? It'll come in handy when mushrooming,' Matthew persisted.

Daniel scrutinized his dagger for a long time, then tore his eyes away from it and looked at Sawasard.

'What is the word you'll say to me before we march out?'

Sawasard gave it some thought and said:

'Palerard.'

'Thank you for the dagger and the heartfelt word,' said Daniel (he thought he had divined the meaning of that unknown word).

Sawasard produced something bound in cloth from the second bag, put it on the table and undid the cloth... Those were four smoke-tinted shirts shot with silver filaments. As they crossed, the filaments formed small rhombs, their corners joined by even finer filaments.

'Put them on,' Sawasard said to the boys. 'They won't weigh heavy on you, but they'll absorb some of your wounds.'

'As light as the smoke they're made of,' said Semimes who was the first to put on a protective shirt.

'No arrow, no sword of barkycrooks are to be feared now,' said Matthew merrily. 'This inspires me with confidence. What about you, Dan the Sorrowful?'

He meant to enliven his friend, who had cared for nothing after the murder of Sufus and Safasy: he had retired within himself and uttered not a word, only to retire to a hideaway from words and looks in his room where he had been until the arrival of Sawasard.

'Same here,' said Daniel without enthusiasm.

'Oh, is there more to come?' asked Matthew as Sawasard delved into the bag again.

'Take these. These are capes,' said Sawasard, holding out to Daniel and Matthew a fabric tube each. 'For protection from the wind and the rain and the evil eye. They'll have to be attached to your girdles at the back. I'll show how.'

'Gneiss, same as mine,' said Semimes eyeing the tubes appreciatively.

'And mine,' said Natan, showing his cape attached to the girdle. 'Retowal's present.'

'I've got another one, Groyorg, for you. Will you take it?' asked Sawasard.

'Why not, it being as useful as all that. Good enough to hide from enemy eyes on occasion, although I'm not one for that.'

'This one's made of smoke,' Semimes remarked again.

'Danad, Matam, I've said you're no warriors. But you're Word Keepers, and you'll have to protect both the Word and yourselves. Daggers alone will prove inadequate.'

Sawasard put on the table seven black bags. Each of them, fastened by a button, accommodated something the size of a barynth nut.

'Open them up: I can't wait to see what's inside,' Matthew urged him on.

'Very much so,' Semimes screeched, in agreement with Matthew for once. 'What are those bags of tricks that turn non-warriors into warriors?'

'I won't open them, I'll just explain. Inside the bags is weaponry as potent as arrows, swords or pole axes.'

'I say!' Groyorg cried. 'I thought they were full of handsels. What are they?'

'They have a whiff of death,' said Malam softly.

'That's right, Malam. These weapons haven't been to battle but they've killed six of us.'

'I say! Why did you bring them here? There're kids around,' Groyorg croaked angrily.

'Who do you call kids?' Natan was outraged.

'Quite!' Matthew chimed in. 'Who are the kids?'

'No offence meant, Lil'un-to-the-rescue. I meant you're all too young to witness all that dread.'

'Some call it a fire-breathing stone, others a rabid stone,' Sawasard began his story. 'This indeed is a stone. Miners pat the ground for it nowadays in the darkness of caves. It's porous, and that helps. Torches can't be used, for light makes it rabid, and it would burn anything within four paces or so. Six of the miners have died when one of them picked one up in a mine: torchlight had fallen on it. One escaped with his life: he'd been standing away from it. He said he'd seen a dark-green matt stone with visible pores in it. He wanted to come closer, but the light made it white hot and a great fiery ball in a jiffy.'

'It's just right to feed the barkycrooks!' said Natan.

'Had we had them the other day, we wouldn't have fled like so many hares, would we now, Dan?'

'No, we wouldn't, Mat. No more fleeing barkycrooks. We'll remember Sufus and Safasy and won't feel like fleeing any more.'

'Attaboy, Dan the Sorrowful,' Groyorg said. 'But fighting takes a little more of a bully in your heart and hands, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'The main thing is to take the Word you're in charge of to Faddaf,' Malam cautioned. 'To do that, one would probably have to be less of a bully, or flee on occasion, so they wouldn't see you for the dust.'

'No, not that, Father,' Semimes screeched indignantly.

'That's right,' said Matthew.

'Matam, Danad, the fire-breathing stones are for you. Ozuard let me take all the stones the miners had discovered in nine years. There are seven of them. Suspend the bags from your girdles by the straps. Remember: a fire-breathing stone takes any amount of hitting and is unresponsive to water; it's light that makes it rabid. You'll have a few moments to pelt the foe... It's up to you to decide which of you takes three, which four.'

'Mat, Dan, my friends,' Semimes screech-drawled. 'Why fight over a stone? Better give one to your guide.'

'Choose any of the seven,' said Matthew.

Semimes picked up a bag from the table and suspended it from his girdle next to the dagger. Matthew and Daniel followed suit.

'Wait a bit, friends, I'm forgetting,' Malam was speaking in a somewhat agitated manner. 'I'll step off for a while.'

He mumbled something as he hastened out of the living room, and no one, not even Semimes, knew what had made the Carroty so agitated... When he came back, they saw a marshland bitubular stick in his hands. It was not his stick. His stick had been left in the hallway on his return from the Council.

'Sawasard, my friend, I want to do something I've long been planning. Take this as a gift from me. Happy New Light to you!'

'Thank you, Malam.'

'I engineered this stick at the same time as Semimes's, meaning it for you. So this is the day! Remember it when the darkness full of traps is all around you, with you in no position to discriminate between the path of salvation and one of perdition. Remember it, hit it on the ground or a rock.'

'Malam dear, don't let your heart bleed for me. I know the borderline between light and darkness. But I'll remember your words.'

'Well, Sawasard, there are places where light seems so near while being a mere illusion luring you into the abyss.'

'That's right, there're places like that,' said Groyorg. 'Malam and I—'

'Groyorg!' Malam cried.

Groyorg swallowed the word at the tip of his tongue and coughed.

'I thought I heard a knock on the door,' Natan said.

'So did I,' said Matthew.

'I didn't,' croaked Groyorg.

There was another knock. It came from the entry door.

'Who can it be at this hour? Falafy? She said goodbye to us,' Malam was wondering aloud.

'I'll go get it,' said Semimes.

'No, sonny, I'll get it. You shouldn't be seen in this shirt.'

Malam stepped into the hall and opened the door.

'Oh! Of all that's wonderful!'

'Hello, Malam. Happy New Light to you!'

'Happy New Light to you, dear Leuely!'

'I see you and Semimes have opted for violet lanterns.'

'Violet, the color of our guest's eyes.'

'I'd like to see him. Is he in?'

'Danad? He is. Come on in.'

'I'd rather wait here, at the linden tree.'

'He'll be out directly.'

On learning that Leuely had come, Daniel felt at a loss and looked at his friends.

'Take off your shirt and girdle and go,' said Groyorg.

'Thanks, Groyorg,' said Daniel, took off his martial gear and hastened to meet his guest.

'Don't blab, buddy,' Semimes screeched. 'And don't take too long, we must be on our way.'

'Don't rush him, Wolfdog: we've still got time,' said Natan. 'Let it be dead dark.'

Daniel went down the stairs and approached Leuely in silence.

'I've been looking for you all night long.'

'Sorry... I can't tell you why I didn't show up.'

'Won't we meet tomorrow?'

'Nope, Leuely. Why did you ask?'

'I don't know. I just thought—'

'Thought?'

'I did. I thought we wouldn't see each other... Tell me what a feather means to you.'

'Feather... ? It's a long story. Did Faryraf tell you?'

'He told me nothing. He just said you'd be pleased if I gave you a feather. Is that right?'

'You can say it again. A feather is the best present for me. It was the start of our friendship, Matthew's and mine... Mat's a feather. He began by being a feather. Then the feather turned into Mat.'

'What were you then? What were you at the beginning?'

'I don't know. Me's me... I may have been a tear on that globe.'

'What globe?'

'The orange one with tears. Have you forgotten?'

'Oh, it looks like such a long time, but it happened only today.'

Leuely removed a thread over her head, pulled it and produced from under her collar a silver feather.

'Happy New Light to you, Dan. Put this feather on. Let it be always with you.'

'A feather!' said Daniel in wonder and at a loss. 'Thanks, Leuely. Happy New Light to you. Sorry, I don't know... I never thought of a present for you... It's a beauty. What stone is this?'

'I know nothing about stones. A forestman gave it to my father. I don't remember his name: I was too little.'

'Is this your hair?'

Leoely smiled.

'You know I've dyed mine, and this one is black. It's a horsehair. There was a custom (it's still there): when someone left home, one of his nearest and dearest put around his neck or arm a closed horsehair, just a plain horsehair or with an ornament attached. So their friendship would last, with him coming back home, safe and sound.'

Daniel held out the horsehair with the feather to Leoely and said:

'Put it on... if you like.'

'I'd like to. Bend your head... I feel you're leaving Dorlief. Are you?'

'Will you wait for me?'

'Why else would I put a horsehair around your neck? You aren't going to the square to see in New Light, are you? Don't say anything, I know. That's that then. Good luck to you.'

Leoely suddenly turned about and went toward Dorlief.

'Happy New Light to you, green-eyes!'

## Part Five

### On the Way to the Prophet

#### Chapter One

##### The Traitor

The hut on the outskirts of Dorlief looked crestfallen, hugging the ground: its light had gone out. And only two violet fires lighting it from outside would not let it be lost altogether. Seven people emerged from the house, one after another, Malam bringing up the rear.

'Have you got a spare pair of socks, sonny?'

'I have, Father.'

'Canteens of tulis and grappian are there, suspended from you girdle? See that they are.'

'They're in the backpack—it's more convenient that way.'

'Do you have enough flashes?'

'I do.'

'Go then. I won't see you part of the way. I'll go to the New Light Tree to see my globes.'

'Fare thee well, Carroty,' said Natan the way he wanted to.

'See you, Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' said Groyorg the way he knew how.

'Goodbye, Malam. I'll be glad to come back to this house,' said Sawasard.

'Your house is now our home, Malam,' said Daniel.

'That's right. We'll be back yet,' added Matthew.

'All right, I'll be going, Father,' Semimes screeched softly.

'I'll be waiting, dear folks.'

The six made for the stand of linden trees, the Carroty to the right, for Dorlief

After a dozen paces Semimes turned back.

'Forgotten anything, Semimes?' asked Matthew.

'I have. Go on, I'll catch you up.'

He bypassed the house, ran up to the rock near the willow, squatted near the hole and whispered:

'The time of separation's on us. I'll no longer be able to come here every evening. I won't be bringing news to this cozy house. Worse luck—I won't dash over here tomorrow when Dorlief has a new sky to let it in by rolling back the boulder. Sorry: I'll be far from here... But my heart will be here... and there, too, sure thing. There, because I'm a Word Keeper. You know why my heart will be here... All right, there's no saying it all: I must be going. Happy New Light to you. Goodbye.'

Nor did Semimes forget Nuruny. He entered the pen, stroked her and said:

'Nuruny, kind soul, I'm going. Far from home, very far. Father will take care of you while I'm away. Be a good goat—heed him. When you see Kipik, don't be



afraid, just rush him—he'll flee. All right, it's time I was going. Happy New Light, dear.'

\* \* \*

Sapha was coming up the stairs in complete darkness, with no candlelight. In the intervening thirty years her feelings had memorized this way better than any other trails she had walked; there were not many of them, and all of them were within the Emptied Lake. She was in a hurry. She was eager to please her master. She had always been, because she carried about in her heart gratitude and loyalty. It was thirteen years since he had chosen her, Sapha, out of all the Emptied Lake girls to replace the former maid (she had fallen to her death down the stairs). He had never hurt her and had even stroked her head eleven years before. No one else on the Emptied Lake had been thus rewarded by the master.

One day of that far-away year she had sat at the Zusuz tower under the window of the room he had given her thinking of her father: he had been four days hunting. He would soon be back with his trophy.

'Don't fret, Sapha. Dara will be back; nothing will happen to him,' said Zusuz as he passed by.

'I know, Lord,' she said and rose to her feet.

There was something Zusuz had heard in that 'I know.'

'Do you?' he asked.

'I do, Lord.'

'How can you know it? He may have been worried by a mountain cat, or torn to bits by cave wolves. Or else felled by a human arrow? How do you know he's still alive?'

'I know, Lord, he's coming home. Here,' she raised the hand she was holding a hair in.

'What's that?' asked Zusuz.

'The biteoff.'

Zusuz laughed uproariously and asked:

'What do you mean, biteoff?'

'A part bitten off my hair, Lord... When father was going hunting, I pulled a hair and attached it to his girdle without him seeing it. I had bitten off a bit of it before I did. It tells me where my father is.'

'How do you know where your father is if you don't know the forests and mountains that surround the Emptied Lake?'

'The biteoff shows on what side of me he is now, far off or near.'

'Take off your kerchief and let your hair flow,' Zusuz told her.

She took off her kerchief and removed the long wooden comb—the thick black strands fell over her shoulders and back. Zusuz touched the hair: it was more robust to the touch than human hair.

'So, where's Dara now? Show me.'

Sapha raised the biteoff, holding it between her finger and thumb and began whispering and looking closely at it:

'Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Biteoff, find—'

'Sapha! It *is* showing!' Zusuz exclaimed.

The hair fluttered and started rising as if picked up by the wind. It then subsided but went on fluttering without rising or falling. It was suspended in place.

'Father's there, Lord,' Sapha indicated the direction with her hand.

'I see,' said Zusuz and laughed again.

Sapha smiled in response, aware that she had pleased her master, and added:

'He's twice the width of the Emptied Lake away.'

'He's hunting in the Hamruth Mountains. How clever of you, Sapha. Who taught you all this?'

'No one, Lord. I caught the trick as I played with my doll.'

'Smart girl!' Zusuz repeated with pleasure and stroked her head.

Sapha hid her eyes so they shouldn't give away her happiness and bowed to her master. Zusuz fell thoughtful and said:

'I'll show you around,.'

He was as good as his promise: he and Sapha flew all over the near and far villages, the forests, the rivers and mountains astride Sus. True to her master's orders, she was attentive and memorized everything. But there was something else to those flights, something she did not have to memorize but could not forget once she felt it. This soaring in the skies (she thought *she* was soaring) gave her a pleasure she had never known theretofore. In those happy moments she was even more thankful to her master. So thankful, in fact, that it became a passion with her, wild and uncircumspect. The life of that passion could be felt in her gut. In her soul, too, for she was filled with spite and fury for no good reason whenever Zusuz was not alone. She could feel it with her skin, too, with her hair standing on end. She could feel it with her fingers, too, that tensed and scratched whatever came to hand. She could feel it in her jaws that ached, so hard she clenched them as she grated her teeth and growled—that was when she gnawed at wood. In those moments she thirsted for tearing apart whoever held a threat for her master... The passion was biding its time, its hour of gratification...

Sapha's infatuation with her master was none the worse for what confused many of the inhabitants of the Emptied Lake, something they had to come to terms with, for Zusuz himself thirsted for it. It was the new guise of their Lord and his new name. Before it happened Zusuz had ordered everyone available on the Emptied Lake to get together at the tower. He emerged on the balcony with Tronort and announced:

'My men! Wives and children of my men! You see with your eyes two of us: Zusuz the Lord who has awakened you to life, releasing you from the stone yoke, and Lord Tronort who has bestowed on you the sign of the invincible arrow. Each of the two of us is powerful because there's Black Lightning fire living in each of us. Time was the fire of Black Lightning was one and more powerful than the assorted sparks it disintegrated into when forcing its way to freedom out of a crag. It thirsts for its erstwhile power. Obedient to its will and eager for more power, we have decided to become one whole, one whole Lord of yours whose

name is to be Trozuzort. Men! Eager to conform to its will and our inherent empowerment, holler: Let there be Lord Trozuzort!

The Emptied Lake was silent. Then the barkycrooks cried out half-heartedly every which how:

'Let there be Lord Trozuzort!'

Zusuz frowned...

'Sus!' he called the gorhoon who was perched on the tower top as usual, unseen from below.

Sus poked through the veil and hovered in front of the balcony, as if tearing apart the veil with its talons. Zusuz sprang onto its back and came down to the men. He dismounted, pulled his stick from his girdle and struck the ground with it, struck it so hard that his countenance was warped and the lake floor quaked in a wave that ran the length of it... Many were pushed off their feet. Many were in confusion... Zusuz returned to the balcony.

'Aren't you afraid to shake their loyalty?' Tronort asked 'I could see none of the former unity in their ranks.'

Zusuz laughed in reply a loud reverberating laugh. It was not just a reply to Tronort alone, rather, he was replying to the Emptied Lake. And it perceived in that laughter that he, Zusuz was still its Lord, that he had merely absorbed Tronort, his power, his Black Lightning fire to be even more powerful. And, as it gained composure, it splashed out its cry:

'Let there be Lord Trozuzort!'

'Assemble tomorrow morning at the tower and, on seeing Lord Trozuzort, holler this in twice this loud and united a fashion!' Zusuz cried.

For starters (a year before the birth of Trozuzort), when the one Zusuz got to be called Lord Tronort, the room downstairs was filled with subdued groans and roars. It was Sapha's passion awakening and tormenting her from the inside. At times, it would not be contained within her bosom, and then Sapha, in pursuit of her passion, would spring off her bed and avidly leap for the door, following those leaps with yet more that neared her to the new tower dweller's abode. But she dug her nails into the wood of the door, scratched and tore at it until the fit was over...

Two things rescued Tronort from the teeth and nails of Sapha: he never once displayed resentment of the master. At least, Sapha noted none of that. All his feelings for Zusuz had been absorbed by sheets of paper that Tronort made sketches of him on. But those sheets that turned into the eyes of the one and the other were short-lived, a moment at a time: Tronort finished a portrait, put his customary scroll of initials captured and transferred by memory from the Non-world and consigned his feelings to fire. Besides, like Sapha, he was lonely and spent most of his days on the tower balcony. He was there alone with his passions and drew on. For some reason he always showed his sketches to Sapha (not the ones that were meant for fire). She liked it, and she liked almost all his living pictures. They set her soul aflutter... but aflutter in a different way: the flutter contained her passion for a while, and her soul felt restful. One day Tronort gave her a sketch one look at which made her legs buckle and she sat down on the floor. It was she, Sapha, in the picture...

When Zusuz shape-shifted into Trozuzort, Sapha had no torments. The feelings she had for Zusuz and the ones the sketch-maker gave her did not sever her heart in two.

. . . Sapha went up the stairs pressing a folded cloth to her bosom. She wanted her master to see everything with his own eyes. The bare walls at last petered out and she was on the landing with the doors of the three rooms under the mists. She thought for some reason the master was out. Her impatience was urging her on to such an extent that she neglected her presentiment and knocked on the door—there was no reply. She called herself a damned fool and mounted a few more flights of the corkscrew staircase with angry bounces and knocked on the door of her master in the upper tier, to the very room that Lord Tronort had occupied not so long before.

‘Come in, Sapha,’ came the voice of Trozuzort.

Her heart raced in response, something the endless stairs had failed to do. She entered the room.

‘The biteoff has shown, Lord,’ she breathed out at last.

‘Is he on his way?’

‘He is, Lord. The one who’s got my hair has set out from Dorlief.’

‘Let us see,’ Trozuzort glanced at the cloth in Sapha’s hand, wise to what was in it.

Sapha unfolded the cloth, took the hair between her forefinger and thumb and got down to business:

‘Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Here you are, Lord!’

‘I can see, Sapha. Where’s the man heading?’

Sapha stirred the hair rocking it. She knew the answer to Trozuzort’s question but wanted to be quite sure. Her hand stilled again letting the hair search.

‘Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Lord, the man’s heading for the Sadorn Forest.’

‘Thank you, Sapha. Go to your room and keep looking at the biteoff... No, stay! First find commander Gura and tell him to see me right away.’

‘Yes, Lord.’

‘Go now.’

Trozuzort went to the balcony and was lost in thought looking in the direction of Dorlief. It means that on top of the Tear, the Dorliefan’s grandson has brought the Word, and they’ve decided to go to him that had prophesied its advent. The Word would not open up to them and they have no other way out. They think Faddaf’s alive and can divine the secret of the Word. But is he? They’ll be looking for him. Where? Trozuzort smirked. The biteoff will point them out to me. The Word and the Tear will have another master. And he will acquire even more power... Who accompanies the visitor? His friend? He has all the eagerness and loyalty of a master’s ferling, less the murderous talons and beak. Who else? Malam’s son, their nimble guide? Hmm, Semimes, the freaky accident... He’s sure to tag along with the two visitors: he’s alone and craves recognition. Malam has taught him the use of the stick pretty well. Pretty well... He could have killed

me... same as me him. Who else? Malam? No, he's in for quiet. He'd sooner go to the New Light Tree—to revel in reverie and go in for dreams... They are sure to invite one or two fiery heads. They'll be a handful for my men unless caught unawares... They marched out in a hurry without waiting to see in New Light. So the phantom daggers have slaked their thirst with the siblings' blood... War time is on us. My time has come.

A loud knock on the door interrupted Trozuzort's thoughts. He came back to his room and said:

'Come in, Gura.'

The door opened. A huge body clad in a carapace with an enormous barynth nut above that looked somewhat like a face took its place. There was no humility in Gura's eye, no servility, but a lot of strength and loyalty. He stepped forward—with Sapha in the space behind his back. On the rare occasions that Trozuzort summoned Gura, she always showed him upstairs, for the gorhoon would not have let him otherwise. The door behind Gura closed but Sapha stayed nearby. She was alert, all nose sniffing out for danger to her master. Her passion made her sniff for danger even when there was none.

'Yes, Lord.'

'Tell me, Gura, which of the lieutenants would you entrust with a most important mission?'

'What sort of mission, Lord?'

'One on which the amount of bloodshed would depend in the coming war.'

Gura looked closely at Trozuzort. Trozuzort continued:

'It's all about tracking down a detachment of five to ten men, no more. They're secretive. That's the mission. They've just set out of Dorlief. There're two foreigners among them, the ones that our men let escape the other day in the Harshid Mountains.'

'Do you need them, those two, Lord?'

'Yes, Gura. They've got what a Dorliefan prophesied to have a mighty force. The force is to serve us, not humans.'

'Lord, I'll track down the Dorliefan detachment.'

'No, Gura. I'll need you for other things. The day I get what humans regard as their salvation and Sapha helps me discover its secret, we'll set out for Natlief. You'll lead ten thousand troops and overrun the Natlief fortress.'

'I've been dreaming of that day, Lord.' It was the first time in the course of the encounter that the barkycrook's eyes shone with what looked like feeling—a foretaste of a great bloodshed.

'It's come time to translate dreams into reality.'

'If it isn't me, it's Dara, Sapha's father—he'll head the unit tracking down the Dorliefans.'

'Track down and kill, all of them. But no tearing the foreigners' bodies. I want them here with all their effects. Tell Dara to take with him men who've seen the foreigners. They're coming the way of the Emptied Lake along Kaduhar foothills. If they aren't back, Dara'll head them off. I think their paths will cross.'

'When does Dara set out, Lord?'

'Two hundred men should be ready to march at any moment. I'll tell when and in what direction before they set out. Let each of them choose a quadruped.'

'Are they to set out on quadruped-back?'

'Yes, Gura. It's time they were tried out in action; why else should I feed them?'

'Yes, Lord. Quadrupeds will catch them up in no time.'

'Tell Dara all I've told you. And remember: no tearing the foreigners' bodies—they are to be delivered to me complete with their effects. Go now.'

Gura left. Trozuzort smirked and said to himself:

'Catch them up in no time, you say? Catch up with the cheeky travelers and shake their cheek out of them like so much smoke from a candle blown out.'

(There were such among the barkycrook's young that never learnt to speak as they grew up or to assume an upright posture from all-fours or to know what hands were for in actual fact. They propelled themselves working their front and hind paws and raced about the floor and tiers of the Emptied Lake. They were still on all fours when eating, stuffing themselves with their snouts from mangers or off the ground. When fighting they drew blood and fractured bones, but they had no use for hands, swords or pole axes, what they needed was a good fierce start, a crushing strike with the head and sharp teeth. They were born bigger and stronger than most of their congeners. They had a flair for hyperactivity from the first. Days later, they could not stay put or apply their hands to an occupation like their biped brothers and sisters, because they had no hands, because their paws craved racing, the four of them. Their eyes, once manifested, stayed put: they were intent on rushing someone on the run.

One day, as Zusuz gazed at them, he decided:

'These quadrupeds will race instead of horses with men astride. They should be conditioned to riders from a young age. Such of them as defy the power of word and quirt and choose to stay wild are to be killed!

Years later, Lord Trozuzort had in his thousands-strong trained troops six thousand trained quadrupeds. They were as fast as horses, negotiated mountains with murdered nuthead beasts on their backs, but above all, they were prepared to crush through cavalry formation charges with their heads, thus conditioned and to the manner born.)

\* \* \*

The Word Keepers progressed in silence. They did not light their torches and kept close to one another. Heading them was Sawasard, followed by Matthew, Daniel, Natan and Groyorg. None of them looked back, for they were saving this parting look for the last hillock, from which they could observe Dorlief. A grim wall seemed to be getting higher and higher and making the darkness even denser and uncertainty even more palpable. This was the Sadorn Forest.

'What about turning left from the trail, Sawasard?' Semimes screeched under his breath, unwilling in his heart of hearts to concede the role of guide to the forestman.

Sawasard slowed his pace and looked back.

'From the hill to our left Dan and Mat saw Dorlief for the first time,' Semimes explained.

Sawasard turned left.

'It's meaningful, isn't it?' Semimes added.

'So it is, Semimes, very much so,' Matthew chimed in who was sick and tired of Daniel's lugubrious silence that his back could feel.

The travelers negotiated the hill with some enthusiasm... and their eyes reflected Dorlief with its New Light joys and New Light rues.

'I haven't seen anything this beautiful in my life!' croaked Groyorg with feeling, and added to that feeling something no one expected him to: 'The march over, I'll stay in Dorlief. A mushroom will grow next to Malam's house... with an orange cap. I'll settle down somehow, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'I'll mark your words, friend,' said Natan.

'If you do, you'll visit me.'

'What's that mushroom you're talking about, Groyorg the Square?' asked Matthew who remembered the bizarre vision that night in Malam's house when Groyorg made his appearance and nudged Daniel.

'Groyorg!' Groyorg called himself to order, used to thus being called by his friend who wasn't there this once, whenever his tongue spoke out of turn, and covered his mouth with his huge paw which, had he done so earlier, would not have let out a rash sound.

Parting with Dorlief made Daniel even more despondent. With each step from Malam's house up to that hill, he had been haunted by his one thought, that Sufus and Safasy were no longer with them... And Matthew's nudge made that thought, crowded with repetition, seek an outlet. So Daniel, still unaware of those present, said in the voice of one doomed:

'Two won't be there to see in the day,

Their eyes clad with violet pending the fray.'

'Dan...' Matthew touched his shoulder. 'Forget it, will you? It's time you forgot that old hag. She'll do you in.'

Daniel shrugged off his hand.

'Forget? Forget whom? Who must I forget?' he said in a strained voice, as if compacting the words and without looking at Matthew.

'You know who I'm talking about,' said Matthew, injured.

'What are you talking about, boys?' Natan said.

'Yes, what was the hag you're talking about out of turn, Mat the Vital?' croaked Groyorg. 'I've hated talk of hags since I was a kid.'

'I wasn't talking out of turn—I just said it.'

'What do you say, Wolfdog?' said Natan.

'He's talking of the old wife we met today. We were walking to the square, the three of us, and there she was. She seemed to have grown out of the ground... with her couplets,' said Semimes reluctantly and paused.

'What sort of couplets?' asked Natan again.

'Bad couplets, very bad.'

'Truth to tell, those couplets are imprinted on my mind,' Matthew admitted. 'But I willed my mind to forget them. Dismiss them as if they'd never been... or that old hag, either.'

'A soothsayer's words aren't all that easy to forget, dear Mat. They are imprinted for you to recall them when they come true. It's then that you start having second thoughts: I was all sorts of a fool to have dismissed the old hag,' said Semimes and added for clarity: 'I think it was the Parlief soothsayer. A soothsayer is no witch, sure thing, but she'd better be given a wide berth.'

'Who must I forget?' Daniel went on in answer either to himself or to Matthew. 'I can't... I can't forget Sufus, I can't forget Safasy... They should have been here with us, standing on this hill... They should have been admiring the fairy tale over there... They should have seen a new sky with us... I want to talk to them... Safasy, say something! Come and say it, say that you and Sufus have been released by the Crossroads.'

'Dan!' Matthew pleaded.

'Answer me, Safasy. Or else you, Sufus. Have pity on me. Talk to me... I so much wish I could talk to you.'

Daniel stopped and clenched his jaws... and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

'Dan,' Natan said softly. 'We haven't forgotten them either. All of us are anguished. You hear, Dan?'

Daniel looked at him reproachfully and said:

'Their eyes clad with violet pending the fray... No, they aren't at the Crossroads, they won't be back.'

'So, Father and I guessed right,' Semimes screeched either out of turn or deliberately.

'Guess what? Out with it,' said Groyorg, at a loss.

'Guessed the color of the sky... if the Parlief soothsayer's rhyme is to be believed.'

'Phew! Blast her!' Groyorg shook his hand.

'They'll step off the limit oh, one by one,  
With none but their faith to vouch for one.'

There was hopelessness in Daniel's voice; he looked depressed. They exchanged glances, each eager to help him without knowing how.

'There's death back there, in Dorlief. There's death waiting for us there,' he poked his hand toward the Sadorn Forest. 'I don't want to lose you, friends. What must I do not to lose you? Should I, perhaps, go back to the Non-world where I belong? And then step forth into blackness? Would it be a fresh start? Would I be able to save Sufus and Safasy and you all, wouldn't I?'

'Dan!' cried Matthew in despair (he could think of nothing to save Daniel; he could not even say, 'I know one thing for sure...')

Daniel opened his pouch, produced the Tear and took Her to his face.

'Let all of this be a dream... with no one overstepping the limit...'

'Stay, Dan! Heed your guide: he hasn't let you down once,' said Semimes in a heartfelt voice. 'Do you remember the name of the Tear you're holding? Remember it.'



Daniel mouthed a word. His grim face was suddenly lit up. It was a tender turquoise light, as if the Tear had said something in a language that was to be seen rather than heard. He understood Her and his countenance lit up.

'I do remember,' he said. 'Sufus... and Safasy... Sufus and Safasy.'

'Right, Dan! Sufus and Safasy. Do you remember seeing it in Her? You saw it in advance... Dan, my friend, Sufus and Safasy are with us. They are in the Tear you keep. And the eight-petal flower hasn't gone—it's there, very much there. Lift your Tear even higher. Let Sufus and Safasy admire a festive Dorlief.'

Daniel raised the Tear higher... and wept. Semimes stood by his side empowered by his faith in his own words, whose importance he had just become aware of.

'Come, friends,' said Sawasard. 'Danad will catch us up.'

Daniel caught up with his friends at the edge of the forest. Sawasard and Natan had lit their torches.

'Stay!'

They stopped, all at once, and looked Daniel's way.

'Here's our Word Keeper-in-chief. You kept looking back and upsetting our pace,' Groyorg reproached Matthew.

'I mean... Sorry, friends. I promise I'll be strong from now on.'

'Very strong,' Semimes corrected Daniel.

'Yes, very strong. I'll rely for my strength on the eight-petal flower: Sufus and Safasy and all of you, my best friends.'

'Attaboy!' croaked Groyorg. 'He's on the straight and narrow now. It'll be all right from now on, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'You are no disgrace as my kinsman,' said Natan as he placed his hand on Daniels's shoulder.

'There's more to it. I believe I understood something in the Parlied soothsayer's rhyme when I was alone.'

'Is it worth it, rubbing it in, Dan?' Matthew was worried.

'Don't be afraid for me, Mat.'

'Let him have his say,' Groyorg interfered. 'Speak up, Dan the Sorrowful!'

'I'm the traitor,' Daniel said.

'Cut it out, Dan!'

'Wait a bit, Mat,' Sawasard said, who had stayed aside of the proceedings, as it were. 'What treachery are you talking about, Dan?'

'Oh, you don't know! Just a moment,' Dan composed himself. 'All right, listen:

The traitor'll upset the eight's narrow and straight

To put time's pace forth well ahead of their fate.'

Daniel paused for a few moments letting the others get to the bottom of the lines he had recited. Then he said:

'It's all about me: I wanted to leave you, flee to the Non-world and have a fresh start, if at all possible. It means turning back time... to rate time higher than fate, mine and yours.'

'Higher than the fate of Dorlief, Dan, and not just Dorlief,' Semimes commented.

'That's right, Dan, it's pat on it,' said Matthew. 'But you didn't go, you didn't become a traitor. Now we should no longer fear the old hag's words. Great!'

'That was wise of you, Dan,' said Semimes. 'Frankly speaking, the old hag also confused my mind: I couldn't do the traitor riddle. Now you have.'

'Right, friends, Sadorn can't wait to have us for company,' Groyorg croaked. 'Let's go before I lie down and sleep.'

'Wait, friend!' Sawasard told him.

'What's wrong, friend?'

'Dan may have divined the words of the Parliel soothsayer, but I don't feel it that way.'

'You don't think there's a real traitor among us, do you?' Semimes asked Sawasard sullenly.

'No, Semimes, there's no traitor among us,' Sawasard replied calmly.

'But someone can become one, can't one? And the idea keeps gnawing at you,' Semimes persisted.

'I have as much confidence in each of you as I have in myself. I can't see myself as a traitor.'

'Who else, then? Where would he spring from, that traitor?' said Groyorg.

'I know as yet no more than you,' said Sawasard. 'But I will, and so will you.'

'I wish it wouldn't be too late as was the case with Sufus and Safasy,' said Natan.

'This rhyme is all lies to confuse us all. We should go on, not mark time!' Groyorg flared up.

'No, Sawasard, there's no other traitor. The rhyme's about me. You know very well: the Council was a secret one, with no one else present but us, Malam, Falafy, Sufus and Safasy, Faryraf—' Daniel paused.

'Tlanalt and Gordrog,' Semimes helped him out. 'Governing Council members are all the right people ('All the wrong people,' flashed through his head inadvertently), and the Dorlielians trust them all—there could not be a traitor among them. No one else knew about our mission. Which means one thing only: Dan has divined the line of the rhyme. He hadn't done it right away, only after he'd done in his soul what shouldn't be done. Sure thing: he won't stray... from the eight's narrow and straight.'

After these words, Semimes looked at him strangely. It could have been a suspicion or, perhaps, a question: Was it a sure thing?

'I can't think straight,' Matthew shrugged. 'In the Flying Ferling, we didn't blab out of turn, I think; never breathed a word of the coming march. Who and where could one...?'

'If I were to nose around for what had been going on at the Council, I'd find a way,' said Natan.

'I for one have no patience with your Faryraf, even if the whole of Dorliel trusts him,' croaked Groyorg.

'I have this to say, Groyorg,' Semimes sounded hurt. 'Every Dorliel's attuned to his time pace.'

'It was just an outburst on my part—I shouldn't have said that. Since I have, let's wait and see. Mum's the word, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'Sawasard?' said Daniel looking questioningly at him.

The rest also looked at the forestman.

'My friends, I see I must own up to you. All the way from Dorlief to Sadorn, I've had the feeling that someone's been watching us. I was ready to admit that all that secrecy had made me oversuspicious. But when Dan recited the Parliel soothsayer's lines about the traitor, I knew the feeling hadn't deceived me...'

'Sawasard, Natan, put out your torches!' Groyorg demanded.

The forestman and Dorliefan complied.

'Why didn't you say before we're being watched?' said Groyorg.

'I didn't want to worry you: confusion is a poor companion. Besides, my ear wouldn't detect the stealthy footfalls of a foe; nor did my eye spy one making his way toward the forest.'

'What do we do now?' asked Matthew.

'If I were the guide, I'd change the route, but the way it is...' Semimes screeched a constricted screech.

'We're all equal here, Wolfdog. Suggest, and we'll decide what to do for the best,' said Natan firmly.

Semimes went on:

'Equal, sure thing, us being Word Keepers. But I have this to say, my friends: whoever's caught the drift of our route won't follow us very far—he'd be afraid. He's matched what he learnt with what is the case. He saw us leave Dorlief without waiting for New Light. What else did he need to betray us? Nothing. Sawasard's failing to see him was no accident. He'd merely caught on to the thought that was trailing us... I'd change the route.'

'Change we should, so long as we're on the way, lest all the evil thoughts of our foes trail us while we are here talking and doing nothing,' Groyorg urged the friends.

'I'd change the route,' Semimes said again. 'To get to the Kaduhar Mountains, we don't have to traverse the Sadorn Forest to the Tawsus Cave, even though it was a Council decision.'

'Right, Semimes,' Sawasard agreed. 'I think the barkycrooks will ambush us at the Tawsus Cave or else in the forest on the way from the Tawsus to the Kaduhar foothills.'

'Yes, Sawasard,' Semimes's voice was rid of any thought of guide. 'It's in this clearing that they'd encircle us. If I were them, I'd crouch in the spur of the Harshid, the one that goes down to the cave and would be among the rocks at the edge of the forest waiting for you... I mean us.'

'Isn't it too much for the one of you?' Groyorg burst out without any ulterior thought.

Semimes's hand reached for the stick, but before it could grip it, he recalled that there was his father between him and Groyorg, then that they both, Semimes and Groyorg were as one.

'I mean: if I were a barkycrook lieutenant, I'd do what I said,' he screeched and frowned, the chance idea of his being a lieutenant having scurried across into his soul and he felt gratified.

'We won't venture there to those barkycrooks. Even though I wouldn't mind getting even with them, Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' said Groyorg.

'I see you're well acquainted with them to want to get even?' Natan caught him at the word.

'As a matter of fact, I am. It's a long story, though. This is not the time for tale-telling.'

'All right then.'

As distinct from Groyorg, Mathew and Daniel were silent, for as they traced their route, following Tlanalt's pencil over the map, they had grasped as much as they had forgotten.

'Groyorg the Square,' Natan's voice had a distinctly facetious ring, 'where should we go, to your mind?'

'I think, Natan the Nervy, we should walk where our footsteps peter out. I don't know where the place is in these parts,' Groyorg looked first at Sawasard, then at Semimes, then at Natan again. 'You know best, my friends.'

'There's a place like that!' Semimes and Sawasard said in unison.

'What a good idea to have two guides to a crew, if they speak on cue,' said Daniel.

'Right you are,' said Matthew.

'Well? What makes you silent?' Groyorg teased the guides. 'Out with it!'

'Except I've never tried that passage,' Semimes screeched, downcast in shame.

'To tell the truth, I've also heard of it... from ours,' said Sawasard.

'A passage?' Groyorg echoed the word as if it nonplused him. 'I hate untried passages! Is there no other way to Faddaf?'

'Wasn't it you suggested we should walk where our footsteps would peter out?' said Semimes. 'I'm prepared to go to the Vanishing Waterfall, even though Father told me to give it a wide berth. Not just now—before.'

'Dorliefans keep away from it. They say where water vanishes, man vanishes too,' said Natan.

'But someone must have passed that way, since both Semimes and Sawasard call this way a passage,' Matthew applied his logic in the hope of hearing a promising answer.

'Four years ago one of ours managed not just to step into the passage where the water flow is cut short but also to step out of it. Know where he stepped out?' Sawasard paused.

'Where?' Semimes's question was half a jiffy before Matthew's and a jiffy before Groyorg's.

'He emerged in the Wedolick Gorge by way of one of the caves. And this is Kaduhar.'

'Just our cup of tea,' Natan commented.

'You said one emerged. How many failed to? Out with it, friend!' asked Groyorg of Sawasard, whether out of turn or not, he was not sure.

'Four of his companions. They never showed up.'

'Does that mean, Sawasard, the way from the waterfall to the Wedolick Gorge will be hidden from the eye?'

'Yes, Natan, this is an invisible way.'

'Then I say yes to our new route.'

'I said my yes when I began talking about the Vanishing Waterfall. Why else would I talk about it?' Semimes screeched.

'I hate untried passages but I love unexpected solutions!' Groyorg admitted. 'So you get my yes, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'An invisible way is better than a visible one, so I also say my yes,' said Matthew looking at Daniel.

'If by changing our route we can outwit the Parlied soothsayer, I also say yes,' said Daniel.

'I, too, say yes to our new way,' said Sawasard. 'And it's going to be like this: we traverse Sadorn and make straight for the Harshid. We'll see in New Light on the way—it'll give us strength.'

'That and a good hunk of festal pie,' Groyorg added.

'And a swallow or two of grappian infusion,' said Natan.

'And a handful of barynth nuts,' Matthew added.

'And a few other words,' said Daniel and added in response to their bated breaths: 'Other than those we march for—festive.'

Sawasard went on:

'We'll camp when we're tired. We'll stop for the night at nightfall. Next day we'll descend to the Kerdock Gorge and follow the Druze to the Vanishing Waterfall. It'll take at least three days. We'll start the ascent to the waterfall in daylight after a good rest. There, on the crag slope, behind the flow, we'll look for a convenient descent to the passage. All right, friends, Natan and I will light the torches and get under way.'

'No talking on the way: we'll have to listen to the forest. And keep closer to one another, lest you get snatched and spirited off to the Emptied Lake,' Semimes put in his weighty word of a guide, and then added with a change of tone from stern to friendly: 'Should you want a bite, you could do it on the go.'

'I do,' said Matthew.

'So do I,' said Daniel (he had not had a bite since witnessing Sufus and Safasy's death).

'I never mind a board with friends,' said Groyorg.

'I wouldn't mind some, either, even though there's no board in sight,' said Natan.

'Right, then let's sit down and have something to eat,' Sawasard suggested.

'Well, since time will be eaten up anyway, I'll have something, too,' Semimes joined in reluctantly. 'Have a nice hunger.'

'Have a nice hunger,' chimed in five voices.

Some short time later, Groyorg's tongue was alive to its secondary duty:

'Here I am, sitting in friendly company, munching on the juicy pie that that good lady brought to Malam... whatsername...'

'Dorrody,' Semimes suggested.

'Dorrody, that's right. Sitting and thinking: what's in store for us in that passage? It wasn't an accident that four forestmen got lost there, was it? Now, forestmen aren't flighty youngsters looking for perdition.'

'We'll get to the Red Cave,' said Semimes. 'It's what ours call it.'

'The Red Cave?' Groyorg echoed.

'In Gontear's words, whoever has been to the cave and seen everything with his own eyes—the inside, the floor, the ceiling and the walls—everything's red throughout. The walls are all fissures. But we must not detour there. Four of Gontear's friends in search of an exit went into the fissures one by one. None of them came back. Gontear hugged the right side of the cave that receded farther and farther. He lost count of time. The unending red all around was cloying to the eyes and affected his reason. The red would not let him go when he dozed off. But finally he did find the way out.'

'Sawasard, wouldn't it have been more reasonable for all five of them to exit the cave where they had entered it, rather than dispersing over fissures losing sight of one another?' asked Daniel.

'Yes, wouldn't it?' said Groyorg who thought the idea promising.

'Dispersing is no good,' Semimes commented. 'That we won't.'

'They reasoned on much the same lines as you, Dan, and you, Groyorg, and, feeling the alien hazard or, perhaps, something beyond its walls, returned to the exit. But there was none. It was just a solid red wall. And they had to look for another exit.'

'What about the exit Gontear ran into, didn't it turn into a solid red wall?' Matthew wondered aloud.

'One thing I heard from Gontear is that one should look for a black spot, the same as where the Vanishing Waterfall flow stops short,' Sawasard explained.

'A similar spot confused us the other day at the Invisible Niche,' Semimes recalled. 'The Loner had told us not to venture there, very much so.'

'Could one get back to the passage from the gorge?' said Daniel.

'Gontear said he got into a small cave from the passage and on to the Wedolick Gorge. There's no stepping back into the passage.'

'Weird,' Daniel thought aloud.

'Even ours thought it weird, too,' said Sawasard.

'I wish we could find an exit from that Red Hole, blast it! There's no point in going back to it,' Groyorg croaked indignantly.

'Wouldn't you like to change the route again, Groyorg the Square?'

'Only if I wouldn't get through the hole, Natan the Nervy, Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

'Well, friends, it's time we were going,' said Sawasard.

'Sitting around and wasting time,' Semimes screeched in a drawl.

After the short but welcome camp dinner, the Word Keepers got up, looked at the skies (as yet untouched by the color of New Light) and stepped into the forest one by one.

'Mat, Dan,' came the habitual screech. 'Don't panic when hundreds of needles and leaves fall on your heads—that's the way forest sees out Old and sees in New Light. It's New Light Defoliation.'

Hardly had they walked half a hundred paces when a torrent of leaves rustled down.

'Mat!' cried Daniel and added nothing, for his feeling were in no need of couching.

'Dan!' cried Matthew (the word sufficed to share in his friend's delight).

The leaves and needles were shed in swarms in the torchlight, filling the entire space. They washed over their bodies, tingling their nerves despite the clothing. They seemed to be taking it off, so much alive they were.

'Mat!'

'Dan!'

But the main thing in this New Light Defoliation was the rustle of the leaves... swarms of them... hollow and tingling and pervasive... as if some giant, the size of Sadorn, had inhaled a lungful of air, only to exhale it over the tree tops... over and over again... The leaves were in confusion, calling (their calls were rustles), dropping, catching at one another, at whatever was in the way. The rustles deafened the air, now on the right, now on the left, now everywhere at once. They penetrated the body and soul and took them away. The souls were dashing about caught with the rustles, now on the left, now on the right, as if torn into fragments. While the bodies rid of their souls trembled and developed cold gooseflesh. When the souls were no longer disembodied, they emerged from the torpor, filled with warmth.

'Mat!'

'Dan!'

The flow now subsided, now resumed... Semimes was walking ahead of Matthew and Daniel and it made him feel good. It was as nothing that they were so loud calling to each other: their cries were drowned out by the rustle of the New Light Defoliation...

Soon the entire Sadorn area was covered in a thick but lightweight mat of leaves and conifer needles. It was a pleasure stepping on it: the feet were facilely received by it and released... It was sheer joy: the swathes of it would now make your feet slither back slowing the progress, now urge you to slide with a running start. At first Matthew's and Daniel's feet took pleasure in the game, quite happy. But after a hundred paces and as many tricks (which could not be called paces) such as gyrations, slides, and kicks (the feet seemed to be designed for kicking leaves), they suddenly felt heavy and resumed a routine pace, different from routine in that the poor feet could not wait for the end of that treacherous matting.

'Had your fill, porcini?' said Semimes in no need of reply. 'Try to forget your feet before camp, as well as the floor they tread—it might be a relief.'

'Thanks for the advice, guide,' groaned Matthew (it was a put-up act). 'I wish we could hear it sooner.'

'It would've been no use before its time,' Semimes objected. 'You would've gone in for merrymaking like so many kids.'

'What about using all this harvest for goat fodder? How d'you like the idea, guide? Would it be a boon?'

Semimes made a few more paces weighing up what Matthew had said before replying.

'I say! That's quite an idea of Mat's! I did say he's a practical guy. Walking along and considering goat benefits.'

'Is that praise or a slur?'

'I wonder at your quick thinking.'

'That's praise enough,' Natan joined in. 'It's a custom with us: both villagers and forestmen gather the leaves before they're too dry for their goats. What isn't good enough for the goats is left in the forest. Our Semimes is in the forefront here.'

'When we're back, we'll raise goats. What about it, Mat the Vital?' Groyorg teased.

'I can't promise, Groyorg the Square, nor do I decline,' said Matthew.

'The goat's a boon... You'll have ferlings in your pockets, however few, with all that milk,' Semimes summed up and added: 'We owe some thanks to Nuruny. How's she doing without me? Missing me, sure thing? So she is.'

'How's she there... now?' said Matthew thinking his own thoughts (Semimes's last words had set him thinking).

'How's she there, the girl of the Non-world?' said Daniel under his breath for Matthew's benefit as he caught on.

## **Chapter Two**

### **'How's she there?'**

The luminous dots on the digital watch ticked off the last seconds of Thursday. She thought it a pleasant experience, even though she had almost no strength left for pleasure, the pleasure being tired. Tomorrow... She did not know whether tomorrow would be lucky. But tomorrow Timothy Bail was sure to call. She had something for her soul's purchase—that call. So she did not feel as awful as before. She had made herself comfortable in her chair in front of the television that lived a life of its own. Strangely enough, it, flighty and stentorian, was not much of a hindrance, helping her, rather, to watch her own life frame by frame from the night of Sunday on.

\* \* \*

On Sunday, about six, she tapped in Dan's landline telephone number—no go. She called his mobile—no human reply either. She called again about seven... half past seven... eight—variations on the subject of 'indifferent infinity.'

He may have taken a flight to Margaret?

'Hello,' a feminine voice answered.

Christine could not place it: it was either Margaret or Cybil in the voice of her mistress.

'Hi. Is this Margaret?'



'Cybil here, darling. I knew it was your voice. Christine?' Cybil machine-gunned in a non-Margaret voice. 'Darling, Margaret's lying down, but if it's anything urgent, I'll get her up. Just tell me, I'll pass it on word for word. What a good thing I haven't gone...'

'Just tell me, Cybil: is Dan there?'

'No, baby, Danny hasn't been here. After you left, he hasn't shown up. Why worry? I can hear you're worried. Don't be, Danny'll turn up yet. And when he does, come here, both of you. You left in such a hurry.'

'Thanks, Cybil. Should Dan... no...'

'What is it, baby?'

'Nothing. Remember me to Margaret.'

I can't quite understand: does she know anything or... 'Don't be worried, Danny'll turn up yet.' Her big mouth defies my understanding, Christine thought. Where's he... ? That diary turning up. It's sure to know where Dan is. It's been making trouble. We parted on a bad footing. Why did I flare up? Blabbing of an abyss. But I *did* think it was there. I wish it wouldn't draw him in. Perchance, it has? What rot! Rot or not? Mat may know something.

'Hello... Hello, I'm listening.'

'Hi. Is this Matthew Feather's number? I haven't got the wrong person, have I?'

'The number's right. But Matthew isn't in at the moment. I merely answered his phone. I'm his mom. Who am I talking to?'

'Sorry to trouble you. I'm his... I'm Daniel Bertridge's acquaintance. You must know him.'

'Of course, I do. How couldn't I? He's my son's best friend. They go way back.'

'He introduced me to Matthew. I'm Christine. I meant to ask Matthew if he knows where Dan is.'

'Dan? He was here this morning... He was, in a manner of speaking: he was in such a hurry he never came in. Matthew answered the door and ran off with him. He left his mobile behind. He allows me to take his calls when he leaves it behind.'

'Where did they go? Do you know?'

'There was no time to ask: it was just "See you" or, perhaps, no "See you," I don't remember. I saw out the window, though, that Matthew picked up the spade.'

'The spade?'

'The spade.'

'Sorry, I didn't ask your name.'

'Pauline.'

'May I ask you, Pauline?'

'Yes, Christine, I'm listening.'

'When Matthew's back, let him call me. He knows my number.'

'I will. Don't worry for no good reason. Matthew's often on the go, sometimes for several days in a row: it's spare parts or ferry a customer's car after repairs. Dan must be with him: the more the merrier.'

'Thank you, Pauline. All the best to you. Take care.'

'Goodbye, Christine. Don't worry. Matthew will call you.'

Christine slammed the phone into its base, ostensibly to make both Cybil and Pauline choke on their dishes of 'Not to worry, baby' and 'Don't worry for no good reason,' one garnished with a sweet taunt, the other with shopworn serenity.

How could they? she thought aloud. Nothing but stupid words. Zilch! I wish I hadn't phoned; it would've spared me anger. Nothing but stupid words... What was it she said about the spade? Oh, yes, Dan was in a hurry... Matthew took a spade along... Some fairy tale, that: taking turns and unearthing spare parts. A likely tale... Calm down, Chris. What could it be? What? What? Dan was in such a hurry he didn't come in. So like him—pursuing an idea, forgetful of himself... Matthew picking up a spade but forgetting his mobile... Where were they bound for with that gear, one with an idea, the other with a spade? What sort of... ?

Christine was very nearly saying 'stinkers.' But she did not—she cried... She felt cold. The tears were dropping on her palm. She saw they were and somehow thought that if she were at the North Pole at the moment (or the South Pole for that matter) her tears would be turning into a growing ice lump and she into a huge ice lump. The word 'lump' was so outstanding in her memory, it had naturally got to the tip of her tongue.

A lump! she got hold of the word. A lump. Dan did say the word... What did he tell me? I did hear him say the word... A lump, a lump or was it a bundle? He should have been holding a lump or a bundle in his hand. I remember, I remember: I somehow liked the way he said it: 'My hands remembered accepting that paper wad from my gramps... This is it.' This is it. So, that was what they wanted the spade for. Well, thank you, Dan, for the bundle of a wad... Why didn't you call me? Did you forget who'd been helping you all along... all my life? I have myself to blame: him showing me his grandfather's diary and me talking of an abyss—anyone would've felt injured... Still, you should've called. All right, when you call me tomorrow—I'll let you have it. You, Mat, too, you should have told him... no, first to yourself, that there's also Chris. Just you wait—the moment you call me, I'll give out to you; I'll give you a talking-to. I'll hang up on you so hard it'll hurt...

She waited for the call all Monday. All Monday she solved the insoluble problem: what was inside that wad? All Monday she picked up the receiver only to put it back in order not to return to the Sunday with its useless words and anger in response. There was no Tuesday. There was Tuesday for other people. It wasn't there for Christine. It was all Monday. It fattened up as it tanked up on Tuesday and a huge piece of Wednesday, so there was no Wednesday any more than Tuesday. It would have tanked up on all of Wednesday, but it was not there any more than Tuesday. But Christine realized it was the limit and broke off the unending Monday by calling at seven pm Timothy Bail. There was no one else she could call.

Oh, let him be in. Let him be in. Let him—

'Hello,' said Cathleen Bail.

'Good evening, Mrs Bail. Christine Willis calling. Daniel Bertridge and I were in your house a few days ago. We were received by your husband.'

'I remember you very well, Christine. Just call me Cathleen.'

'Right, Cathleen, could I speak to Mr Bail? Is he in?'

'He is and would be pleased to listen to you. Just a minute. I'll tell Timothy to take your call in his office.'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Hello! Christine?'

'Hello, Mr Bail.'

'It's Timothy. Timothy for you and Daniel. I thought we parted as friends last time we met. Let me keep that faith.'

'Good, Timothy. It's better that way for me, particularly in my current position.'

'What's happened, Christine? On the other hand, no, don't! I've said the word: happened. Let me play my hunch since it's on hand... Ever since you and Daniel left, I've felt I'll soon see you again. You of all people. For Daniel—for God's sake, no offence meant—has vanished, hasn't he?'

The word made Christine hold her breath.

'Vanished?' she whispered as if she had not divined as much. 'Yes, he has! I wouldn't admit it to myself, but that's what's happened.'

'Pray don't panic before it's time.'

'Pray don't! I've been told that before.'

'Okay, I won't. When did it happen?'

'On Sunday.'

'On Sunday,' echoed Bail and considered it.

'He and his friend Matthew Feather left for someplace... with a spade and without saying anything. Oh, and I'm forgetting...'

'I can guess where it happened. I've been there, you know.'

'Good of you. I think it's something to do with the thing you told me about... the one Thornton had sent you once to Bushtunts for.'

'It's a good thing you called me.'

'Will... you help?' Christine asked with a note of hope.

'I must help. I've no right not to help,' Bail hastened to say, so the idea that Daniel and his friend had been lost without trace should not get the upper hand. 'Just give me a day to consider things.'

(Bail hardly knew what he wanted the day for. He could have said, 'Two days,' but that would have been too long a wait for Christine).

'Yes, Timothy, I'll wait.'

'I...'

'What made you pause?'

'I don't know whether I should talk about it, but I will since I began. I could see from Daniel's eyes that... he was different, unlike me, that there was no stopping him. Once he decided to go ahead to the end, he'd... he's no longer here.'

'I don't get you. What are you talking about?'

'Listen to me, Christine. What I'll say will seem improbable to you. But it's the truth. Don't look for him here. Don't call anyone... He's over there... in the country that Lee told me about many years ago. Lee is Felix Thornton.'

'I remember. But what country are you—'

'You won't find it on a map. It's a country where childhood traitors aren't in favor. Lee said as much. I don't know where it is but I'm sure Daniel and his friend had left for it.'

'I can't understand a thing all the same.'

'It's impossible to understand. Nor should you try to. I haven't been able to over the years... But Daniel is there at the moment. And so is Lee. Fate may bring them together yet. So much for it. I've been fantasizing. Sorry, I could have frightened you.'

Christine became aware all of a sudden that she knew the truth... and there'd be nothing more. And yet she asked, weakness and disbelief in her voice:

'But how could one help? Timothy? You must've got an idea or two... or else your hunch might suggest something?'

Bail could make out what there was in her voice. He suddenly remembered he had heard notes like that in the voice of another person. And he knew at that moment what he would undertake tomorrow... no, today, right after the conversation with Christine.

'Give me a day, just a day. I'll call you on Friday. Now wish me good luck and say goodbye,' he said, aware that she would find it difficult to bring the conversation to a close and stay alone with her thoughts.

'I wish you good luck, Timothy. I'll be waiting,' she said, hung up and broke into tears.

\* \* \*

The long-awaited Friday was on them. Bail called at ten in the morning on the dot. Christine picked up the receiver before the second ring.

'Hello! Timothy?' she blurted.

'Morning, Christine.'

Both Christine and Timothy were silent for a while.

'You aren't asking me anything?' There was something promising in his voice and the question.

'I am but I'm afraid of the words.'

'I can quite understand: I've been afraid of words on a few occasions, too. I'm answering your tacit question: I've got something for you. To be exact: it's not something but someone. That's to cheer you up. We'll leave the rest of the words for the meeting. Just hop in the car and come to my place. Cathleen and I will be waiting.'

'Thanks, Timothy. You're... a friend. I'm on my way,' said Christine, excited.

'Christine, wait!'

'Yes?'

'It may be superfluous, but take care on the road.'

Between this phone conversation and the one in the office Christine knew (with a picture over the caption *The Power of Words and Tears* on the wall) there was a road with no more pictures along the way... there was a meeting that looked the looks of old friends and spoke the words that did not have to be looked for... there was a luncheon in the family circle, Jenny being the kid sister and Christine her older sister amidst the feeling—Christine's feeling—that she had never had it so good...

'It's hard to get rid of my ladies,' said Bail with a wide grin in his office.

'They're such dears. They made me feel good.'

'Me, too.'

'What have you got for me? I'm no longer afraid to ask the question.'

Bail cast a glance at the clock on the table.

'A man will arrive here in a quarter of an hour at my request. Godfrey Leif, my former classmate, currently a dentist, but that's beside the point. I called him on Wednesday, right after our conversation. But he was drunk, dead drunk, so I could talk to him only last night.'

'And the man might be some use?' said Christine (and her voice and look betrayed frustration).

'But pray, don't jump to conclusions.'

'Okay, I won't.'

'His wife died two years ago, survived by himself, his son and his daughter. Two months ago his son was lost.'

'I did jump, Timothy.'

'Got lost under unexplainably eerie circumstances. This is no exaggeration. I don't know all the details, but I've never heard of people lost that way...'

'What way?' Christine could not help the question, for Bail had suddenly paused.

'Sorry. I fancied for a moment myself and Jenny... and that sort of thing... He got lost under Godfrey's friend's and the boy's sister's very eyes.'

'Do you see any connection between this case and... ours?'

'Oh, Christine! One can't always see the connection... The day after you and Daniel visited me, I went to have my dressing changed and nearly ran down a man. The man was drunk (he could barely use his legs) and staggered right in my path. You will have understood that it was Leif. But that's not the point. I knew him at once and, strangely enough, so did he. I gave him a lift. On the way he bewailed his fate, and I could quite understand. But that's not the point. At some point in our conversation on Wednesday, I could plainly see he hadn't come my way by accident. He turned up so we could meet today and talk with him. That's that. That's the connection I see. And I believe today's meeting will mean a lot... a terrific lot for you. I should have made a reservation: that's the way I see it but you never know given the mood... or something like that. Were it someone else, I would have made the reservation as a backup. But I won't, not with you: you've called me your friend. I've told you what I think without reservation.'

(Bail was so eager to talk to Christine without reservations that he had trouble doing so. At this point, his nature outwitted him and he made a reservation about reservations).

Christine meant to ask something but their chat was interrupted by a light tap on the door. Cathleen entered the room.

'Timothy, Godfrey Leif has arrived with his daughter Amery. I told her to play with Jenny. Leif didn't mind, and they went to her room. Will I show him in? He's waiting down there, in the living room.'

'Thank you, Cathleen. I'll come down, I think. Will you wait for us here, Christine?'

'Yes, Timothy.'

Bail was back with his guest three minutes later.

'Meet Christine Willis. This is Godfrey Leif.'

'How d'you do?' said Christine stepping forth and holding out her hand.

'How d'you do?' said Leif.

Christine very nearly pulled back her hand: the ice of his palm burned so. That made her look closely at his face. Leif's eyes expressed despair; it seemed to be imprinted on his face and have nothing to do with what was going on at the moment. The livid skin exuded cold. And unexpectedly a thought flashed through her mind that left her thrown: 'He's dying. He'll probably be dead this very minute.'

'Take your seats, friends. Will I leave you alone?'

'No, Timothy. Stay, please,' Christine hastened to say.

'I don't care,' said Leif shrugging and took a chair. 'I'll do what you asked me to do.'

'Sorry, Godfrey, you'll find it hard to speak about that...'

'I find it hard anyway, whether I speak about it or not.'

Christine saw his hands and knees were shaking.

'I can't control them,' said Leif as he caught her gaze. 'I don't give a damn. But it isn't what you think.'

'I had no time to think anything, Godfrey.'

'I mean it isn't drink. Think what you like.'

'Godfrey, please, tell Christine how it happened,' Bail asked him, not to make her humor the wretch.

'Yes-yes-yes-yes,' Leif uttered nonchalantly, hurt.

'Godfrey, I'm here not out of curiosity,' said Christine gently. 'I have to know your story to look for the extension of mine.'

Leif raised a hand to indicate he knew.

'Cora died two years ago... leaving me Andy and Amery. A year later I met Gladys, Gladys Towler. She wasn't my patient at the time. I look people in the mouth, that's my job, with just a foot between me and my patient. At that distance, people sense not just with their eyes and ears but also through the auras they emanate. We started dating. It was in earnest, so much so that the children and she had... to get used to one another... Gladys spared no effort: she played computer games with them (I never did), helped Andy with his homework. They took walks, went to the Luna Park. They liked best the Ferris wheel. That was where it happened, at the very top. Getting away from it all, from what you tread day in day out, and have a bird's eye view of it, who wouldn't?'

Leif paused... Then went on:

'They were seated, the three of them. Talking. Perhaps, laughing... Enjoying life... Gladys went mad. She kept saying the one word—abyss.'

'Abyss.' Two words converged in Christine's consciousness: one, *abyss*, had only just rushed in, the other, *abyss*, was racing to meet it down the long tunnel of her consciousness. They clashed and made the entire structure inside her cranium shudder. Christine was all atremble.

'You're too perceptive of words, Christine, you're trembling,' Leif said.

'It's just a memory. It'll pass. Go on, please.'

'Gladys never said another word. She's still silent. In a psychiatric asylum.'

'Will she pull through? What do the doctors say?' Christine wanted to know.

'I know from experience: new teeth don't grow out,' said Leif.

'Your daughter? Did she tell you anything?'

'She was the one that did. No one else had seen anything. She's just a kid—she explained everything her own way.'

'What did she say?'

'She said Andy had joined mother. Mother had called him, and he had joined her in heaven.'

Christine suddenly thought the meeting was unavailing and began considering what else to ask: there was no getting up and going, although she wished she could. Bail, too, doubted for a moment the idea had been a good one, but just for a moment: as distinct from Christine, he kept on waiting for the sign of fate to manifest itself.

'Godfrey, I don't know if you've asked Amery, or if the question would've hurt her—' Christine began.

'I think I have,' Leif interrupted her. 'I've asked her all sorts of things. Don't hesitate to ask your question.'

'Why did Andy and Amery's mother call him alone?'

'I've told you I have. We're all alike, the wretches that we are, we clutch at the same questions until we drink ourselves to death or—'

'I'm not going to drink myself to death, Godfrey, I mean to find my friends.'

'Sorry, Christine, but it's naïve of you. There's nothing but the air left. There was a manikin with not a trace left of him. No one had seen the angels or Cora's soul descending.'

'Stop it!' cried Christine. 'I asked you a question; you never answered it.'

'I, too, meant to track down my Andy. I took a few rides on that blasted wheel. First with Amery, then alone... Now I answer your question. Amery said mother had called Andy through that gawping stone. Amery always left hers at home in the casket Cora had given her with that gawping stone. Amery was afraid to lose it... and was afraid Andy would lose his... gawping stone. Cora's father had given it to her on his return from an expedition. He was a geologist. The stone made its way from her childhood to Andy's and Amery's. It's just that when she was a kid, the stone had two eyes, and then turned into two one-eyed stones. Cora had asked me to saw it into two, with an eye to each. But she wouldn't call them one-eyed stones—just gawping stones. So, we had two of them. Cora must've felt she'd soon abandon us, and gave the kids one gawping stone each for Christmas. That was two and a half years ago.'

Christine was moved. There were tears on her eyes.

'I'm sorry,' she said and left the room.

A minute later, Bail and Leif left it too.

'Wait for me, Christine,' Bail said (he was obviously in a hurry). 'I'll just take Godfrey and Amery home.'

'Goodbye, Christine,' said Leif, looked aside and went down.

'Goodbye, Godfrey,'

Bail was soon back. He ran upstairs right away. But there was no Christine either on the landing or in the office. He left a paper bag on the table and ran downstairs. He found Christine in the dining room. Cathleen, Jenny and their guest were having coffee and cookies.

'Sorry, I must talk to Christine in private... Have you had a taste of the coffee? Sorry, but I want to have a word with you... it's pressing,' Bail was speaking in the doorway, as if fearful he would lose what had been left behind his back. He rushed the words on their way feverishly in a manner that was both apologetic and urgent.

The hostess and guest smiled at each other. Christine excused herself, got up and followed Bail out.

'Let's go up to my room. So whatever is concerned with—' Bail was very nearly saying: with Thornton, but decided against it at so auspicious a moment and put it a different way: 'So whatever's concerned with this affair is confined to this room. You're about to see a thing. It's put me out, if I can put it that way. Come up to the table. It's in the bag. Take it out: you must feel one another.'

It was clear Bail meant to gladden her, wanted her to partake of his gladness. Christine was somewhat embarrassed by his words, but she opened the bag and removed what Bail had called a thing. It was a piece of rock, perhaps of solidified lava. She thought immediately (because of Bail's strange words, perhaps: 'You must feel one another') that it was not... inanimate, that it had felt her. She twisted it in her hands. On one side, another round stone protruded from it (or was it a stone?) The turquoise of it had many tints: blue and greenish.

'A gawping stone!' Christine exclaimed. 'It does gawp!'

'Looking as if it were alive, isn't it?' Bail was as happy as a child.

'Yes, Timothy. It's hard to pull your eyes away.'

'It was even harder to cadge it from Amery. I won't bother you with how I managed it, lest you call me a rogue and a cynic.'

'Then, why did you... ?'

'Wait a mo, Christine. You don't know as yet what you're holding in your hand. Do you remember? I never saw the thing I was trying to extort from Bushtunts.'

'But you saw the sketch. You mean...'

'It's Her! Except it was enclosed in a stone. I remember very well: the thing looked like a bead, but it seemed to consist of tiny clouds that floated against one another, exactly like this one, and the eye couldn't sense its solidity. I didn't know what color it was: the sketch was in black pencil. But I'm sure: inside our stone is a bead like the one in Thornton's sketch.'



'So, inside the paper bundle Bushtunts had given Dan before his death was a bead. It was the bead Dan and Mat were out to unearth.'

'Precisely, Christine. And now we have to consider everything carefully before we do anything,' said Bail and whispered, afraid of this words: 'What am I talking about? I don't know what I'm talking about.'

'Timothy, you were just playing a hunch. I also thought this gawping stone is just a beginning... The eye would help me find my friends... But we have to consider everything carefully... I can't think straight.'

'Christine?' Bail exclaimed suddenly as if he had remembered something or had a guess.

She looked at him questioningly.

'Christine, you must stay with us. Please, stay! Cathleen and Jenny will be ever so happy.'

'You don't have to talk me into it: I will, gladly.'

\* \* \*

Saturday started with some clarity for Christine. There was no longer confusion in her head, and she realized that there was no longer a problem she should rack her brain over peering into the gawping stone. She should just proceed step by step where the eye tells her to. It was no mere guess: it was just that her consciousness had bred the notion.

After breakfast, Christine called Leif. She and Bail had decided that if she were to speak to Godfrey, he would not have the heart to refuse. Without him, Christine's idea would be unrealizable.

'Good morning, Godfrey. Christine speaking.'

'You find it good?'

'Good enough, for we're obsessed and have no desire to drink ourselves to death,' she said, only to doubt she had said the right thing.

'Good morning then, Christine. I haven't had a drop since our meeting yesterday. Don't you believe? Well, no matter.'

'I do. Will you show me the place where Andy got lost?'

Leif considered it for a while and then asked:

'When?'

'Bail and I will pick you up right now,' said Christine firmly, and faltered: 'Is there anyone to babysit Amery? It would be a shame to torture the child with the same things.'

'A nanny comes to take care of her. She'll be here any minute now.'

'Good. See you.'

. . . The cage Christine, Bail and Leif were sitting in had passed the topmost point of the unending path of the giant wheel.

'We're nearing the point where Andy got lost,' said Leif under his breath. 'There... there it is. Amery said it happened here. She somehow remembered the place. I seem to be feeling it now. How? I can't tell. But I could detect it with my eyes closed. He stepped off the cage here, on this side.'

'Stepped where?' Bail asked incredulously, as if he had heard about it for the first time.

'Where could one step off this cage?'

'Sorry, Godfrey.'

'He should have been frightened?' Christine said in wonderment as she leaned over the side and looked down. 'It's frightening! It's best looking into the middle distance.'

'I don't know... I don't know where he was looking at that cursed moment, my son was: I was nowhere near.'

'What did Amery say the first time around?' Christine asked.

'. . . Andy raised his gawping stone in front of him. She immediately told her brother to put it away: she was afraid he'd drop it. He didn't seem to be listening. Amery said he never so much as looked at her or said anything. He kept looking at the stone. He thus stood on the seat and stepped over the side. He vanished under her very eyes right in the air. Gladys cried and tried to catch his arm but she could not stop him. Her mad cry merely frightened the life out of Amery.'

'Godfrey, did Amery see or hear her mother?' Bail asked her gently, even carefully.

'I've asked her about it. She said she had no gawping stone with her, so she couldn't see mother. I think those words were born of the imagination,' Leif said.

A silence fell. There was something trying about it. The cage was nearing the ground.

'Well, I think I can be of no more help. I don't feel like going round and round on this wheel.'

'We're sorry, Godfrey,' said Christine (there was pity in her eyes).

'I've no reproach. Goodbye, Christine.'

Bail took Leif home. Christine stayed behind. On the first ride, she had not the heart to produce Amery's gawping stone from her purse. She was afraid of something. Perhaps, it was uncertainty. Perhaps, she was afraid it would all end in nothing... On her second ride she thought she could feel the place where Andy had got lost. To put her obscure perception to the test, she reached out with her hand and fingered the air: would it respond in any way? She sensed nothing special... and thought she would produce the awful stone on the third ride and look at it... into its eye...

The Ferris wheel took no note of some gazers leaving and others getting on. It crept on and on... up and down simultaneously. Christine's cage was again nearing the fateful point. Christine screwed up her eyes, groped her purse open and removed the gawping stone. The wheel's traveling so slowly, she thought. A hateful gigantic snail: stretching time itself, its every moment. It should be there to give a ride to those who need nothing. On the other hand, that's what it's doing. You're the odd one out here, secretary to an oddball, in love with the oddball... Now, have you made up your mind or not? You have, haven't you, after a manner? The hateful snail's modifying your resolution to 'after a manner,' making it look reasonable, with you beginning to think you might back out, to think of your former self and return to it. Then you won't go mad like Gladys. Suddenly Christine sensed (the way you sense somebody's furtive glance) that

she had come level with some invisible window, and it was luring her invisibly and inaudibly. She lost no more time—she took the stone to her face, and recoiled to the opposite side. If anyone had seen her at that moment, he would have thought she had been swept by a hurricane that made her shake. She was all ashake. Her heart was racing, as if it were going to get both out of her chest and the cage that was hovering over the abyss.

'Oh, that I wouldn't go mad! Oh, that I wouldn't go mad!' Christine murmured as she fisted her hands, as if trying to hold her reason in hand; but it wouldn't be in check, it would get lost, because it could not come to terms with what Christine had seen. 'Oh, that I wouldn't go mad!'

Bail was back waiting for Christine at the Ferris wheel. As soon as she emerged from the cage, he realized she was not herself. She looked like one in danger: she cringed, pressing her hands to her bosom (there was her purse in one and the gawping stone in the other) and staggering in her hurry, her face pale. On seeing Bail she rushed to him, buried her face in his shoulder... and cried. He could feel her shaking as in a fever.

'Timothy, am I out of my mind?' she asked him suddenly.

He stroked his head and said:

'If your only word were the word *abyss* I'd think that but would never admit it.'

Christine smiled through her sobs.

'It wasn't accidental, my uttering it,' she said.

'So you accidentally haven't gone mad.'

'Yes, Timothy. Take me away from here in a hurry.'

Halfway home to the Bails, she said:

'I'll stay with you for another day. It'd be better that way.'

'Christine, stay as long as you want. One day's not enough in any case. You need a good rest. Unless—'

'Timothy,' she interrupted him. 'I've seen—'

Bail waited for Christine to take her breath.

'I've seen a fissure... in space. It grew and was ready... to swallow me. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't even look. But I saw it.'

'That means Thornton country does exist?'

'I don't know.'

That night Christine called first Margaret Bushtunts, then Pauline Feather. She told them Daniel and Matthew were on an expedition to Tibet. Why Tibet, she knew not. The word *Tibet* just occurred to her. Then she had a walk with Jenny. Then alone, until late at night. Then she talked to Cathleen—about nothing in particular; she just felt like sitting with someone and listening. Then she went upstairs, took a shower and lay down. And thought: what would she see if she closed her eyes? She closed her eyes... and saw nothing. Good. It means she's calmed down and can sleep.

She suddenly remembered the picture in Bail's study. She tried to see it in her mind's eye... What was the important detail missing in the reproduction limned by her imagination? It seemed to have been lost. What was it? she thought. Now you won't rest until you see the picture. Is that hard to do? What

you do is get up, enter Bail's office and look at it. And the missing detail will turn up. It isn't hard at all. It's nearby. She overcame the gravitation of her cozy nest, shrugged on her dressing gown and went into the corridor... The office door was unlocked. Probably, Bail never locks his office, she thought. The footfalls amplified by the silence and the darkness of the night frightened her. Who could that be down there at this late hour? She scurried into the office, shut the door to and switched on the light to shoo off the darkness with its tricks and do what she was there for—look at the picture. Here it is in front of me. I can see everything. But I can't see... I don't quite know what? A sudden thought made her shudder. It was the word that occurred to her. The fissure. There must be a fissure. Where is it? It seemed to her at that point that the awful faces had come to life and turned their wild eyes at her. A saving thought flashed through her mind: It's a dream. She shut her eyes tight: in her childhood it had always worked whenever she wanted to opt out of a bad dream. She opened her eyes: there emerged in the picture... (This is what was wanting; this is what I couldn't find in my memory.) There was a fissure in the canvas. Christine recalled that Thornton had cut the canvas with a knife in his rage. This is how it got there. The fissure grew bigger and bigger...

'Christine! Don't do it!' came Bail's voice from behind the door.

The voice had a different ring. It was alien. She was afraid of it for some reason. No, this is not Bail, she guessed. It's Thornton! I have to hide. But where?

'Christine! It'd make no sense.'

The voice behind her back made her hide for her life. She stepped where she could hide herself from him within those walls—into the huge black hole that the fissure had grown to. And was blinded, as it were.

'Come back, Christine! Come back!' called the faraway voice of... Bail's.

That's it: I'm inside, she told herself. That's that. The gigantic snail's been left behind.

The blackness led Christine on. At some point, she thought she was losing herself, she was ceasing to exist, she was dissolving in that benign blackness... Suddenly she awakened from the dream. Violet, a lot of violet. It's everywhere. A sea of violet... Why, it's the sky! The sky in the picture... And mountains... mountains... Her gaze stumbled and turned back to check on something. It's them. As dreadful as in that picture. Marching right at me. That means I'm still dreaming? What do I do? Holler? I will in just a moment and wake up. And everything will vanish. Timothy, Cathleen and Jenny will come back to me. Christine hollered for what she was worth:

'A-a-ah!'

'Look, there's a broad there!' cried one of the five ugly-faced monsters in a hoarse croak that sounded as if it was passing through a rusty tube, and waved his hand at her.

'She's ours. Let's seize her,' another croaked, and all of them made a dash for her.

A surge of fear lifted her: she fled. The merciless rocks made her stumble, caught and tore at her feet. The heavy resounding tread behind her back drew

her impotence nigh. She fled in a straight line, with the crags on either side. They could not help her. Were she to reach one, it would be a cul-de-sac. That was why she was making for where the plateau abutted nothingness. Could her salvation be there... ? Christine stopped at the edge and froze. There was nothing but water down there. A mountain lake? she thought. It looked strange: murky and dead. It's not beckoning: it won't help me. She looked back: the ugly faces were nearer than she had thought—within five paces of her.

'That's all,' she breathed out, doomed, and leaped down.

She could feel herself submerging deeper and deeper... In those deaf and mute moments, she recalled the giant snail sprawling under a cold morning rain until it defied reason, Bail's desperate words broken into hundreds of cold jets, the gawping stone rabidly pulsing in her hand, and the fissure... fissure... blackness... The air in her chest was petering out, but she was not afraid: she had dived before and knew how to hold her breath for three minutes, while her record was three minutes and thirty-five seconds. She made a stroke: she had to go up and breathe. Suddenly the water went wild: it entwined her legs with its watery ropes and rolled her into a wet cold coil drawing her under all the while. Christine could no longer resist. But she had enough life left to recall something that would give her a saving grace.

'Chris, come to us. You'll meet my best friend... Mat, this is Christine Willis, my—'

'Personal secretary.'

'Or rather, an agent for extricating Dans out of problems. Ever since school.'

'Why Dans? Oh, I know why: you've always been different. Let me meet your best friend at last.'

'Matthew Feather, PhD, MD: cars, bikes, you name it.'

'Enchanted, Prof. Can I call you that from now on?'

'Suit yourself, if there's a from now on.'

The whirlpool which had captured Christine a few moments before suddenly pushed her out of its coil right on to the shore. At that moment she plunged into what was wanting—the air. She breathed in, and again... and again—it made her dizzy, and she blanked out... I was in too much of a hurry, she thought, it'll go... The bright light had banished a freak eclipse. The sky was still violet. Mountains all around. She got up carefully: the ugly faces were gone... The mountains are somehow different... Grass instead of the rocks. Christine realized she was somewhere else. It cheered her up. She rose. The legs felt weak, the head was giddy. Where now? Away from those mountains: they frighten me.

. . . Christine skirted a crag at whose foot was the forbidding... saving lake. On her way she looked apprehensively around but, apart from the still, warped aspects of the mountains, nothing frightened or gladdened her. At last the crag was left behind and she sighed with relief. Whence now? To the left of her, up to the foothills, there was forest. The attenuating mountains on the right were also consumed by forest. But her gaze was drawn by what appeared in front: meadows, hills, the edge of a wood. The edge is just right for me. I'll skirt it and see what is behind it. If I see nothing I'll get up the tallest tree: a tree's no crag,

me being a squirrel rather than an ibex, or, perchance, a monkey. I'll see which, anyway. Christine was thinking while her legs were taking her to the wood...

But Christine's gaze was deceived, drawn by the wood's edge, after it had run over the way she was to cover too briskly and too facilely. It proved too long and too dull. Besides, her shoes, though sensible (soft, light, on a solid sole), had not rid themselves of the lake water, as distinct from the jeans and blouse, which had dried up on her body, and made that way awkward to boot. Halfway through, Christine was tired out. She sat down on a boulder that turned up handy, took off her shoes and started fantasizing to save herself despondency.

'I'll count to thirty... no, fifty... no, a hundred would be more like it, and riding out of the woods would be... At first, I'll see a horse, a bay... or perhaps, a dappled grey, then a wagon, and an old man in it, grey-haired with a long beard. I won't be able to sit waiting and meet him halfway. When we meet, he'll say: "Hi, baby. You haven't lost your way, have you?" I'll say in reply: "Hi, uncle. Right you are: I've lost my way." "Whence are you?" he'd ask. "Out of the lake, uncle, out of the lake."'

The last words pepped her up a bit. She went on having fun.

'The old man would have pity on me and take me along with him to the village. He'll consider my words about the lake mere tittle-tattle, but would never let on, not to offend me, but will just smile in a knowing way. He would hold the rein in one hand, pat his wagon for the canteen and hold it out to me with the words: "Drink, baby. You must be thirsty." And I'll take huge gulps of cool water enjoying its virginal taste, for it's sure to be from a spring... Unlike my murky lake. On the way, he'll tell me about two guys who'd chanced on his village a few days before, who had also lost their way, and their names are Daniel and Matthew...'

Unbeknownst to Christine as she was talking to herself was that two pairs of keen eyes were watching her at a safe hunting distance and two pairs of nimble legs were in hot pursuit. Little did she know, too, that this and another thing lay in wait for her within three paces of what was to be for her at the moment the benign old man's wagon.

Suddenly Christine heard some strange sounds. They were proceeding either from underground or right from under the rock of a wagon. They were hollow and strained. Christine was alert and thought that the plot of land nearby stirred and rose... Then another one, two paces from the first... then another, two paces from the second. She tucked in her legs watching (A mole, she thought). A moment later three hummocks rose. There must be several of them, Christine thought and felt ill at ease. Hardly had she put on her shoes when the hummocks started cracking up under high pressure, and breaking apart—three red snouts appeared, snorting and soughing. In another moment, where the hummocks had been, there were three black heads as big as those of huge dogs gyrating and shaking off the earth. The gyration stopped, and three pairs of fierce eyes peered at Christine. Her whole body shaking, she got up to her feet, fumbled for her cell phone in her jeans pocket, threw it at the nearest head and missed. There was nothing else to hand... save... She unzipped the main pocket (that morning she had put in it the thing that made it main), took the gawping stone and pelted the

same head with it—and hit it. But the head in question did not vanish underground—on the contrary, it was enraged, opened its maw and hissed. The other two heads hissed in a rage next. The beasts, their eyes fixed on Christine's fearful eyes, bit at the air in impatience, as if to show what they would do to her, trying to get out in the meantime. Their trunks were strong, resilient, covered with thick black fur. With their ratty aspect (Christine feared rats most of all), their ferocity that emanated from their eyes and was suggested by their motions (the very air seemed to be contracted and trembling thus affected), their shrieky hiss (ssst-ssst), their unnatural emergence (they seemed to hatch from the earth) the fierce monsters inspired such a horror in her that she could stand it no longer and lost consciousness.

### Chapter Three

#### **'You shouldn't stay in place, but you shouldn't go on either'**

Sawasard got down from a ledge above the cave where the Word Keepers camped. Semimes was sitting near it.

'Good morning, Semimes. You're an early bird today, I see. Why can't you sleep?'

'Something makes my stick anxious. It's either the waterfall or the hundreds of heavy footfalls bringing the danger near.'

'There's no one in sight as far the eye can reach.'

'We can't see but the stick can hear something,' said Semimes. 'Father would've known, but I could be confused and inadvertently frighten you all... On the other hand, it's better to err than to be caught unawares.'

'I'll go wake up the boys,' said Semimes and clambered into the cave through a small opening.

The cave had been spied the previous night by Semimes when exploring the approach to the waterfall with Sawasard and Natan. There could not be a better place for a camp: it was high over the floor of the gorge on the right side of the Druze, the ledge above it afforded a good view of the terrain, with their objective, the Vanishing Waterfall, within fifty paces of it.

'Rise and shine, friends. Day's breaking,' said Semimes when inside the cave.

'I only just closed my eyes, and there you are making us get up,' came the resentful voice of Matthew. 'It's still dark. Let us sleep.'

'It's dark in your cave. The fire had long gone blind, with the embers left smoldering. Give Dan a nudge; I'll take Groyorg to task.'

(Groyorg had to be repeatedly shaken to make him part with the mushrooms he dreamt of every night.)

'I say! Now it's a mushroom under a clear sky, now it's a lair!' croaked Groyorg.

'I see you dream of a skilletful of mushrooms every night, Groyorg the Square,' Natan jumped at the occasion.

'It could be a skilletful, it could be a field of them. What good is it to you, Nervy? You weren't there.'

'That would make quite a few skilletfuls. Was the field large?' Daniel woke up.

'The field was vast, as large as your Dorlief, except it's no occasion for a skillet.' Having exchanged the invigorating morning pleasantries and taken the weapons and travel bags, the friends got outside.

'It's a fifth violet day, and me none the wiser,' Matthew commented as he looked at the sky.

'I got wise to it right away. It's my kind of sky,' said Daniel.

'A violet-eyed one getting wise to a violet sky,' said Groyorg.

'Guide?' Semimes's screech, tense and tenacious, made everyone look his way. 'Do we exercise?'

Semimes could no longer disregard the idea he had had since he first met Sawasard: putting it off until a later date could meet with uncertainty.

'Not a bad idea, guide. What do we begin with?' Sawasard would not be outdone, though Semimes's idea was all too sudden and incomprehensible.

'We'll begin it and finish it like warriors: let's pit our weapons, your sword and my stick.'

Everyone looked at Semimes puzzled.

'What're you up to, Wolfdog?' said Natan as he detected determination in his tone and gaze.

'Cut it out, Nervy, let us be.'

Saying this, Semimes pulled his stick from under his girdle and hit Sawasard on the chest. It was lightning-like and hard, and the forestman lost his balance, for he had had no time to recoil. Semimes hit again, but Sawasard evaded and the hit landed on a rock. Sawasard drew himself up to his full height, bared his short swords and charged. Semimes repulsed his left strike on the shoulder with his stick only to miss Sawasard's lightning-like lunge—the second sword hit his thigh. At the end, Sawasard had turned his sword so it would not dissect Semimes's leg but fall flat. For all that it was flat, the strike was painful, and Semimes sprang back to compose himself and decide how to deal with the two smart swords controlled by one thought. The next moment the guides rushed each other, and it was a feat of slashing, each choosing at any new moment the one move that was effective—a lunge, a feint or defence... In this feat, Semimes made one wrong move—and Sawasard's lunge caught him in the side (with the flat of the sword again). It was only once that Sawasard stumbled, and Semimes managed what no one had ever done to the invincible forestman: he knocked a sword out of his hand. Each stood his ground, and the slashing went on and on... involving the other four.

Groyorg croaked with pleasure ohing and mumbling something under his breath. He had an appreciative eye for the encounter, for he knew a thing or two about battle. In his mind's eye, he took now one side, now the other, his Dorliefan and forestman mentally wielding the incomparable Lil'un-to-the-rescue.

Natan appreciated the encounter as a warrior that could pick up a trick or two. His sword was no match for Semimes's stick or Sawasard's swords. The bow



in his hands being as much an artificer as the stick in Semimes's hand or the swords in Sawasard's hands was no merit to his mind, any more than a keen eye or tenacious talons to a ferling's mind.

It gave Daniel and Matthew the creeps, because, all eyes and ears for the encounter, they could sense its third participant—death. It was nigh. It touched now Semimes, now Sawasard, only to retreat on being burnt and of no avail. It was its cold that got to the souls and bodies of the two foreigners.

Both Semimes's stick and Sawasard's sword (to pick up the second sword from the stone would have been an irreparable mistake) were bent on the opponent's last blunder... which was not to be in that encounter... An arrow suddenly pierced the space between the sword and the stick and bounced as it hit a crag. The sword and the stick paused and were lowered all at once.

'Barkycrooks!' cried Natan.

Everyone faced the gorge. A score of barkycrooks had stopped some three hundred paces from the waterfall. But it was not the entire troop, more kept arriving from behind the crag. There was a narrow passage there between two mountains that linked the Barynth Gorge to the Kerdock Gorge.

'They're riding some creatures,' croaked Groyorg.

'The creatures are barkycrooks, same as them, except that they're driven with crops and have no carapaces or helmets,' said Semimes as he peered at the quadrupeds.

'Right!' said Matthew. 'The mugs look the same.'

'I've seen barkycrooks, Lil'un-to-the-rescue, but I can't remember seeing one monster carry another.'

'How many of them are there?' Daniel wondered out loud: the entire upper reaches of the Druze were crawling with barkycrooks.

'Don't fret, Dan the Sorrowful, they're all our guests,' said Groyorg, a challenge in his voice. 'We'll wine them and dine them.'

'Gate-crashers, aren't they?' Natan stepped forth unslinging his bow.

'The blackguards're advancing,' whispered Matthew as he saw the barkycrooks rush toward them.

'Take cover behind the rocks!' said Sawasard loudly and nodded at Daniel and Matthew as he touched Semimes's shoulder. 'Look after them, friend.'

Semimes put his hand on his shoulder and screeched softly:

'Will do, friend.'

Everyone took cover except one. It was Natan.

'Back off, Nervy!' cried Groyorg as the rocks chattered all around: dozens of arrows had hit them only to drop and leave bloodless wounds.

'Am I to fear them?' snapped Natan and let loose his first arrow. It upended a barkycrook that was charging ahead of them all; another brought down the quadruped under another barkycrook...

'Nervy, take cover!' barked Groyorg, recoiling, his eyes widened, as two arrows bounced off his chest as he off them. 'Thanks, spiders! Just let me stroke your bellies.'

Sawasard emerged from behind a rock to join his arrows to those of Natan... Barkycrooks kept falling... but came closer nonetheless to the people they thirsted to slay and tear.

'Dan, it's time our rabid stones got rabid,' said Matthew as his hand reached for one of the three bags suspended from his belt.

'Not a bad idea,' said Daniel.

'Throw them past the heads of the frontrunners,' suggested Semimes and cried turning to Groyorg. 'Get the club ready: it's our turn.'

'Only too willing, Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' Groyorg put away the two daggers he was ready to wield and removed his rescuer from its sheath. 'He's raring for a fight, too.'

Daniel and Matthew were agitated (Daniel more, Matthew less) as they unbuttoned their bags, removed the dark-green porous stones and threw them into the middle of the barkycrooks. A few moments later, two huge fire balls flared up, the rabid fire consuming a dozen quadruped creatures along with their riders. The barkycrooks turned back in disarray. But such of them as were at the foot of the crag could not see what was happening behind their backs and, thirsting for blood, kept charging. Semimes and Groyorg moved toward them. Semimes leapt down the slope and was the first to engage.

'Tarry awhile! The more the merrier,' cried Groyorg and rolled down like a square stone.

Sawasard and Natan bared their swords and rushed the barkycrooks, too...

There was nothing for it but for Daniel and Matthew to stand and gawp.

There were five to six barkycrooks with swords and pole axes rushing each of their friends unless you counted the quadrupeds with their bestial press, sharp teeth and sledgehammer foreheads. Natan felt overpowering excitement: it was his first real battle; he had a sword in his hand rather than a bow and arrow. He was not as sure-handed as when exercising, and the sword soon weighed heavy. The barkycrooks would not let them take their breath, pressing on all sides. It was his legs, nimble and enduring, that helped him out, for they had been conditioned to the task by the mountains. Sawasard helped, too: his swift swords that were everywhere at the same time would not let the barkycrooks make use of Natan's errors... Semimes was to the manner born: sinewy, spry and cunning, five of them were too few for him to give all he was worth and work to the limit. His father had taught him an altogether simple but difficult thing—to make use of his chance ('When fighting, be on the lookout for your chance. Once you lose it, there's no getting it back'). Which Semimes did: he let the pole ax of a barkycrook sense blood (not taste it) and crashed the fingers gripping the pole ax the next moment. It was just one of the hundreds of tricks at his disposal that he had a very special sense for bodily. Pride had taught him one other thing—patience. Seeing his chance and patience were a good help for his being sinewy, spry and cunning... But it was Groyorg that stunned Daniel and Matthew most of all. Uncouth to look at, grown into the ground, he saw off six barkycrooks even faster than Semimes. They rushed at him with their pole axes, swords and foreheads and fell dead. Groyorg did not adapt to his attackers, he did what he wanted to do with his Lil'un. He only did two things: beat and repel. Rather beat

than repel, because each time he was ahead of the barkycrooks—the rider and the quadruped under it. A barkycrook would heft the sword over him and even lower it over his head and then hey, presto!—there was no one and nothing to heft...

‘Mat, look, they’re coming back,’ cried Daniel who was the first to see the retreating barkycrooks about-face and charge again.

‘Sawasard, Sawasard! The barkycrooks!’ cried Matthew, but neither Sawasard nor his three friends heard the cry.

Daniel and Matthew exchanged glances and understood each other. A few moments later, two fiery balls rose in the barkycrooks’ way and cut their charge short.

‘What about more fire, Dan?’

‘To give them a taste of their own medicine?’

‘To make them taste nothing else.’

‘Let’s.’

Matthew and Daniel took their last fire-breathing stones out of the bags and pelted the retreating barkycrooks.

‘We win! We win!’ they cried hopping with joy like children.

Their friends who had finished off the barkycrooks in close combat, got up to the cave. There was blood everywhere—on their faces, hands, protective shirts and weapons. Everybody’s eyes were shining.

‘Good for you, porcini. You’ve done in a hundred barkycrooks,’ Semimes praised his charges with all his heart.

‘Well, I’d never seen fire that greedy,’ croaked Groyorg contentedly.

‘Thank you, my friends,’ Sawasard joined in.

‘Thanks to you, too, forestman,’ said Natan. ‘But for you, I wouldn’t be celebrating with you all.’

On hearing the words, Groyorg decided to cheer up his young friend:

‘It’s not for you to be self-denigrating, Natan the Nervy. I saw you twisting here and there and everywhere in battle, with no sword or pole ax keeping pace with you.’

‘And you standing your ground like a stubborn rock, Groyorg the Square...’

‘I’d say a square rock,’ commented Matthew.

‘. . . Whatever, you’re impossible to get at,’ said Natan to Groyorg.

Sawasard saw a bloody tear in Natan’s shirt and said:

‘You’re wounded, friend.’

‘Am I, now?’ Natan glanced at his shoulder. ‘It must’ve been a pole ax.’

‘You, too, Semimes,’ Daniel gestured toward his leg.

‘Must’ve been another pole ax. It’s a mere scratch. Stinggrass is more painful.’

‘Wash your wounds with tulis and dress them. We’ll be on our way to the waterfall,’ said Sawasard. ‘Put on your capes: we’ll have to blend in with the rocks.’

‘What is it, Sawasard?’ asked Daniel when he saw a glimpse of an idea in his eyes.

Everybody looked at Sawasard...

'How did they know our new route? Was that what you thought?' asked Semimes.

'So I did. Their emerging to meet us was no accident.'

The Word Keepers' joy in their first victory was replaced with anxiety.

'How could they?' Groyorg said in puzzlement as he made his way to his bag next to the cave mouth. 'I thought we'd win and eat to celebrate the victory... in grappian if nothing else.'

'We'll eat in the Red Cave. And there's nothing to celebrate for the time being, dear Groyorg,' said Sawasard.

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that when you're being watched you shouldn't stay in place, but you shouldn't go on either,' screeched Semimes.

'What's the moral, guide?' said Matthew.

'Shouldn't we change our route again?' guessed Groyorg.

'I don't know yet what should follow,' said Semimes and cast down his eyes. 'Father would know... I don't.'

'Yes, Malam would counsel,' Groyorg chipped in.

'We have two paths open to us—one through the secret passageway to the Wedolick Gorge, the other back to Dorlief,' said Sawasard.

Everyone was lost in thought. The ideas hovering over the Word Keepers were cut short by Natan.

'Should we go back to Dorlief, the Word would be as far from Faddaf as ever.'

'We should go by way of the Red Cave,' said Daniel.

'I don't know which of the two is right, but I know one thing for sure: I'm with you, Dan,' said Matthew.

'The cave it shall be,' Groyorg snapped.

The Word Keepers put on their capes and backpacks and made for the Vanishing Waterfall.

Meanwhile about thirty barkycrooks were crouched behind a crag in the passageway between the Barynth Gorge and the Kerdock Gorge. The fiery beasts they had never seen before that had interceded for people had instilled fear in them, and they did not feel like engaging the travelers again. The quadrupeds under them were also frightened and confused by the panic retreat. They felt out of sorts, butted rocks and bit at one another. The crop lashes would not make them reasonable; they only exacerbated the situation. The barkycrooks' lieutenant Dara was sorry he had left the other two hundred of the warriors entrusted to him by Trozuzort at the Kaduhar foothills. He had no doubt he would have finished off the handful of Dorliefans. Now the task was harder to accomplish. But he could not return to the Emptied Lake without the bodies of the two foreigners: what if Trozuzort's fury would be vented on Sapha as well as on him? So he had to make the warriors return to the Kerdock gorge.

'Warriors of Trozuzort!' Dara roared. 'There're too few people, and they think we've left and are not expecting us. We'll go back and slay them. I'll lead you personally.'

'But they have fiery beasts!' one of the warriors dared say what everyone thought.

'Are you afraid of the fiery beast?'

'I am, Dara.'

'But you're not afraid of arrows and swords?'

'No: I'm a warrior.'

'You don't want to be eaten up by a fiery beast?'

'No, Dara, I don't.'

Dara came up to the warrior and hacked off his head. And then said in as impressive a manner as he had acted:

'You chose your own death. A real warrior doesn't.'

He then rode up to his warriors astride his quadruped and his glance dwelled for a moment on each of them. He loaded his glance with his will and realized he should not give up on his chance.

'He was afraid he'd be eaten up by a fiery beast. He'll now be eaten up by wolves... Warriors of Trozuzort! To arms! Death to the people!'

'Death to the people!'

'Forward!' Dara cried and spurred his quadruped.

This time around, there were no fiery beasts in the way of the barkycrooks. The swords and sticks of the people clashed with their swords and pole axes. They progressed down the gorge strewn with the bodies of warriors felled by arrows and nibbled by fire, and the thirst to tear people apart was in them.

'Da-ra,' gasped an injured barkycrook when the lieutenant was riding past. He was lying on stones, with the water of the Druze splashing over his face and not letting him sleep.

Dara sprang off the quadruped and bent over him.

'They're climbing up the mountain... to the water—' the words were cut off, so was the blood flow in his veins.

Dara's eyes shone: there would never be a better chance to do away with the detachment of people. There was a clear view of the crag from where the barkycrooks had stopped with their lieutenant.

'There's no getting fast up that bluff. Keep your eyes peeled,' Dara said and watched for movement.

The Word Keepers got up two and two. Each pair had one for whom mountains were home. Sawasard and Groyorg were the first to climb, followed by Natan and Daniel. Sawasard said suddenly:

'Friends, don't show your faces to the gorge: the barkycrooks are back.'

Natan had hardly touched his bow when Sawasard stopped him:

'Don't—that's inviting their arrows. We'd better freeze until Mat and Semimes are on the ledge.'

Matthew, on hearing the barkycrooks were at their back, got distracted to look if his cape was secure enough: his left foot slipped. He panicked and made an awkward movement—his right foot lost its purchase. He clutched at the stone hanging over the precipice.

'Mat,' he heard Semimes's voice, 'my shoulder is next to your foot.'

Matthew found Semimes's shoulder with his left foot and rested on it.

'Attaboy, Mat the Vital, now find a purchase for your other foot... Have you?'

'I have.'

'Attaboy! Now get your wits about you.'

Matthew smiled at the crag looking him in the eye and told the guide:

'I have.'

'Don't forget your left: I can't support it forever.'

Next to the waterfall (left of it, as viewed from the gorge), a deep rift divided it in two. It also broke the narrow ledge Semimes and Matthew had finally got onto. Now the Word Keepers had to get to the place behind the waterfall from where they could descend to the mysterious black spot on the crag that incredibly sucked in the flow. But to do that, they had to leap over the rift. Semimes leapt... then Groyorg... then Natan followed Groyorg...

Dara's eye caught the short flight. It was not a bird, nor an ibex. The black opening in the crag betrayed a man. (It was Daniel.) Dara cried out:

'Archers!'

The barkycrooks lifted their bows in no time. Dara motioned with his hand that one was to be handed to him, and took a bead.

'Let your arrows hit the crag to the left of mine,' with these words he let loose an arrow and commanded: 'Shoot!'

The arrows hit the crag like so many stings of a swarm of angry bees. There were cries like staccato groans. Those were the voices of pain. Voices of men joined those voices.

'Palerard, help me!' whispered Sawasard and took the stone suspended from his neck to his lips (the whisper was to be heard by the Vanishing Waterfall alone).

'Thank you, spiders-to-my-rescue! When we are in the Red Cave, I'll ask the boys to stroke your bellies for you: I won't be able to reach that far,' croaked Groyorg (he had overpraised his bodyguards a bit: one of the arrows had penetrated the protection, but its sting had been weakened and skin-deep).

'I have no fear of you, monsters,' cried Natan facing the gorge and grimacing (was it a grimace of pain?)

'Shame on you, Semimes,' Semimes reproached himself for having disregarded his stick's warning. Then screeched for all his pain: 'Leap, Mat!'

Daniel leaped over the rift and looked at Matthew. Matthew also would have cried to him to leap but had suddenly recalled seeing it... in the gorhoon's eyes. And cried for all he was worth:

'Ma-at!'

But Matthew had already pushed off the crag, while two arrows had pushed off the springy filaments. They stung him and drank his blood to win over his power over himself. He flew over the rift to be possessed by it. Such was the will of the arrows.

'Mat! Mat!' Daniel cried and rushed back to the precipice.

Natan caught him by the hand and forcibly pulled him back.

'Don't, Dan! Back! Back, Dan!'

'Back, foreigner!' cried Semimes. 'Back, you wimp! Make for the waterfall. For Faddaf! You go back, all of you! I'll follow Mat. Go!'

Semimes's words, shrieky, angry, lashed at Daniel's ears, caught at his soul and made him compose himself. He turned to Natan. Natan looked him in the eye and let go.

'Come, Dan, or else they'll slay us all.'

Daniel turned his head toward the rift and said softly:

'Sorry, feather, I didn't save you.'

Groyorg faced the gorge, unsheathed his club (one arrow hit and bounced off with a whine) and, having described a circle with it that involved the barkycrooks, drew a snake inside. Then he hurled it at the barkycrooks. Then he drew another and sent it the same way. The barkycrooks instantly found themselves in warped, unknown space and lost control of themselves... When they came to (and space rebounded to acquire its familiar features), their bows were no use any longer...

The four Word Keepers vanished behind the waterfall. Their thoughts were on Mat and Semimes alone. Each was aware of what had happened, and each was putting his own construction on it. But no one would dwell on the wound that rankled, and they all were silent. The noise of the waterfall was some excuse for each. They knew the barkycrooks were near but were in no hurry to leave, hopeful of a miracle and glancing at the rift.

Sawasard took off his bow and backpack. He produced a length of rope and looked around for a suitable hook (that was what forestmen called hooked or crooked crag projections suitable for fastening a rope without a hammer or spikes). This one will hold, he thought, threw a rope loop over it and pulled at the rope. He then threw the free end of it down.

'It's time, friends. I'm going to the black spot. When I'm there I'll call out and enter the Red Cave.

'Go ahead, Sawasard the Bright. We'll follow you,' croaked Groyorg.

'After me, Danad.'

'It's as clear as day,' Groyorg replied for Daniel.

'You hear, Dan? You go down after me.'

'I can hear you, Sawasard,' said Daniel.

'You come last, Natan. Leave the rope in place.'

'I will... for Semimes and Matthew.'

Daniel raised his eyes to him.

'They'll catch us up, you'll see,' said Natan.

. . . Sawasard was descending slowly hand over hand, feeling for purchases with his feet. The waterfall would have torn off the rope even from the strongest of desperados who ventured to pit his strength against it. That was why Sawasard had found the place that Gontear had told the forestmen about. There, between the flow and the crag, there was a small space: the water came off an overhang over the gorge. Sawasard had already left behind (or, rather, above him) a length of four of his heights. He stopped now and then, and looked about him to find the black spot. Little did he know that it was impossible to miss... It revealed itself of its own accord and lured him, as it were. Sawasard could already hear its call. He recognized the feeling in him as he thought back to it. He had first experienced it at the Crossroads. He descended a bit more and saw that the flow on his right

reached the black spot and petered out. Vanished. The water did not hit it or splash as it would if it hit a stone. Nor was there water motion inside the spot, as if it were an entrance into a tunnel or a cave or a hole. He could clearly make it out with his eyes. My eyes must be deceiving me: if I go the way Gontear and his friends did, it would mean the water would, too, thought Sawasard. The spot was probably not on the stone, but was suspended from invisible threads before it and shimmered slightly. It was by itself, as it were. Sawasard pulled the rope from side to side and cried:

'I'm there, Dan. Come down.'

'Coming!' a barely audible voice came.

Sawasard was about to push off the crag and jump into the spot but he spied a small ledge. I'll wait for Dan, he thought, and, rocking twice, jumped onto it.

Daniel found it not quite so easy to get down as Sawasard. Exhausting was the rope that he could not get the hang of and kept knotting himself with even where he could relax... and the precipice which lured the part of him that craved death... and the water, water on three sides that was eager to catch him (wasn't it what he wanted?) and take him to Our Lake, where he would come to, to find himself in Mat's arms who would say: 'Been gulping water again, haven't you? Didn't I tell you to exhale and dive when you chance on a hole? The main thing is not to inhale.'

'Dan?'

Daniel emerged from oblivion and clenched his fingers again. In another moment he might have let go and fallen down.

'Dan?'

He saw Sawasard and felt better and found it easier to manage the rope.

'Coming!' he called.

When level with Sawasard, he said:

'Same as the Invisible Niche, but it isn't quite as frightening for some reason.'

'Get in, then,' Sawasard said firmly as he saw Daniel was shaking with the strain (thinking of Mat seemed to have exhausted him).

'I'll try.'

There was nothing for it but for Daniel to do what he had made up his mind to. He pushed off, but it was not much of a start and he would not have made it. He pushed off for all he was worth and let the rope go at the right moment. After a few moments of blackness and unawareness, Daniel felt he was in the cave. Both space and darkness here were different—palpable and visual; he was not dissolved in them the way he had been in the blackness of the spot... He heard a footfall, and another.

'That you, Sawasard?'

'Yes, Dan,' he said and lit a torch. 'We'll wait for Groyorg and Natan here.'

'And Mat and Semimes.'

'And Mat and Semimes.'

The walls of the passageway were uneven and lumpy, as if glued together from a multitude of massive stones. There was no trace of a passage in the wall



they had gone through, not even the black spot. Only the water as it trickled down was there to remind them of the waterfall beyond. It vanished somewhere under the stone floor of the passage. The floor was as lumpy as the walls.

'As far as I can see in this light, nothing's changing,' said Daniel.

'It may be all for the better. We'll have one concern—to find the exit,' said Sawasard.

'But you said... What's the forestman's name?'

'Gontear.'

'Yes, Gontear. You said it nearly drove him mad. It's because of the uniformity.'

'It's because of the loneliness, Dan. The loneliness pervaded with uniformity.'

'I see you've put on the light,' Groyorg frightened Daniel out of his mind. 'I don't quite know how I found myself here, Lil'un-to-the-rescue... It looks red indeed. Just right for an ibex... to jump around these rocks.'

Groyorg made both Daniel and Sawasard smile as he turned the ibex into a burrowing beast.

'Natan the Nervy does take his time,' said Groyorg anxiously and turned about... Suddenly where there had been no one before he saw him. 'Ah, here he is! Welcome to the Red Hole, Natan the Nervy!'

Natan patted the wall, curious how he had got in.

'There's the vanishing water,' he said.

'So it is,' echoed Groyorg. 'Of course, it's there. How would you be here, if it wasn't there?'

'My fiends, it's time we saw to our wounds and had a bite,' Sawasard suggested.

Natan lit his torch and leaned it against a rock. Sawasard found a suitable rest in the wall.

'Not a snag around, not a twig,' Groyorg complained. 'A fire to sit around with friends and eat is as good as a table. Without a fire, even though we are all together, each one is by himself: there's no circle to draw everyone... It does sting, Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

Groyorg had pushed back his collar and splashed some tulis juice over his back. Tulis had taken immediately.

'No, dear Groyorg, sitting at table is one thing, one joy, while sitting around a fire is quite another. One adulterates the food with conversation, the two being equal. Now, when sharing bread and water around a fire, it's another pair of shoes—the fire's the main thing along with the dreams it breeds. The dreams cut the words shorter and shorter... Do I give you a hand with your wound?'

'Thank you, friend, but I've calmed it down. You'll do better stroking my spiders on their bellies, the ones on my back, with your palm. I've promised them.'

'Well done, spiders, you've fended the enemy arrows off Groyorg's back,' with these words Sawasard patted Groyorg's back.

The friends washed their wounds with tulis and dressed them. Then they put up four torches, braced them with stones and sat around this improvised camp fire. Daniel said:

'Have a nice hunger, friends.'

Everyone responded:

'Have a nice hunger.'

'Let's dream along in silence since it's the done thing at the fire,' said Groyorg.

'Dream of Semimes and Mat striking it lucky,' added Natan.

\* \* \*

In the few moments that Groyorg stupefied the barkycrooks, Semimes dashed down the crag. The slope next to the rift was bluffy, with no ledges, but he had to risk it to get through to Mat before the quadrupeds.

'You did it just in time, Groyorg the Square, very much so,' he kept mumbling. 'But for your trick, I'd be lying on the rocks with an arrow in my back or several of them. And Dorlief would be a Word Keeper short. She was like, "Fate has chosen Semimes—have faith in him." Falafy of all people (there aren't many like her) would shed a bitter tear in memory of the eighth Word Keeper, Semimes, son of Malam.'

Semimes looked up and wondered at himself:

'I dare say! You're able to scale mountains even better!'

Semimes jumped off onto a small platform and reached, hidden by the rocks, the rift on all fours.

'Hold out, Mat... if you're still alive. If you're alive, we'll find a safe place yet, one that no barkycrook will get through. The main thing is not to groan. Once wounded, you live as long as you groan, but you also die if you groan, sure thing... I've got to get down to the very bottom. I should take care not to tumble, or else there'd be two groaners, us two drowning out the waterfall.'

The descent to the rift was harder: the lower Semimes descended the less use were the eyes, and he had to grope his way... Suddenly he smelled fresh blood.

'Why aren't you groaning, Mat?' Semimes wondered and was frightened at the thought. 'Living blood must groan... Mat! Mat! Answer me. Don't be afraid: it's me, your guide! Mat! Mat!'

At last Semimes stepped onto the horizontal ground. It was the floor of the rift. He cast about looking for Matthew, patting with his hands, his stick, sniffing but barely looking.

'Where are you, Mat? The blood is there, you aren't... An arrow... another one, broken. This height's bone-crushing, not just arrow-crushing. The arrows are there, and you aren't. Is it a good thing or bad? You would not go... crawl deep into the rift: there's no more blood. You were here in anguish, at this very spot. Where are you, Mat the Vital?'

The idea that crossed his mind was boggling:

'The wolves, the cave wolves! They'd been drawn by the blood. Their lair is somewhere near.' Semimes tapped the walls with his stick. 'I can't hear them:

they must be crouching. Sensed me and dragged Mat away. Where will I look for you, dear Mat? Where did they drag you? Where's the passage they took you through?'

Semimes heard the barkycrooks.

'This way! This way! Here's the fissure. He fell down it.'

'What do we do, Dara?'

'Get down!'

Semimes briskly got away from the edge of the rift. Testing the walls with his stick he found a hollow at the bottom of the wall on his right. It was a small niche. He scuttled into it and kept quiet... Soon torches lit the rift.

'No one there.'

'What about the blood? There's a lot of it. And the spoor.'

'His footmarks. He tried to survive. But the cave wolves did him in and dragged him to their nest.'

'Easy quarry.'

'And sweet. They must've devoured him by now. Let's go up.'

'Wait! There's a footmark here. Let's look further. Look down!'

Semimes covered his face with the cape and bated his breath. His hand was clutching the stick. The barkycrooks passed by one by one. And then back again after awhile.

The wolves must've got him.

'I wish we had. All right, let's get up.'

In the barkycrooks' torchlight Semimes noticed some hollows that he had not checked yet. What if those are passages? he thought and decided to explore them, just in case. Some of them were so narrow, they would not have let in a man, unless he was a kid. The ones that were big enough were not spattered with blood... Suddenly...

'What's this? What's this... ? A bone?' Semimes took off his backpack, put it near the passage and lit a torch. 'A bone. It was gnawed by cave wolves, but not today.'

Holding his torch before him, he crawled inside. The passage led to a small cave. He looked around.

'A wolf lair, just as I thought. More bones here. Not human bones. Must've brought a lamb to their young. The bones aren't fresh. And the wolf smell's gone. Must've changed quarters, the smart asses.'

Semimes emerged from the cave and put out the torch. He tested the walls with his stick as he returned to the edge of the rift.

'Another burrow. How could I miss it? There... He wouldn't have got through... all of him. Now, what a lot of blood! Oh, Mat, what a letdown. What will I tell Dan? You never said a word to me, the Vital that you are. What will I tell Dan?'

Semimes took another step and stopped. I've got to get out of here, he thought. But instead of climbing up, he slowly, painfully bent, as if the persistence that originated at the Emptied Lake drew him down onto all fours, roared a lasting and horrible roar... and sped into the rift... He fell... pressed his

face against a cool rock and lent it half of the self that originated at the Emptied Lake.

\* \* \*

The tap on the door, hollow and reserved, suggested to Trozuzort that Sapha was the bearer of ill news.

'Come in, Sapha... What brings you?'

Sapha cast down her eyes.

'Don't be afraid. Speak up.'

'Lord, the hair I gave to father has responded. The biteoff told me that he's in the Barynth Gorge. He's coming back,' Sapha said and cast down her eyes again.

'I see you haven't said it all.'

'I haven't, Lord.'

'Out with it!'

'The hair with the Dorliefan doesn't respond.'

'What do you mean, doesn't respond?' Trozuzort was outraged. 'Why not? Speak up!'

'The biteoff stopped indicating him: it must have got lost along with the Dorliefan.'

'Can you tell me where it happened?'

'At the Vanishing Waterfall. The Dorliefan was there: the biteoff said that. I looked for a long time, and then it withered. I went on looking at it and asking it to find the hair, but it was silent.'

'The Vanishing Waterfall, you say?'

'Yes, Lord.'

'Not to worry, Sapha, your father's alive.'

'Yes, Lord.'

'Go.'

'Thank you, Lord,' said Sapha and turned to the door.

'Wait.'

Sapha looked at him and said without waiting for her master's word:

'I'll show you both, Lord.'

'How did you know?'

Sapha shrugged.

'Well, first the one that indicates Dara.'

Sapha pulled a cloth out of her pocket unfolded it, held the hair with her forefinger and thumb and lifted it in front of her.

'Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... There, Lord, it's indicated right away.'

'I see, Sapha. Now the second one.'

Sapha produced a second cloth, this time out of her cuff.

'Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Biteoff, find the hair that lost you... Biteoff—'

'That will do, Sapha. Show up Cruda. We'll fly Sus to Dara. Give him a hair and keep the biteoff. You'll serve the meal when I'm back. Go now.'

Trozuzort was alone in his room.

So you thought the secret tunnel would keep your path hidden from the Emptied Lake? That's complacent of you. It'll cost you dear. There are only three exits from the secret tunnel. One will open up the Eternal World for you. It'll captivate your hearts and lure you: you'll find it hard to resist the temptation to step forth. And then it'll turn you into nothingness. Another will lead you to the Roosh Cave inside Mount Rafruth on the Hidden Side. You'll find the bones of four forestmen. Your lot will be the same—staying there forever. The third one will take you to the Wedolick Gorge where your dreams will come to nothing at the will of the Emptied Lake. But may one of you survive and help me win.

Trozuzort went to the balcony and called:  
'Sus!'

\* \* \*

Sawasard, Daniel, Groyorg and Natan moved ever farther into the Red Cave without turning into fissures and passages that opened up in torchlight right and left. The progress was exhausting beyond expectation, the reason being the rocks different in size and shape. They would not let the legs do what they were used to doing—walk. Each stone, true to its nature, made them adapt to it. And no part of the way gave them joy: it kept getting longer as the light went forth. The impression was the rock river would never end. The friends camped, though briefly, often enough. That rested their legs and let them close their eyes, thus fighting back what they could not conquer or hide away from—the red that suffused the stones and, seemingly, the air itself.

The foursome camped.

'If I were to choose between the barkycrooks and these stone spitfires, I'd choose the former. No stick's good enough to teach these spitfires a lesson, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

Groyorg swore each time they took a breather.

'Courting trouble, aren't you, Groyorg the Square?'

'I can tell you this: I'm not afraid of any creature that can be laid to rest with a stick, Nervy.'

'Hush!' Sawasard said motioning toward where they were coming from.

There were footfalls proceeding from the darkness that followed them... The footfalls were fierce, as if urged on by the quarry. Groyorg unsheathed his stick and croaked wide-eyed:

'Have I been courting it?'

'I did warn you,' said Natan and unslung his bow.

Sawasard, too, got ready to shoot.

'Is this a quadruped creature trampling down our spitfires?' Groyorg said wonderingly.

'I can't quite get you: are you against the spitfires or for them?' Natan ribbed him.

'This is no man,' said Sawasard.

Both bowstrings were as taut as a nerve...

'Wait! It's Semimes,' cried Daniel suddenly as he remembered the night adventure in Malam's house when they took Semimes for a beast.

A moment later, the blackness brought forcibly forth into the torchlight the one whose footfalls had alerted them. It was indeed Semimes. His face would have frightened a stranger, and it was frightening. His posture, however, had every aspect of a run on all fours. He neared the friends and screeched in his manner as he patted himself.

'Friends, tell me whether it's me or not.'

'If me's me, then you're you,' croaked Groyorg in reply, dispelling Semimes's doubts.

The guise of a bogey off, he was happy to see the dearest faces again. He was happy but feared meeting the violet eyes like the new sky over Dorlief, and was thus caught by them for that reason.

'Dan,' he said softly. I haven't found our Mat. I've probed every fissure—nowhere! The barkycrooks were also in the rift. They couldn't find him with torches.'

'Mat's gone,' Daniel whispered and looked at his friends 'Is he gone?'

'He's not in the rift, so he's left,' replied Groyorg who could stand the silence no more.

'What about the arrows? Did you find the arrows?' asked Natan.

'What else have you got to ask?' said Semimes instead of answering.

'What is it, Natan, what's wrong? Semimes?' exclaimed Daniel.

'Was there blood there?' Natan persisted despite opposition in Semimes's eyes.

'I've told you: Mat's not in the rift, either dead or alive.'

'I, too, am bloody, but I'm alive. Who isn't after that fight?' said Groyorg.

'All right, Wolfdog, I've got it.'

'What have you got, Natan?' said Daniel.

'Don't abuse hope—that's what he's got, Dan,' said Sawasard. 'We've got hope, and it'll speed us on the way.'

\* \* \*

'We've got to go on, you hear, Dan? Wake up, we've got to go.'

Daniel aroused: bending over him was Sawasard, with Natan and Groyorg by his side. He looked around and asked in wonder:

'What about Semimes? Where's he? Hasn't he arrived?'

'No, Dan,' said Sawasard.

'I seem to have dozed off. I dreamt Semimes had caught us up.'

'What did he tell you?' Groyorg demanded.

'It was a dream, Square,' Natan jumped at the occasion. 'You keep dreaming of mushrooms every night, but have to eat flat cakes and barynth nuts.'

'I wish it was by night! There's no knowing when it's night and when it's day in this poky hole where all time's red.'

'Semimes said he hadn't found Mat, either dead or alive,' said Daniel.

'If he isn't in the rift, it means he's gone. If he's gone, he's alive,' Groyorg concluded.

'You said the same in my dream, word for word.'

'A good dream, Dan: it gives us hope. We've got it and it'll speed us along... You look strange. Did I say that in your dream?'

'Yes, Sawasard.'

. . . The Word Keepers walked long down the secret passageway. It was not shortened by the next day's borderlines, tittle-tattle and the night to come. So it was infinitely long. The stones underfoot would not let the travelers relax their progress with habit: once born, it was shattered by them. So progress was sheer torture. The red seemed to get through into their heads and nerves not only through their eyes but also through their mouths and ears, skin, too. It got through to their dreams. There was no getting away from it by closing their eyes or falling asleep. So they did not feel like sleeping or speaking or listening. They had no strength left to holler the red sway. It was just the Word whose Keepers they were that made them take step by step... step by step...

They walked long down the secret passageway. Suddenly (suddenly, because no one had said a thing for a long time) Natan, who brought up the rear, broke the silence:

'Stop!'

The three stopped and looked at him.

'We don't have to go further.'

'Why not?' Sawasard asked.

'I've seen a light... over there, in a fissure. It's an exit.'

'No, we've got to find a black spot on the right wall,' Sawasard objected. 'It's through it that we can get to the Wedolick Gorge. No one knows what light lured you. We should sidestep uncertainty.'

'If no one knows, we have to try it. There must be more exits than one, Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' croaked Groyorg.

After voicing their opinions the three looked at the fourth: it would be either two voted in favor or a tie.

'I miss light. If we're careful enough... we've got nothing to lose,' said Daniel and added looking at Sawasard: 'Sorry!'

'Sawasard, I'll have a go while you wait for me here,' Natan suggested. 'I'll be careful, I promise.'

'It remains to be seen who's to give it a go and who's to wait,' Groyorg snapped. 'This poky hole has got to me, too, to just sit and gawp at it, while you're being careful.'

'You win, friends: let's see if there's an exit there,' said Sawasard. 'But we all go, me leading you.'

'We'll walk the way we have. No one's debating it,' Groyorg calmed down.

'We'll walk the way we have,' Natan agreed.

It was a distance of only ten paces—ordinary paces, not encumbered by stones—that separated the travelers from the place pointed out by Natan.

'I can see pale light,' Sawasard said. 'It covers the walls of the rift. It seems to extend to the right.'

'I say! With us hobbling along over those spitfires and seeing nothing,' Groyorg croaked as he squeezed himself through the rift. 'Just let me take a look, my friend... It does look like light. Let's go for it.'

'Groyorg the Square!'

'I know, I know, Nervy. But you'll have to enter after me, anyway,' said Groyorg as he let past him Sawasard and Daniel.

The rift was narrow. It was *very* narrow for Groyorg. But he did not swear, pleased that he had got through. Besides, the stones underfoot did not wobble the way they had in the main passage. The rift was about a hundred paces long and then turned right. As they neared the bend, the light became brighter and brighter. The torches were put out.

'Wait here. I'll go have a look and call out to you,' said Sawasard before he stepped round the bend.

'Go ahead,' said Groyorg for the three of them...

'Palerard, help me!'

On hearing Sawasard's exclamation, the friends hastened to him. Another three steps or so, and they found themselves... in a cave basking in light. The cave was pretty large, approximately the size of Malam's living room. Across from them, they saw a wide exit wall to wall. And light outside, a sea of light that had made Sawasard exclaim. Nothing else but light—no sky, no earth, just light, white, perhaps with a barely perceptible tinge of lilac, gentle, which did not irritate the eye but pacified the soul. It did not seem to be filling the cave but lit it from the outside. It seemed to be by itself... The friends came to the edge of the cave. Each of them would have been enchanted with it, but for the tender quality of it: he would not have his wonderment get the upper hand of enchanted admiration. Each of them saw himself in that empty lit space. Not himself reflected as if in a mirror where right is left, but himself as if created by this light of teeny bits and living in him. And more: each of them saw there his friends who were with him the way they were in the cave, each of them had the desire to step into it and join his other self, because the soul of that other one was undarkened but filled with light... But one of them, the one that was endowed with a sense of boundary, said as if he had read the thoughts of his friends:

'No, friends, this is no time yet for us to leave for this World. It had revived us when we were left drained. Now we must go on our way.'

None of the enchanted travelers suspected that they were in for another surprise in the rift they were now going through to the passageway. As soon as they emerged, Daniel cried:

'Look!'

From the wall opposite the rift there was a black spot looking at them like a huge eye.

'How could we have passed it by?' Groyorg was both puzzled and outraged. 'I'd been all eyes!'

'Yes, Groyorg the Square, but the question is where you were looking. Admit it: wasn't it the spitfires underfoot?'

'I have admitted it a hundred times, Nervy! They're the source of all our trouble.'

'I was at the head and should have seen the spot. Sorry, friends.'

'You're not to blame, Sawasard. The route had dulled our senses,' said Daniel.



'Attaboy, Natan the Nervy, you saw that light just in time!' Groyorg was happy to praise one he had recently had a tiff with, however insignificant.

'Or else it was the light saw and lured him. Look back,' Sawasard nodded at the rift they had just emerged from.

Everybody turned to see nothing but cold darkness.

'Of all that's wonderful!' Groyorg exclaimed. 'There was light, and now no light!'

'The main thing is it was there and helped us find the way out, friends,' said Daniel.

'There's no debate about that, Dan the Sorrowful, not even our Nervy.'

Sawasard approached the black spot.

'See you in the cave.'

'I hope it isn't red this time around, Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

One by one the friends stepped into the black spot and found themselves in a small cave into which daylight seeped through a wide fissure between stones (just right for Groyorg). The friends' faces shone with happiness. Natan dashed for the exit.

'I'll take a light bath!' he cried.

'Yes, Nervy! It's time we shook off the rot of the Red Hole. I'll follow you, Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

'Back off!' was the desperate cry of an anguished Natan. 'Back off!'

He backed off into the cave, raised his hand to unsling the bow and fell down supine. And said in a rasping voice, as if hopeful the words would lift him:

'Am I to fear them?'

There were four arrows in his body: two to the chest, one to the left shoulder and one to the left thigh. The shots were at close range and the shirt would not protect him.

Wedolick rattled with stones. The Guiss slurped. Barkycrooks were making for the cave from every direction.

'Hug the wall!' cried Sawasard and pushed Daniel to the left of the cave.

That same moment the back wall stopped all the arrows that were down on their luck. Barkycrooks barked close by:

'The burrow! They're in the burrow!'

'This way!'

'Kill them!'

Sawasard bared his swords and dashed along the left wall to the exit. Groyorg, club in hands, stood on his right. Daniel bent and made for Natan to lift him by the shoulders and take him inside the cave.

'Give Dan a hand,' Sawasard said to Groyorg and with two sword strikes felled the intruder (the first cut off its hand hefting the sword, the second pierced its throat).

Groyorg held Natan by the legs and helped Daniel take him to a corner.

'Let me have the tulis canteen, quick!'

Daniel removed the canteen from his belt and opened it. Groyorg pulled out the arrows and poured tulis over the wounds. Natan groaned and opened his eyes.

'Are you a healer, too, Square?' he said in a weak voice.

'I wish I was, Lil'un-to-the-rescue. Dress his wounds, Dan!' said Groyorg and rushed to help Sawasard at the entrance.

'You'll block the cave mouth with the monsters, forestman!'

'How's Natan?'

'He won't last long. We need a healer but there's no getting one.'

'Hold them back!' cried Sawasard and hastened to Daniel.

To prevent the bodies from blocking the mouth indeed, Groyorg forced the invaders outside. His club was so angry that no amount of carapace saved their skulls and bones.

'Have that for Natan! Take that for the Nervy! For Natan! For the Nervy! Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

'You have to leave, Dan,' said Sawasard as he nodded at Natan.

'How can I?'

'You know how.'

Daniel realized what Sawasard's words implied, and his hand, obedient to the ruthless idea, touched the pouch on his belt. But another idea that flashed through his mind stopped it.

'Unsure, are you?' said Sawasard.

'I don't know where we'll find ourselves and what's in store for Natan and me there.'

Sawasard produced from a leather bag on his girdle a Tear, white with a violet tinge and handed Her to Daniel.

'Take mine. Tell them I disclosed Palerard to you.'

'Who will I tell it to?'

'The first fiery-haired man you meet. Now look for the passage.'

'What about you?'

'We'll break through. Be quick about it: Natan's running out of time.'

Daniel took the Tear to his eye and looking at it started dashing about the cave.

'I can't see it, Sawasard. There's no passage here. None,' he said, dismay in his voice.

Sawasard took the Tear and started looking for the passage. He moved slowly in complete calmness despite Groyorg fighting a lone hand next to the cave. Suddenly he stopped.

'The passage is here. Come... Do you see it?'

'I do.'

'Stay put here.'

Sawasard came up to Natan, bent over him, lifted and laid him over his shoulder. Natan groaned.

'Stick it out, Nervy,' said Sawasard and asked again as he came up to Daniel: 'Do you see the passage?'

'Yes.'

'You'll find it hard with Natan over your shoulder. Will you cope?'

'It's all right. Two make for easy work. I'll be off.'

'The arrows,' said Natan in a barely audible whisper.

Sawasard removed the arrows from the quiver across Natan's back.

'Thank you, Nervy, they'll avenge your wounds. I promise.'

As soon as Daniel was out of sight, Sawasard whispered:

'Palerard, help them!'

'Say something!' cried Groyorg when Sawasard's swords joined his club.

'They're gone, friend!'

'So will we, friend! Which way do we break through?'

'Down the gorge!'

'Hug the rock! I'll give them some potion!'

Sawasard fought back the barkycrooks as he inflicted fatal wounds on two of them and leaped back to the cave. Groyorg's Lil'un-to-the-rescue went on battering the monsters left and right for Natan the Nervy ('Here's for Natan! For the Nervy!') as he closed a circuit in the air enveloping most of them and threw in a fleshless snake in the meantime.

'Let's flee, Bright!'

'Tell me, Square, do you do it or your Lil'un?' asked Sawasard on his way.

'I merely ask him to help me, and he does all the hard work.'

Groyorg's magic made it possible for them to run some twenty paces. Groyorg stopped and exercised it again... and again... Then he said:

'At this distance the Lil'un won't cope. Unslung your bow, forestman, and ask it for help.'

The barkycrooks shook off their stupor, jumped onto their quadrupeds and gave chase.

'Fell the chargers!' Groyorg said to Sawasard.

Sawasard felled three of the closest monsters with three shots.

'Now fell the rider, the one on the right. I could see he commanded the whole caboodle.'

In a moment, the arrow that Sawasard let loose pierced the black circle on his carapace, joining the orange arrow, and Dara's heart throbbed and stopped. The barkycrooks crowded around his body.

'Well-done, Bright! Let's go!'

\* \* \*

'Biteoff, find the hair that lost you.'

Six times did Sapha test her sense that told her her father was dead... killed in action.

'Killed,' she said hoarsely, her head against the wall, as she scratched the wall with her nails. 'They should be slain, all of them, to avenge my father... Killed...'

She left her room and stepped up the stairs slowly and long. Her legs were heavy with the onus she bore, with the rue and hate. She stopped from time to time and wailed without shedding tears. Even Sus, drowsy on top of the tower in its nest, writhed at Sapha's wail, rue and hate. On hearing his maid, Trozuzort did not wait for her to come up and knock and opened the door for her. Sapha dropped to her knees.

'What's up, Sapha?'

'Lord... father's been killed,' Sapha said sullenly, her voice congested. Trozuzort understood what was going on in her at the moment.

'You thirst for vengeance?'

'Lord,' Sapha drawled, gratitude in her voice for the passion she was consumed with.

'Call Gura for me. I'll tell him to dispatch hundreds of riders and to make short shrift of those guilty of Dara's death. Now rise and tell where the Dorliefan is that's got your hair on him.'

'The biteoff indicated him: he was in the Wedolick Gorge—'

'So he's turned up... left the secret passage,' Trozuzort interrupted her.

'He then got lost, Lord: the biteoff no longer indicates him.'

Trozuzort's countenance fell: the news had thrown him. But it was not just that—it puzzled him. He was deep in thought...

'Cruda will get at you, Dorliefan,' he thought aloud and became aware of Sapha as he heard his voice. 'Why didn't you say anything of the biteoff you'd given Cruda?'

'Sorry, Lord.'

'So you have checked on it?'

'I have, Lord. I checked it thrice today. The biteoff indicates the same place in the Wedolick Gorge. But I can feel it—Cruda's alive.'

'How can you feel it?'

'I don't know. I can feel it when I look at the biteoff.'

'Let me see your eyes, Sapha! What's crouched there?' Trozuzort commanded, aware that she was concealing something from him.

Sapha looked at her master with no attempt at sidestepping the designs that tormented her.

'Know: I need you here.'

Sapha cast down her eyes and said:

'I won't venture out to kill them, Lord... until you tell me to.'

'Dara shall be avenged. Call Gura for me now.'

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Lords of Faetre**

Daniel was in no position to resist the Path. He felt the Path wanted to take Natan away from him. He would lose him should he stop. He could feel the darkness he was negotiating had no power over them, it was the light hidden by the darkness, the light endowed with such a winning power that it was hard to disregard, the very light that they were standing in the anteroom to. It was not for nothing that it had lured Natan in the Red Cave. The light had known something at the time. The light was aware that Natan would be between life and death. Daniel felt that should he stop, he would yield to that unknown power... He suddenly remembered Chris, and her words. She said that when the air in her

bosom had all been consumed and she could stand it no more, she started counting the seconds—and that helped to stay afloat in the water some more. He started counting the moments:

‘One, two, three... sixteen, seventeen.’

At seventeen, he stepped from the darkness into the light... A valley of parti-colored stones opened up before him: red, yellow, grey, violet, green... The stones were small, they formed a continuous carpet, and it was not hard to tread. Foremost over the colored stone valley was a towering palace. To its left and right were rows of houses, blue with steep yellow roofs.

‘A blue city,’ said Daniel softly. ‘You hear me, Natan?’

Natan made no answer.

‘We’re there, friend. I can see a blue city. And so will you, soon. If you can hear my words, may it feature in your dreams.’

Daniel took a few more steps and saw his own shadow moving in front of him. The sun, he thought, looked back and saw up there, over the grey hills against the somber grey sky with a cloud here and there, a huge pale-yellow sun slowly floating... Suddenly he heard voices. To the right of a crag, from its bluff across from the palace, three forestmen were running (he knew them by their fiery hair). They approached Daniel.

‘Greetings to you, stranger. You a Dorliefan?’

‘Yes. My friend Sawasard opened up Palerard for me,’ said Daniel.

Two of them took Natan off his shoulder. The third unslung a cape from his girdle, unfolded it and spread it over the stones. Natan was laid on the cape.

‘I know him. He’s Natan, son to Lutul and Falafy,’ said one of the forestmen (the one that had spread the cape) and touched his hand. ‘He’s quite cold: he must have lost a lot of blood.’

‘Yes, he’s wounded and is in need of attention,’ said Daniel. ‘Urgent attention.’

‘Tatruan, Dowgar, take him to Feltraur. Meanwhile, I’ll take our guest to Ozuard,’ said the forestman and added something in a tongue unknown to Daniel.

Tatruan and Dowgar took Natan at a run, using the cape as a stretcher.

‘What’s your name, Dorliefan?’

‘Danad.’

‘Come, Danad. My name’s Oniard. Did barkycrooks wound your friend?’

‘Yes, we were caught in an ambush. Sawasard gave me his Tear, so we could get safely away. Here it is.’

‘You’ll produce Her to Ozuard. Ozuard’s our lord.’

‘What about Palerard?’

‘It’s the city in front of your eyes... I can see you’re about to ask something else.’

‘Looks like forestmen live in Palerard, not in Sadorn, don’t they?’

‘A good guess, Danad. Dorliefans have long called us forestmen. We emerge in Dorlief from a forest and go back to the forest. So they’ve come to believe we live in a forest. Just look around you.’

Daniel looked around.

‘No trees, no shrubbery, not even grass!’ He was surprised.

Oniard smiled.

'Nothing but rocks, hills, mountain lakes and underground rivers.'

'And still, I haven't seen such a beautiful valley in my lifetime.'

'You'd be even more surprised if you saw ice-capped mountains, and a sea of ice,' said Oniard.

Daniel fell silent.

'But to see all that, you have to take any direction from the city for at least a hundred forty days. It's on the other side of the Faetre.'

'Faetre?'

'The Faetre is the huge ball we live on. There's no life on its other side. It's where darkness is eternal, and so is cold.'

'And on this side there's eternal daylight,' Daniel guessed.

'Yes, it's a bit different from Dorlief,' Oniard grinned. 'But we've lived by your time from time immemorial, and for thirty years by your clock. Our craftsmen have somewhat altered the dial, with day, tittle-tattle and night side by side. Can you see that shining stylus top in front of the palace?'

'I can.'

'There's a clock on it. It faces the city. There's a mirror polygon over the clock. It shines reflecting sunlight.'

'I can also see shining polygons in front of other houses.'

'There're thirty of them all over the city, and as many clocks. Your Faryraf's revered in Palarard, too. Look, Tatruan and Dowgar have stopped and laid Natan down. I think he's come to and wants to see you.'

Daniel and Oniard ran up to Natan... and stopped near him. Daniel bent.

'Natan,' he said softly. 'I'm here'

'Within five paces of here he opened his eyes and then called you twice. We stopped. He whispered, "The sun!" smiled and died,' said Dowgar.

'Na-tan!' Daniel's desperate cry shattered the air. His voice seemed to be caught up and swept away by a wave to take it into the distance. It next caught and span Daniel...

\* \* \*

. . . Daniel opened his eyes: a dull light with Leely's face in it.

'Good morning, Dan,' she said, bent over him and kissed him on the cheek. 'You're back at last.'

'I am, but who'll kiss Natan? Will it be Falafy... as she sees him off to the Spirit World?'

'Yes, Falafy kissed him and saw him off to the Spirit World... and so did Lutul... and his brother Ratytar. Novon doesn't know yet: he's a warrior, and he's away in Natlief.'

'When was the funeral?'

'Three days ago, the day he died, as is the custom with us.'

'Three days ago?' Daniel was puzzled: so much time had passed him by.

'Yes, you've been oblivious for three days. I'll fetch Feltraur, he's a healer. He thought you'd come to today, and he's been here for an hour.'

Leely drew the dark-blue spangled curtains, and a gentle light filled the room through a large window.

'Where's here?'

'You're in the palace of Palarard Lord Ozuard,' said Leely and left.

Daniel recalled that Leely had found a Tear. She had passed Her on to Sufus and Safasy. He had seen Her... the day the siblings died... Faryraf had shown Her to the throng... White with a violet tint, same as Sawasard had given him. That was where you'd seen the sun, he thought. You looked into the Tear and entered the doorway She had opened for you to find yourself in Palarard. So that was the secret of the green-eyed witch.

A tall skinny old man entered the room. Grey strands with fiery highlights fell over his shoulders. Resting on his chest was a stone shaped as a ball of solid-gold yarn. It seemed to have absorbed the fire of his strands. The old man was wearing a light-grey wrap. The look in his grey eyes seemed to penetrate one through and through. The look frightened Daniel. What if he tells me I've got falling sickness? flashed through his mind (his bodily weakness must have fed the doubt).

'Good morning, Danad,' the old man said in a youthful voice and sat down on a wicker chair Leely had taken before.

'Good morning,' Daniel replied in a tone that disagreed with the words.

'Your hands, please. Your eyes have told me a thing or two.'

Told me a thing or two, Daniel echoed to himself and consigned his hands to the power of Feltraur. Feltraur closed his eyes and listened...

'He's back,' he said softly in a few moments.

'Where was I? I don't remember the three days.'

'I know, Danad. You left the Waking World but didn't enter the World of Dreams. You stopped in between. But you were in luck: you stopped short of committing to memory all that had happened to your thoughts and perceptions in the course of the three days. Had you taken them to the Waking World, you'd have lost your reason and your sense of reality.'

'I'd have gone mad, wouldn't I?'

'But it didn't happen. It's all right now. What you do is eat and walk a bit.'

'Thanks for the good morning, Feltraur.'

The old man smiled, rose and departed without another word. The door had hardly closed behind him when three people entered: Leely with a glass jug full of milk, a youngster with a basket heaped with brown loaves of bread, and a girl with a tray holding a teapot, two cups and a glass vase of intense-blue jam. Both the youngster and the girl were fiery-haired, blue-eyed, their eyes smiling, with features that suggested siblings.

'These are my friends Estean and Efriard.'

'Good morning,' said Daniel, somewhat embarrassed. 'I haven't got up yet, and I'm embarrassed.'

'Lord Ozuard told us to feed you, Danad,' said Estean and all but burst out laughing. 'When you feel you're strong enough, go to him for a chat.'

'Here're some efsurelle buns,' said Efriard.

'As if there were any others,' commented Estean looking at her brother. This time she did burst out laughing.

Leuely, Estean and Efriard put Daniel's breakfast on a round table of white stone polished bright.

'The washroom's behind that door,' said Estean, took Efriard by the hand, and they departed.

'Don't let Estean's gayety affect you: she and her brother were sad because of Natan's death. You made her weep along with... along with me, by your bedside. Feltraur had said you were between life and death. Now that you're back, we're all happy, and Estean's as giggly as ever.'

'Ever? You seem to be at home in Palerard.'

'Ever since the Tear brought me here. But no one knows about Palerard, nor should they know. It's their condition. They're forestmen where Dorliefans are concerned.'

'But you gave your Tear to Sufus and Safasy. I know Faryraf has it now, while you're here.'

'That's right, Dan. But let's not speak about it any more.'

'Just as you say.'

'You'd better eat something. The efsurelle buns are delicious. I'll go now.'

'Leuely?' Daniel said. 'Will I see you today?'

She left him with a green-eyed witch's look instead of replying.

Daniel had hardly sat up in bed when he felt he had grown very weak. He felt giddy, his legs of putty seemed to tread a shaky floor. He came up to the window. Down there, a lake stretched from the palace. There were benches and swings along its shores. Some of the swings were next to the water. One was used by a fiery-haired kid. Half the arc his swing described was over the smooth water of the lake. Great, Daniel thought as he remembered his swing... Matthew... I know nothing of you, feather... or of our guide, either. What's befallen you? There were boats at the landing stage. One was gaily taking a measure of the lake with two golden lights above it... Apart from those two and the kid, there were no more people within the scope of the window. The sky was light-grey, but bright and cloudless—there was nothing somber about the day, and to the right of the palace a clear shadow was cast over the lake. Left and right of the lake there were rows of one- and two-story blue houses with yellow roofs. Here and there, goats were grazing in front of the houses. Beyond the lake there were two more rows of houses. Further on, beyond the city, the mountains poked their tips at the skies... 'Palerard...'

Leuely was waiting for Daniel down there, in a spacious violet hallway. There were white-stone benches all along the walls with violet cushions. Leuely got up.

'Let's go to the lake, Dan. I've been to see Ozuard. He said he would join us a bit later and talk to you. He loves talking as he walks.'

'You're my guide in Palerard. It's just as you say.'

They left the palace through a back door.



'There're parti-colored stones everywhere underfoot here,' said Daniel. 'I think I like that. If ever I have a wall with shelves, like the one in Malam and Semimes's house, they'll be full of stones.'

'In the palace's right wing there's a special room with a separate entrance. Assembled in it are Faetre stones. You'll visit it yet.'

'May I?'

'Anyone that wishes may visit it to view the collection or leave a stone that's not there yet. For the moment, you must wait for Ozuard.'

'All right.'

'Underfoot aren't just stones. What do you think these yellow things are?'

'I'd say they're stones, too, if all the rest of them are.'

'What are they then, to your mind?'

Daniel sat down and tried a few stones to the touch, beginning with the yellow one and ending with it.'

'You're pulling my leg... to take my mind away from rueful thoughts.'

'So, is it a stone or not, that yellow one?' Leuely asked with a crafty look and her head to one side.

'I'm no longer one for the green-eyed witch's tricks. You want me to say this is no stone. Well, I say it's a stone, and it's final.'

'Lift it then.'

Daniel put his fingers around the yellow fist-sized stone and pulled it—it wouldn't go, as if grown into the ground. Daniel tried others: the red one, then grey, then blue. Close though they were to one another, they were not as stubborn as the yellow one, and each of them was bounced in his palm.

'I can supply a prompt: goats eat them,' said Leuely.

'I've seen goats near the houses. But it never occurred to me they ate stones.'

'There's nothing else to eat.'

'Nothing else to eat? What do Palerardians eat then? Oh! I've eaten yellow buns. They're yummy.'

'Efsurelle!' Leuely cried. 'It isn't a stone; it's a plant. On the surface among the stones is a yellow efsurelle fruit. Deep underground is its root, with the stalk pushing through a thick layer of stones.'

'Stalk?'

'Stalk. Twice as tall as a human. Get up; there's no chance of your pulling it out. The Palerardians use a device to do that.'

Daniel took a few steps and staggered.

'Looks like I'm a wreck.'

'Let's go sit by the lake,' Leuely suggested.

Daniel and Leuely took about thirty paces (Leuely holding him by the arm) and sat down on a wicker bench.

'The benches around the lake have been made by Palerardians out of efsurelle stalks.'

Daniel touched the bench, tapped his fingers on it, deliberately fidgeted on it and concluded:

'Well engineered.'

'Everything's done from it,' Leely boasted as if she were a Palerardian.

'Baskets with buns, is it?'

Leely looked askance at him.

'Don't taunt. Will I tell you what they make? Bows and arrows, and even thread to weave fabric for shirts and dresses. And a lot of other things besides.'

'That's why I see no one about: they are all busy practicing their witchery on efsurelle at home and wondering what else they could make, munching on it all the while.'

Leely shook her head.

'That's spiteful of you. I mean today. What makes you so spiteful today?'

'Only efsurelle fruit are edible,' a voice came from behind Daniel's and Leely's backs.

They looked back and rose. A Palerardian came up to them, forty to fifty, slender and broad of shoulder. He had on a violet shirt festooned with precious stones. Hanging from his neck by a silver chain was a blue-black stone. His big blue eyes exuded goodness. He went on:

'They can be eaten raw the way goats do, if you're so hungry you can't wait. In this case you might be able to munch them. You can stew them with mushrooms. We, Palerardians, love them stewed with milk-caps, though Dorliefans make fun of us because of that, saying milk-caps were only good for salting down. But it's best as bread made of efsurelle flour. Greetings to you, Daniel. I'm Ozuard.'

'Good morning, Ozuard. I thought the buns very yummy. Thank you.'

'Let's go down the embankment, friends.'

'Dan's too weak, Ozuard, and he's giddy,' Leely said anxiously.

'I'm feeling better,' Daniel said in duty bound. 'Let's walk.'

'As you wish, Dan, but then I'll hold you by the arm.'

'I'm game,' Daniel grinned.

They walked... Ozuard was in no hurry to talk, and that made Daniel look for a suitable opening. It duly offered: his hand inadvertently touched the pouch on his belt, and he immediately remembered the Tear Sawasard had given him. He produced it and turned his head to address Ozuard. But the momentary thought that Ozuard was Palerardian Lord confused him and he fought shy of addressing him by name a second time.

'... Lord...' he began, but the Lord interrupted him:

'Call me Ozuard: you're our guest and Sawasard's friend, him being as good as a son to us.'

'Ozuard, this is Sawasard's Tear. Take Her.'

'I know, Danad. But let Her stay with you. You'll give Her back to Sawasard when you see him.'

Daniel bowed down his head and said:

'When I left the cave, Sawasard and Groyorg were fighting barkycrooks, protecting me... They had lain in wait for us. Natan was the first to emerge unsuspecting and was felled. I don't know if they'll manage to get out.'

'I think you'd been betrayed, my friend.'

Daniel replied after a pause:

'But by whom?'

'Consider it when alone with yourself. And don't let your heart ache for Sawasard: he's one of the best warriors in Palarard and sure to come back.'

'So is Groyorg. We call him Groyorg the Square.'

'Two of the best, and one of them a Square, that's more than just a twosome. They'll come back.'

Leoely walked by Daniel's side holding him by the arm, silent.

'Danad, I must have your word,' said Ozuard. 'Do you know what I'm talking about?'

'Yes.'

'Don't be in a hurry to give it. If you feel you aren't sure and the arcane knowledge torments you, see Feltraur: he'll help you forget Palarard. I'll put it like this: it hasn't come time for us to reveal Palarard to Dorliefans. The forces of Darkness are great and perfidious, and we've no right to risk our small World and people.'

'I'm quite prepared to give you my word, but I'll betray myself if I don't tell my best friend Mat about Palarard. Allow me to do that, Ozuard. I can vouch for Mat. Except I don't know if he's alive.'

'Own up to him,' said Ozuard.

'Thank you, Ozuard.'

'I thank you, too, Danad. When speaking of your confidence you didn't seek to hold out on your doubt. I liked it. I must leave you for the moment, to Estean's joy, I think. I see she can't wait to take my place next to you. Lefeat and I will expect you for dinner,' said Ozuard as he made his way for the palace.

'Dorliefans, let's go boating! Bags I row!' Estean confronted Daniel and Leoely with those words that bounced merrily over the rocks. 'Run for the one with green sides!'

Daniel turned to run, but suddenly all he had before his eyes swam—the green boat that he barely glimpsed, together with the lake and the benches made of efsurelle and the swings, as if all they wanted was for Daniel to lose his balance. His legs could not adapt to the swaying and the next moment he found himself flat on the stones... He rolled over from his tummy to his back to see the frightened faces of Leoely and Estean.

'Where's Efriard?' he asked for no good reason.

Leoely and Estean exchanged glances, bewildered.

'Are you all right?' said Leoely.

'I'm fine, Dorliefan.'

Estean laughed, then said:

'Brother would have liked to be just right here. He's a permanent fixture at Feltraur's learning the secrets of healing which would come in handy now.'

'What secrets do you learn, forest lady?' asked Daniel.

'It's my secret,' said Estean.

'Let us take you to your room,' said Leoely. 'Lie down until dinner.'

'Do you want me to fetch Feltraur?' said Estean.

'No need of Feltraur,' Daniel protested remembering his weird words: "Your eyes have told me something" and the ball of gold yarn on his chest. Ball of yarn, flashed across his mind: fate is a ball of yarn, was how Semimes put it.

'A ferling for your thoughts,' said Estean.

'Estean, better show me the stones room.

'Then let Leuely and me have your hands—we'll help you up.'

. . . Estean opened a door, let Leuely and Daniel in and then came in herself. The multifold sunlight which had peeped in from the mirror hallway with tall windows caught on that the room had been taken over by other colors and hastened out while the crack between the door and the wall was still there. The visitors and the hostess found themselves in a space whose darkness was barely managed by a stone seemingly filled with red fire. One could make it out on a small oval table covered with a black cloth next to the wall opposite the entranceway. Another thing one could make out, though indistinctly, were two large oval tables along the left and right walls of the room some distance from them. There were stones on them... but only to humor darkness which is fond of shrouding things in mystery and never disclosing it of its own accord, and tantalize the imagination. What hovered over those two tables made Daniel feel that in his ball of yarn, one of the turns hid this room.

'Put on the light, please, Estean,' he said (impatience in his voice).

'In just a moment, Dorliefan. I've given them some time to sense you and your soul.'

'They're attuned to the soul, aren't they?'

'You'll see,' said Estean lighting candles one by one.

Daniel froze in expectation. Leuely stood nearby. And then the table to the right of the entryway was flooded with light. It emanated from three lamps each of which was suspended from the ceiling above the table by a barely noticeable thread and shaped as two hands, left and right, folded like a boat and directed palms down.

'You see, Leuely, these hands seem to give off their warmth to the stones! They seem to be saying: "Don't be afraid of us" and waiting for the stones to reply,' said Daniel (his words and their tone, soft and heartfelt, were testimony to his inner tremor).

Estean came up to him, kissed him on the cheek and said something in Palarardian. Leuely cast down her eyes, then thought better of it (some unexpected new feeling made her do it), only to compose herself (or so she thought) and blurt out:

'This room *is* Estean's secret, Dan! She thought it up and created it. She's the keeper of this collection of stones.'

'Leoley! You shouldn't! You shouldn't have started with this! I thought we'd agreed it!' said Estean with unmistakable excitement.

'You let it on yourself, dear Estean,' said Leuely.

Daniel came up to the table: stones, stones, stones... over a white cloth. He was of a mind to tell them what he felt at the moment. But he could not sort things out. He just whispered:

'A stone avalanche!'

'What was that?' asked Leely (she had heard him but wanted to hear him say that again).

'The stones seem to land in your soul at its very bottom where the finest nerve is.'

Another three pairs of hands were on fire to touch with their gentle light the stones on the other table. Daniel dashed over to it and barely managed to keep his feet: he felt giddy again.

'You aren't going to have a fall?' Leely touched his hand.

But Daniel did not hear her words or feel her touch. His feelings were all out with the stones that rested on the red cloth. He had gooseflesh all over, the bumps proliferating the joyous tidings.

'The Lords of Faetre!' His whisper hovered over the stones.

Leely and Estean were hushed, not to hinder him. Daniel reached his hand out to a stone.

'You *are* beautiful! You are... maddeningly beautiful! And you love my words...'

Leely came closer to Estean and took her by the hand. Estean put her forefinger to her lips.

'You... you're kind and full of sympathy. You take pity on me without knowing much about me. I can feel that... You... draw one more than a dozen stones. You're multifaceted and mysterious. Which of your facets is the main one? Which is the one I must touch for you to respond? You... you have something to tell me... What is it?'

Daniel suddenly looked around, as if the stones had told him he was not alone, saw the familiar faces and drew back his hand.

'Leely... Estean... let's go,' he said in a low voice. 'I'll have some rest before dinner.'

Estean put out the candles and they emerged through the mirror hall into the open.

'Danad?' Estean said, and when he turned his head to her, continued: 'Solve a riddle, will you?'

'Riddle?'

'One to do with the stones room. Leely, you try it too.'

'Stones room. I like this naive name,' said Daniel.

'So do I,' said Estean.

Leely paused.

'All right, let's have your riddle, stones room keeper.'

'Did you note that one table is covered with a white cloth, another with a red cloth, and the little one with the luminous stone, with a black one? Why?'

Daniel took a dozen steps in silence, then stopped and said:

'You chose white for the stones on the surface of Faetre that the eye can see. Red for those that hide themselves underground or in mountain hideaways. And you singled out the luminous stone. It has a very special property—it absorbs light only to give it back later on. And we see that light. But the stone does not reveal itself, and we don't know how it does what it does. It's still unknown to us, clad in darkness. Hence the black cloth.'

'Did you think the riddle as naïve as the room itself?' asked Estean (her eyes radiant with happiness).

'Not at all,' said Daniel and added for no good reason: 'And neither are you.'

'What am I, then, Dorliefan?'

'I'm not telling.'

'Speak up, Dan, once you started,' Leuely could not contain her curiosity.

'You're... like the luminous stone.'

Estean laughed. Then she said:

'You got the black cloth all wrong. It's your turn now, Leuely.'

'You never offered that riddle before, Estean.'

'I didn't think it could be a riddle before. When opting for colors, I simply answered the question why this one rather than that.'

'What's your solution, Leuely?' asked Daniel.

Leuely noticed that he regarded her the same way as in Dorlief—as a green-eyed witch.

'I never knew you were a connoisseur of stones,' she said.

'I don't know the first thing about them.'

'Neither do I... I thought the same as Dan about the white and red cloths. As to the black one... my solution's simple enough. The luminous stone sucks in sunlight to show us the way in the dark. They're indivisible, it and darkness. The black cloth is the darkness that envelops us.'

Estean came up and kissed her on the cheek.

'And right you are, Leuely,' she said.

\* \* \*

After dinner Daniel went up to his room. He was tired. Not because of his weakness. Not because he had grown weary of his hosts' and Leuely's care. His mind was preoccupied with one thing and he languished in the expectation. But while Leuely was in Palarard, he could not disregard her attention and go in for what he thirsted for most of all...

There was a tap on the door and Leuely's voice:

'Can I, Dan?'

Daniel opened the door.

'I'm here to say I must be leaving for Dorlief.'

'I'll see you off.'

Leuely looked at him without saying anything. There was sadness in her eyes.

'Can I send you on your way, Leuely?'

'There's something wanting, isn't there, Dan? There's something missing around our words, isn't there? Is it the dark of late tittle-tattle and the light of the Dorlief clock?'

'I still remember.'

'Let's go. I've said goodbye to everyone.'

They left the palace and made for the crag across the way through the stone valley. Its bluff jutted out like a ferling beak. It was some three hundred

paces away, and another two hundred to the ferling head (that was what Daniel saw the crag as).

'What makes you silent, Dan? Lost in thought? What about?'

'Lost in thought? Rather, I'm all a mess of thoughts and feelings... You set me thinking of Dorlief. Once we left the palace, there was a carpet of stones underfoot. It's just a few days since I and my friends, Mat, Semimes, Natan, met you on the street. And it's far off. Natan's no more. Mat and Semimes... are missing. I'm not even wounded. It looks like you feather's safeguarded me. It's strange: they're all in the past, and my head's spinning with a new life.'

'It isn't a new life that makes your head spin,' Leoley interjected, 'it's what you've had to go through in the intervening time. You were tottering on the brink.'

'My heart pines for the past. It's happiness that...' Daniel could not finish.

'Are you all right, Dan?'

Daniel fought back his excitement and went on:

'Happiness that I was at the side of Sufus and Safasy. But I'll... never see them again.'

There were tears in Leoley's eyes.

'Good or bad... those fragments of a past life being in my head? They hurt a lot. I arrived in Dorlief and believed Dorlief would mean happiness... I didn't know what I was in Dorlief for. Nor do I now. But I wasn't there for suffering and pain. I have no patience with suffering. I want the Celestial Meadow. I want a New Light celebration.'

'It'll come yet.'

'No, Leoley. I want a New Light with Sufus on top of a step ladder next to a New Light Tree and Safasy pulling out ornaments out of a box for it...'

'Dan?'

'I'm not out of my mind, Leoley.'

'I can quite understand you, Dan.'

'But if that New Light that started so auspiciously, that I found so dear to me, isn't there—what do I care for any other? If Sufus and Safasy aren't there, what do I care for Estean and Efriad?'

'Me now... at this time, rather than on that night at the clock? What for?'

Daniel was silent.

They were approaching the stone beak. It was half-open, with a fissure in its depth. There were Palaradians on both sides of the beak. They had swords hanging from their girdles with quivers and bows across their backs.

'Going home, aren't you, Leoley?' asked one of the four guards.

'Yes, Garbiard, I'm going.'

'You, too, Dorliefan?'

'Danad will stay for the time being,' said Leoley. 'That's Feltraur's decision.'

'Stay on, Danad, fortify yourself.'

Leoley paused.

'I'll tell you something tomorrow. Promise you'll forgive me.'

'Forgive what?'

'What I haven't told you today.'

'Tell it then.'

'I've made up my mind I'll do it tomorrow. It would be better that way.'

'Bad news?'

'Don't ask me.'

'Bad news of one of my friends?' Daniel persisted.

Leoley shook her head.

'Leoley?'

'What, Dan?'

'Forgive me.'

'I forgive you. You'll forgive me, too, tomorrow.'

'I forgive you today for tomorrow.'

'See you, Dan,' said Leoley, entered the ferling beak and vanished.

The moment Daniel turned about to go back he saw Estean. Captured again, he thought, when will I see you? Estean was not walking; she was running to meet him...

'Did you see her off?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Head spinning?'

'No,'

Estean smirked.

'I can quite understand: you want to be alone. I thought we'd go boating. There'll soon be a lot of people on the lake.'

Daniel did not know how to extricate himself out of this plight. He did not feel like boating or being among people... or being with Estean.

'Estean, Palerard in your tongue means 'Blue City' or perhaps, 'Fiery-headed City?' he said to make up for his tacit refusal.

'I'll take you to the palace and leave you alone,' she said sparsely instead of giggling (at the slightest provocation) as was her wont.

'No offence meant.'

This time it was Estean who started speaking to fight off the offence that was there in her eyes and on her lips:

'There was no Palerard many hundreds of years ago. The sunny side of Faetre was populated by two nations, Paruans and Oleards. They lived in permanent hostility and settled their disputes by war. But once a new trouble beset Faetre, borne not of human will or thirst: the one you call Shwarrawsh came to us. He razed all the villages of both nations, and few of the people survived. The Paruan and Oleard lords were spirited off by Shwarrawsh. At that dreadful time, Daltruan, Feltraur's ancient forefather, was the first to refuse dividing people into Paruans and Oleards. He helped all those disabled by Shwarrawsh and war. He was aware that people on Faetre might be no more. One day he got all the survivors and suggested they unite and build a city that would combine the names of both nations—Palerard. Not a single man dared object because everyone was grateful to him and believed him. Daltruan was the first Lord of Palerard... But it was not the Palerard in front of your eyes. That one had been built elsewhere. But fate decreed otherwise.'

'Fascinating.'



'Yes, isn't it?'

'It is, Estean.'

'One day two boys dared disobey the ban and stepped across the rift that Shwarrawsh was believed to have come to Faetre through. They were away a long time, and their friends who were aware of what had happened had to tell grownups all about it. Those two boys' fathers entered the rift and found themselves in a forest that was to be called Sadorn. After awhile the four returned to Palerard. Thus it was that the Path was discovered. It's been a boon for our people: our friends Dorliefans, Dorliefan time, goats, mushrooms, berries, nuts, herbs. One far-off day the Palerardians made up their minds to build a palace for the Lord across from the entryway to the Path. And a new city was erected near the palace, the present-day Palerard... Why are you looking like that? That's that: we're here.'

'Sorry, Estean. You guessed right: I do want to stay alone. But you have to know I feel good in your company. It's the truth.'

'No offence taken, Danad. And I think I know where you want to retire. Do you remember the way?'

'I do, Estean. Thank you.'

. . . Daniel shut the door leaving behind it what he had no business with now, what was in the way of his aloneness—everybody. The stones room held its breath.

'I've come. I'm back in my hut. I'm home. Can't a stray traveler stop at last when he feels he's arrived, and enter the hut waiting for him among the stones? And it'll be his home. You wouldn't mind my considering your home mine, too? You wouldn't... Lords of Faetre, I know and you know that I'm different from you. Pray rid me of whatever makes me different.'

Daniel took his time lighting all six lamps and stopped by the table with the red cloth and looked... He was looking at all the stones at once to embrace and sense their World in its entirety: now at a separate scrollwork several stones made (willy or nilly?), now at a single stone. It was not Daniel's choice—it was the stones' as they called out to him at one moment or another. He touched this or that stone and his facial expression changed: an encounter with one was facile and joyous like a gulp of spring water, which you enjoy saying, 'Great,' gulp again and run on; an encounter with another one called for listening and trying to understand; a third would not reveal its soul, with Daniel saying as he held off his hand: 'Sorry, let's put this chat off until a later date.'

He took his time admiring the stones. Little did he think it would be over at some point. He seemed to be immersed in a rainbow dream... that held off the memory of Sufus and Safasy, Matthew and Semimes, Sawasard and Groyorg, Leoley and Estean, the Tear and the Word... immune from the passion for accomplishment... immune from the question 'What for?'... immune from fears and pain. Daniel just lived this new life, and there was nothing about it to make him think of a different life. There was nothing in it to make him look back or care about the future. There was neither the present nor the future in it.

In mid-tittle-tattle, Estean entered the room to ask Daniel to dinner. He was lying next to the red table. Her heart suddenly upset the silence petrified over the stones and made her cry an anxious word out of her bosom:

'Dan? Are you all right?'

He did not respond. Estean bent over him and touched his hand. His countenance was serene, his hand warm.

'Dan?' she called softly again... 'All right, sleep on.'

When she came to the dining room, she asked Efriard to go to Feltraur: what would he advise? The brother was soon back with a word of hope:

'Danad's getting well. If his soul, after the brink, has opted for the stones, let them heal him, rather than the words of people, healers' potions or food.

Leoley arrived in the morning. On learning that Daniel was in the stones room, without dinner or breakfast, she was frightened. No amount of Estean's chat, who shadowed her, or Feltraur's words, whom she had been to see, would dispel her fears. Feltraur told her:

'Danad will leave the stones and return to the path of fate when one of them chooses him and helps him to know lies from the truth.'

She would not act against the hosts' advice and did not bother Daniel. She just left... fled Palerard without saying goodbye to anyone, and took along the absurd idea that Dan... was a captive. The absurd idea made her tears stream all the way to Dorlief.

Daniel was not surprised when he woke up. He greeted the stones and yielded to their power once again. That was how another day passed... and another... and another night...

\* \* \*

Daniel opened his eyes. He was reclining in a chair. It was early morning: the skies had already colored the translucent roof of measureless violet, wavy and ragged. There still was not enough light, but Daniel knew the room—Faryraf's living room. Where's Leoley, he thought, and listened: Leoley's and Rablbary's voices were coming from the dining room.

'Leoley?' Daniel called. She can't hear. She'll soon be here of her own accord.

He got up from the chair and approached the fireplace: he wanted to see once again the pictures that the Dorlief clock began with.

'I won't be able to see anything that way.'

He picked up a box of flashes from the mantelpiece and lit two candles on either side of the pictures—the ferling guards peered at him from both sides with their grave fiery eyes.

'You're not all that friendly, are you? I'll just have a look, so don't look sullen.'

He took a step back and pored over each of the sketches made by Faryraf one by one. A strange feeling took him over after a few moments.

'How do I know you... ? What is it there in each of you? You're teasing my memory. But what... what do I recognize in each of you?' he was asking the pictures and himself.

He remembered that the last time he saw them he thought that the design Faryraf had embellished the sketches with had come to life... More voices came from the dining room. They'll next be calling me to have tea with cheesecake, and I won't be able to remember again. The door opened and... the curator from the Eifmann Gallery came in (he could recognize her). She turned her head to him.

'Good morning. I'd like to ask you,' he was startled to find himself saying that in a different language... not in the language of Dorlief... the one he had used before.

The curator came up to him in silence.

'There's something barely eligible in these sketches that keeps worrying me, but I can't understand just what.'

'The name,' she said and left.

'The name? I know the name,' Daniel shrugged and returned to the sketches. 'I should simply watch them... the way I watched the stones... Where's the name? Why should it be here?'

The design on one of the sheets in silvery frames did yield the answer. It came to life and stirred the way it had the first time around. It seemed to show Faryraf drawing it with care, extending the line and curving it and intertwining it with another one... Suddenly Daniel recoiled from the fireplace in horror.

'F, T,' he whispered as he started coming to little by little. 'FT is not Faryraf... not him. It's a letter from another language, one Faryraf never spoke. It's Felix Thornton. It's his initials, hidden in the scrollwork. He hid them to... say that his time would arrive in Dorlief... It was Thornton who made the Dorlief clock when he was here... Faryraf has been deceiving everybody as he has pretended the clock is his brainchild.'

Daniel stood in the middle of Faryraf's living room not knowing what to do... Suddenly another idea burnt him. He squeezed the stone feather on his chest and cried desperately:

'Leoely!'

\* \* \*

That was how he awoke with the feather Leoely had given him in his hand. He opened his palm.

'I cried in my sleep. Why?' he whispered. What was it the feather told me... ? I don't remember. What did Leoely tell me that time at Malam's? She asked me: "Tell me what the feather means to you." She had heard about the feather from Faryraf. "Faryraf said you'd be pleased if I gave you a feather." Faryraf said... There was something wrong... What... ? Why did I cry? A feather of stone... Horsehair... a closed horsehair... What did Faryraf want with it? I don't understand... What was there in my dream? Faryraf's house... the sketches on the wall above the fireplace... I remember—the design, the scrollwork with the two letters hidden in it! Felix Thornton had made the sketches of the Dorlief clock... Faryraf is a cheat! But why did I cry? Why... ?'

Daniel got up from the floor. He came up to the table covered with the white cloth. He touched the stones with his fingers... He came up to the table covered with the red cloth.

'Thanks for the bed and board. I must be going now.'

He did not know if he could get to the other part of the palace through the hall of mirrors. He had to get to the violet hall to get to his room. So he decided to get there by way of the street. He skirted the right wing of the palace and saw Estean and a black-haired girl in a red dress next to her. They were on a bench facing the lake.

'Estean, Leoley,' he called.

They looked back and hastened to him. 'Leoley!' Not the blonde he had once met in Dorlief, but the black-haired green-eyed witch she hid. She was smiling, but there was room for sadness in her. Estean was all ashine with joy.

'Left your dreams to the stones and back to people?' Estean cried.

'I took one dream along.'

'What stone did you choose, Dan?' said Leoley (her tone was grave, as distinct from her friend's).

'Which stone chose me?' echoed Daniel. 'I don't know. But I do know that today you look smashing.'

'Feltraur's said that one of the stones will choose you,' Leoley hastened with the words not to be tongue-tied by the flux of feelings. 'He also has said that the stone will help you tell lies from the truth.'

'Lies from the truth?'

'Why do I know nothing?' Estean wondered aloud (there was something besides surprise in her countenance). 'What are you talking about, Leoley?'

'I hardly know what about. That's what Feltraur told me yesterday.'

Daniel's countenance fell: he had again remembered the words about lies that were revealed to him in his dream.

'I know! That stone chose me!' Daniel lifted the stone feather hanging from his neck. 'It means it'll help me tell lies from the truth.'

'It's asnardat,' said Estean. 'A Palarardian made this feather from silvery asnardat.'

'I must talk to Feltraur. But first I must smarten up.'

'We'll go to see Feltraur together, Dan,' said Leoley. 'You mean to ask about the feather, don't you? I gave it to you.'

'I'll go fetch him, Dorliefans,' said Estean and looked away: she envied her brother at the moment (he had managed to make himself understand something ahead of her) and she felt like fleeing.

'As you like,' said Daniel in reply.

Estean turned about and walked briskly off. Leoley started off with her but then stopped.

'Stay, Dan! I've something to tell you. Before coming here, I stopped by Falafy. A man—he's staying with her at the moment—wanted me to pass on these words to you: "I know one thing for sure: I'm with you."'

'Mat!' Daniel exclaimed. 'You've seen Mat? How's he?'

'Much better than four days ago. Palarardians... forestmen brought him to Falafy's house the day you arrived here, much closer to night, though. Lutul and Falafy had buried Natan by the time. Mat was poorly, and Falafy kept close watch.

She couldn't have him dead. The next morning I visited Mat. He could barely speak, he was so weak. And Falafy kept calling him sonny.'

'Does he speak now?'

'He does. He keeps asking about you. He got up for a bit yesterday.'

'What did you tell him about me?'

'Only that you're with the forestmen. You'll tell him the rest.'

'Mat... Mat's alive... And you wouldn't tell. And that's what I must forgive you for.'

'You have, remember? You were weak and I didn't want to worry you.'

'Semimes? Is he back?'

'Mat said Semimes rushed to catch you up. But first he helped the Loner take Mat to the place where he had a boat hidden. He didn't catch you up, did he?'

'No.'

'All right, go. We'll talk later. Estean and Feltraur will be coming soon. He lives nearby, seven doors from the palace.'

'I have to go to Dorlief. Better go to Feltraur and then to Dorlief.'

'Agreed.'

. . . Feltraur and Estean were coming out of the house when Daniel and Leoley approached him.

'Greetings to you, Leoley, and to you, Danad.'

'Good morning, Feltraur,' said Daniel and Leoley.

'Since you chose to come, let's sit on the bench.'

The four stood undecided in front of a strange bench right in front of the two-story house of the healer. The high-backed bench formed an open circle that could be entered.

'Don't hesitate to enter and sit,' Feltraur suggested again.

Everybody sat down. The bench proved very comfortable.

'I see it isn't concern for your health that brings you here, is it, Danad?' Feltraur began.

'I'm quite well and it's this that brings me here.' Daniel took off over his head the horsehair with the stone feather and held it out to Feltraur. 'What's wrong with it?'

Leoley held her breath: what was wrong with the feather she had given Daniel? Feltraur took the charm and looked long at it... And even longer at the horsehair which he felt to the touch... Then he asked Daniel:

'Did this stone choose you?'

'Looks like it. I clasped it in my dream and for some reason cried. When I woke up, the feather was indeed in my hand. But I don't remember what made me cry.'

'Can you tell me how you came by it?'

Daniel glanced at Leoley.

'I gave Dan this charm for New Light Day. It used to belong to my father.'

'What about this hair?' asked Feltraur (anxiety in his voice).

'The feather had always been suspended from a silver chain. Faryraf replaced it with a horsehair and told me to give it to Dan. He probably knew of the expedition Dan was going on. It's a domestic belief with us...'

'I know, Leoley,' said Feltraur and looked at her for a long time.

'What's wrong?' she asked. 'I must know, too.'

'All right, listen. It's the truth that shouldn't be concealed, however painful it might be for both of you, for unawareness would lead to further losses.'

'Losses?' Leoley was stunned. 'Could the feather be to blame for Natan's death? And Mat's injury?'

'The feather's not to blame, Leoley. On the contrary, it's there to help you. It woke up Danad for him to uncover the lie. The lie's in this hair. The horsehair was attached to the feather not for him to come back but for the friends to get caught in a trap, which was what happened.'

'How can it be, Feltraur?' Leoley was outraged. 'It's a long-standing custom with the Dorliefans to sling a closed horsehair over the neck of one setting out, so he should get back home.'

'Keep your temper in check, dear Leoley. This is no horsehair.'

'What is it, Feltraur?' cried Estean.

'It's a hair of one of those Dorliefans and we call nutheads.'

'They're now called barkycrooks,' said Estean.

'That's more like it,' said Feltraur.

'But how can a hair lead into a trap?' said Daniel.

'Why, Danad, there're people who have power over things other people don't. Some have the power to pass on to things part of their potency. Once they do, such people (or barkycrooks) can talk with those things and hold them in their power. The barkycrook it belonged to had power over it until you reached Palerard. It tracked the path of the hair, and, hence, yours.'

'I'll take this hair to Dorlief and make Faryraf own up to everything!' said Leoley (there were resolution and excitement in her, half and half).

'No, Leoley, the hair stays in Palerard for now. Whoever comes back to your parts with the hair courts trouble, the way Danad has.'

'How did Faryraf come by the hair?' Daniel wanted to know and cast down his eyes.

'You already know the answer to this question, Danad: your eyes have told as much,' said Feltraur.

'How, Danad?' Leoley cried.

'Let the Dorlief Governing Council sort it out, not us.'

'Do tell, don't torment me,' Leoley insisted.

'I want your word you won't tell Faryraf anything.'

'I promise.'

'The cove that murdered Sufus and Safasy had brought the hair to him. Faryraf did him in to remove a witness to his treachery. But there's one witness still left.'

'How d'you know? What makes you so sure?'

'I'll reveal it to you in private. Feltraur, Estean, sorry.'

'The truth's been revealed to Danad. Believe him, Leoley,' said Feltraur.

'I do.'

'Take your feather, Danad, and carry it about with you: it's chosen you and will protect you.'

'It's a custom with us to wear the stone that's chosen one,' said Estean.

'Leoley, you wouldn't mind my giving Danad a silver chain?' asked Feltraur.

'Of course, not.'

'Then wait for me. I'll bring it directly.'

\* \* \*

Leoley and Daniel emerged from the blackness and found themselves in the forest. A huge boulder was left behind their backs.

'There's Sadorn for you, the ghostly abode of Dorlief's good neighbors, the forestmen.'

'Cut it out, Dan: there's a slur in your words.'

'Okay, I will. Let's go home.'

'You've taken the wrong direction, ghostly Dorliefan. Mark this, it may come in handy: the entryway to the Path and its exit are in this rock on the Harshid side. Dorlief is that way. If we make haste, we'll be there before tittle-tattle.'

'You don't seem to be afraid to walk through the forest all alone. It was quite dark when you left Dorlief, wasn't it?'

'It was just today that I made an early start: I was in a hurry to see you,' said Leoley, and asked what had been tormenting her: 'We're alone now, Dan. What did you hold out when we were with Feltraur?'

'I don't feel like talking to you about it... it was a slip of the tongue.'

'Oh, but you must! Faryraf's my grandfather... Don't be silent, Dan: your silence shatters my soul.'

'It was not Faryraf who made the Dorlief clock.'

'Not Faryraf? You must be out of your mind, Dan. If that was the case, someone would know: there's no concealing a thing like that.'

'There, you see. I shouldn't have told you.'

'All right, sorry... and speak,' Leoley had trouble fighting down her indignation.

'The artist who chanced on Dorlief over thirty years ago made sketches of the clock. His name is hidden in it, in its scrollwork.'

'And that was what made you faint when you were poring over it?'

'Looks like it. The artist is all spite. He's to blame for my grandfather's death, and not just his. He's here again, on the Emptied Lake. He and the spooky humpback Malam told me, Mat and Semimes about have joined their forces and bodies into a single one to control the barkycrooks.'

'Dan, your words frighten me.'

'I'm frightened, too. The other day we saw the Lord of Darkness at the Harshid foothills. He flies around on the gorhoon's back.'

'Dan?'

'Sufus and Safasy were slain on his orders. He made Faryraf plant the barkycrook horsehair on me.'

'Is he stalking you?'

'I shouldn't say that... He *is* stalking me.'

'I think I know what he wants. Is it the Tear?'

'It isn't just that, but for the time being, I can't tell you more than that.'

'But how did Faryraf succumb to him? He's not a wimp.'

'Don't you dig it yet?'

'No.'

'Clocks are his weakness. You've said he loves them best of all. The Lord of Darkness has power over Faryraf because he knows the secret of the clock, so everyone might know it.'

'Just say it again!' cried Leoley and stopped.

'Everyone might know the truth, all Dorliefans.'

Leoley closed her face with her hands and wept... Then she said, sobbing:

'I've just understood the meaning of the words I heard as a kid the night I got back from the lake with mom and dad. Remember me telling you? Faryraf was talking with a man in the garden, and my father and I overheard the conversation inadvertently?'

'I do, Leoley.'

'The man said, and I remember the words well: "I'm sure the captive will be back, and then everyone will know the truth." The captive is back, isn't he, Dan?'

'Did the man have a resonant, frightening voice?'

'Yes.'

'It was the humpback. The Lord of Darkness, while the captive—'

'Was the artist.'

'It looks like he was your grandfather's captive, making sketches for the clock.'

'Dan... father and mother's death wasn't an accident. Father seemed to know something... It made him suffer.'

'He probably knew the Dorlief clock hadn't been thought up by your grandfather. Leoley, pray don't tell anyone about the clock. I'll be the one to tell Falafy about Faryraf's treachery. No one should know about the clock.'

'What about Mat? Will you tell Mat?'

'I will.'

'Dan?'

'What?'

'Are you asking me that on my account? Thank you.'

## **Chapter Five**

### **'Respond to life'**

Semimes was lying on the rift floor and venting on the cold rock his injured feelings.

'You'll still have to return to your friends, Word Keeper... instead of the other guy who they're waiting for rather than you. Sorry for the one who fell, sure thing, not the one who was sure-footed. And the one who offered to pick up the



fallen will be held accountable two-fold, no less... Accountable, as if he were to blame... "How do you account for Mat, Wolfdog?" That's just like you, Nervy, being outspoken. What about letting your reproach wait and listen to what Semimes has to tell you? "Did you find Mat?" Little does the sorrowful foreigner know that Mat has to be somewhere to be found... "Own up, friend!" It's either you own up or a friend. It's squarish of you, Groyorg the Square... I expect no words of you, forestman: you know light from darkness by the eyes... Now, Semimes, what will you have to say to all those questions... one question, in fact: Have you done more than everybody, Semimes, son of Malam... ? What makes you so crestfallen... ? Tell them it took you so long to get down to the rift, careful of your bones, that the wolves had had the time to eat him up? Oh, Semimes...'

Semimes's stick suddenly seemed to be about to say something as it lay nearby. He hefted it and heeded: someone had betrayed his presence under the crag by a stir. He touched the right wall with his stick... then the left one...

'Get your wits about you,' he commanded himself, lit the torch again and started thoroughly investigating the left wall. "That is a tight fit looking like a solid wall, so I didn't detect you right away... Now, our injured guy wouldn't have coped with that huge rock on his own. Looks like he's not alone crouched under that crag.'

Semimes sat down and pressed his spine against the right wall to heave it with his legs, but suddenly changed his mind.

'Get your wits about you! They might take you for a barkycrook and give you a taste of a sword.'

He sprang up, ran toward the entryway to the rift and started clambering up without wasting any more time. The hope of seeing Mat alive gave him stamina.

'Accountable for two, no less,' he urged himself...

He had some rest on the ledge he and his friends had used on their way to the Vanishing Waterfall, and proceeded in the opposite direction. Then started clambering higher...

'Just lie down on this ridge. Drape your cape over your head, eyes outward, and wait. That's what time's for... I say! Someone's stolen a march on you, Semimes, very much so. Friend or foe, the one who's been shadowing us? You should've heard him before. He must be cunning, crouched, waiting. That's what time is for, waiting. What brought him here: the anxious whisper of the mountains or the dreadful word of the Emptied Lake Lord? What eyes does Mat the Vital have for him when coming to? Are they the eyes of a happy-go-lucky Spaps who saw a luminous sluisy tree through a thicket of Ietrique? Or the eyes of poor Nuruny frightened at the sight of that walking menace of a foolish Kipik with a rock in his hand?'

That was how Semimes was reasoning things out, or rather considering suppositions one by one and lying in wait for whoever had hidden Mat (for better or for worse)... Suddenly he started: his eye had caught a movement. A man in gneiss cape appeared from behind the crag. The man looked around, and Semimes knew it was the Loner.

'Loner!' he cried throwing caution to the winds. 'It's me, Semimes, son of Malam!'

The Loner waved his hand on seeing him.

'I won't be a moment!' Semimes cried forgetful of his father's advice of some standing ('When scaling mountains, let your sighted thought forth, with your hands and legs to follow.') and rushed down helter-skelter...

His thought was so far forth that his hands and legs could not depend on its sight catching at whatever was to hand or to leg. The result was that the crag took its toll: he fell barely escaping with his life.

'You alive, Semimes?' came the Loner's voice from afar.

Semimes opened his eyes, raised himself to arm's height and shook his head. The Loner was not far away—he was right above him.

'Alive or very nearly so,' he screeched.

The Loner held out his hand to help him up.

'Get up, your friend's in need of you.'

'That's our Mat,' Semimes said hollowly, rubbing his left side.

'I knew him.'

'How's he?'

'His bones are intact, but he's lost a lot of blood. I've washed his wounds with tulis and dressed them. He's come to twice. He knew me, smiled—but not a word: he didn't have the strength for that. He has to be taken to the boat. It's hidden in a cave nearby. It's faster by river.

'The barkycrooks got Mat when we were walking down the ledge.'

'I know, Semimes, I'd been shadowing you.'

'Why? Why were you?'

'Why? Because I follow travelers on occasion, mindful that not everyone's accepted by mountains, and that the Emptied Lake monsters have got as far as the Harshid... And another thing, Semimes, son of Malam, it's something I've never told anyone before. I'd been following you because there were two people among you that are my nearest and dearest: Natan, my grandson, and Danad, my son's grandson, who was also called Natan.'

'Is Falafy your daughter?' Semimes whispered. 'Oh, I say. And the Natan that inscribed the sacred Word is your son? I say! And your former name's Norron?'

'It is, Semimes. And now help me carry Matam.'

'Why, yes. Where's he?'

They helped each other to pull Matthew out of a deep fissure in the crag that the cave wolves had adapted as a passage. Matthew was draped with a cape. His face was drawn and disfigured with pain, harrowing visions and patience. Semimes produced a canteen of grappian infusion from his backpack and moistened his mouth, having raised his head.

'Drink some of it, Mat. Grappian has strength, your strength.'

Matthew opened his eyes.

'Semimes,' he mouthed, and Semimes made out his name in the barely audible sounds.

'He knew me! He knew me! Loner, Mat knew me.'

'So he did. How could he fail to know his guide?' the Loner supported Semimes's joy with a word.

'Mat, my friend, have some grappian: you have to restore your blood, very much so.'

Matthew sipped and closed his eyes again.

'He's very weak. His lips are all dead, he can neither sip nor speak. He has to be taken to Dorlief, to Falafy,' Semimes said.

'Semimes, be so kind as to cut a straight branch not unlike my prod—we'll make a stretcher.'

Soon, the Loner's cape tied at the corners to the prod and the pole turned into a stretcher. They placed Matthew carefully on it and made for the bridge along the Druze to where the boat was hidden... Matthew kept groaning because of all the shaking. Semimes responded:

'Groan on, Vital, do, respond to life. It's gratifying to hear you respond to life, even though it isn't all that kind to you, giving you pain... Groan on, do. Squeeze out a word of sorts to give us something to tell your friends. Groan on, I'll make it out, very much so.'

The cave that was near in the Loner's words was not very near. Where the Loner would have taken short cuts or Semimes, fond of such things, had hopped a tree felled by Shwarrawsh or some scree, they had to take care. The way they took was chosen by Matthew without being aware of it by groaning, his only way of expression...

By the time they had pulled the boat out of a low cave under the crag and taken it to the water, tittle-tattle was taking on a somber tinge.

'Thank you, Semimes, son of Malam: I'd have had a hard time of it without your help. Go catch up with your friends. Mat and I will find it easier from here on.'

'Thank *you*, Loner for shadowing us, for rescuing Mat from barkycrooks and wolves,' screeched Semimes in a heartfelt manner. 'And...'

He felt like saying something else to express his gratitude, and when the right sort of idea flashed through his mind, he only hesitated half a jiffy before leaving with that man what he had used his quick thinking to get in the first place. The man who had revealed to him what he had never revealed to anybody before. He removed the black bag from his girdle.

'... There, take it. There's a fire-breathing stone inside. Throw it the moment you take it out, for it turns into a huge fire ball when exposed to light'

'I've seen one, Semimes. And I thank you. This unbridled power may come in handy these days.'

'Very much so.'

Semimes bent over Matthew.

'Mat, my friend, cling to life since you were called Vital. Don't reply, save your breath. Well, goodbye for now.'

Semimes pushed off the boat... but did not run straight off... He stood looking at Mat's floating home as it was carried off by the Druze until it was hidden by the Harshid crags. He knew: he was to walk along long in solitude and

would not break the thread that linked him to one of the petals of the eight-petal flower that was steadily attenuating...

\* \* \*

Semimes pulled the boat... again and again... He had never had it so hard. He could not see the end of the way through the red stones. The torch fell off yet another time. Semimes seemed to have tied the painter hard; the rope was not supposed to undo. But the torch fell, the rope was undone, and he fell down. Semimes stopped to fix it. He was going to use this chance to have a rest and talk to Mat. But Mat was not there in the boat this time, either. Well, Semimes had heard him groan. The Loner said something. Semimes looked back but there was no one in sight.

'I wish he'd come and help me pull the boat,' he screeched audibly wishing the Loner would hear him. Then he called Matthew: 'Mat, where are you? Talk to me: you're in the boat, aren't you? I could hear you groan. I could.'

No answer forthcoming, Semimes picked up the painter from the rock and pulled the boat for all he was worth... Some time later, Mat groaned again. Semimes was pleased: that was the way it should be; Mat was obviously in the boat and the Loner was sure to respond to his groan. Semimes was tripped up and fell to his knees. On his knees, he looked over the board inside—Mat was not there.

'Who's that groaning?' Semimes asked himself. 'I've got to call the Loner: he might know where Mat is. Loner! Loner! He'll be coming directly. He must've fallen behind. Loner!'

Light and shade shied, as if afraid of something. It was the torch falling down again. The boat has to be pulled and the torch tied up... Semimes took long tying up the torch: his hands felt clumsy, the rope no good, unyielding... Semimes got up and pulled the boat. His head ached with the effort... his eyes and neck, too... The pain grew worse. A thought had just flashed through his mind. The torch dropped again, and everything vanished—the boat, the red stones and Semimes himself. There was just the pain left which restored the momentary guess: It's a dream.

Semimes felt he had come to. He wanted to open his eyes, but something would not let reality break through the blackness. And Semimes was frightened by that importunate blackness, and even more by the idea born of it: Have I gone blind? His nose sniffed blood, blood nearby.

'It's the blood out of my eyes,' he whispered ushering in the dreadful idea. 'The birds must've pecked them out while I was asleep... Where was I sleeping? Where am I?' Semimes tried to raise his hands: he meant to touch his eyes... what was left of them. But the hand felt heavy.

'What's wrong with you, Semimes?' he screeched a piteous screech.

He subjected his hands to his will, took them to his face and touched his eyes... and realized the eyelids had been caked solid by congealed blood. But the good thing was his eyes were intact. He grinned with the momentary pleasure at the eyes being all right and started to peel off the bits of dried blood... and finally the eyes opened: hanging over him was a blackish-violet sky. He raised his head

(it was a hundred times heavier and splitting) to look around. To his right he spied a cave mouth. Next to it and all around as far as he could see, there were felled barkycrooks. He could hear a river nearby... Oh, that it could carry away the pain stuck in his head. Semimes took his hand to his crown and pulled it back.

'Father!' he whispered in a tremulous voice. 'Will you know your Semimes?' Everything swam in front of his eyes, and he threw back his head...

'Unless Semimes is far wrong, there was a battle here...'

He started patting the ground for his backpack to get the grappian and tulis canteens, but ran into barkycrooks' bodies clad in carapaces instead. Feeling that his body was weary and unresponsive, he decided to see if he had other injuries besides the one on top of his head. He was terrified as soon as his hands touched his chest...

'Father,' he called like one doomed and clenched his jaws in order not to burst out in a great roar, and closed his eyes not to give way to tears. I was to him like, 'Respond to life.'

\* \* \*

For two days and two nights Sawasard and Groyorg retreated from the barkycrooks who dogged them with wolfish persistence. It would have been much safer for the friends to crouch in some secluded place (such were plentiful in the mountains), wait until the barkycrooks had marched further down the Wedolick Gorge and follow the Kaduhar trails hidden from the eyes toward the Sadorn Forest. However, Groyorg was implacable in his resolution.

'Friend,' he said to Sawasard. 'I'm not going to flee from the monsters for fleeing's sake. I'll slay them all, Lil'un-to-the-rescue... to avenge our Mat the Vital and Natan the Nervy. Will you help me?'

'You won't be able to do without my arrows, friend,' Sawasard said.

They attacked the barkycrooks five times letting loose the Lil'un-to-the-rescue and the two swords, only to retreat again fighting off the pursuers with arrows. Five times had the enemy pole axes and swords got through the friends' protection leaving bloody wounds: four of them to Groyorg, one to Sawasard... When Kaduhar was left behind, the friends decided to follow the scree toward the Three-headed Hill. The huge rocks strewn here and there over a vast area confused the barkycrooks and they attacked them from ambushes...

Light had not yet dispelled darkness and it was just right for the two friends: they could easily hide themselves, wait and attack at close range. Groyorg sat with his back to a boulder chewing a barynth hut. Sawasard stood nearby watching the approaches.

'Why do you keep looking, Sawasard? Visibility's nil. Sit down. We'll hear them coming. Sawasard?'

'Reflect in undertones, Groyorg.'

'I've a favor to ask, but you keep watching and watching.'

'We'll hear many but miss one. That's what makes me peer into the darkness. What is it you want to ask?'

'Let me go, friend. After we've slain them all, let me go to the Natlief fortress. I want to keep on slaying those rabid beasts. To avenge our Mat the Vital... our Natan the Nervy... the siblings who arranged New Light celebrations in Dorlief. Let me go. Lil'un and I will be a boon to the fortress.'

'Who'll safeguard the Word? Tell me.'

Groyorg lowered his head and croaked softly:

'It's just that I want to slay them.'

'You'll be doing it in just a minute. Do you hear them?'

Groyorg rose and listened.

'I do. Do you see them?'

'Yes.'

'How many?'

'I've counted sixteen, two astride quadrupeds.'

'Some eye you have, Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

'I wish I had a dozen arrows to help it along.'

'We'd better use the last one to the greatest advantage. I'll use my daggers. Just let them get closer, like that time. Where are the barkycrooks going?'

'Heading our way. Must be smelling the blood.'

'Let's do it this way: I'll make my way to that scree. As soon as I'm there, shoot a quadruped down, and we'll rush them either way,' Groyorg suggested.

'A good plan, friend.'

'We'll finish them off in no time.'

The battle does not last long. Following Sawasard's arrow that felled a quadruped, five of Groyorg's daggers flew barkycrooks' way, two of them piercing heads as they entered through the eyes, three slashing throats. The rest of the barkycrooks, roared in fury as they rushed the people. Four of them, one astride a quadruped, crowded Groyorg, seven surrounding Sawasard... When it was over, one of the two, still able to keep his feet, croaked:

'Avenging Natan the Nervy.'

'Avenging Mat the Vital,' said the other.

Sawasard came up to a rock, leaned his back against it and sank to the ground.

'Where did they get you?' asked Groyorg.

'In the leg.'

Groyorg bent over Sawasard to look at the injury.

'Blood streaming. I'll pour tulis over it and dress it in no time.'

'Much obliged, friend.'

'Gulp some grappian.'

'You, too.'

'So will I.'

After doing Sawasard's leg, Groyorg said:

'Sit around awhile. I'll go gather the chums that helped me out in the fray—they'll come in handy yet.'

Day was breaking. After a bite and a rest, the friends made for the Three-headed Hill to look around from its height...

'I dressed your leg, and you now run faster than ever,' cried Groyorg after Sawasard.

'This is it, friend. Thank you again!' Sawasard replied and, having reached the hilltop (the tallest of the three), suddenly hugged the ground.

'Who was that, why hug the ground like a lizard?'

'I wasn't quick enough: I think they saw me, too.'

'Who? Out with it!'

'Barkycrooks. At least two hundred of them. Advancing from the Emptied Lake. All riding quadrupeds... At the double... Making right for us.'

Groyorg joined Sawasard and cried on seeing the barkycrooks:

'I say! I've got seven daggers left; you haven't got a single arrow—nothing to contain their dash! Will your swords and my Lil'un stand such a press? Why are you silent?'

'I've nothing to say, so that makes me silent,' said Sawasard.

'Don't be. Say something.'

No matter how much his square friend's volubility was in the way, Sawasard still had an idea and recalled what he had to recall under the contingency.

'I've heard my father say—' he began.

'The guy we're to look for?'

'The same, Groyorg, Faddaf.'

'Yes indeed, Faddaf.'

'Among the stones around, there are three: they lean against one another and look like a three-petal flower as viewed from above, the way we're viewing around. There's a passage between them that leads underground. We've got to find it before the barkycrooks are on us.'

'Attaboy, Sawasard the Bright! And so is your father,' Groyorg cried and jumped up. In another moment he was on his way crying, 'The flower! The flower, Sawasard! I can see it.'

Sawasard ran after him. They quickly got up the stone petals.

'What next?' said Groyorg. 'Where's the passage?'

'Do you see the rift underfoot?'

'I do. Is this what you call a passage?'

'There's no other. If we loiter like this, we'll soon be an easy prey for the barkycrooks. Just get in.'

'I've hated tunnels since I was a kid. Well, no matter—I'm going, Lil'un-to-the-rescue,' Groyorg croaked indignantly, took off his backpack, got in... and got stuck. 'A passage, my ass! Help me, forestman.'

'Raise your hands and I'll push you in... Higher, don't fret!'

Groyorg raised his hands, jerked his legs and started getting down until finally he was through the treacherous fissure with a fall.

'Groyorg!' called Sawasard.

'Drop your backpack and get down: it's spooky here on my own,' his hoarse subdued appeal came.

In another moment the friends were together again.

'Sawasard, I can hear you as well as myself, but I can't see you at all,' croaked Groyorg in anxiety or indignation. 'Are you here?'

'I am, friend, here's my hand.'

'What an eerie place: the light seems jammed in the fissure like me and goes to my head like some potion. Shouldn't we light a torch to clear the head and the eyes?'

Sawasard found his pack, removed the torch attached to it with some straps and lit it.

'I say!' cried Groyorg. 'I've been to caves and tunnels (that's what makes me hate them!), but I haven't seen any like this. It's a foul place. I feel out of sorts here.'

From where they stood, eight narrow tunnels radiated, their walls pierced with scores of small passages.

'Is this for real, Sawasard? I look at the wall this way, and it's all burrows, so deep they should be all the way through, but they aren't. Once you look inside,' Groyorg did, 'there's no end in sight. When I look from the other side, it's the same. How can it be?'

Sawasard twisted and turned scrutinizing the cave and found no explanation for what they saw.

'Keeping mum again, forestman?' Groyorg persisted.

'Must you go on crying and spooking ideas, Square?'

'Am I?'

'What do you think?'

'I wish Malam were here. He wouldn't be silent—he'd know what to say,' Groyorg croaked as he waved a hand at Sawasard. 'We'd better put out the torch: I can't stand these cursed holes. We aren't going anywhere. We'd better ride it out and then get out, lest we get lost underground.'

Sawasard put out the torch and said with unexpected vigor:

'And thank you for Malam, friend.'

'What are you so happy about? Malam isn't with us.'

'Malam isn't, but I've recalled his advice.'

'What advice?'

'I'm not telling—I'd better do as Malam said.'

'Get a move on, then: I can't stand it!'

Sawasard produced from the quiver the stick Malam had given him for New Light and knocked it on the wall—the knock rebounded with a variety of fragmented knocks which rushed off hopping every which way. Sawasard and Groyorg held their breath... The fragments receded and abated after a few moments. A few moments later, the friends heard a return knock—it was bouncing down one passage only.

'Can you hear that?' said Groyorg in a whisper as if afraid to spook the nearing knock.

'I can,' Sawasard whispered back.

The knock died down some twenty paces from them, and there appeared the Carroty from nowhere. It was as dark as ever all around, with just Malam standing there in a coil of light.



'Malam!' cried Groyorg.

Malam beckoned them with his hand: Come, follow me, and walked down the tunnel.

'Malam, wait!' Groyorg was on the ball and somewhat lost.

'Let's follow him,' said Sawasard. 'He's called us.'

'I'll follow Malam. I did as a kid, and I'll follow now. One can't get lost with him around,' said Groyorg and could not contain himself any more: 'Malam!'

Sawasard let Groyorg go ahead, so they could both see their guide.

'Don't call out to him for no good reason, my friend; you're only indulging in wishful thinking.'

'How do you know it's wishful thinking rather than something real?' Groyorg hoarsely snapped, injured.

'No offence meant, friend.'

Groyorg forbore for some time from sending a verbal Malam in pursuit of the one they could distinctly see. However, he decided to outwit everybody: Sawasard who would hardly see through his trick because of the monotony of the proceedings, and Malam who was progressing at a measured pace without looking back and who was so preoccupied he had delegated to the forestman his habit of cutting him down to size. He gained momentum a bit, then a bit more... to catch up with Malam, but Malam was somehow as far away as ever without hastening his pace or that of his stick. Sawasard who had seemed to take no notice suddenly said:

'I think we have a long way to go down this tunnel, friend. So is it a good policy to court weariness?'

'It's Malam's fault; I'm not to blame, friend. And you won't have me call out to him... Malam! Wait for us! Let's go together, Malam!'

Thus it was that they marched in sight of the Carroty... wasting time as they did... forgetful of their thirst and hunger... the idea of camping shed by the side...

## **Chapter Six**

### **'I remembered but forgot'**

Hardly had Daniel and Leely put some distance between themselves and the forest when they heard a screechy-jingly voice:

'Hey, wait, wait!'

They stopped and looked to their left in the direction of the voice: the caller was some two thousand paces from them.

'Semimes?' Daniel said in wonder.

'Who do you think? There's no confusing our Semimes with anyone. Let's meet him halfway,' said Leely and cried, waving her hand, 'Semimes!'

'He looks wounded.'

The shorter the distance between them, the more they could see that there was something wrong with Semimes. His step was no longer springy, he dragged

his feet along the grass, and he leaned on the stick. His pack was not across his back but over his abdomen pulling him down. He had his head to one side. His hair hung down in tousled locks with blood congealed in them. There was a reddish-brown scab on his forehead above his right eyebrow suggestive of a recent wound. His face was bloodstained... They were four paces apart, but Semimes's eyes had not betrayed the twinkle they usually had for his friends, their look as sullen and distrustful as before, unlike the wont of those who resign themselves to their nearest and dearest.

'Semimes! Guide!' Daniel gave vent to his feelings, ready to hug his guide, only to be stopped by a stare not unlike a caked wound. 'It's a good thing... you're back.'

'I'm back, since I'm here, not there,' Semimes screeched reluctantly.

'Dear Semimes, what's happened?' Leuely said anxiously as she neared him.

Before answering, Semimes gave her a close stare.

'I was attacked by those...' he nodded toward the Emptied Lake.

'Barkycrooks? Where?' said Daniel.

'There, in the Wedolick Gorge.'

'So you never made it to Sawasard and Groyorg?'

'Wait, Dan. He's unwell. We've got to see Falafy. Come, Semimes.'

'Take me to Malam, my father... My head's all wrong. There,' he poked at the wound to his forehead. 'A barkycrook... did that.'

'Your father it shall be,' Leuely humored him. 'But Falafy will still have to see to your wound.'

'You got the worst of it, guide,' said Daniel as he shook his head and decided against telling him about Natan. 'Let me carry your backpack.'

'No, man, I'll carry it myself,' said Semimes giving him a sullen stare.

'Man it shall be. You know best, guide. I may graduate to Dan again,' Daniel thought it best to joke.

Leuely looked at him with reproach.

'Don't, Dan. I've told you my head's all wrong. I haven't got my wits about me: they left me when that one,' he nodded toward the Emptied Lake, 'hit me.'

Daniel felt queasy: he both knew Semimes and did not.

'There's good news, though, guide. Mat's getting better. I haven't seen him, though.'

'That you will.'

'Will we, perhaps, go straight to Falafy, Semimes?' Leuely asked, hopeful that he would change his mind for the sake of Mat.

'You'd better agree, guide. She'll get your wits back to you. And then we'll show up at your place, the three of us. Malam would be glad.'

'Don't, Dan! I told you not to,' there was a threat in Semimes's voice.

'Semimes! It was Dan's joke about your wits—no offence meant.'

'You have goodness. What's your name?'

'Leuely. Don't you remember?'

'I remembered but forgot... when that one hit me. Take me to father first, lest I die before seeing him.'

'What are you talking about, Semimes? You're strong,' Leuely said fighting back the tears.

'You're Semimes the Conqueror. Aren't you, now?'

'I am, Dan,' Semimes's countenance brightened up.

He remembers, thought Daniel, so our Semimes will be back.

'I'm afraid of father: once he sees me like this—he may send me off packing.'

Daniel could stand it no longer and laughed. He imagined the Carroty chasing Semimes with his stick, which looked to him more for fun than for real and sad. Semimes growled in an undertone and shook his stick at him.

'Semimes!' Leuely warned him.

'Leuely, I meant it as a joke,' Semimes screeched and added to those words what cancelled them. 'If Semimes had meant to kill, he would have... with this stick.'

'What are you talking about, Semimes dear? We can see you're wounded and exhausted, and you must be feeling awful. But Dan's your friend, and no such thing should be said, even in jest.'

'Leuely?'

'What?'

'You're my friend.'

Daniel was outraged by Semimes's escapade, but he kept mum, mindful that the former Semimes would be back yet. But still he thought: I wish we could get him to see Falafy in a hurry.

'Will you race me, Dan?' Semimes suddenly said.

'Like that once?' Daniel was pleased.

Semimes nodded his assent.

'Let's run,' cried Daniel and dashed off.

Semimes waited a bit, then bent and dashed off with a growl... He was level with Daniel in a few moments, pushed him hard on the back and knocked him off his feet. He looked back at Leuely.

'Semimes the Conqueror!' she humored him, to stop him doing something worse.

'What makes you so fast, guide?' Daniel asked him with a grin.

'Don't,' Semimes said and went ahead to meet Leuely.

Daniel waited for them, and the three of them went on their way to Dorlief...

\* \* \*

Malam sat on the lower porch stair waiting for his son. The other day, the stick told him that the distance between him and Semimes was getting shorter. Still, his soul was anxious. It was some time since he had had a bad dream, and he did not remember any. And suddenly... Nothing had frightened him quite as much as the dream he had had five days before: Semimes was among the fallen in a battle, dying of his wounds... calling out to him... and meaning to say something to him...

Malam knew his son among the threesome that emerged from the stand of linden trees right away. He sprang up and hurried to meet them

'Malam couldn't stay sitting: hopping along like you!' Daniel said nudging Semimes. 'Run, why don't you?'

But Semimes would not run—he looked as if one struck and fell down to his knees. When Malam was on him, he screeched piteously:

'Forgive me, Father. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry...'

'Come, come, sonny.'

'I'm back... not as I was... That...'

'Barkycrook,' Daniel suggested.

'... barkycrook hit me on the head... And I lost my wits. There...' he indicated the wound.

Malam hugged him, pressed his head to his bosom and started stroking it.

'Don't banish me, Father!' Semimes groaned. 'Don't!'

'Come, come now! Come, Semimes!' Malam reiterated as the tears were streaming down his face. 'You're back, sonny, back, back. So will your wits be. Falafy will help us. I'll dash off to fetch her.'

'Don't bother, Malam. I'll call Falafy,' said Daniel.

'Danad dear! Leuely! I'm ever so glad to see you, dears. Let me hug you, Danad.'

Daniel bent and they had a good hug.

'You're back home now. And a good thing, too. Mat will soon be back, and it will be better than ever. We'll live the way we always have,' Malam was talking as if Daniel and Matthew had been permanent fixtures in his house from time immemorial, rather than short-lived friends, and the house was theirs as well as his.

Leuely stood nearby, the tears rolling down her cheeks. Semimes drew himself up to his full height, Malam took his hand in his, pressed it to himself and they walked toward the house, Daniel and Leuely following.

'Father, Falafy will cauterize my wound, and my wits will be back. I'll be a good son to you yet... the way I was before that... barkycrook hit me.'

'Yes, sonny, yes, dear.'

Daniel left his backpack at the porch and went to Dorlief with Leuely...

They were silent on the way. Their thoughts, accidental, confused, had to do with Semimes but they did not feel like talking about him... They stopped by Falafy's house.

'I'll go home,' said Leuely (there was sadness in her voice). 'I don't feel like seeing Faryraf... I'm sorry for gran. She'll feel awful when she finds out. I'll be going then.'

'Thank you, Leuely.'

'It was a pleasure, Dan. I'll be going, I have to.'

'Wait... You'd better take care with Faryraf. He should suspect nothing.'

'Blast him!' she waved her hand, turned and... staggered along.

'Dan?' Matthew's voice, loud and jovial, seemed to have flung the door open before dashing out.

Klowolk growled, started and ran up to meet Daniel with Matthew.

'Mat!'

'Dan! At last! What kept you so long? I hear you've been staying with the forestmen.'

'You said you were with me, I hear. So, I'm taking you with me. Falafy, Lutul, I'm ever so happy to see you.'

'Dan, my boy!' Falafy cried and hugged him.

'I'm sorry about Natan,' Daniel said softly.

'You're not to blame, Dan. None of you is to blame,' said Falafy. 'Let's go inside.'

Only now did Daniel take notice of the change in her: her face had grown older, as if years had passed since he saw her last. There was none of the confidence in her eyes, no twinkle that inspired Dorliefans with hope.

'Falafy...' he lost the thread of thought for a moment. 'Falafy, I can't just yet.'

'What do you mean, you can't, our dear grandson?' said Lutul, excitement in his voice. 'We've been waiting ever so long for you. What do you mean, you can't?'

'Ee-oo, ee-oo!' cried the ferlings as if seconding their master.

'What do you mean, you can't? The ferlings are calling you, too,' said Matthew nodding at the cages left of the house between two spreading willows. 'Can't you hear them agitated? I know each of them by name. This one's Rur, next to him is Tat, this is Sisy, this—'

'Wait, Mat! Wait, sorry,' Daniel touched his shoulder and addressed Falafy: 'Falafy, you have to go to Malam's. I'm here to call you.'

'What's wrong with him?' Lutul was frightened. 'Has our Malam fallen ill?'

'Semimes is back. He has a wound to his head. There's something wrong with him.'

'Wrong?' Matthew echoed.

'Yes, Mat, he's somewhat... He's not what he used to be. He says himself there's something wrong with his head. He says he's lost his wits.'

'Lost his wits?'

'Not to worry, Mat. If he says he's lost his wits, it isn't as bad as all that,' Falafy said quietly. 'Let's go see him.'

'I'll collect my backpack: it's time I joined my friends,' said Matthew guilt-ridden and added with a grin: 'I'll look after our guide.'

'Take my basket along: the infusions are sure to come in handy if he's wounded. It's in the infirmary, under a wicker cover.'

'I know,' said Matthew on the go.

\* \* \*

In the meantime, Leuely had arrived home. Faryraf, on hearing the footfalls (the door from the hallway to the living room had been left open for the purpose), called her:

'Leuely!'

There was nothing for it but for her to show up. The chair he was sitting in did not face the wall that held the secrets of the clocks as was the case usually; it faced the door, and she ran into his gimlet stare.

'Did you call me?' she asked and heard a touch of agitation in her voice.

'Sit down for awhile, dear.'

Leuely took a chair across the way.

'Is he back?' asked Faryraf.

The unexpected question threw her, shaking all she had hidden inside, and she felt at a loss.

'I was walking with Rodor beyond the gardens and saw you coming from Malam's. Was it with him?'

'You did see. Why ask?' she said trying to keep her tremor in check, but it had a defiant ring.

'I asked you if he was back. You have to answer me. It isn't just curiosity. Don't forget: I'm not just your granddad, but also a Governing Council member. He's... a foreigner.'

'What do you want to hear? The truth?'

'Pipe down, Leuely. The truth, of course.'

'The truth? You thought he wouldn't be back. Is that the truth?'

'What?' Faryraf got up. 'What did you say?'

Leuely got up, too.

'You heard me and you understand it all. Don't pretend you don't,' she cried and ran out into the dining room.

'Leuely!' Faryraf tried to stop her.

She went on to the kitchen, hoping her grandmother was there and he would not be at it in her presence.

'Good tittle-tattle, dear,' Rablbary met her with her usual cordiality.

'Good tittle-tattle, gran.'

'What was the tiff you had with your granddad? He'd been looking forward to seeing you. He could hardly wait.'

'I don't know. It was nothing.'

'You must be hungry. Leaving at the crack of dawn. Sit down and have some cookies.'

'I don't feel hungry.'

'Sit here awhile—their fragrance will whet your appetite in no time.'

But Leuely hardly heard her grandma. She was preoccupied with something else: It's the truth: Faryraf's a traitor. My granddad's a traitor. He was the one that slew Natan... Mat very nearly died, too, and Semimes is out of his mind... Gran... poor gran knows nothing... Happy with the cookies she's made... proud of Faryraf... Leuely ran out of the kitchen and took her rue to her room... 'Been picking up cornflowers... cornflowers in the field?' Natan's words, facile, jovial, invoked bitter tears.

'Oh, Nat!'

The knock at the door made her spring off the bed and wipe her face. Faryraf came in. Leuely could hardly believe it: his eyes which had only a few

minutes before been full of implacability... were now all pity and understanding. He had said nothing as yet, but his eyes said he was there to repent.

'Leuely, you'll probably never forgive me but you must hear me out and remember: I'm here to say I'm sorry. I've always loved you.'

'You've loved your clocks even better than me... than your son.'

'It's true: clocks have been my downfall. But there's no understanding everything at once, dear...'

He was about to say something else, but Leuely interposed:

'Say that to Falafy!'

Faryraf held out his hand and opened it—there was the white Tear with a violet tinge.

'Take your Tear. I'm no longer a Keeper.'

Leuely hardly knew what she had to do for the best. Confronting her was a Faryraf she did not know. Looking at her were the eyes she somehow believed. She was hearing a voice that held no lies in it. At the moment, her soul did not repel the man. She sat down on the bed, cupped her face with her hands and cried again... Faryraf put the Tear on the pillow.

'Be a solace to Rablbary. Goodbye,' he said and left...

She wished she could ask him something else (her heart did), say something, make amends. She ran after him... But he was neither in the house nor near it. He was near the fence at the bottom of the garden. He had one hand raised (the other held Rodor's leash) and slowly stepped forth changing tack.

The Tear, flashed through her mind. She felt petrified... and then cried in despair:

'Gramps!'

Faryraf never looked back and vanished after a moment along with Rodor.

\* \* \*

While Daniel had been away to fetch Falafy, Semimes (assisted by Malam) had washed, changed, brushed his hair (so no hair was in the wound's way) and settled in anew. He was now at table in the kitchen (the kitchen had welcomed his injured soul more than any other room, as it followed his nose) enjoying the board: fried fish with a side-dish of boiled potatoes, carrot balls in sour cream, shepherd's pie of carrots and mushrooms, a variety of flat cakes, goat's milk and parate tea.

'I'll have some more fish, Father,' he said shoveling up with nimble fingers, which were actively engrossed in the process, more fried bream in order to hear yet another time the gentle words his father had for him, the words being as sweet as, or perchance sweeter than, the bream.

'Tuck in, sonny, help yourself to as much as your nice hunger craves. Whatever's on the table is for it, for nice hunger.'

'Father, my nice hunger would enjoy these. I'll help myself to some.'

'These are carrot balls, sonny.'

'What about these?'

'These are flat cakes. Have you forgotten?'

'I remembered but forgot when I was hit by a... barkycrook on the head.'

'I got them only this morning at Darrad and Plilp's. Try some cream flat cakes if you like with huckleberries in them. Tuck in: you have to fortify yourself. There, there's the door. It must be Falafy. I'll get it while you have some tea. Come to the living room when you've had your fill. Falafy'll see to your wound.'

Father, can I have some of this?'

'Do, sonny. Goat's milk is there for you and your nice hunger: it's wholesome.'

'Is anyone there?' Falafy broadcast her arrival on entering the premises.

'Over here!' Malam was in the corridor at a run. 'Falafy dear, come into the living room. You too, Dan and Mat, back home again? How are you, Mat? Let me embrace you, dear... Did my hug hurt?'

'It didn't: Falafy had it all banished by waving her hands.'

Falafy, the boys and Malam entered the living room. Some time later the dining room door slowly opened and let in Semimes's injured head and suspicious eyes.

'Come in, sonny, don't be afraid. It's just Falafy and your friends, Dan and Mat.'

Semimes stepped into the living room and paused.

'There's something wrong with my head, and it made me afraid,' he screeched.

'Hello, Semimes! Hello, my dear!'

'Hello, Aunt... Falafy.'

The boys exchanged glances.

'Hi, guide,' said Mathew and waved his hand (something prevented him from coming up and giving a hug to one who had helped him survive several days previously; perhaps, Semimes's eyes had lost on the way what they had had in the Kerdock Gorge).

Semimes waved his hand and stared at the floor.

'Well, sit down on the sofa and let me examine your wound,' said Falafy.

Daniel and Matthew made for the door.

'Dinner's in the kitchen, boys,' Malam said. 'Have a nice hunger and chat: you must've missed each other.'

'Hey, tuck in without asking,' said Semimes unexpectedly. 'Whatever's on the table is for nice hunger.'

'Thanks, Semimes,' said Matthew, delighted in this turn from a sullen stare to a welcoming word. 'Will you join us?'

'We'll wait for you,' Daniel chimed in.

'That I will,' said Semimes and addressed Falafy: 'Will you have dinner with me, Auntie? I'll wait dinner for you.'

'Thanks, dear. I'll have some tea with you and your friends,' said Falafy with a smile.

'And goat's milk,' added Semimes. 'Goat's milk's wholesome.'

'And a cup of goat's milk,' Falafy humored him.

'And some of the... flat cakes, too, cream flat cakes, if you wish, or else... huckleberry ones.'

'I will oblige, my dear. Now let me see your wound.'



Daniel and Matthew left the living room.

Semimes meticulously saw to his hair (what if a stubborn strand hindered auntie Falafy's having a good look at the wound) and leaned forward jutting out his forehead.

'Here, that's where the barkycrook hit me.'

Falafy examined the wound and touched it gingerly with her fingers.

'Semimes dear, tell me: when the barkycrook hit you, did you lose consciousness at once?'

'Yes, Auntie Falafy, and everything hid from me, as if I'd died.'

'Did your head ache when you came to?'

'It did splittingly, so I felt like removing the pain. But there was no doing it, was there?'

'Did the whole of it ache or just where the barkycrook had hit?'

Semimes was lost in thought... and answered as he cast down his eyes:

'The whole of it did... Here and there and everywhere...'

After Semimes had poked his finger all over his head, Falafy washed the wound with tulis. Then she produced from her basket a translucent sachet (made of measureless) and out of it a green leaf of a plant. The leaf was the size of a big hand's palm (as big as Semimes's) and broke it in two lengthwise strips.

'I'll apply to your wound a leaf of naris: it'll pull out all the infection,' she explained to Semimes. 'It's slippery, and it'll adhere to your forehead without dressing your head. You'll wear it for three days without removing. You can cover it with hair, so no one will notice.'

'And all the infection will leave the head?'

This 'leave the head' struck Falafy as touching and she laughed.

'Why do you laugh, Auntie Falafy?' Semimes stared suspiciously at her.

Falafy put her hand upon his and said gently:

'The infection will go, but not out of the head—out of the wound.'

'And my wits will be about me again, won't they?'

'Yes, dearest. But first I'll check on your wits with my hands.'

'All right.'

Falafy got up, raised her hands (palms down) and slowly passed them over Semimes's head... The moment she glanced anxiously at Malam and shook her head, Semimes felt something was terribly wrong and screeched softly but tensely and impressively:

'Speak up... Auntie Falafy.'

'So be it, Semimes. We'll banish things alien: me with my hands, you with your will, your will to have the former you restored to you.'

At these words, Semimes first trembled bodily, then bent and huddled. Malam, on seeing that, came up to him and stroked his head.

'Don't try to hide yourself, sonny: Falafy will help you, and everything will be all right. You're back home—that's the main thing.'

'I'm back home—that's the main thing,' Semimes agreed. 'My head's all wrong; that was why I hid myself.'

'Semimes dear, listen to me: Your wits are about you, but someone strong and spiteful has put a curse on you. Your head and face seem to have been

enveloped in a bewitched coil. Now you're both Semimes and not quite Semimes. I'll be coming every day to remove this coil layer by layer. You'll help me along with your will, won't you? You've got a lot of will. Agreed?'

'Agreed, Auntie Falafy.'

'Now treat me to some tea, as promised. After we've had it, you'll tell me when we begin to get rid of the coil, today or tomorrow.'

Semimes thought... and said:

'We'll begin in three days' time, Auntie Falafy.'

Malam and Falafy glanced at each other in puzzlement.

'Why three days, sonny?' asked Malam.

'The infection will be gone from the wound in three days.'

'So be it,' said Falafy, aware that the loss of three days would give her a much better assistant in Semimes than today's.

. . . When everyone wished one another a nice hunger and Semimes held out his hand for the piece of shepherd's pie he fancied, there was a knock on the door.

'Lutul must be out of patience and has arrived,' said Falafy.

'I think it's Sawasard and Groyorg. I've dreamed of them tonight,' said Matthew.

Malam had risen from the table to answer the door and objected:

'It's too early in the day for Sawasard and Groyorg. I can only say that they're safe today though their path's over a very dangerous aisle.'

Mathew and Daniel looked at one another. Malam sensed their tacit question and explained:

'They've got a reliable companion and will arrive in two or three days.'

'So they've got through!' Daniel exclaimed under his breath and his eyes shone for happiness.

'That's some news!' said Matthew joyfully and looked at Semimes: what would he say?

'I remembered but forgot,' screeched Semimes. 'My head's all wrong.'

'I'll go see what news is asking to be let in.'

Malam went to the hallway and opened the door.

'What's happened, baby?' he cried when he saw Leoely.

'Hello, Malam. I have to see Falafy, all of you in fact!' she said in agitation.

'She's here. And all the rest you have in mind are here. Come on in, Leoely.'

Malam showed the unexpected visitor into the living room.

'Falafy,' she said, only to address Daniel: 'Does Falafy, know, Dan? Have you told her?'

'Not yet.'

'I... I mean Faryraf's understood it all... He wanted to know about you, and I flared up. He's left...'

'Left? For the Emptied Lake, is it?' Daniel said the first thing that occurred to him.

'What are you talking about, Leoely, Danad?' asked Falafy in surprise.

'Wait a mo, dear Falafy. There's some confusion, I think. It calls for a thorough discussion,' said Malam and addressed Leely: 'You'd better sit down at the table. You and Dan had better tell us everything in good order. And we'll have our meal in the meantime.'

'Have a nice hunger, Leely!' Semimes screeched in a sonorous screech unexpectedly. 'Whatever's on the table is for nice hunger. Fish, if you feel like it. Or else carrot balls, or else this...'

'Carrot shepherd's pie with mushrooms,' Malam prompted.

'. . . Or else flat cakes.'

'Guide ever on the job,' Matthew remarked.

'Er... don't,' said Semimes looking askance at him.

Daniel nudged Matthew without being seen.

'Thank you, Semimes,' Leely sat down at the table. 'I'll sit for awhile and then eat.'

'Where did our esteemed Faryraf go, Leely?' asked Malam.

'To the Crossroads: I saw him go. He had the raspberry-colored Tear in his hand. He gave me this one before he left. Take Her, Falafy.'

Falafy accepted the Tear and asked:

'What made him leave for the Crossroads?'

'Faryraf... had betrayed everyone. Betrayed Natan... and his friends. You better tell them, Dan.'

Matthew stared at Daniel.

'So Faryraf betrayed us? Groyorg did call his bluff.'

Daniel nodded.

'Go on, tell us, Danad: you've got the words,' said Malam.

'The barkycrooks knew where we were heading. As we approached Sadorn, Sawasard sensed we were being shadowed, and we decided to alter the route. We crossed Sadorn and by way of the Kerdock gorge made for the Vanishing Waterfall to get to the Wedolick Gorge through a secret aisle. It was no use; they attacked us at the Vanishing Waterfall. That was where Matthew was wounded. Our way was indicated by the hair Leely had given me before the march.'

'The horsehair?' asked Falafy.

'Leely and I also thought it was a horsehair. In fact, it was a barkycrook's hair. The Lord of Darkness had been following us through its agency.'

'Garr!'

Everyone started and involuntarily looked Semimes's way. He had choked on something so loudly that everyone was scared.

'You must've choked on a word, sonny?' Malam said, for he had seen that Semimes had not been chewing, rather listening so hard he had poked his finger in the shepherd's pie without noticing.

'Yes, Father, I got choked on a barkycrook. A barkycrook hit me so hard my wits're no longer about me.'

'It's one of those things, sonny. Just cough clear of it.'

'It's one of those things,' Semimes echoed and started coughing with zeal: 'Garr! Garr!'

'I can see you've got something at the tip of your tongue, Leuely,' Malam said to keep to the subject.

'It's about the hair. Faryraf gave it to me along with a silver feather... for Dan.'

'Here's the feather,' Daniel pulled it out of his bosom to show everyone. 'This chain was given me by Feltraur, forestmen's healer. It was he revealed the secret of the hair to Leuely and me.'

'So you left the barkycrook hair with the forestmen... for the Lord of Darkness to be unable to follow the path of the Word you keep?' said Malam to be quite sure he had guessed right.

'Yes.'

'Then we may rest quiet; the forestmen know how to keep hidden from strange eyes and hide away the hair for the time being.'

'But how did Faryraf come by the hair?' Mathew wondered aloud.

'It isn't hard to guess, Mat,' said Malam. 'The man who slew Sufus and Safasy with his phantom daggers (only the Lord of Darkness could've given them to him) gave Faryraf the hair along with his master's instructions. Faryraf accepted the hair and the instructions and killed the man not to be spotted as traitor... The Lord of Darkness outwitted us... He means to get hold of the sacred Word at any price, for that's humanity's last chance of salvation. Tell us, Dan, have you got the Word? You didn't drop it by any chance?'

'I've got it. Both the Word and the Tear.'

(Semimes gave Daniel such a greedy stare as if he wanted to eat him up instead of the piece of shepherd's pie he had ruined, and thought: I walked all the way with this guy from the forest. If anyone had caught that stare he would not have thought he hadn't got his wits about him.)

'Well, if that's the case, we haven't lost the battle yet. But we have to be circumspect from now on. All right...' Malam looked around the table. 'Since I've let on about the sacred Word, dear Leuely, I ask you to keep this knowledge secret.'

'I will, Malam.'

'There's one thing I can't understand: what made esteemed Faryraf betray?' said Falafy.

Daniel was silent. He never raised his eyes to her.

'I'll tell you,' Leuely began. 'He's my granddad and I must... It wasn't he created the Dorlief clock.'

'How can it be?' Falafy was puzzled.

'Who was it?' Malam said frowning.

'An artist who lived in his house in secret thirty years ago,' Leuely hastened to reply. 'The one we call the Emptied Lake Lord or Lord of Darkness got word of it somehow.'

'Thirty years later, the Lord of Darkness absorbed that artist,' added Daniel.

'We know that much,' said Malam. 'So the clock was why the Lord had power over Faryraf. A bitter lesson to learn for all of us, dear Falafy.'

'It can't get bitterer than that,' said Falafy in reply as she recalled Natan, and everybody around realized she had by her eyes (excepting perhaps Semimes who was still chewing on Malam's earlier words, and was none the wiser).

'Falafy, Malam, it's only just occurred to me,' Matthew began. 'Dorliefans are sure to miss Faryraf sooner or later. So someone has to explain it to them. What sort of eyes would they have for Leoely when they know the truth?'

'That's a good question, Mat,' said Malam. 'and it calls for just as good an answer. We won't postpone the answer until tomorrow.'

Falafy arose.

'We'll tell the people the truth. We'll hold an assembly tomorrow, and I'll tell them Faryraf has left for the Crossroads of his own free will. They'll know the rest of the truth about the clock and the treachery when we've overcome the Lord of Darkness. For the moment, though, we'll suppress it in order not to confuse them.'

'I won't be able to tell gran anything.'

'Don't worry, Leoely. I'll talk to Rablbary. But I won't tell her the whole story, not to wound her heart—she won't be able to stand it,' said Falafy.

Malam arose, too.

'Falafy dear, let me add something to your words bred of goodness and clarify a thing or two to the newly born Dorliefans, Danad and Matam... We have to face it: Faryraf is a traitor. But he must've understood something since he consigned himself to the Crossroads. He's shown people by his departure that he did something really bad to Dorlief and Dorliefans. It isn't for nothing that the Ban on the Path Law says that a Keeper can step on the Path of his own free will, not on orders of the Governing Council, in case he's done something really bad and, when choosing between people's judgment and that of the Crossroads, opts for the latter, in which case people reserve their judgment, for they regard the Crossroads judgment higher than their own. So we're within our rights to announce his departure for the Crossroads and suppress the reason why. (He's left, so he's done something wrong; let the Crossroads judge him rather than us, people, who've made him our chosen by our will). Moreover, we should also suppress the information on whom he's betrayed, on our Word Keepers and their secret mission. That's all I have to explain.'

A silence fell over that table, and then Falafy said:

'Thank you, dear Malam. Law makes us sure we're right.'

'I see none of you has touched the food. As host, I'm legally bound to ask you not to counter me and yield to nice hunger right away. Have a nice hunger.'

'Have a nice hunger,' said Falafy, followed by the others.

. . . The latter half of tittle-tattle, Daniel, Matthew and Semimes sat by the fireside in the living room giving their rue to fire (at Malam's suggestion). At first, the two friends tried to get their guide to talk, recalling episodes of their first day and the hike from the Loner's cave to Dorlief that were so memorable. But they only heard 'I remembered but forgot,' 'My head's all wrong,' 'I haven't got my wits about me' like incantations in reply, and finally decided against chat altogether...

'Altogether' was not quite the case, though, for on one occasion and then another, the semi-darkness lulled by the crackling of the wood screeched a soft screech—altogether familiar:

'I wish... I wish... I wish...'

Spurred on by the idea that the guide was his own former self, Matthew asked:

"Were Semimes a whole man... Right, Semimes?"

Semimes stared closely at him, weighing up the options: whether the guy was courting an 'Er, don't!' on reflection decided against it and said:

'Were Semimes... Semimes, he'd live with his father in his wooden orange house... he'd have his own room with a door and a window... he'd run off mushrooming and fishing... he'd eat, like... shepherd's pie of carrots and mushrooms... he'd douse carrot balls in cream and help himself to them... he'd dress a bream on his own, fry it and treat his Father and Auntie Falafy to good hunks of it for them to enjoy their hunger. And his father wouldn't mistreat him because he hadn't his wits about him.'

'Don't you worry about your wits, friend: Falafy'll get them back to you. Won't she, Dan?'

'Yes, Mat, very much so, as a guide of our acquaintance would put it,' said Daniel looking at Semimes.

'Auntie Falafy,' Semimes screeched, 'will come in three days... and remove the curse... layer after layer... to open up...'

At these words he winced and became ugly and alien, so alien as if the fire in the hearth had heard his words and broken out to burn out the coil over his face to cause him unbearable anguish.

'Semimes!' cried Daniel, to banish what his eyes had seen.

Semimes started and the burnt nerves of his face withdrew within the renewed coil.

'I'll be off to my burrow,' he screeched in a strained voice, forcing himself to be Semimes again as he got up, potted about in search of the exit and found it finally.

It was long that the house on the outskirts of Dorlief would not let in its habitual night visitor—sleep. Heart-to-heart talk that had long bidden its time would not give way to it...

Daniel and Matthew seemed to have resumed their childhood, Daniel engrossed in the telling and Matthew in the listening, spellbound. Except those were not figments of the imagination but the truth so like fibs: the cave with its windows on the Waking World and the Spirit World; the blue city amidst a parti-colored stone valley, its streets and the entire environment lit by a huge single lantern that never goes out; days and nights lost in its light and unable to find their place and time; the room hidden behind mirrors in which one can see oneself twice, before and after meeting the stones, the room where stones and people talk and understand one another; the swing that lifts you off and consigns you to space between sky and sky; the healer Feltraur who bears the onus of keeper to the life that his ancient forefather did not let die on the huge ball called Faetre where a blue city is situated, called Palerard; the Palerardian Lord's palace

facing a petrified ferling that had flown from another world; efsurelle, the gift by a stone valley to Palarardians, a stone turned fruit full of nutrient juices; the new friends of Daniel, Ozuard and Lefeat, Efriard and Estean...

'Were Semimes Semimes...' The magic of the words would not let Semimes go in the small hours out of a cherished world that kept accreting ever new pictures. 'Were Semimes Semimes, he'd take the mushroom shelves from the living room to his room first thing, light a candle and admire them before sleep... he'd suggest that the two foreigners who made fun of him consider lodgings of their own... as to the rooms, he'd keep Mat's room for good guests, like Leely, while Dan's room would be reserved for drying a stock of mushrooms... he'd make a couple dozen cages to raise rabbits to augment the diet... he'd choose a couple of rabbits on occasion, dress them and stew them in goat's milk to treat the fair Leely to...'

Malam turned from side to side because of heavy thoughts. The first was of Semimes, his dear son. It wasn't once that he remembered Falafy's eyes when her hands ran into the cursed coil about his son's head. There was anxiety along with fright in her eyes that she could not conceal from Malam, so unexpected was her fright... What's gone wrong with you, sonny? Never before, not even when nice hunger started to snarl, did you prefer fried bream to you black horse. You never looked at your dear black horse's shelf today, never said a kind word to it, never stroked its mane. What's gone wrong, sonny... ? I've no reproach, for you were wounded, drained of strength, your reason all askew and feeble. I say: nice hunger to you, sonny, enjoy! But I'm at a loss... because of your indifference to the black horse. I'm at a loss because, even though our dear Falafy has promised to free your reason of the coil, I could see you were in no mood to help her—on the contrary, you would postpone the moment, I could see. I can't get my head around it or get my soul to accept it. Dorlief's in need of your will, same as every Dorliefan's will to counter the will of the Lord of Darkness.

Malam's second thought was of the evil in the one people called the Lord of Darkness, the one who used to be called Zusuz. 'Get inside and subjugate,' the youth had said firmly when it was time to devise the motto that would lead him on through life. There was Zusuz for you. Now that over twelve hundred years had passed and Zusuz had acquired tremendous force and power, the motto stood for one thing only—limitless power. Faddaf's prophecy said that the Word alone whose Keepers I have opened my door to could save humanity. And there's, among them, the youth I once dreamed of as a kid. Unbeknownst to me at the time was why he had he had come, but I've remembered his face as long as I've lived. No doubt it was Danad's face. So it wasn't for nothing that I came to the Dorlief razed by Shwarrawsh ninety-three years ago. The youth of the Non-world, a Dorliefan's grandson, has come to the land of his forefathers. We were destined to cut the incredible distance between us and meet. Which means I'm in duty bound to counsel Danad and his friends. But how can I counsel them... ? Those were the lines Malam was thinking on before he sank into the World of Dreams in the small hours...

He was awakened by rattling... and knocking... and stomping behind the door... What was the fuss all about? The stomping now died down, now intensified...

'Nuruny must've snuck inside the house,' he talked to himself. 'Knocking around, poor thing, unable to find the way out. I must've forgotten to shut the door, both this one and that...'

Malam got up and looked in the corridor. Semimes emerged from the kitchen, the mushrooms shelf in his hands. On seeing his father he stopped short and screeched:

'Good morning, Father.'

'Good morning, sonny. So you thought you'd take the mushrooms to your room?'

'Yes. Let them stay in my room. I'll admire them by candlelight when going to bed. I'll get my wits quicker about me that way.'

'Will you take the black horse, too?'

'No, let the horses stay put.'

'Do you remember the horse Sawasard gave you for New Light Day?'

'I remembered but forgot when the barkycrook hit me over the head,' Semimes machine-gunned and ran on.

Malam shook his head, but said nothing. Semimes had brightened up, that was the main thing. It'll come time before you know it when he recalls his former self and finds room for his black horse in his soul.

After he had transferred the last three shelves, Semimes approached his father. Malam was starting the fireplace in the kitchen.

'Father...' Semimes began and paused.

Malam turned to him.

'I'm dying to go mushrooming with you.'

'Why not, sonny?' Malam brightened up. 'We will when you're strong enough.'

'Father... I want to go mushrooming with you today.'

'Today?'

'Right now.'

'. . . All right then, we will. After I've gone to get some bread and flat cakes at the bakers. You eat some in the meantime.'

'Good morning, Malam, Semimes. Good morning to you,' said Daniel and Matthew.

'Good morning,' said Malam.

'Good morning, guests,' screeched Semimes.

'What do you mean, guests?' Malam corrected him (there was gravity in his voice). 'They're homefolk.'

'I remembered but forgot, Father,' Semimes hastened to make amends. 'My head's all wrong again.'

'I heard some racket and thought we had another guest, Groyorg the Square,' said Matthew.

'It made me think of Groyorg, too,' said Daniel.



'It's too early for Groyorg: he's still on the way along with Sawasard,' said Malam.

'We're going mushrooming today,' said Semimes, somewhat offended.

'A good idea,' Matthew brightened up. 'It'll make my feet remember what they're for: they've got slack lately.'

Semimes looked at Matthew and then at Daniel.

'Er, don't. I'm going with Father, he with me. You'd better stay at home, Dan, and keep the Word. You,' he did not bother to call Matthew by the name, 'will look after Dan. There's no way you should get to the forest with this Word, lest the... barkycrooks hit you on the head, like they did me, and spirit off the Word.'

The stare askance and the tone of voice that could not be taken for friendly were enough to make Matthew, Daniel and Malam ill at ease. The hiatus in the conversation that no one knew how to continue was broken by the Carroty who was somehow crestfallen, quite contrary to his morning wont.

'Sonny, treat the boys and help yourself. And leave some nice hunger for the fresh bread; I won't be a moment. Danad, Matthew, my friends, you make up your minds if you'll go mushrooming or busy yourselves with something else as you have your breakfast.'

'Er, if you're not afraid for the Word, come with us,' said Semimes, his eyes cast down, as he rustled up some breakfast.

Mathew and Daniel went to the water-and-soap room. It was a good enough idea, so, the way Malam put it, the distance between could get longer and they could quite compose themselves.

'Never fear, lad,' Daniel screeched Semimes's way, 'your feet will remember what they're for, very much so.'

'What's on your mind, guide?'

'Never mind that, you're still with me, aren't you?' said Daniel in his own voice, not to offset his friend's standby with a screech.

'Just so, Dan.'

'Let's fetch Leuely and go to the lake for the day. Her best childhood memory is Lake Werent.'

'Just as ours is Our Lake,' added Matthew.

'Yes, that was where I meant to catch a feather and had it the other way around.'

'All right, let's go to the tavern... of that one,' said Matthew. The friends were quite jovial and went to the kitchen where Semimes had laid the table: he had piled up burnt yesterday's flat cakes, set the bowl of cream and huckleberry jam and three teacups.

The rustling up had somehow cheered him up.

'Have a nice hunger, Dan and Mat. Sit down and tuck in. Leave a bit of nice hunger for afterward: father'll bring fresh bread from the bakers.'

'Have a nice hunger, Semimes,' said Daniel.

'A guide's a guide no matter what,' said Matthew.

Semimes had nothing to say to that, but it was clear the comment was after his heart.

\* \* \*

It was past mid-tittle-tattle when Leely, Daniel and Matthew were coming back from Lake Werent. Semimes was sitting on his rock at the farthest willow. He had somehow divined the boys would be coming from the lakeside, but, above all, he knew Leely would be coming with them. He was waiting for her... and ran to meet her the moment he saw her.

'Good tittle-tattle, dear Leely,' he screeched in adulation.

'Good tittle-tattle, Semimes. How's your head? Does it hurt?'

'Falafy applied a leaf to my wound yesterday. Look. It's going to draw out all the infection.'

'That's good.'

'Was the hunting good?' asked Matthew.

'Er, don't. My father and I didn't go hunting—we went mushrooming.' Semimes explained in earnest and again concentrated on Leely: 'Come and have mushrooms at our place. We've brought two basketfuls. Some we've fried; some stewed with goat's milk.'

'Am I alone invited or all of us?' she wanted to know.

'Just you,' he said.

'What're you saying, Semimes?' Leely was surprised.

'Because you're my guest, while Dan and Mat are family: they're at table anyway.'

Leely laughed.

'Thank you, guide, for having us at table,' said Matthew with a poker face. 'It's very convenient, isn't it, Dan?'

'I'd say as convenient as they make it.'

'As convenient as they make it,' Semimes echoed and added sniffing: 'Come in, quick, I'm ravenous.'

'Ravenous indeed,' Leely echoed.

Semimes grinned with pleasure, took her hand in his and led her to the house.

. . . He was still happy at table: it was a complement of four pleasures: number one was to enjoy his own hunger, which Semimes did with abandon and with utter simplicity: he wielded his spoon fit to be a threesome or at least a twosome... forgetful of everything... but one thing only—and it was his second one: while still munching, he looked for the choicest mushroom... once he had, he would snatch the ladle and put it in his guest's bowl, whereupon his third one was revealed: he would tell Leely how he had spied that one.

'Leely, I'll treat you to this fat porcino. Look: it's whole, the way I picked it. I marched on following my eyes—'

'As they flickered.'

'Er, don't, Mat. You spoilsport! Following my eyes as they flickered here and there observing things. While my stick—'

'My smart stick.'

'Er, don't, Mat... While my stick, my smart stick, doesn't just follow my eyes—it pats the grass and worries the shrubs that hide mushrooms. I follow my

stick with my knife. It was my stick uncovered that porcino. While this red-capped scaber stalk (I left it whole for you to enjoy) betrayed itself with its red cap. My eye was keen enough to—'

'Spy it.'

'Er, don't, Mat! I was in the forest, not you... My eye was keen enough to... spy it when it was thirty paces off...'

His fourth pleasure was derived from watching the party eat his, Semimes's treats, and drinking in their praises (Matthew was unequaled in this respect) now for him, now for the stems, now for the caps, now for the whole mushrooms, which, by the by, he had dished out to dear Leoley.

'Oh, the charcoal burner my fork's landed! And onto my tooth. It *is* yummy. Though I'm not sure who spotted it, Semimes or Malam.'

'There was no guessing it, Mat—you picked up half a cap, less the other half and the stem. If the charcoal burner were whole, I'd tell you: I know every single one of my mushrooms.'

'I'd never know which is yours, which is mine, sonny.'

\* \* \*

There was a regular flap on at Malam's the next morning.

The Carrotty got up at the break of dawn as usual and rushed off to buy flat cakes, doughnuts and gingerbread. The day before Plilp had assured him that there would be baked-milk gingerbread the next morning (the sort of pastry that was baked once in a long while at Darrad and Plilp's bakery), and Malam would not miss the chance. It was Malam's contention that it did not just taste delicious—it was delicious in the baked-milk way: he would compare its delight to what your cold feet felt at the fireplace. On the way home he indulged in what he always had on such lucky days—he ate one alone... When back he kindled the fireplace, put on the kettle took down three baskets and put his shopping in them. Then he let out Nuruny to graze. Normally, it was Semimes's job, but after his injury he apparently 'remembered but forgot,' because he had not remembered or stopped by her either on the day of his return or the next day.

Malam ran into Daniel and Matthew in the corridor.

'Good morning, boys,' he said in an undertone not to wake up Semimes by any chance.

'Morning,' Matthew returned curtly in a low voice.

'Good enough... despite somebody's importunate knocks putting paid to my sleep,' said Daniel looking askance at him.

'Go to the dining room. I'll get your breakfast for you.'

'What about the kitchen?' asked Matthew. 'That would save you trouble.'

'Why not? Tuck in and get ready. Choose your baskets. We'll set out as soon as Semimes is awake. He'll catch us up... Take your seats and enjoy the fresh pastry. Be sure to try some of the gingerbread. It's superior to most: delicious in the baked milk way. Have a nice hunger, my friends.'

The boys exchanged glances and took a piece of gingerbread each to try something delicious in the baked-milk way, whatever that was. Matthew tasted it and found it yummy, saying:

'I've never tasted its like. Delicious—the baked-milk way!'

Malam's eyes displayed pleasure and turned to Daniel: what would he say?

'Your Dorlief certainly knows a thing or two about palate. It's very special, the baked-milk way.'

'It isn't mine—it's ours, dear Dan. Eat with pleasure and don't hesitate to help yourselves to more. I bought a lot of it. There'd be enough even if I hadn't, among friends.'

'Shouldn't we tempt Semimes... with gingerbread?' said Matthew rising.

'A good idea. Tempting with gingerbread's not the same as just waking up. Stay put, Mat: I'll go.'

Malam left with these words... Some time (half a doughnut) later they heard his hoarse voice. He was trying for some reason to hit a bum note and was about to break down. He was rushing about the house:

'Semimes! Sonny! Sonny! Semimes!'

Matthew and Daniel left their doughnut halves on the table and ran out into the corridor... They'd never seen the Carroty pale-orange before.

'Sonny's gone: he's neither in his room, nor in the living room, nor in the water-and-soap room, nor in the needful room... I was about to check the padlocked room but remembered soon enough it was padlocked.'

'Could he have left for the forest early in the morning rather than waiting for the sleepyheads,' ventured Matthew, awake to the simplest explanation.

'I wish he had, dear Mat, but his basket's here. And he left through the window as if spurred by a sudden idea... I wouldn't have rued before over a trifle like this. But at the moment, it's 'remembered but forgot.' Where would his chance idea take him?'

'Perhaps, it isn't as chance an idea as all that? He may have planned it that way,' Daniel was at pains to comfort Malam.

'We had different plans: mushrooming all together. It was his idea in the first place as you will remember, dear Dan—not mine, not Mat's.'

'We'll go to Dorlief to look for him.'

'Do, Dan, without wasting any more time. I'll explore the environs in the meantime.'

Daniel and Matthew stopped by Leely first thing: what if Semimes had got it into his head to tell her the whole story of one of yesterday's mushrooms. As it happened, he had not, while Leely was so anxious she tagged along... They stopped by Falafy: he might have wanted to see her about his wound. On hearing of Semimes's disappearance, she merely smiled and said:

'Go to Malam and tell him from me not to worry: Semimes didn't show up to get lost. And then come and be our guests.'

Strangely enough, what Daniel and Matthew had caught from the Carroty, only to pass it on to Leely, was no longer in evidence in no time, and they went back to Malam's as quiet as could be...

He was sitting on the porch, cheek to stick, his eyes closed.

'Dan, did you get the idea of exploring the environs?'

'Now that you mention it, I do.'

'What are you talking about, boys?' Leely inquired.

'Do you see what Malam's busy doing,' said Matthew.

'He's all woe.'

'That goes without saying. But that's not what he's busy with,' said Daniel. Leely looked reproach at him.

'He's listening to the stick, while the stick's listening to the environs,' he explained.

'Get lost!'

'You'll see for yourself in a moment,' said Matthew.

'Rather, hear,' Daniel said.

And right he was. The moment they approached Malam, he opened his eyes and said:

'God morning, Leely.'

'Good morning, Malam. I don't know if it's that good to you.'

'I've found Semimes,' said Malam, his voice dull. 'However, I'm rather dismayed, for he's been found at two places at once.'

The three thought: How could he be in two places at once? But none of them voiced it. Malam had his stick to his cheek again. Everybody held his breath waiting.

'Can you hear?' asked Malam, the wait even more anxious.

'Can you hear?' asked Malam again. 'That knocking came from the Harshid slopes. It's Semimes's stick hopping the stones like an ibex... Now listen to this side... I can know Semimes's tread... except it's weak, fumbling.'

'What side, Malam? Which way is Semimes now?' Matthew asked impatiently.

'He's in the Sadorn Forest, near the Tawsus Cave.'

'How can that be?' asked Daniel.

'Could it be the echo?' Matthew suggested.

'It can't be, but it is, Danad... This is no echo, Matam: it's his stick, as spry as an ibex, there are his faltering footfalls.'

'Sounds like sorcery, no less,' said Leely, barely aware of what she was talking about.

Malam glanced at her, hooked by the word.

'Falafy said the same: sorcery. Come on in, dear Leely, have some of our fresh gingerbread. You, too, Dan, Mat: you must've left your tea undrunk. I'll sit here awhile listening and reflecting... on what sorcery's all about... as visited on my dear Semimes.'

After Malam's tea, there was tea with Falafy and Lutul. Then Dorlief welcomed Daniel, Matthew and Leely with open arms. They walked the streets recalling the New Light eve... Sufus and Safasy... Natan... Efriard and Estean... Christine... They weren't in a jolly mood—they were sad. But they found it good walking all together... Someone would recall something, and they would talk about it. Then more silent walking... until something occurred to someone that was a good talking subject... The pleasure of the proceedings was precisely their purposelessness—walking where the Dorlief paths led, neither them nor their feet knowing where they would wend their way further. And the day was pleasant in that no words had to be spoken—they would drop from their lips of their own

accord, should they feel like it. And the day was pleasant in that sadness was their companion all along... When the light of day faded, there was more sadness in the air because lit near some houses were New Light think lanterns. They were there like frozen tears reluctant to part with the day they had been think lanterns rather than tears. When the light of day faded, they were attracted by the waxing light of the luminous stone. They stood long at the clock, feeling good because the clock was there and they could stand nearby, with time pausing: it was there and it was not—stand to your heart's content. Leely said Lutul would wind the clock from then on (that had been the resolution of the assembly the day before). He had done it for the first time that day with her suggesting things, and it was fun watching him carefully winding the wheel fearful of upsetting its works...

The roof of the house on the outskirts was filled with light that suggested to Daniel and Matthew that Semimes was back, and they hastened their pace...

Semimes sat on the floor next to the fireplace in the living room deep in thought, aided by the warmth of the hearth, and never saw the boys.

'Were Semimes Semimes, he'd throw him into the fire for it to consume him, and for him to forget the dreadful hands that had spun the web around his head, and these eyes that stare at you from the inside at any moment, and these words that are always there in your ears. Should...'

The boys exchanged incongruous glances... and pretended they could hear nothing. Which was no deception to any great extent, because they could not understand it anyway and were just the least bit frightened... for Semimes who would be Semimes. That was a precaution... as if suggested by some voice: You'd better pretend.

'Hello, friend,' said Daniel startling Semimes.

'Hi, long time no see,' said Matthew jovially.

A weird thought occurred to Daniel: Who'd look at them now? Semimes turned their way, and contentment lit up his countenance.

'We haven't seen one another since last night. Sit near the fireplace. We'll sit around all together,' his words confirmed that he was in a good mood, his good mood having been restored to him.

'The fragrance in the house is just delicious,' Daniel said. 'Looks like you didn't come back from the forest empty-handed.'

'Not from the forest—from the mountains beyond. I remembered but forgot what they're called.'

'The Harshid,' Matthew suggested.

'All right, the Harshid, if you say so.'

'All right. Who was your stick chasing there, guide?' said Matthew.

'The one it was chasing is no more: its hide's back there, hanging from the willow. I flayed it myself. Dressed it, too.'

'What was it, Semimes? Was it a rabbit you shot with your stick?'

'Er, don't, Mat! Rabbits don't scale mountains.'

'An ibex?' Daniel feigned surprise.

'An ibex? You can't have!' Matthew played along. 'An ibex shot with a stick?'

'I jumped it from a ledge and strangled it. It's easier said than done: it was quite an ibex trying to shake me off while there was life still in it... raving and

hopping and beating its sides at the rocks... Father says there'll be enough for boiling and for roasting... and, like... stewing with veg of all sorts.'

'A stew it is, sonny,' Malam, who had appeared in the doorway, encouraged his son.

'I remembered but forgot, Father, when that barkycrook hit me over the head.'

'Here're some fresh flat cakes, boys. You liked them the last time around.'

'I can just remember, Malam: it was our first night here. You had left to fetch Falafy, while Semimes treated us to some flat cakes,' said Daniel. 'Do you remember, Semimes?'

'I remembered but forgot.'

'I'll put this basket on the table and bring some tea... and goat's milk. Whichever you wish... I'm not offering meat, though, at this late hour: it'd affect your sleep.'

'Thank you, Malam,' said Daniel.

'Malam, is the other Semimes back, the one that was leaving the Tawsus?' Matthew blabbed for fun.

'Er, don't, Mat,' Semimes screeched a growl full of rage.

'Sonny, sonny: it was a jest of Mat's.'

'It was stupid of me, Semimes! I didn't mean it that way.'

'You're always at it. You should be strangled a lesson,' said Semimes through gritted teeth.

'Strangled a lesson? Like that ibex?' Matthew would not stand it. 'Try me!'

'Don't, sonny,' said Malam in a severe tone. 'And listen to what I have to say: it was me at fault this morning, hearing your stick in the Harshid and your footfalls in Sadorn. That was what bred that joke. Mat merely meant to use it now.'

Semimes got up from the floor, bowed his head and left the living room without saying another word. A piteous groan proceeded from his room after awhile.

'Sorry, Malam, that was silly of me,' said Matthew.

'Sit by the fireplace. I'll bring you some parate tea. Semimes will find himself yet, with dear Falafy helping along. Go to bed after you've had your tea and flat cakes—don't sit through to the embers in the fire. I'll trouble your sleep tomorrow,' said Malam and paused deliberately.

'Is it fishing?' asked Matthew (for no good reason).

The Carroty's eyes lit up.

'I hope I didn't look like a bream when I thought of one?'

'Looks like it,' Matthew grinned.

'Was it a good guess of Mat's?' said Daniel.

'It certainly was. I'll take you to the Fleiss tomorrow to fish for bream.'

'That's kind of you, Malam,' Daniel said, aware that the Carroty was having a hard time of it.

'You hit the nail right on the head,' said Matthew. 'Very kind.'

## Chapter Seven

### 'Forgiveness'll look vengeance in the eye'

'Ma-at! Rise and shine without any of your "Just a mo" this time: we're going bream-fishing,' Matthew heard through his waning sleep.

'Good morning, Malam. I'm awake and coming!'

Malam would not come in and said through the door:

'Fill your canteen with tea, put fresh flat cakes in your pack, and some barynth nuts, too. Everything's on the table in the kitchen... Da-an! Get up: fishing's waiting!'

'I can hear, Malam. I'm on my way in a manner of speaking.'

'Anything can be said in a manner of speaking. Semimes has unearthed some worms; I've made some poles for you.'

The boys emerged from their rooms. Malam went on:

'Semimes and I tie lines to our sticks: the bitubular senses fish like anything.'

Matthew detected a few pieces of bark in Malam's basket with line wound about them.

'What's the line from, Malam?' he asked.

'Horsehair: you accrete hair by hair until it's the length you need, and no line's like this one: strong and water-resistant. I attach three hooks to each from short pieces of hair.'

'Is this stone a sinker?' asked Matthew.

'Heft it: does it feel good?'

'It's weighty enough.'

'Let me have it, Mat,' Daniel said.

'Try to tear the line,' Malam said.

'It looks strong enough for a carp, let alone a bream,' said Daniel, his voice strained with the effort.

'If two breams bait at once, it's sure not to give. All right, go get your packs ready.'

The boys soon emerged from the house and found Semimes waiting by the linden tree. His look revealed he was up to something.

'Morning, Dan and Mat,' he said beckoning Daniel. 'Come here, will you?'

Daniel came up, while Matthew stayed by the porch.

'I've... something to ask you,' Semimes was visibly embarrassed.

'Don't hesitate to speak, friend.'

Semimes looked askance at Matthew.

'Dan, I'll tell it just to you alone,' he said giving him a stare.

'Have it your way.'

'Ask Leely along... She'll make fishing feel good.'

'What a good idea, Semimes. She'd sure like it, but she said yesterday she would be leaving for her forestmen friends—'



'Then I've nothing to ask of you,' Semimes interrupted him and hung his head. 'Let's go: there's no one else to wait for. There's father just coming. He must've let the goat out of its pen.'

The fishermen had not gone fifty paces when Semimes stopped short.

'My head's all wrong, Father. I'd better stay at home... and keep the Word. Let me have it, Dan, the Word Lord Trozuzort wants to have.'

The moment he said the words, the three pairs of eyes stared at him. He saw both wonder and a question there... He did some quick thinking and bent... Malam began talking:

'Sonny, you know the name of the Lord of Darkness? Not even I knew it. How do you know it? You never told me about it.'

Semimes was silent for some time. Then he found the answer and said:

'I remembered but forgot. I forgot but remembered. When that... barkycrook hit me over the head, it all went black, like I was dead. And the voice above me said: "I'll get a rich prize for your filthy life from Lord Trozuzort." That was how it happened, Father. That was how it happened, Dan and Mat. I remembered but forgot. I forgot but remembered.'

'Your wits must be coming back to you, sonny. If this is the case, you'd better come fishing with us rather than staying at home. The fresh air might let you recall something else.'

'That's right: our Semimes will be back at last.'

'Er, don't, Mat.'

'Why not, sonny? Mat's glad for your sake.'

'All right, if he is... if you are, Mat.'

. . . They were walking at a good pace. Mincing ahead was Malam, his legs vying for briskness, so eager he was to land the first bream, to give pace to the proceedings. Whatever the case, he made his youthful companions hurry along.

'Look, someone's coming,' Semimes screeched poking his hand into the distance.

'Looks like an old lady,' said Matthew.

'I fight shy now of meeting old ladies, particularly when they spring up from nowhere,' said Daniel in earnest or in joke.

'The old lady must be coming from Parliief,' said Malam with a smirk. 'From nowhere.'

'Well, if it isn't our Parliief soothsayer! Can you see the basket on her head?' Matthew said.

'So it is,' said Malam. 'Her name's Gushugy.'

'She gives me the creeps. Do we turn aside?' Daniel suggested (strangely enough, her name floated nearby in the air made him scared indeed).

'We can't, dear Dan: we'll give her offence by so doing,' Malam disagreed. 'We'll turn off later to the river. Why, you know it: we used it the other day when we went to Werent.'

Daniel defied his weakness as he peered at the old woman whose features were getting clearer and clearer, and recited out loud:

'The traitor'll upset the eight's narrow and straight  
To put time's pace forth well ahead of their fate.'

'We now know who these words are about,' said Matthew.

'Who about?' asked Semimes trying to get to the bottom of the rhyme, and not only that.

'Remembered but forgot?' said Matthew.

'Remembered but forgot,' Semimes screeched in an injured tone without the 'Er, don't,' though.

'Faryraf,' said Matthew.

'Who's going to be condemned by her words this time? I'd rather turn than know that.'

'I'll tell you this, dear Dan: what makes Gushugy a soothsayer is precisely that she shouldn't be shied from; we should heed her words not with feelings alone but wits, too, and act accordingly,' said Malam calmly.

The old woman was nigh and everyone was hushed... Malam was the first to greet her:

'Good morning, dear Gushugy.'

'Both good and bad as the World of Dreams' mirrors have shown to me today. Entertaining visitors, aren't you?'

'You know everything ahead of time,' said Malam.

The boys glanced at each other.

'Greetings to you, old lady,' said Matthew, when Gushugy looked at him from under her basket.

She pecked at him with her beaky finger right in front of his nose and said:

'I remember you.'

Then she looked at Daniel.

'You, too.'

'We'll remember you as long as we live,' said Daniel with deliberate benignity.

'I don't know you,' she said stepping forth toward Semimes.

Daniel and Matthew exchanged glances again. Malam did not betray his incredulity.

'Let me have a look at you—I may remember.'

Semimes shrugged off her hand.

'Er, don't,' he screeched and stepped back.

But she, on sensing or remembering something of her nocturnal visions, blocked his way with her stick as crooked as her fingers, and spoke in recitative:

'Lake's son and brat coiled by a crumb,

Heed, Semimes: you'd better keep mum.'

But Semimes would not heed her. He hung his head, pushed away her stick and went on his way. The soothsayer's words flew after him:

'Fire keeps tailing you with nowhere to hide,

Just as another one's running 'longside.

You've seen his wry aspect slowly wane;

You'll see it once more as it nears again.'

Semimes stopped.

'I remembered but forgot... when he hit me over the head,' he screeched without turning to the old woman.

She went on:

'Forgiveness'll look vengeance in the eye.

Fire's implacable, tears' potence a guile.'

Once she stopped soothsaying she whispered with emphasis:

'Go thy way.'

For Malam, Daniel and Matthew, the silence that ensued lasted for a hundred paces or so. For Semimes... Semimes had outpaced that hundred by another hundred and was cursing fate without the fear of being heard.

'Oh, were Semimes Semimes! Could a thing like that have happened? He'd live with father, go mushrooming and fishing for bream... Fire keeps tailing you with nowhere to hide... What's that fire? Oh, I see... It's gonna be Falafy coming to see you tomorrow... with invisible fire in her hands. That fire'll burn up my coil. I could feel that fire in her hands as she wheeled her hands over me over and over again. What else did the old hag say?

You've seen his wry aspect slowly wane;

And you'll see it once more as it nears again.

'Why yes, it's about the coil... my coil... with my face in it... I'll see my face again the moment my coil turns into ashes... Those ones will see, too... Oh, were Semimes Semimes... What if the oldie had seen worse trouble coming? What if I got it all wrong? How could I get it all wrong? My head must've been all wrong when that one hit me. I must've been in too much of a hurry if I am to see that aspect again. That'll be my undoing... Oh no, not that... Not that... Better Falafy than that...'

A hundred paces later Daniel thought he would talk.

'Malam?'

'Go ahead, Danad, talk. We're thinking on much the same lines, all of us.'

'This time the soothsayer's words referred to Semimes...'

'That's right, Dan, they did, tailing him like the fire with nowhere to hide from.'

'Have you divined them with a sober mind like you told me to employ recently?'

Malam smirked and said:

'My mind is anything but sober with my feelings very much in the way. But I'm trying to... It wasn't for nothing that my stick heard Semimes in two different places. Gushugy's words set me thinking on those lines... I keep telling myself and I tell you, Danad, and you, Matam: keep an eye on Semimes. The time's nigh when forgiveness and vengeance cross their paths...'

'What'll be next?' asked Matthew.

'That remains to be seen.'

'What about applying reason to act?' said Daniel.

'The good thing, my friends, is that we know what we'll have to choose between.'

'Between what and what, Malam? Dan and I haven't reasoned anything out.'

'Gushugy's supplied us with a prompt:

Forgiveness'll look vengeance in the eye.

Fire's implacable, tears' potency a guile.'

'It doesn't make much sense.'

'What do you mean: it doesn't make much sense, dear Mat? We'll find ourselves between forgiveness and vengeance... Our greatest concern, however, is keeping Semimes away from fire.'

'Well, there isn't much chance of that near a river—we'll give Semimes a ducking—and there'll be no fire left. But we'll keep an eye on him at the fireplace.'

'That's not the fire she meant, Mat the Vital: it must be coming from afar in hot pursuit.'

'Malam, what makes you talk like Groyorg all of a sudden? Have you thought of the Vital?' Daniel wanted to know. 'It doesn't look like an accident: are you about to entertain guests?'

'Gushugy's disclosed my secret. There's no keeping things from her: she sees everything ahead of time. I'd thought I'd keep it to myself for the time being. Well, I'll have to own up—there'll be more of us coming home... But first, we'll fish for bream,' said Malam and called as his eyes spotted Semimes: 'Semimes, sonny!' (Semimes looked back). 'Wait for us.'

'All right, Father,' Semimes called back. (A moment later, there were tears in his eyes as he thought of something.)

The fishing spot was Malam's choice, or rather, he was taking them to the place he had in mind... The boys liked it: there was no moist grass that grew in abundance over the Fleiss banks nearer and farther than that arid place strewn with huge rocks. Some of them jutted out of the water. It was here that the Tanuth ridge scree petered out. The scree was the remains of the mountains once carried off by Shwarrawsh, and loose rocks. The boys followed Malam in choosing a rock each at the water's edge, hooked worms and cast them rippling the drowsy, violet and serene water. Before nimbly waving his stick and sending worms after good luck, Malam said:

'Beware of biting, fish, unless you want to land on a skillet.'

The boys said nothing: they had none of Malam's standbys, nor were they about to tell the bream of the bait's perfidy. Semimes's tackle hit the water third try, which made him took back at his father and friends and say:

'I remembered but forgot when that... barkycrook hit me over the head.'

'Not to worry, sonny, your hands will recall their tricks.'

'The hands will recall their tricks, Father.'

. . . They did not fish long—about two hours. The boys observed that the Carroty used to thrust his stick against a rock and listen attentively as he pressed his cheek to it, the least of his concerns at the moments being the bream that were swimming past...

'Matam, be so kind as to see how much we've got,' he asked.

Matthew sprang off his rock and came up to the bucket with the goofs plashing about that loved easy prey and had not heeded Malam's warning.

'I see... Mine, three of yours, two of my perch and five ruff (three of mine and two of Dan's).'

(Three bream were not all Malam had fished: he had let several ruff and perch go.)

'Not much of a catch, I must admit,' Malam summed up sadly.

'How many were you planning to land?' said Daniel.

'With anglers like us?' Matthew chimed in.

'We've landed as many as I planned, while the care-free abandon we were after had been robbed by Gushugy before we could quite enjoy it. Well, so be it. We'll pick up the bucket on the way back. You'll carry it between you suspended from a stick. Mat and Dan, or Dan and Semimes or else Semimes and Mat. It's too heavy for just one of you.'

'I won't find it heavy after I'd carried an ibex all alone,' Semimes screeched.

'But I won't, not this time,' Semimes screeched on and hung his head.

'Why not, sonny?'

'I haven't landed a single bream, a single perch or a single ruff. I remembered but forgot.'

(Was it that Semimes had indeed used to remember but lost touch of a fishing pole, or that, while the bream nibbled at the bait, he was being nibbled by the insatiable thought of were Semimes Semimes?)

'Chin up, guide. Your ibex would outweigh all the bream, let alone the small fry,' said Matthew.

'Don't, Mat. Don't lump today with the day before. The day before was the ibex, today it's the evil old hag.'

'Well, I don't: I mean we'll have a dinner of bream, ibex and good company. You did think right: an ibex is much better than an oldie, especially when the ibex's hide is there hanging from the willow at the bottom of the garden.'

'All right then,' said Semimes and glanced at his father.

'Let's go meet our friends halfway. They'll soon emerge from a place they don't know. We'll be there not to let them feel lost.'

Malam was taking the boys through some scree, and from the way his legs picked out the path through the rugged maze, it was clear he had it well-trodden in his mind's eye...

'We'll stop here, my friends,' he said as he slowed down. 'Mind you don't venture here without me: it's all treacherous sinkholes you can't see.'

'Where will the company emerge from, Malam?' asked Matthew.

'They'll appear from behind the rock that looks like a hog's head. Can you see it?'

'I can see the hog's head, all right.'

'Will they be here soon?' said Daniel (like Matthew, he was increasingly impatient all of a sudden).

Malam lowered his head to listen to the stick in order to answer the question and suddenly hopped up to run for the hog's head. The boys followed suit. And then, out of nowhere, there was that croaky voice they all knew:

'Where the hell is Malam? Malam?'

'Here I am, Groyorg,' the Carroty said, 'waiting for you.'

Groyorg and Sawasard, gaunt and exhausted by the long way without sleep, rest or food, emerged from behind the rock.

'I'm ever so pleased to see you, dear Malam,' Sawasard cried.

'You can't imagine how *I* am pleased.'

Malam and Sawasard gave each other a bear hug.

'Why did you keep fleeing from us? I did call, and you wouldn't listen. Let me give you a bear hug, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

Daniel and Matthew greeted Sawasard and Groyorg, too, and hugged them. Semimes alone stood aside with a sullen stare.

'Attaboy, Mat the Vital! To have fallen down that crag with two arrows to the side, and none the worse for it!' Groyorg was overjoyed.

'Thanks to the Loner and Semimes,' said Matthew. 'They wrested me out of death's grip. And then Falafy and Lutul stayed by my bedside.'

'Semimes, old friend, come here and let's hug each other. Thank you for the Vital.'

'I remembered but forgot,' Semimes screeched as he stepped forth to meet Groyorg.

'I dare say! What d'you mean you forgot? Didn't you know Sawasard and me?'

'A barkycrook hit our Semimes over the head, so he's forgotten,' Daniel explained.

Sawasard looked a question and Malam replied:

'A barkycrook did hit him over the head, but that's not the whole story. Falafy says someone's bewitched him. She'll be removing the coil over his head tomorrow.'

Everyone hushed on seeing Groyorg's eyes looking for someone.

'What about him? Out with it!' he demanded.

He had rueful silence for reply.

'What about the Nervy, Dan? Out with it!'

'Our Nervy's dead,' said Daniel, unable to say another word for he had clenched his jaws not to burst into tears.

'Dead?' Groyorg whispered hoarsely... and, aware that there was no other meaning to the word no matter how hard you tried, dropped to his knees, cupped his face with his hands and cried.

Malam put his hand on his shoulder, rode out the first wave of rue, and said:

'Come home, friend.'

Groyorg got up to his feet, his eyes still cast down:

'Who betrayed us?'

'Faryraf,' said Daniel.

'I thought as much... Malam, I can tell you in advance: I'll kill the traitor as soon as we're in Dorlief. Don't try to hold me back—I'll go counter to your wishes for once... There's no holding me back, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'There'll be no need of holding you back. Faryraf's gone to the Crossroads for his fate to be settled there,' said Malam.

'It may have been settled,' said Sawasard.

'A pity he hadn't faced my rage before his death,' croaked Groyorg. 'Never have I wished that whenever I wielded my Lil'un, but I would've this once: I'd have killed him twice—with my fierce spirit and then with my stick.'

'Let's go home, friends. We're all together now,' said Malam and set back home.

'All? All it shall be. Natan the Nervy, too,' croaked Groyorg, turned his head to one side and upward addressing the one he would see, or perchance, saw alongside himself. 'Come along, Nervy. We have things to remember.'

No one, save one, dropped a word as they walked to where they had left the fish bucket and tackle. The one talked fit for two, and no one would intervene in that funny and, at once, rueful chat.

'Stomping along again, aren't we? I think you aren't disappointed: you would join us. Stomping where? Malam says home. So, it's home for the time being (Malam knows what he's talking about). And then... who knows what'll happen then? I suspect we won't sit around long as Word Keepers...

'. . . D'you remember what you told me when first you saw me? "This guy's as good as two." "What about three?" I snapped back, you becoming the Nervy thereupon... Nay, I'm wrong: you'd always been one. "Am I to fear them?" was your standby whenever you engaged. You weren't scared of the monsters; you wouldn't hide behind the rocks when we all did, to further the cause and to take shelter from the arrows...

'. . . D'you remember thinking I kept dreaming of a skilletful of mushrooms every night? I teased you: "Perhaps, a skilletful, perhaps a fieldful?" Do you, still, keep teasing me? Say you do. All right, I'll own up: it was a fieldful of huge mushrooms. You've never seen their like, I'm sure...

'. . . Thanks, Nervy... What for? For the light in the Red Hole, blast it! You detected the light no one else did, not even Sawasard the Bright, who's generally apt to. Why yes, your light showed us the way out. And then we saw another light, the light of a sky. You were overjoyed and ran off to bathe in it. "I'll bathe in this homey light!" "Do, Nervy," I said. "It's time we shook off the rot of the Red Hole..."

'. . . I'll tell you this, Natan the Nervy: you were shot because you're an irredeemable nervy boy...'

Groyorg talked to Natan and was happy, while his friends, Mat the Vital, Dan the Sorrowful, Sawasard the Bright, and even Malam, cried under the rose. It was easy to, because they were walking in a file and didn't see one another... Semimes's soul alone was untouched, for he remembered but forgot...

"You're also a healer, Square?" you teased me when in a bad shape. "I wish I was at the moment," I replied in earnest... I reiterate it now: I wish I was...'

'What about a swim, friends?' Groyorg said loudly as they approached the river.

Everyone stopped unsure what to think: Did they hear his last words right? Meanwhile, Groyorg dropped his backpack, followed by the Lil-un in his sheath, the cape, the dagger girdle and all the rest.

'Sounds like a good thing we all need,' said Daniel as he followed his example.

'Will you race me, Square?' cried Matthew.

'Joking apart, boy: you aren't strong enough yet.'

'Wouldn't you like me to joke?'

'Suit yourself. I'm no slouch for a contest, Lil'un-to-the-rescue! Is it the opposite bank and back?'

'There and back,' said Matthew.

'There and back,' Daniel agreed.

'I'll join you,' said Sawasard. 'I'd like to dip in the river of my childhood.'

'What about you, Semimes? Wouldn't you like to remember what you've forgotten?' Daniel asked.

Semimes said nothing in reply, and that made Daniel hold his gaze on him. Semimes's eyes, his whole attention and his thoughts were drawn by the edge of the book with the Word in it... and it wouldn't... wouldn't... wouldn't let them go. He seemed to have seen the book for the first time, to have only just had the hideaway he had heard about revealed to him. Daniel could see as much in his face that displayed something else, some sinister idea. The ideas had stunned Semimes and estranged him from everything around. Daniel came up and nudged him. It was a somewhat sharp nudge... because it wasn't Semimes he was nudging but something, some feeling, inside him.

'Are you going in for a swim with us?'

Semimes started and came to his senses.

'What?' he screeched inimically.

'Are you going for a swim with us, guide?' Daniel soft-pedaled his question.

'Nope!' he snapped. 'My head's all wrong.'

'A vague idea brushed him, with something sinister about it. Daniel turned to the others and said:

'Count me out.'

'What made you change your mind?' Matthew said.

'What's up, Dan?' asked Sawasard as he detected something fishy in him.

He waved his hand: swim along! And started putting on his things. Matthew decided against pressing him and merely shrugged. While Sawasard glanced at Semimes and thought: All in good time. Then they both looked at Groyorg.

'Do we? I'm tired of waiting,' he croaked angrily. 'What are you staring at me like that for?'

Indeed, Matthew and Sawasard were staring a bit too pointedly, for they could not quite understand how the Square was going to swim with that hump upon his back, let alone race.

'I'm not going to take off my undershirt: it's more comfortable with it on,' he croaked as he waved his arm behind his back. 'Say "On your marks, get set," Mat, and let's go.'

'Go!' Matthew cried and three of the six dove in.

'Let's go home, Father,' Semimes screeched indignantly and picked up the fish bucket. They left a few flat cakes in a cloth and a canteen of parate tea next



to Sawasard's clothes. Malam took the basket and the two of them made for Dorlief.

'Father,' said Semimes after a few paces, 'what if I dress the fish and you fry it... with me watching you fry?'

'We'll fry them together, sonny.'

'We'll fry them together, Father.'

As three of Daniel's friends were surrendering what was left of their stamina to the Fleiss Daniel was urging them on from the bank:

'Mat! Get a move on, Mat! Go for it, Mat! I'm with you, you hear?'

If he were not all for tinkering with mechanisms, he'd surely take up swimming. His body remembered it the moment he plowed the water. Good though his rivals were, he was the first to reach the other bank, two body lengths ahead of Groyorg and three ahead of Sawasard. He was flat out and... could barely reach the other bank.

'Work it, Mat!

His stroke had shed its brio, and his arms would not furrow the water.

'I'm with you, Mat!'

His legs floundered, the water feeling like paste.

'Hold on, Mat, just hold on!'

There was nothing for it but for Matthew to cling to Dan's voice...

The main contest was between Groyorg and Sawasard, between the pressing thirst for subjugating the Fleiss and the virtuoso flair for getting along with it... With just a quarter of the river's breadth left, Sawasard caught up with Groyorg and finished half a body length ahead. But the moment Groyorg saw the crystal splash turn golden and rush past, he got the short and the long of it and hollered wildly... Half that hollering shattered the air, the other made the water gurgle and bubble in anger... The fragments of words and clusters of energy washed ashore suggested to Daniel what could be strung together as words and feelings: 'Never you reckon on my hump helping you to outdo me, forestman: I'm as much a humpback as you a forestman. It's a poor policy to hitch your hopes to somebody's hump!' It was a strange thing for a humpback to say. But anything goes when a victory is at stake... Thus hollering, Groyorg touched the bank the merest jiffy before Sawasard... only to swim back to help Matthew along...

\* \* \*

After first commemorating Natan the Nervy with a drink, Groyorg next toasted the Dorlief domes that are friends with the sky, the proceedings taking nearly the whole of tittle-tattle. But no one at Malam's noticed that. It was the case because the words that crowded the space about the table were increasingly numerous with each glass they drank, filling up the dining room in its entirety, from candle to candle, from the floor to the very sky, mating past time with the future, and thus proving the future nonexistent in that space.

Groyorg croaked a toast to the Dorlief skies, drank another one out of number in Hoglief's Ember wine, Hoglief's Purple wine and Hoglief's Bloody wine and remained standing. He waited until everyone had lowered their care-free

vessels, poured himself more Bloody, sent the bottle around his friends, and croaked again without much faltering (all those days without sleep, either!):

'My friends, from the smallest, our Semimes the Conqueror, to the greatest, our Malam, I give you the Dorlief nights... nights that don't make days go hiding in the dark.'

No one could quite grasp the essence of the toast, but everyone raised his goblet to Dorlief nights. Only the Carroty cut his square friend to size before raising his:

'Groyorg!'

'Let him have his say, Father,' screeched Semimes. 'No good word's one too many.'

'Come off it, Malam, I merely mentioned the Dorlief skies, not a word about the sky above—'

'Groyorg!'

There was a knock on the front door.

'I'll get it,' said Daniel. 'Someone must've bolted it.'

The one who had remained silent, stared suspiciously after him and bowed his head. No one took notice.

Daniel opened the door and it was all he could do not to cry out: confronting him was, shrouded in semi-darkness or semi-light, a tramp in blood-spattered rags with a hideous face seemingly cut up with bloody strands. Not to let sounds betray him, the stranger covered Daniel's mouth with his mighty hand and whispered vehemently:

'Keep mum, Dan! How's Mat?'

The words made Daniel peer closer.

'Alive and kicking.'

'Is that one here?'

Daniel thought for just a moment and said:

'Here.'

'Let's go.'

. . . The guest pushed the door into the dining room—the party looked at him in puzzlement. A moment and another—and the words flooded. The one who remembered but forgot was ahead of them all: he snatched a knife off the table and dashed for the tramp. It was so unexpected that neither Groyorg nor Sawasard nor Matthew could intercede. Malam alone, who had the words of the soothsayer ringing in his ears on top of Groyorg's croaky toasts, had the presence of mind to heft his stick. The one who remembered but forgot cried for pain, dropped the knife from his battered hand, and, knocking both the tramp and Daniel off their feet, ran helter-skelter to Semimes's room. Everybody followed him... The door slammed shut in Sawasard's face and shut them off. Matthew and Groyorg hammered on it with their fists.

'Open up, chum! You've bitten off more than you can chew! And don't even think of fleeing through the window. We'll sic the dog on you and let Dorlief's fiercest ferlings flying!' Groyorg was hollering hoarsely.

'Stay, friends!' cried Malam. 'Let him come to his senses... and me greet my son finally... Sonny dearest, how are you?'

'Poorly, Father. I let you down, very much so. It was inadvertent of me.'

'Come off it, Semimes! What a thing to say! Not to worry. This is not the time for worrying—you're back home. Alive, for all that. You're back home, sonny.'

'The Red Cave robbed me of attention and reason and hunches. As I stepped out of the darkness into the semi-light of Wedolick, I saw felled barkycrooks and didn't think quickly enough to anticipate a living barkycrook.'

Everyone was hushed on either side of the door listening to Semimes's story.

'The stinker,' he nodded his head toward the door, 'hit me with a stone before I could wave my stick at the rustle above: he was crouching on a crag above the cave.'

'You, too, hit me over the head,' came a screechy voice from Semimes's room.

'Shut up, you blackguard!' Groyorg croaked. 'Or I'll set my Lil-um working on you, Lil'un-to-the-rescue. You'll forget you had a head.'

'Groyorg! This is no place for unleashing the Lil-un.'

'The stinker thought he'd slain me (you did, didn't you, stinker?) and started pulling my shirt off me. I came to, saw myself... in front of me... and was stunned, sure thing... Father, friends, the blackguard stabbed me with a dagger,' Semimes hitched up the rags that covered his body: the wound to the chest was packed with some kind of herbs, which had changed color from green to reddish-brown.

'I'll fetch Falafy,' Daniel suggested.

'Back off, chum!' Semimes stopped him. 'I'm not going to confront Falafy like this.'

'It'll wait, Dan,' Malam said gently, and addressed Semimes: 'I haven't given you a hug yet, sonny. Come here... Thank you for coming back alive.'

'Malam, just let me hug him, too,' Groyorg croaked. 'Welcome back, Conqueror. And thank you for our Vital.'

'Thanks to the Loner, too, not just me,' Semimes replied.

'Hi, guide. I didn't know you for starters,' said Daniel and hugged him, too.

'Hi, guy. "Groan on, Vital, just groan on... I'll make out what you're groaning about, very much so."'

'So you remember?' Semimes grinned.

'I'll remember it as long as I live, guide,' said Matthew, and they gave each other a hug.

'I believed you'd be back given time. The time's come,' said Sawasard and hugged him, too.

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say everyone will remain what he was, provided he was someone,' said Semimes.

'If I'd been Semimes,' came from behind the door, 'I wouldn't have hit anyone with a stone over the head or stabbed him with a dagger.'

'You must've thought, stinker, that I'd forgotten you. Nope, I haven't. I just had to give hugs to my friends first... such as you've never had nor ever will have. Now's the time to get quits with you.'

'Er, don't: Cruda's not to blame. Lord Trozuzort ordered Cruda to slay you, and Sapha turned Cruda into Semimes.'

'Of all that's wonderful! There's a Cruda, and a Trozuzort, blast them! Where are they hiding? Out with it!' Groyorg commanded.

'Zusuz is called Trozuzort these days, Groyorg,' Malam explained.

'The Zusuz?'

'I know no other. He lords it over darkness these days.'

'We'll get at him yet, friend, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'Cruda's me. I was him before becoming Semimes.'

(Cruda spoke the truth. The night that Daniel and Matthew first appeared at Malam's, Trozuzort, on coming back to the Emptied Lake, after meeting Nadidan, summoned to his tower Sapha and Cruda (a half-breed same as Semimes and looking like him). He made a sketch of Semimes from memory, which was fresh: they had nearly clashed at a rock at the Harshid foothills. Then he asked Sapha:

'Are they alike: the one in the sketch and Cruda?'

'Yes, Lord,' she said contentedly as she remembered Lord Tronort who made sketches of her.

'Do your hands have the touch to make his face the same as in the sketch?'

'Yes, Lord. But in order to do that...' Sapha hesitated.

'Speak.'

'The sketch will have to be burnt.'

Trozuzort set it alight right away.

'Lower it onto my hand, Lord,' said Sapha.

'You aren't afraid of fire?'

'I'm not if I mean to harness it.'

Trozuzort put the flaming sheet on her palm. Sapha came up to Cruda who was on the sidelines.

'Never fear,' she said to him.

'All right,' he screeched.

Sapha nimbly picked up the smoke, doused his face with it and started winding it around his head as if it were a length of cloth rather than smoke. She picked it up, doused him with it, and wound it again and again... saying:

'Spirit, fill the flesh, flesh, admit the spirit... Spirit, fill the flesh, flesh, admit the spirit... Spirit, fill the flesh, flesh, admit the spirit...'

Cruda was all atremble groaning: it was awfully painful. He felt like crying. But Trozuzort's eyes made him clench his jaws and merely groan. Both his body and soul resisted the intrusion that burnt and corrupted his face and head. But Sapha's hands were strong and implacable: they seemed to be pushing something foreign into him.)

'You wanted to slay me twice,' screeched Semimes. 'Come out!'

'I didn't mean to kill you today. I merely wanted you not to be there. I would then be Semimes and live with father in our house. We would go mushrooming and fishing for bream.'

'Shut up, stinker! There's only one Semimes here: it's me! I dare you to fight me... one on one. Give me my stick and choose any weapon you like (an ax if you like, or else a dagger... or else a pitchfork) and we'll fight.

'Semimes won't fight Semimes,' Cruda resisted. 'Semimes doesn't feel like fighting Semimes. He wants to stay in this kind house and live a good life. He's come to like this good life.'

Those on this side of the door exchanged glances.

'You found yourself between forgiveness and vengeance,' said Malam. 'We're all with you: you have to choose.'

'Stay,' said Sawasard. 'Semimes'll make his choice. But let Cruda answer my question first.'

'Ask him, Sawasard,' Malam agreed.

'Shoot, forestman,' Semimes agreed reluctantly.

Sawasard neared the door.

'Cruda?'

'Just call me Semimes, fiery-haired.'

'Hey, barkycrook, there's only one Semimes here,' Matthew cried hitting the door with his fist.

'Er, Mat, don't,' Cruda snapped.

'Must we stroke you on the head, murderer?' Daniel was indignant.

'Murderer,' Semimes echoed.

'Falafy'll come tomorrow and stroke it. She's got kind hands and a kind heart... unlike Sapha. I haven't killed anyone save the ibex we ate yesterday.'

'You have to live until tomorrow, guy,' Groyorg croaked.

'All right, Cruda it shall be. Except I'm nor going back to the Emptied Lake. I like it better here. I lived in a hole in the ground on the Emptied Lake. I had no father.'

'Look here, Cruda.'

'I'm listening to you, fiery-haired. You're not an evil man.'

'What did Trozuzort order you to kill Semimes for?'

Cruda did not answer.

'All the barkycrooks who lay in wait for us in the Wedolick Gorge, all those we didn't kill, were in hot pursuit. You crouched. You were after Semimes, weren't you?' asked Sawasard.

'Come clean!' Groyorg demanded.

'I was... Lord Trozuzort sent Sapha for me. I presented at the tower. The Lord said: "If Dara doesn't take the bodies of two Dorliefans to the Emptied Lake, find among the dead or kill the one who looks like you now, Semimes, son of Malam, and go in his stead to Dorlief, to his father. Look and listen around there. Once you hear about the Word, stay near the one who's got it. Become Semimes, his friend and trusty bodyguard. Touch not the Word. I'll take it when it's on the way." Then the Lord told me to ride Sus (that's his gorhoon's name) and we flew to Kaduhar, to Dara's detachment. Then I got as far as the Wedolick Gorge with the detachment and crouched there.'

'And how do you propose to tell Trozuzort the way of the Word?' asked Groyorg.

'I know how,' said Daniel. 'He seems to have got a hair, same as was on me.'

'What do you mean, a hair?' said Groyorg wide-eyed.

'Leoly gave me a feather before I set out. It was suspended from a hair.'

'I do remember, Dan the Sorrowful. How could I forget?'

'Faryraf strung a hair through it for it to indicate the way to the Lord of Darkness. It had been handed to Faryraf by the one who slew Sufus and Safasy.'

'It was Sapha's hair,' Cruda screeched. 'I've also got her hair. Lord Trozuzort said, "Don't take off the hair whatever you do: Sapha will know where you are through its agency."'

'Come out and give us that hair,' Groyorg demanded (his patience had been sorely tried).

'And my stick to me,' Semimes screeched.

'You won't kill me, will you?'

'That we won't,' said Matthew. 'Couldn't you hear Semimes challenge you to a fair fight, one on one?'

A silence fell. Then Cruda's voice came from behind the door:

'Er, Semimes?'

'What is it now?'

'Semimes, I don't want to fight you. I want to be your brother. Do you agree? Then I'll come out and give your stick to you and the hair, to boot.'

'What sort of trade-off is that?' Matthew was outraged. 'Open the door and come out!'

'Listen to me, Cruda: do what your heart suggests to you, not your fear,' said Malam (his voice was as gentle as could be).

'All right, Father,' Cruda screeched after a short silence, opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. 'Here's your stick, brother, take it.'

Semimes stared closely at him... and took the stick.

'Now let's have the hair,' Groyorg croaked.

Cruda hitched up his right trouser leg: wound under his knee was the hair. He bent, bit it off and gave it to Semimes.

'It has to be burnt immediately,' Sawasard said. 'Then the way of the Word will be hidden from the eyes of the Lord of Darkness.'

'Great will be his ire,' said Malam. 'The darkness will emerge from the compound of the Emptied Lake and make for Natlief. But we have no other way out. The Word can't be endangered.'

'I'll burn the barkycrook hair, Father. But I won't foul the fireplace; I'll burn it outdoors.'

'A good thing, too, sonny. We'll go outside, all of us, and take care, mindful of the Parliel soothsayer's words.'

'What words, Father?'

'Dan dear, recite the rhyme. We all have to consider Gusuty's words.'

'I'll try, Malam:

Lake's son and brat coiled by a crumb,

Heed, Semimes, you'd better keep mum—'

'It's about me,' Cruda screeched. 'I'm Lake's son. I've no father... had no father.'

'There, Lake's son, let us listen, don't barge in,' Groyorg croaked.

Daniel went on:

'Fire keeps tailing you with nowhere to hide,  
Just as another one's running 'longside.  
You've seen his wry aspect slowly wane;  
You'll see it once more as it nears again—'

'These words are about us, brother,' Cruda could not contain himself.

'Yes, that's about the two of us... brother,' Semimes screeched.

Everyone stared at him in surprise.

'Go on, Dan,' he said.

'Forgiveness'll look vengeance in the eye.

Fire's implacable, tears' potence a guile.'

'This one's about me again,' screeched Cruda piteously. 'Lord Trozuzort will roast me.'

'It's about all of us,' said Malam.

'We'll burn the hair, and he won't track you down,' said Daniel.

'Exactly,' said Matthew. 'It remains to be seen who'll roast whom.'

'It remains to be seen who'll roast whom,' Cruda echoed.

Semimes entered his room and took a candle. Then everybody went outdoors.

'Let's go farther from the porch,' Daniel suggested.

They did.

'Set it alight, Conqueror,' Groyorg croaked. 'I can sense Zusuz's stare with my back.'

'Trozuzort's,' Matthew said.

'Trozuzort's, blast him! I used to know him as Zusuz.'

Semimes threw the hair over the stick and set both its ends alight. The hair, aflame, started writhing.

'Resisting it, the stinker,' Matthew said.

'Resisting it, the stinker,' Cruda screeched, content that it was Sapha's hair he had rid himself of, not him, that was a stinker.

The hair, indeed, was resisting the fire, endowed with Sapha's potency that it was.

\* \* \*

Sapha's right hand sensed a burn. She knew right away where the call was coming from and immediately produced the biteoff from her sleeve. She rushed out of her room and ascended the stairs in a hurry. She was holding the biteoff in front of her, as if afraid of losing it. It burnt her fingers... and troubled her mind...

'Lord!' she called hoarsely before she was at the door.

Trozuzort heard her anxious voice and opened the door before she could knock.

'Lord, look! Biteoff, find the hair that lost you.'

The moment Sapha uttered the words, the biteoff bent and started writhing like a worm on a hook. It became white hot in no time.

'What's wrong with it?' said Trozuzort.

'They're burning my hair, and the biteoff's dying along with it of the heat.'

'What about Cruda? Can you say anything about Cruda?'

'I can feel he's alive... He's let you down, Lord.'

'I'll kill him!'

'Lord?'

'Speak.'

'You won't kill him right away. You'll have to wait,' said Sapha and hung her head.

'There's something at the back of your mind. Look at me... I can see vengeance in your eyes. Tell me: can you kill Cruda now?'

'I can, Lord.'

'How?'

'The fire will help me. The fire that's burning my hair. The fire that's made the biteoff white hot.'

'Kill him!'

Sapha rolled her eyes and uttered in a croaky whisper:

'My hair, burn the one that betrayed you.'

She snorted with resentment... tensed... Her face was petrified... her whole body convulsed.

'My hair, burn the one who betrayed you,' she whispered barely mouthing the words and blew fiercely at the biteoff.

\* \* \*

When Sapha's hair burnt out, Semimes waved his stick to shake off the ashes.

'Let the wind carry you away from our home,' he screeched. 'Let's go, friends.'

'And right you are, Semimes the Conqueror: so there should be nothing left of its evil spirit, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

'Friends, we must have a drink to celebrate this small victory,' Matthew suggested.

'Indeed, dear friends, let's go in and have a drink. We might find another excuse for raising our glasses,' said Matthew and looked at Semimes, then at Cruda.

Everyone made for the house, and no one could see the ashes of the hair soar as if blown by the wind (but they were not), redden and drop on Cruda's head, shoulders and back. He was immediately consumed by violent flames, as if his very hair, clothes and his whole body were impregnated with tar. He cried an excruciating cry of anguish. Everyone dashed his way, but the dash proved just a pace long: he was consumed in a jiffy, and there was no rescuing him. His wild cry, as it extricated itself from the flames, was cut off at the word that everyone could make out:

'Semimes!'

There was nothing left of Cruda but a heap of ashes. It was just the light from Malam's house that would not let the sudden overwhelming darkness hide everything from view.

'I'll pick up... Cruda and strew the ashes in the willows,' Semimes said softly. 'Stay behind: I'll do it myself.'



. . . The Word Keepers, save for Semimes, were assembled in the living room. They sat by the fireside, first in silence... then diluting the silence with sparse words... They were suddenly, before they knew it, possessed of a feeling that contributed toward their other feelings. That feeling outweighed all their others. They felt something had ended, something that, once said, made the others share in it, as if it were a crust of bread passed around a bonfire. An eerie feeling tinged with rue. It would not leave their souls because the time they were in at the moment had got caught by a vacuum. And they were waiting for the vacuum to be replaced with something new, to make them bandy what had been said by one of them...

Semimes alone kept on living a life filled with unfinished business. He seemed to be catching up with his friends. Back from the stand of linden trees, he washed off the traces of his seventeen-day journey and put on his beloved light-brown shirt. He then stood at the black-horse wall... stroked as many manes as there were waving at a gallop on the shelves. Said something to them in an inaudible murmur... Then joined his father in raising a glass of Hoglef's Ember wine to celebrate his homecoming, had some roast ibex and commemorated Cruda in a kindly manner:

'Thanks for the ibex, brother. Frankly speaking, on the way home, I kept thinking of foodstuffs on many occasions, very much so. But no idea of roast ibex occurred to me, ever. Once I saw roast ibex on the table among other delights, the very thought of other dishes fled of its own accord. The brown tidbits seemed to be poised to make it to my mouth. Even the savory bream had to be left until afterwards—I'll get to it yet... What a pity, brother, we can't go hunting together... What a pity we can't sit on the Fleiss bank angling for bream... What a pity we can't go mushrooming to the forest and chat on the way, very much so.'

Then they went to see Falafy, the two of them on Malam's insistence:

'A hastily tended wound's like a beast not quite dead: it could give you a bite when you least expect it.'

Truth to tell, Semimes was not averse to seeing her as a genuine warrior. So they were off... Father told him about Natan on the way. While Falafy was busy with his wounds, first the one to his head, then the one to his chest, he cried quietly, forgetful of being a warrior. She humored him giving him of the vital power of her hands and talking to Malam... Malam asked her nearer the end:

'Falafy dear, tell me: are there many arrows left that used to belong to Natan?'

'There are some, dear Malam. You must be in need of some since you ask.'

'I am. I'll take them with me unless Lutul and you mind very much.'

Falafy brought him two quivers of arrows.

When it was time to say goodbye, Semimes brought himself to ask her:

'Falafy, do you know who rescued our Mat?'

'Mat said it was you and the Loner.'

'Yes, it was the Loner... But he disclosed a secret to me... I mean to disclose it to you, very much so.'

'Semimes, my dear, I'm listening.'

'The Loner's your father,' said Semimes and his face shone.

Her face shone, too, for the happiness that filled her heart.

'Thank you, Semimes. Here's joy knocking at our door after all that woe.'

'Yes, Falafy, joy. I believe you'll see him.'

(Ninety-three years had passed since Shwarrawsh separated Falafy from her father; and all those years Falafy had been nourished by the faith that he had not been lost as she had cherished the feeling that the Loner, who was rumored to do good works, was her father. Now she knew.)

... Semimes could not help seeing another kind soul he always had room for in his heart.

'Hello, Nuruny,' he said as he entered the pen.

When she heard the dear voice intrude her sappily green doze, she sprang up, sniffed the known smell and rushed him off his feet for joy. He caught her head and would not let her butt him.

'I say! I don't quite know whether you've taken me for that fool of a Kipik to be butting so.'

Nuruny persisted. Semimes stroked her neck and back saying:

'Calm down, sweetie. You'll slobber my shirt for me, the fool that you are: I've just put it on. Has Kipik been worrying you? Good. Here's some sugar for you... Father must've kept you grazing. Enjoy your sugar... All right, I'll be going: there's someone else I have to see.'

Semimes got up, left the pen and went to the farthest willow. When there, he moved back the stone, reached his hand into the burrow, gently touched the velvet bag, and said under his breath:

'Sleep on, don't worry. I'm back after the journey... I kept thinking back to you every day of the seventeen away from You. There was a moment every day for me to forget myself. And then I thought about You and about Father... I could've never made it back, like one of us, Word Keepers, the one called Natan the Nervy. You know what he called me? Wolfdog, thus displaying his reverence for me. Though I say it, the journey has added to their reverence. I knew it the moment I came back home. The guy who fell off the crag was like: "As long as I live, guide." No amount of imagination would yield a thing like that. Matam will remember my words as long as he lives, for they kept him alive better than any potion. He needed nothing better than those words at the time. That made him remember them as long as he lives. That nice forestman? He was like, "I believed you'd survive." Why, sure thing he did: he'd experienced my power to its full extent. I didn't much believe I'd survive, though. But I live... Groyorg there, there's... He did really well saying: "Welcome back, Conqueror. And thank you for our Vital." I have this to tell You: I'm sad... very sad... A stinker hit me over the head... and stabbed me, meaning to kill me. He did, in a manner of speaking. It was the thought of You and Father that made me rise... and another thought—that I'd let down the Word Keepers... The crookedest of them all shouldn't let them down. If he had, they'd have spilled the beans saying: "He'd let us down... He'd let us down..." Well, I did not! And came back... so they shouldn't say that... and also to kill that stinker... But then the tables were turned on me: he hadn't been doing it of his own free will. He called me his brother of his own free will... his brother. He was like, "Semimes, I don't want to fight you. I want to be your

brother. Do you agree?" I'll tell You this: I've never had a brother—just Father and You... Hardly had he of the improbable name of Cruda appeared in my life... when he was consumed with the fire sent along by the Lord of Darkness. We hadn't had the time to change his name to a regular one... Do you know the difference between my friends and my brother? They seem to humor me with what they say, while my brother Cruda expected me to humor him... That's all, I'll be going... No, it isn't... He was like, "I'll tell you, Semimes, son of Malam, what I haven't told anybody." And he revealed his secret to me. It transpired that the Loner is Norron, Falafy's father. That's all; I'll be going now.'

Semimes pulled his burning fingers off the bag and out of the burrow, and replaced the stone. And he went home.

Before settling at the fireplace among the Word Keepers and plunging into a wait not unlike a vacuum, he undertook the last business of the day, very pleasant and very homey... When he brought and restored the first mushrooms shelf, Matthew asked him:

'Do I give you a hand, guide?'

'Thank you, Mat. But your fuss would be in the way of my getting used to home. The living room was soon restored to its former aspect.

'It was rather dull without this beauty, Lil'un-to-the-rescue. Join us, Conqueror. There's someone wanting without you.'

'Sure thing: you miss me when I'm away,' Semimes screeched contentedly, sat at the fireplace and put a log on the fire.

'Between Malam's and Dorlief, there could be a mushroom field like this. And the name's there at the tip of my tongue: Dorlief Mushroom Field,' Groyorg croaked not unlike the crackling fire in the hearth.

Everyone tried to fancy this strange dream as translated into life. It was easier said than done. His voice interrupted the tricky task:

'Nights are just great in Dorlief: there's no getting lost, even if you've a mind to.'

Everyone agreed that the word 'great' applied, though in doubt about the meaning of 'lost.' But they kept mum.

'Ruricks are no good in Dorlief, if only for fun,' croaked Groyorg something that was altogether incomprehensible.

'Groyorg!' he heard the voice that pulled him back out of a world of mushroom fields, evil nights, and ruricks that were no good in Dorlief.

The Carroty sat on the sofa on its farthest corner from the fireplace, looking at Semimes and enjoying the company. He was also sad because he knew that the moment was coming when he would say, 'My friends, catch some sleep: I'll wake you up before daybreak. We'll have to carry the Word forth. Let darkness be blind at this hour.'

**Part Six**  
**Returning to Himself**  
**Chapter One**  
**People of Sorts**

Martin suddenly cut short his resolute jogging, looked briefly around, and sat down near him who had previously been hidden by the fern growth and who had the moment before made him very nearly jump out of his skin. (He was making the planned rounds of the forest with his uncle. They kept within shouting distance of one another, testing from time to time the distance between them, and, hence, the security of mutual assistance, with calls.)

Lying immovably on his back was a man, a youth in fact, who looked just a bit Martin's senior—about eighteen-nineteen.

'Uncle Samuel? Uncle Samuel? Come here, quick!' Martin cried.

'Where are you?' Samuel responded. 'I've lost you.'

Martin, as if prodded with a hedgehog's spines (whose birthright it is to be a hedgehog rather than a hare), emerged from the tall grass and waved his hands violently:

'Over here. Quick! He's here.'

He called to his partner making his shrieks more pervasive with a lot of body English, gestures and grimaces that only one part of his face was prone to, leaving the other lifeless but somehow potent with power over the sinews that were there to render connections to the soul. Both Martin's aspect and stirrings betrayed impatience in him as if he had stumbled upon something that was there to change his life style and was now forcing the pace.

Spurred on by his nephew's agitation (that was first to be heard and then seen) and 'Who's that "he..." a wounded man?' that flashed through his mind, Samuel hastened his pace, and, once Martin's face, flushed and wincing, surfaced once and then once again over the bluish-green ripples, they became level with each other.

'Is he alive?'

Martin shrugged in reply, for he did not feel like confessing to his suspicion that the stranger spread-eagled on the ground was not. Both knelt. Samuel's hand felt for the pulse on the youth's neck.

'Racing along—at least two hundred a minute... Seems to be in one piece... no wounds, no blood... There, his neck isn't broken, and that's the main thing. Who's toppled you over like this, poor thing?'

'There were two of them, Uncle Samuel. The second dashed for the thicket.'

'Do you say, the second?' The concentration in the forester's face lent itself to a frown (he got up, followed by his voluntary help, to have a better look around). 'Dashed for the thicket? What sped him on? Oh, I see. But why? What occurs to you, sonny?'

Martin hung his head to hide his eyes or, rather, one eye, the right one, the one that was a giveaway: he hated people (even Uncle Samuel) to see him probing for an idea. Half a minute later, he replied:

'Those two said a lot of words.'

Samuel's questioning stare would not relax, and Martin explained:

'They lost their way, were psyched out and said too many words, and that one,' Martin nodded aside, 'hit our guy.'

'Looks like a one-off blow: I see no signs of a skirmish. If they'd fought it out, we'd have heard them a mile away. No, it's something rather trickier than a slanging match... something rather craftier...'

Martin noticed at that point that Uncle Samuel's eyes were detached from the meaning of the words he was still mouthing as they were impregnated with the meaning of something else, something that was behind Martin's back, something that was rather more important than any babble. Then it occurred to him: 'The second!' He looked behind and scrutinized the forest: nothing... nothing to attract his eye with novelty or startling motion.

'Must be crouched behind a tree,' said Samuel in a low voice, and then hollered loudly but amicably, 'Hey, stranger! Stop playing hide-and-seek. Come our way. You'll help us, we'll help you. Your companion's alive.'

'Must be afraid.'

'Not leaving, though.'

'Not leaving,' Martin agreed. 'Will we have another go?'

'If you're afraid,' Samuel went on with his entreaties, 'respond, and we'll talk at a distance without much trust in one another, like Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef in *For a Few Dollars More*. What about it?'

'Uncle Samuel, the man without a name and Colonel Mortimer,' Martin suggested (he was a fan of Clint Eastwood and had seen all the films that featured him with his uncle, even what he called 'ancient classics').

'The man without a name and Colonel Douglas Mortimer!' he called. 'Try either on for size... Don't you like westerns? Okay, suit yourself. In any case, you must know what's good for you. We're foresters. If you and your companion have lost your way, we'll take you to the motorway. You hear me? Make up your mind.'

A brief hollow sound came from behind a tree that was not unlike a bestial growl, and the next moment a figure not distinctly but still definitely human dashed into the depth of the forest.

'Shit!' Samuel was outraged. 'Snapping back rather than saying a human word. He's seen nothing that matters.'

'I'll catch him up,' Martin suggested (there was resolution in his eyes, but he wanted the forester's approval: within the vast expanse many miles any way, his was the final word, and always fair).

'It isn't worth it, Martin. I don't think it is. He'll be back. He's left himself beside this guy, and this decoy will have him going round and round nearby.'

Listening to his uncle and inwardly agreeing, Martin was still looking for a loophole: the enthusiasm of a headhunter was rife in him and getting the upper hand over common sense. And somewhere deep inside, in the repository of all sorts of ideas and fads, he did find the reason why that helped him persist.

'But he's... he's lost his way. Can I catch him up?'

Samuel saw through it and replied in one word:

'Go.'

Martin did not waste another second (it now depended on his vim) and dashed off, only to hear:

'Wait, Martin! Wait!' (He stopped short and snapped back a look not of anger but of frustration). 'Leave behind the stone!'

Martin unhitched a small but weighty bag off his belt and quickly swung its narrow strap from across his shoulder over his head. He dropped everything at Samuel's feet and instantly forgot all but the eerie growl that had so suddenly stirred his nerves intent on cherished dreams.

'Good luck, sonny,' the uncles' voice trailed him.

It was the first time in the past three years that Samuel had asked him to part company with his stone (for a time only, of course). In fact, it was the first time he had spoken about the stone in the three years.

\* \* \*

Three years before the stone had been the cause of fierce contention between them.

One day, when making his rounds of the forest, Samuel had run into a felled young birch whose crown was not yet withered. Its trunk had been broken in a fashion unusual to the eye of the forester some five feet above the ground. He found another small tree a short distance off, ruined in precisely the same way for seemingly no good reason. ('Some problem,' he told himself). The next day, another three with, close to them, Martin's boot prints. 'He's seen,' Samuel thought, 'but wouldn't tell for fear of upsetting me.'

At dinner, when the yards that made them closer or farther from each other were reduced to mere feet, he said:

'We've a problem to solve, Martin. You must've noticed half a mile from home to Upper Lake, someone or something keeps ruining young trees. He doesn't saw or hack them but merely breaks their back.' (Martin replaced the bit of fish he was taking to his mouth back on the plate and bowed his head). 'I can't think what the point can be and who can be doing such outrages. It can't be a twister, nor has one visited our parts lately. It doesn't look like a beast, either: there'd be specific marks. Nor a man either: what's the point? I can't make head or tail of it...'

'I did it... with my friend,' said Martin in a low voice, his eyes still cast down.

'What do you mean, you?' Samuel said in a loud whisper, as if pushing back at what he had heard (he was nonplussed by the absurd admission). 'Sonny... What friend? What for? We're rangers, you and me! And what's... what's that friend?'

Martin got up and left the room. Samuel, petrified, was staring at the door, unable to think straight... A minute later, Martin was back. He came up to the table and laid a stone on it (it was a smooth dark-grey boulder not unlike a rugby football but half its size). Samuel looked from the boulder to the one who could

not be perpetually recalcitrant, whose eye would tell him something. But Martin persisted in his silence...

'What's this?' Samuel said, unable to keep that stony silence further (he somehow fought shy of saying the word 'sonny' that flashed through his head).

'It's my friend,' said Martin, resolution in his voice (which could easily be taken for cheek).

'What was that? What did you say?'

'It's my friend.'

'You son of a bitch...' Samuel said through gritted teeth. 'I don't wish to see this thing, or broken trees, either!'

Martin snatched the stone and ran outside leaving behind three words in his stead:

'Meaning a freak?'

The words, plus another one that Samuel choked on and that never got out, were to tear his soul apart for another four days. Martin would be back by the fifth, gaunt and exhausted. And the word 'Sonny!' would greet him.

\* \* \*

Seventeen years earlier...

Francis and Martha Garber were racing on their way to hospital spurred on by the son, yet unborn but scrambling on his way out before term and making the minutes of the essence.

They had been staying with Samuel, Martha's older brother: both the mother and the 'bun in the oven' were in need of wholesome air, and the forester's hut made of wood and in the middle of a wood were just what the doctor ordered. Those were the fine days in July, and, it seemed, nothing would upset yet another two to three weeks either in nature or in Samuel's home or in Martha's womb. Martin would have waited another day or two to see the light of day, if he had known that he would come by his name not through the grownups' exacting choice or their last-minute whim, rather in memory of his mother whom he was never to see—if only he could have known that there would be no light in the space between heaven and earth, that thousands of black clouds would darken it and disgorge a mighty force that would consume Martha when she...

'Frank, I can't...'

'Hold on, darling: it won't be long.'

'I'm out of breath, I can't. Stop, please, stop...'

'Martha, pray hold on, there's not a minute to waste. Our kid... You're sick because he's impatient to be out. But he's before his term, and we can't risk his life... your life. You must hold on, darling...'

'Why talk? Why talk and talk?'

Francis knew his words irked Martha, they were probably out of turn. But he had to play for time, while the wheels were winding on mile after mile (there were just a few left).

'Oh that we could make it! Oh that the three of us could make it! You must understand you shouldn't move now, trouble the kid, or shift your position by an inch until we're there. Or else...'

'Shut up! I can't, can't, can't!'

'Or else it'll be all over. If we stop now, it'll be all over. Hell, I can feel it. It'll go to hell in a handbasket. I can feel it.'

'You don't understand!'

'I don't care. I love you.'

'You don't understand!'

'I love you.'

'Frank, Frank, Frank, I'm sick. I'm ever so sick... I'm out of breath... I'm suffocating, Frank. I'll be stifled next!'

'I can quite understand, darling, but...'

'Stop that frigging car: I'll be dead in it next!'

Francis looked at his wife and braked down, unable to persist in his being reasonable and cruel.

'Wait a mo, I'll help you out.'

She pushed the door (she did not give a damn to the moment or to Francis's words; she did not hear them probably; she did not care for the mind-boggling warps of space in throes of the darkness, or for the fiery stings probing the strength of the metal skin that protected her) and had hardly stepped down when...

'Maternity ward, quick?' the doctor called as he examined the lifeless body of Martha who had been struck by lightning, for he had heard a life in it.

A quarter of an hour later, the obstetrician looked away (for just a few moments) unable to keep his composure while the midwife fainted as the infant was extracted from the burnt-out flesh, turned face up, and they saw instead...

'Jesus!' whispered the convulsed lips of the doctor who had seen it all, as he forced his eyes to look back at the mask, whether dead or alive, that they resisted seeing again.

The mask gave a sharp squeal as it paid tribute to the darkness... the darkness that had left the freak alive for some reason...

Two years later, when Francis got married on the rebound, it was definitively decided to entrust the education of Martin to Samuel, the father, while officially remaining one, providing child support for the growing boy's needs and, on top of that, for nannies and teachers (thank goodness, there was no talk of him going to school, whether ordinary or a special-needs one).

So the word 'sonny' Samuel had used for many years now when addressing Martin was charged with anything but a condescending or age-related meaning.

\* \* \*

Martin stopped and listened. I'll get you now. Which way will you dash next? I'll steal a march on you if I guess. Patience... Lying low, are you? Holding your breath? I've got all the patience in the world. Once you dash, your noisy ways will be a giveaway fit for one deaf. Waiting, are you? That's strange... What are you up to? Now that Martin was half a mile into the forest, he knew for a certainty (It isn't mere fancy, is it?) that his prey had made a dash not to flee. What's on your mind? Playing tricks on me? Winding loops like a hare? It's clear as day you're a sly one. Trying to outwit a forester... well, almost a forester.



You'll have another think coming. Aren't you afraid the forest (my forest, not yours) will lead you astray and spin you dizzy... ? Standing stock still and listening for telltale sounds? Run, why won't you? You can't outwait me. Which way? I wish I knew... In this drawn-out silence, Martin never stopped eyeing the parcel of forest that had last let on the fugitive was there. It was a sign for his ear for the umpteenth time: Forest, my forest, show him up, if only with a stirring twig.

Suddenly there was a footfall back of him. Uncle Samuel, he thought, couldn't stay where he was, afraid I'd do something foolish. A fraction of a second was all he lacked to justify his guess and turn to look at Uncle Samuel. Within that fraction, someone heavy and filled with fury and breathing that fury down his neck jumped him with the familiar growl. Martin could feel strangling him a hazelnut bat-hard hand (it was the attacker's right), just as his face was squeezed by the left paw as capacious as the jaws of a boa-constrictor. And pain right away... As he fell, Martin could feel the pain of a breaking neck... and death robbing him of life, inhuman, bestial, blood-thirsty death. And death showed him at that point something that is drawn out in time when one lives: the wild cry of a lightning-struck infant, the breaking spines of birches, those birches, and the inhuman aspect of one he had not seen yet with his eyes, of the one robbing him of life. And that death as he sensed it made both his spirit and his flesh blow up. As he fell, he jabbed his right foot into the ground, jerked his right half (from his toe tips up to his shoulder) forward and leftward in a spin—and they both were down. They immediately got up to rush the other. Martin saw in front of him for real, not in the sketch death had just shown him, a face... It was that either of a man or a shapeshifter that had not had the time to take his other guise. And he thought (fast, he would not have uttered two syllables within that time limit) that if he did not kill the shapeshifter, the shapeshifter would kill him. He also thought (not in his mind—with his fingertips as they slipped over his belt) that his single trusty pal... or at least the bowie knife his Uncle Samuel had given him last year... would have come in handy. He had hung it from a peg on the wall, rather than from his belt, lest his trusty friend take offence. The thirst for blood was suddenly extinguished from the eyes of the shapeshifter who had been prepared to tear him to pieces the moment before (Martin could not be mistaken: the eyes were his pain and his ultimate truth), and they clearly showed (Martin could not be mistaken), they clearly showed the revelation related to him, Martin... The shapeshifter bowed his head and backed off and turned his back to him when some ten paces off and got lost among the trees...

In the seventeen years of his life, Martin had never been involved in anything that might not just envelop him in dreams strung out into incredible youthful constructs, but really come close to a discovery, however intuitive. As his feet covered foot by foot the way back, right in front of him, as if resting in place, were the eyes of the shapeshifter (shapeshifter?) with the answer in them as to why he, Martin, was there in this world. But the answer was so deep in he could not read it. Nor could he fail to see (and did see) on the readable page of the shapeshifter's eyes his own reflection. It means the answer's there, in that Martin in the shapeshifter's eyes. It means the answer's in me. But what is it I don't

know about myself that those eyes could see? Why don't I see it? Why doesn't Uncle Samuel? Perhaps, he does but wouldn't tell? Why not? Martin kept guessing on those lines until he found himself within twenty yards of Uncle Samuel and the stranger in the grass. What do I tell Uncle Samuel if... ?

'What's wrong, sonny? What's happened?' Uncle Samuel asked as he took a step toward Martin. 'Your face is all scratched and bloody... What happened? Did you fight him?'

Martin smiled in reply and said, said facilely (he did not pretend: the skirmish had left him with no sense of a loser, for he had gained rather than lost something):

'It's okay, Uncle Samuel. He gave me the slip, but he won't get lost, never fear. (Martin remembered very well that 'getting lost' was his wife rather than his uncle's concern.)

Samuel smiled in reply: he had seen through his nephew's bluff way before.

'How's the guy?' asked Martin. 'I see you've got the folder ready.' (That was what the forester and his helper called the collapsible stretcher that Samuel always took along with him when going on his rounds. It fitted into the backpack and was no burden for the shoulders or back.)

'Groaning a bit. Mumbling something. I think we'd better help him arouse. I've been waiting for you, partner.'

'A pleasure, partner,' said Martin adding to himself: 'I wish I could look in his eyes.' And then out loud: 'But first, Uncle Samuel, answer my question. Please, do.'

'Shoot, sonny, ask your loaded question. I never prevaricate, you know.'

'Uncle Samuel, what do you know about me that I don't? Tell me.'

Samuel thought for a while and said:

'You know all there's to know... about your mother, about your father, about yourself. All except what I thought might be painful to you... It's your eye... your left eye.'

'What about my eye?'

'What about your eye? You know you were to the manner born: the lightning that struck Martha was to blame. But when talking to you, I never mentioned another thing, and I'm not sure it'll be plain sailing this time... What about your eye? The physicians—some quite eminent among them—couldn't answer this question. Or wouldn't. At least, there was some understatement about it all. After examination, they gave it up for lost, each of them. I think we shouldn't have taken you to all those clinics. All to no avail. However, the first of them, an old dear (I believe, it was his strange ways that put us off), warned me that there had never been such a case in modern practice and no one would go beyond initial examination. We should've given it up as a bad job, just as he'd suggested, and let you be.'

Samuel shifted his eyes to the stranger—he needed a pause—and continued after a silence:

'You wanted it without reservations, and I'll be frank with you, to the bitter end... He said your eye... had developed a new quality, an unknown quality... He also said—it was probably a bon mot or a resignation for all I know—that the

quality wasn't... I can't get my tongue around it; it's such a mouthful...' Samuel could get his tongue around it, all right, but he seemed to have lost confidence in his agitation (Martin had not known him to be that agitated before). 'It didn't quite go with our idea of being as we regard it with our brains, our brains not all that clear-visioned as all that... I'm not in a position to judge how much of it's true, how much idle talk. However, the more I think about it, the more I believe it's all for the best, their having resigned themselves to non-interference. You want to know why?'

'Why, Uncle Samuel?'

'Because what doesn't go with our idea of things is the stuff of the bag of tricks with all sorts of secret services, and they would've surely pried into it. Whenever I'm lost in a reverie, I think the doctor hinted at just that. When talking to me, he mentioned a certain case. It, too, involved a patient that didn't quite go, with a hidden third eye that could see as well as his other eyes had been able to before he lost their use in a fire. He could see not just what other people could, but something else besides. He could see... through obstacles: walls, you name it. The non-medico feds let the sawdust out of the poor thing... That's that... I don't think you wanted to hear that sort of thing from me, sonny.'

'I hardly know what I wanted to hear. (Martin's soul was at the moment invaded by an obscure feeling not unlike triumph that he kept bottled-up.) But I wanted to hear and I have. It's okay. Let's rouse the guest.'

'A pleasure, partner,' Samuel echoed Martin's recent answer, glad he had not frustrated his nephew (he knew it from his eye).

While Martin slung on the bag with the stone, Samuel leaned over the stranger and slightly slapped his cheeks—the stranger groaned. Martin came up closer.

'He'll come to in just a moment,' said Samuel with authority.

The guy opened his eyes: 'Looks like I'm alive,' a voice in his head said. 'People of sorts... Who are they? Sky-tall... You aren't God by any chance, are you? He's puckered his bushy eyebrows in a frown. What did I do wrong? Or are you just a grave ranger, such as a ranger should be? Another... Good God!'

'He's blanked out again, Uncle Samuel.'

'No, sonny, he's taken fright. Something frightened him out of his wits, so he's afraid of coming to.'

'Hmm, taken fright? Frightened he's still alive?' Martin smirked, bent and shook him by the shoulder. 'Rise and shine, pal. No need to be afraid: you're with us now. You hear?'

'I do,' the guy said in a low voice without opening his eyes. 'Who are you? Tell your new pal.'

'Uncle Samuel, our pal's found his voice. Won't he find his eyes, too?'

'I think that'll be the case once he knows who and what we are. We're foresters, man. You're lying about on our grass, so be our guest, and—the word's been said—our pal.'

'The ball's in your court,' Martin added.

'What's your name, pal?' the eerie stranger said without opening his eyes.

'I'm Martin.'

The guy opened his eyes and said tremulously:  
'Martin and Samuel... you can't imagine how glad I am to see you.'

## Chapter Two

### Catalepsy

The breeze wafted in through the sash of Daniel's room, swept across his face as a facile wave, touched his lids and lifted them as if in passing, by chance, letting in light.

'A classy dream!' said Daniel when he opened his eyes and grasped that what he had seen a second, a minute or an hour before and what had been happening to him a second, minute or hour before was a dream, a classy dream unreal in its reality and its lucidity. What were they called? That old man... a humpback? What a dream to have—a humpbacked old man! How did he land in my head? What's his name? Ah yes, Malam. Malam of all that's wonderful. Like a Malam in my head. How would one account for all that? No way... except it's a word circle. Curiouser and curiouser. Wherefrom would they emerge... ? Now, that guy... where was he taking Matthew and me? Led on and on. Hmm, I was there with Matthew. I'll tell him one of these days... Semimes... Semimes, Malam's son... It was at the tip of my tongue, like half of something... Who else was there? I've just seen them... The fireplace! Us sitting by the fireplace. Who's everybody... ? I don't remember anyone else... Who did I think of just now? Who, who? I meant to remember who was by the fireside and suddenly thought of someone, the thought coming of its own accord, flashing quite close by. A recollection flashing by. Like a presence nearby... That's it, gotcha! I fell in love with her, was mad about her. Her name was... I can't recall, of all that's wonderful! Her face... (Daniel shut and opened his eyes again—only to recoil.) Here it is... right in front of me. She's thinking about me. She's wondering why I forsook her. She doesn't know it's a dream and she's part of my dream. What's her name? The face is there but what about the name? No name... Gone. (Daniel closed and opened his eyes again.) Okay, I might see you on the street and ask your name. And I'd know it's you... That's where I saw her, on the street in my dream. What street? What was the place? Some unfamiliar town... And orange houses! Round orange houses! But I saw it all... saw it for real! Where was it? That's right, in the picture! In the picture of that artist—Felix Thornton! Yesterday, in the gallery. Felix Thornton. That's where all these visions come from. Felix Thornton... Christine was to call me, it suddenly dawned on Daniel. She promised. She said she'd go to the gallery... I'll call her.

Daniel glanced at the digital clock on a bookcase shelf... and was stunned. It was not the glowing hours and minutes that had given him a shock.

'Can I have slept for a whole month? I must be raving!'

Daniel jumped out of his bed and booted up the computer... Having made sure he had indeed been away from the real world too long—too long for an honest-to-goodness guy, he snatched the receiver to hear the honest-to-

goodness voice of the honest-to-goodness person he had talked to, like, the day before... The answering machine took over in Christine's mother's voice:

'Hi. If you're calling Christine, keep in mind that she's traveling far from home and is expected back early in September.'

An hour later, Daniel was crossing the threshold of a café with the improbable name—The Last Chance. It had an improbable ring at first glance only, for it was across the way from a high school and was there to give the wretches there a good chance to, as it were, sugar the pill of nerve-rendering lack of freedom and frustration with things that were keen on chance. It was members of this estate that whetted their wits on that frivolous shingle, but, having got a taste of a different shingle, did not hesitate to drop their superciliousness and frequent The Last Chance.

Daniel found it increasingly difficult to keep his own company after resurrection from the catalepsy, and he resorted to the tried and only way of escaping himself... Judging by the response of his old cell-phone (he must have mislaid his new one), Christine, who invariably tended to his aches, was indeed out of reach until early September. Mat? he thought. What a pity you aren't available, feather: you'd at least dispel my... (Daniel substituted another, more innocuous, word for the one that was very much to the point but spelled disgrace—he had Googled four items on near-death experiences)... you'd dispel my apprehensions about the precious and precarious 3-D construct around me. But Matthew was unavailable, and his best chance was running into a familiar face...

Daniel flung the door open—the starkly bright sun dazzled him and made him pause: confronting him were faces... two faces in this purblind bleary space swept by the waves of blond strands, enlightened, with eyes that spelled benignity.

'Sufus and Safasy!' Daniel mouthed. 'Sufus and Safasy,' his consciousness chimed in recalling something... recalling only to lose it the next moment.

Sufus and Safasy smiled in response and vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

'A classy dream,' Daniel comforted himself and hastened to resign himself to the habitual course.

Daniel sipped his cappuccino thinking that he might sit like this for an eternity eyeing these honest-to-goodness people who were keen on chance. The people and the cappuccino and the appetizing smells his nose was so keen on seemed to be saying: 'You're back, cove, so you're still the same old Dan who's put in seven hours of sleep (rather than a month), been to school every day, to finally find yourself at one of these tables.'

'That you, Bertridge?' Someone touched his shoulder with the words and made him look back. 'Sure, it's you. Hi, buddy.'

'Eddie! You're just the man!' Daniel was overjoyed.

'Do you mind? How are you? Shoot. It's a year since we met last, Bertridge. Now we're in The Last Chance, it looks like we haven't left and there wasn't that long year in between. Bugger all, eh? Isn't that the way you feel?'

'Sure, Eddie: bugger all...'

'What gives?'

' . . . Nothing much. (Daniel had suddenly discovered he had nothing to say: the frigging dream had proved stronger than the reality he had lived theretofore, and eclipsed it to the point of obscurity).

"Nothing much" calls for a hard drink rather than coffee. What's wrong? You look bleary-eyed...'

Daniel hesitated, shrugged and said nothing.

'Out with it, buddy. You can't fool me: I'm a third-generation psychiatrist,' Eddie tried to liven up his schoolmate, aware that Daniel was at odds both with himself and his silence. 'That's my idea of bragging.'

'Got your scholarship?'

'You bet. I've been at it for a year doing the frigging thing.'

'You're a godsend, Eddie Zelman.'

'Am I, now? Hmm, at your service, buddy... What makes you hesitate? I can see you're dying to spill your guts. Do: this is just the place.'

'I've slept for a year. Lived for a year in my dream without waking up. It's catalepsy, isn't it?'

Eddie smirked.

'Joking, aren't you: me a psychiatrist, you a loony?'

'I fell asleep a month ago and woke up only today. It's up to you to decide whether I'm a loony or not.'

'Do you mean it? Went to sleep and never woke up, not even for a pee? Let me give you a look...'

'What do you say, third-generation psychiatrist?'

'What do I say? Come to see me in, say, six years. I'm out of my depth at the moment. That's what I say.'

Daniel looked aside: no offence taken, but something in him did feel hurt—because of his own weakness, rather than because of what Eddie had said.

'I say, Dan! Da-an? Eddie Zelman here. Have you forgotten I'm a godsend? I thought you were telling me to bugger off. What was that you saw out the window?'

'I saw my embarrassment: imposing on you...'

'Wait! You're doing right. If I were you I, too, would shit in my pants and take my trouble to Zelman Sr. You do right imposing on me: I'll be addressing your problem right now.'

Eddie produced his mobile from his jeans pocket and started scrolling the screen with his forefinger.

'Wait, Eddie, what's on your mind?'

'Just a mo, buddy. It's my turn to worm myself... Hi, Pops. It's me. There's a problem sitting next to me, just up your street... I'm in a café but that's beside the point. The upshot is: my classmate, Danny Bertridge... Good, so you remember him... Danny has slept for a month... Slept in every sense of the word: went to bed a month ago and woke up today... No, he's not pulling my leg. He's afraid it was catalepsy, and he doesn't know what's in store for him... Good, Pops.'

'I'm embarrassed shitless, Eddie.'

'Danny, that's what we're in the business for. What would we do without you, loonies?' Eddie parried (it was clear he was enjoying every bit of it).

'Well?'

'I'll call back Zelman Sr in five minutes. Well, what's your trouble? Just get me posted.'

'Zelman Jr's question to his first patient?'

'A question from one patient of a dearly loved greasy spoon to another patient of just as loved a greasy spoon.'

'Okay. I think Felix Thornton's at the bottom of it all.'

'Do I know him? Wait a bit... I know: he's an artist. Mom was at his picture exhibition a month ago exactly. She's a sucker for all sorts of schizo artists. You know what her treatise is called? Schizophrenia and Artistic Trends. Whatever possessed you to go?'

'I don't know... Just dropped by. Must be fate. I was still there inside those pictures when I left. You know the rest.'

'I say!'

'In my dream I lived in a town. Everything happened as if for real. The town's in one of Thornton's pictures. What if I wake up here today and show up there in a month's time? It would be anyone's guess which is reality and which is a dream.'

'D'you remember everything well... in your dream?'

'Not exactly. I remember something very well. Some people's faces are there alive in front of my eyes. I remember some names... Something's gone... You see: the visual images are gone but some perceptions are still there: you remember them and you don't.'

'Cool. I'm calling Pop immediately,' said Eddie pedaling his words down with a jocular tone. 'It's me, Pops... Speak, I'll pass it on. He sure can: I'll take him there. Thanks, Pop. See you.'

'Where're you taking me?'

'To a cool cove. I know him: he's been to see my father.'

'A colleague?'

'You bet. Come, we've got to make haste: father said he'll see you right away. Consider yourself privileged: you'll dump your glitches on Job Cohan.'

\* \* \*

'Give your rue to fire,' flashed across Daniel's head as if someone had screeched the words in him when Job Cohan stepped forward to meet him. There was fire in his mop of hair (fiery-red, it sent the ambient light packing), in his eyes (the fire inside seemed to bathe their blackness with the flames warning that it was hot enough to singe), and in him (no man can so visibly, perceptibly ooze energy the moment you see the first footsteps, the first gestures unless there is fire inside). He came up to Daniel, held out his hand (forty, stocky, with a broad forehead and a raven beak) and said, with Daniel's hand still in his:

'I want to hear from the horse's mouth how you've managed to sleep a whole month, young man,' he pronounced the sounds as if it was not his tongue, but a shovel scraping at gravel that was popping along. 'Job Cohan at your service for an hour.'

'Much obliged. Daniel Bertridg.'

'Take a seat, Daniel,' Cohan motioned toward the beige leather chair. 'Or else pace the room if that makes you feel better. I must ask you to answer my questions spontaneously and matter-of-factly. I'm listening.'

Despite the obvious advantages of 'talking as we walk,' Daniel sank into the chair. Cohan took the one facing it.

'You know, doctor, when I woke up, it never occurred to me to count the hours I'd slept. I woke up and said to myself, "It was a classy dream." And then I glanced at the clock and realized I'd been asleep for a month. I couldn't fill the month with real events no matter how I tried: they just weren't there. So here I am, even though I hadn't considered seeing a shrink in my wildest dreams. The Last Chance's to blame.'

'Very good. Are you on drugs?' The shovel was at the gravel again.

'What was that?'

'I want a spontaneous answer, not a question or conjecture. Drugs...'

'No, I've never had any.'

'Very good. Glue-sniffing?'

'No, perish the thought.'

'Oh, they do sniff: they think it cool and they do. Were you stressed the day or two before? Dismay, compunctions?'

'You might call it a stressful situation: a month ago I went to an exhibition of pictures by Felix Thornton. It was them... You see, doctor, there's something in his work—at the subconscious level—that I could feel inside me... Or should I say I'd captured a link between myself and what was in the pictures. I felt without grasping it. It wouldn't let me go. I thirsted to grasp... and you may think it all rot, but I thirsted not to be at the gallery but inside those pictures, in the world of Thornton's pictures, and the thirst wouldn't let me go... I spent the next day in the gallery scrutinizing them. It quite exhausted me. So that I took a sleeping draft before I went to bed (I've just remembered).'

'What draft, do you remember?'

'No, but I read the instructions before I took it. It said: one to two pills before sleep. I took three as far as I remember. Could it be... ?'

'Let me have your hand... Good. Do twenty sit-ups.'

Daniel got up and started doing the sit-ups.

'That'll do. Your hand... Do some more, briskly this time... Enough. Your hand, please... Very good.'

'Meaning good or well-done?'

'Well-done! Both. That means you last took food a month ago before this morning?'

'Looks like it.'

'Was there anyone to look after you while you were asleep?'

'No, I'm on my own now. My parents are archeologists staying away from home for long, if the word "home" applies.'

'Were you perceptive of your room when you slept?'

'I perceived what I dreamt.'

'A lot of fat burnt off?'



'Come again?'

'Did you slim a lot in the course of the month?'

'I don't think I've slimmed.'

'Do you feel giddy in the morning? Did you, today?'

'No, but...' Daniel hesitated.

'But what? Please, answer me as per our arrangement.'

'I see pictures in my mind's eye, from my dream. Faces, objects. You've asked me about the room, and I thought I'd remembered a room from my dream, a room in the house I lived in my dream. A momentary impression rather than a picture... a remembrance of something real. But there was no such room in my life.'

'Very good. That was very apt. Now we'll get into you dream.'

Daniel looked questioningly at Cohan.

'A brief session of hypnosis. We're both interested in one, aren't we?'

'I don't know: I haven't considered it. But if it's any use...'

'Will you get up, please? Raise you right leg, will you?'

'Raise how?'

'Bent at the knee. Now your left one. Once more your right and your left. Are they hard to lift? Lead-loaded?'

'No, that was okay.'

'Very good, Daniel. Sit down at the table and fill out this form—your consent to a session.'

. . . Cohan looked through the paper signed by Daniel.

'Very good. Put on these on top of your shoes,' he motioned toward the box of booties next to the door. 'Now come to this room.'

Cohan was the first to enter and flipped a switch—the room was filled with lilac twilight. Daniel was startled as he remembered something.

'It may be important, doctor...'

'Speak without hesitation.'

'The sky in my dream was violet.'

'Very good, it's very important. I'll supply that in my hypnotic set. Sit in that chair. (There was nothing but a chair with a sloping back in that room—no windows.) Recline and relax with your feet on the footrest. Relax: you must feel comfortable.'

'I'm quite comfortable in this cozy chair.'

'Okay, we'll begin. I'll switch on what I call a snake. Pray: concentrate on it and my words. And no foolish or smart-aleck questions.'

As soon as Cohan said it, a turquoise light snake appeared a foot in front of Daniel's eyes in the lilac space. It was suspended vertically, its light was not monochrome or still: a soft turquoise flowing gently and producing the impression of the snake continually wriggling...

A minute later, Cohan began speaking in undertones and not so pushfully as before. Daniel listened intently to the sounds which were strung together into trains of words. He listened and listened. There was some power in those sounds and words, something that drew him. He felt like following and divining them. Strangely enough, he could not make out a single word, could make no sense of

what Cohan was saying. But the turquoise snake and the undeciphered words lured and led Daniel on... taking him further and further. Where... ? Perchance, into the lilac distance where some mystery would be solved. What mystery? Daniel was looking and listening... look-stening and look-stening...

. . . Tapping intruded on his sleep, slight and frequent. It was unending, seemingly loaded with anxiety. Daniel suddenly realized they were coming from the outside, they had nothing to do with his sleep and, surprised at the idea, he woke up... They were tapping on the window frame. He sat up. Darkness had not yet subsided hiding whoever had introduced anxiety into the serenity of the night. Daniel thought it was an appeal that someone wanted to remain secret. "Leoely," crossed his head. He got up, pulled on his jeans and neared the window. The tapping stopped, and a minute later, someone's hand beckoned him and somebody's barely audible voice called him:

'Danad, Danad.'

'Leoely,' Daniel whispered and opened the window—lilac semi-darkness opened up...

'Very good.' (Daniel started). 'Wake up, wake up,' the voice suddenly became familiar.

Cohan would not torture Daniel with questions at once. He had him seated in the beige chair and pressed a cup of coffee on him. He had one, too.

'Well, we seem to have quite come to. Let's go on searching for the truth.'

Daniel fancied Cohan's intonation had somehow altered. Perhaps, in the course of the session he had learnt facts that had made him lean toward his strange patient and relent.

'I wish we could find it.'

'Do you remember anything of our communication during the session, any of my questions or your answers?'

Daniel considered it and could only think back to the beginning—the luminous snake and the doctor's cunning gobbledygook.

'Nothing at all. Did I tell anything of interest?'

'Pretty curious things, Daniel. In a minute, I'll give you a few names that you fished out of your memory with ease. I assume with a weighted degree of probability that the events associated with those names took place shortly before your mysterious dream. But I'll anticipate that with a few questions. The rules are the same: question—answer unburdened with fancy.'

'I've learned that lesson, doctor.'

'Very good.' (Someone must have turned a key in Cohan to put him in a different mode of operation). 'Are you writing a novel?'

'What?' Daniel was nonplussed.

'So you've learned it, haven't you?'

'Sorry, doctor. The answer is no, I'm not.'

'Do you go in for computer games? Aren't you hung up on the wish to move to one of them... or, rather, weren't you hung up on it as a fixed idea before you visited the gallery?'

What was it I told him? Daniel thought and smirked.

'It was a long time ago, but thinking back, I'd frankly say: No, no such hangups.'

'Very good, I thought as much,' Cohan said conversationally, only to add in a counter-intuitive manner, as if to catch him in the act:

'Are you Danad?'

Daniel was confused indeed, and it made him pause. He did recall he was Danad, but looked for the answer (basically, for himself) as to where it was from: Why Danad... ? Cohan did not urge him on: he was sure Daniel was not weighting his answer; he was merely looking for one.

'I only know I'm not Danad in this life,' he said at last.

'Is there a different one?'

This question nonplussed him, too. Cohan patiently waited.

'I think it's in my dream. I was called that in my dream, as far as I can remember... It's just glimpses: now it's there, now it's gone.'

'That was an apt remark.'

'An apt remark?'

'Your "as far as I can remember." Let's proceed. Did you make straight for home after the gallery, or did you stop by a bar, to relax?'

'Hmm, that's right: I did stop by a bar. I've told you what was going on that day. I couldn't think straight. I was all at sixes and sevens; I dropped by a bar. I don't remember which, frankly speaking.'

'Very good. Now the names, just as I promised. You merely comment in brief: what I need is a primary association. There goes: Christine.'

'That's easy. You might say she's my pal in life. We go way back: school and college together.'

'Matthew, I dare say, is another lifelong pal?'

'Good guess: he's my best friend: we go back a long way—way back to the swing on my grandparents' lawn.'

'Very good. Leoely.'

'Leoely?' There was a quiet delight in Daniel's eyes and in the way he uttered the word. 'That's the name I meant to recall when I woke up this morning. But couldn't. It's the name of my girlfriend from the dream.'

'Perhaps, not just from the dream, Daniel? Perhaps, you met her at the bar? That night after the gallery?'

'Not that I remember,' said Daniel, only to think: That would be great. And said out loud, 'She's the girl from my dream.'

'Are you sure she didn't get teleported from the bar to your dream?'

'I don't think so.'

'Does this name say anything to you: Falafy?'

'My granny,' said Daniel without thinking.

'The one that has your and Matthew's swing on her lawn?'

Daniel hastened to make amends (as he had come to his senses):

'I didn't mean that, doctor. Not quite: Falafy is my granny from the catalepsy.'

'What about real life?'

'My real granny's name is Margaret. You probably thought I had a split personality: Daniel and Danad, Margaret and Falafy.'

'Malam, Semimes, Groyorg. Do you know these people?'

'Malam was my host. Semimes is his son. Groyorg was also staying with them. We were by the fireside.'

'And all of them are characters in your dream?'

Daniel did not say anything: he, too, thought it weird. And he was sorry he had come here to... ask to be certified.

'Moron,' he said through clenched teeth (somehow he wanted Cohan to hear that self-assessment).

'Very good!' hollered Cohan (but quite amicably). 'You call into question what brought you here in the first place, to wit: the idea that you had been in catalepsy for the past month.'

'Isn't that the case, doctor?'

'I'm sure it isn't. Let's advance from the simple to the complex. You're physically quite fit: your muscle tone is fine, your heart rate is that of an astronaut. I'd sooner believe that you've been scaling mountains or white-water rafting, rather than spending a month as a dead man. Your psyche, though, has been affected by one of those people with cyclic names, among whom you were known as Danad. Leely, I think, played the part of bait of her own free will or through coercion in this shady story (and did well, parenthetically). This whole story is all about being in the right place at the right time, to wit: in a bar, when the girl in question was refreshing herself. It's like your unplanned visit to Doctor Cohan: the dread of uncertainty took you to The Last Chance, where Eddie Zelman picked you up; you spilt the beans to him—how couldn't you?—and found yourself here. But back to business. Who could benefit by it, you might ask. It looks like some community. Look: standard orange dwellings round in shape (I inferred as much from the session). It could be a sect. Look: palindromes—cyclic names that read either way, suggestive of eternity and infinity—the ideas of unearthly eternal living. It could be a shared interest drew them together, notably of the mercantile kind, I dare say. Actually, ideas, whether mystical or religious, are a tool to dupe or cover up. Apropos of your dream: I won't talk nonsense of a past or future life—we'll leave that to the charlatans. You dreamed what had been associated this way or that with your actual life over the past month. One question—quite grave—remains: why don't you remember? There was likely a conflict between you and the guys of the sect. What led to it? Any number of things. For instance, Leely could've been the contention. No substances are involved, as far as I can judge. Otherwise, you could've forgotten who you are. There would be nothing left of you: no name, no address, no mom or dad, no Christine—nothing but the desire to eat. Yours is a minor case: you've been blocked by suggestion, the suggestion being uncommonly powerful, I could feel. As the result, you're closed to yourself. Danad's closed off to Daniel. I had a similar case in my practice. I must admit I never opened it up, and the lady patient had to come to terms with the blanks in her memory. She wouldn't be committed to the clinic where the success rate is fifty-fifty: I'd told her as much. Besides, all those lab tests and things—instrumentation... a life in its own right—

are mostly for the science, not the patient, him still locked in the cycle and its side-effects which are as many as ever, to say the least. I'm talking as a friend of you friend's father. Would you like to be committed?

Daniel smirked.

'No, thank you, doctor.'

'Get a life, man!' Cohan was nearly hollering. 'Life goes on. If you remember, so much the better. If you don't... Well, let us not estimate this eventuality. My advice is—or, rather, not mine but my mentor's (I won't take his name in vain: it'll mean nothing to you)... My advice is: look for the beginning, for the secret door in the wall... Are you all right?' Cohan could see his last words had hooked Daniel: what little had flared up in his soul had been reflected in his eyes and the suppressed impulse to say something. The doctor's anxiety spurred Daniel on.

'It really happened. I could feel it had. It's in my brain, somewhere close by, in some past but very perceptible life.'

'What exactly?'

'The secret door. Perhaps, not the words but the idea behind them... There was a door, a padlocked door. No, it isn't that. But it's close by, doctor. There's something I can't grasp, but it's close by.'

'Very good. It's close by but you can't grasp it. Very good: that's what I'm talking about, or, rather, not me but my teacher. Find the beginning. It's somewhere near. It can be anything: an object (for instance, a picture from the collection of the artist that has enchanted you), a place, that is the bit of space where you can find your soul's impulse you've lost; it can be an event—anything. The beginning is what holds the emotional upheaval. In the end, it could prove to be a word. Look: the way you've reacted to the word I said—it gave you gooseflesh. Look for the beginning—and you'll unravel the chain.'

'I got you, doctor. I'll be looking.'

'And another thing. When you wake up try to remember as much as you can of your dream, as many specific details as you can.'

'I've done it today.'

'Very good. Sudden immersion in reverie (it happens) may result in faints. Don't be scared: it's all right, for animated explicit recollections would divest you of reality... It's still a beginning. Any questions? Perhaps, those you laid by? Try to remember.'

'Yes, I have one. In the course of the session, did you grasp when I fell asleep?'

'Oh, sorry! I left out the most important thing for you. I stand corrected: yesterday.'

'Yesterday?' Daniel echoed in surprise (no catalepsy was one thing, but yesterday quite another!)

'Yesterday,' Cohan repeated leaving no doubt as to his accuracy if only by his manner alone. 'To all appearances, someone gave you a lift home. If I got the sense of what you said right, you hitchhiked. You found the place unfamiliar (I twice tried you with pointed questions). You gave your address several times, obviously to the driver.'

'Search me.'

'But much of what I wanted to know wasn't disclosed. For instance, how you got to that road. More questions, Daniel?'

'I don't think so. Yes, your fee?'

'Here's my business card, call me. Should Leoely or one of those guys turn up, I think you'd better call the police: they've robbed you of your memory. As to my fee, see my assistant—you've met her. Well, Daniel, all the best to you,' Cohan said smiling goodbye and holding out his hand.

## Chapter Three

### What's That?

There was no one in the house. Daniel decided to have a walk and look for the place while he was at it—it was time he did it. Give it another day—it could be seen it was pleased with the company—and go back. He went out on to the porch and jogged feeling the air wave sweeping over his face just as his soul was being pepped up with hope. Jogging warmed up his feeling and thought. Both were far away. This 'far away' began somewhere here. He was about to find out where... Some four hundred yards from the house, Daniel stopped, raised his hand and unclasped it. The fleeting shadow troubled the light next to his attenuated silhouette on the ground as it caught him up—a sudden pain and a sudden darkness.

'So long as I don't lose it, so long as I don't lose it,' Daniel murmured as he emerged from the darkness of his dream into the semi-darkness of the room. 'So long as I don't lose it...'

The never-ending gravel had been rolling around in Daniel's brain. 'Look for the beginning, for the secret door... find the beginning, it's somewhere close by... look for the bit of space... look for the beginning, and you'll unravel the chain...' Daniel roamed the streets looking for something. What for? The Eifmann gallery without Thornton's 'inside views' proved to be just another gallery, a picturesque view from the inside and nothing else. He looked inside bars and asked for Leoely. The very first produced right away a girl with a name that had a similar ring—Lolly, and it gave him inspiration for some reason. Probably because it was just a letter short, even though the letter should have occurred twice in it, but still one letter, and it was sure to be found in another bar. But then two barmen two blocks apart shrugged their shoulders in empathy, as if they were not two blocks apart and played it out. The inspiration was gone. By the beginning of night three, the yield was small: on top of Lolly, there were just a Lilly and a Leila at his disposal. The Last Chance, long though Daniel had waited for his finest hour, did not give forth any of his past dates, one that would recall something of his past life, rather than pestering him with a 'beginning.'

'To hell with it all!' Daniel swore as he plunged impotently down on his bed. 'I don't give a damn for the month of catalepsy! I'll wake up tomorrow and start a new life.'

The nimble fingers followed an algorithm they knew by rote, flicked switches... opened... fed parameters... and paused for a moment—to start in a jiffy to implement what was in the convulsive words: ‘So long as I don’t lose...’

First the contour... There. A bit smaller... Good, the contour is there. Highlighting next: color is of the essence... No, that’s wrong, take your time. Should I delete the contour? No, that’ll wait, highlight first. No, that’ll never do, highlighting with one color, then another—there’ll be nothing left of the image. So long as I don’t lose it. Try the bold strokes in the field—the eye will know. You’ll know it as soon as it’s there. There, blots, blots all over... Here it is! Highlight it, quick! There! Good... or... No, there’s something wanting. No interplay. Where would it come from? Try another tack. You’ll have disparate tints first... Another bit of green... This is too dark, I think. Not green—greenish. That’s better. And the interplay... Now for the volume... Looks good... Something missing... Or, rather, interfering. The contour’s in the way! The contour’s to go! Delete. Just the thing. Do you recognize... ? Do you? Tell no lies. And think, think... What... ? Wanting again? It’s a lookalike. What’s wrong? Think, Dan, think. There! You’re right—it’s nowhere. It’s hung up in nowhere. Ask yourself the way you’re about to ask the world: What’s this? Like, a cul-de-sac. Go on, search! What’s this... ? Where is it... ? What size... ? It’s anything, hence nothing. But you need the answer. You’ll never get it like this. Because it’s nothing, nothing or anything. (Daniel closed his eyes and tried to imagine who it looked like in his dream... and he did.) There! You’ve separated your brainchild from reality, from your own hand. Now I’ll create a hand and join them, and life will result... Let it be my left hand. I’ll use the right one to create, looking at my left. Like this... the pinky. The pinky to the fore. A bit bent. Like this. The other digits aren’t there to be seen in their entirety—the ring finger least of all. The forefinger’s to be seen best of all. The thumb’s a bit apart... pointing into the distance not that far away... The palm’s boat-like... Let’s see what we’ve got. Do you think it’s a hand? More like an octopus parched by the sun. No octopus is fool enough to lie in the sun. A five like this is a disgrace in the eyes of the world. I’d better find a ready-made one and blend it into the picture... Doesn’t look too bad. The hand suggests the size. Good... because it’s real. Lost in thought, aren’t you? Something wanting again? You perfectionist, you... Day’s breaking. How long have I been at it? Three hours, no less. What did you think about? What did you think of just now? Thought the night wasn’t enough? Thanks for the suggestion. Night’s too short... with highlighting. Nothing simpler: highlighting against a black background...

An hour later, the captioned sketch was ready to be posted on the internet. The caption read: Whoever knows what this is, contact: dan.betro@gmail.com. Daniel.

\* \* \*

To speed up the appointed time (six pm) or, in other words, to compact every second thus making tick-tocks into ticks or tocks, Daniel decided to turn over a new leaf or, rather, it turned over on its own after the unforeseen adrenalin surge the night before, followed by a huge cup of strong coffee, he felt like an ‘optimistic boy’ (that was what he mentally referred to himself as) and set

about to get this optimistic option done. He began by urging 'Cybil' (the nickname given to his pot-bellied vacuum cleaner) to suck up the 'space dust' (as Danby Bushtunts put it) accumulated over the months in his room, and in the living room while he was at it, just in case somebody chose to bring him an animated bit of his night vision on a salver. He then filled the starving fridge with cartons and cans from the supermarket nearby: he would soon have to be glued to his monitor for good and all. The optimistic boy then made for The Last Chance where he had a couple of appetizing creamy éclairs in good earnest and then put in a couple of hours appetizingly (in spirit) watching the creations of young expressionists and mentally adapting his *Octopus Parched in the Sun* to them.

Six o'clock at last! Daniel sat down in front of the computer with the air of a victor. His fingers habitually touched the keys—the optimistic boy in him started: he had sensed in his gut what was in store for him in the very near future whose distance was a matter of moments—a vacuum, he had sensed a vacuum... and said to himself:

'Goodbye, optimistic boy: I've no need of you any longer.'

Daniel looked in his inbox—nothing, a nothingness even more perceptible than he had sensed the moment before, there where the digit—sought-for or unexpected—should have been, nay, should have leaped to his eye. He made such short shrift of the nothingness that the chair under him went clattering down to the floor. Distaste replaced nothingness. It was in everything... in everything that he had only just compacted every second into a tick or tock, enjoying his naively cheeky message to mankind in the commonplace clean-up to a whistled tune, in the smugly cloying éclairs, in the false splashes on the lake of expression on a full stomach at Eifmann's, and in the very optimistic boy that he had turned into as he was sold on a new life in compacted seconds.

Three hours later, in the inbox—nothing. No emotions, either, just a white cul-de-sac... on the ceiling overhead...

Another three hours later, Daniel told himself:

'If it's another zilch I'll join the marines—and to hell with it all...'

He gifted the wait a few more seconds (because everyone expects good luck in his heart of hearts whatever he says to the contrary)... and the inbox (4). His heart raced. Daniel opened the first message.

'Hi, Dan. I knew it was my hand right away. There's a drop of my love in it. I'm all for a date. Are you?'

A month earlier, Daniel wouldn't have cast a slur of silence. This time he deleted it immediately without giving it the chance of a thought, whether grave or facetious. He opened a second message.

'I think it's your attitude to the planet you live on.'

One more for the bin, with no cover text. The third message (its second part) made Daniel smile.

'Sugared slobber. You'd better join the marines.'

He was opening the last message with no regrets for it being last: he was sure the idea worked, and it was just a matter of waiting. It's like having a ball, waiting, he thought and read:



'Daniel, no offence meant, but what did you do with the messages you've read? Andrew.'

Daniel had not yet got down to the logic of the words, the hidden logic that was sure to be there when he felt it was just a beginning. And tapped in: 'I deleted them.'

A minute later, another Andrew message: 'Have you seen what you sketched or is it a figment of your imagination? If it's the latter, don't bother to answer.'

Daniel tried to extricate himself out of the ambiguous situation he was in with: 'It's no figment: I've seen it but...'

'Daniel, I think we could be of use to each other and find a way of circumventing our "buts." Until tomorrow.'

Daniel reread the Andrew messages and his own. And went to bed happy with the question 'What's that?' both in reference to his sketch and his new acquaintance.

There were two messages waiting for him the next morning. One had been sent at two in the morning. Daniel neither deleted nor answered it—he laid it by: it had struck him as strange and appealing to his empathy. The second message was from Andrew: 'Morning, Daniel. Two more important questions, by your leave (I overlooked them yesterday): How old are you, and are the exact sciences a priority in your activities?'

Daniel smirked as he remembered Cohan's: 'a shared interest, notably of the mercantile kind,' and tapped in: 'Morning, Andrew. Going on for 20. Student, nothing but humanities.' He very nearly sent it, but thought it a bit dry on that fine morning, and added: 'Exact sciences are double Dutch to me, as distinct from my (late) grandfather. I doubt everything.'

Andrew's message arrived at seven pm: 'Exact sciences set a greater store by doubt than humanities. What was your grandfather, by the way?'

Daniel answered: 'Astrophysicist. Name of Danby Bushtunts.'

Andrew's message came back immediately: 'Glad to get acquainted with a man whose work I've studied and highly appreciate. I'm coming to see you tomorrow if you don't mind. Punch in your address and phone number.'

At midnight Daniel deleted five new messages and resumed the strange one he had laid by:

'Hi. I'm James Hogstein. I'm 16. I can't answer your question. But I looked at the picture and thought it had something we haven't got around us. It's not so much the sketch as the thing in your hand. It's left something in you I can feel. You may not be aware of it, but, believe me, it has. It's all nonsense that everything does: such things leave an imprint that harbors mighty potency. That was my first impression of the sketch. I'm very sensitive to the first wave I'm swept by. I'll tell you about myself if you don't mind.'

'Do, James,' Daniel tapped in. And read next morning:

'Thanks, Dan. Here's what I meant to say and still do. There are many instances of things animate and inanimate all around us that make us scared. There're instances of fear you can't allay (I primarily mean what I've experienced). The only way out is flight: such that you've fled and will come back

once you feel you can. You can feel the moment, I know. You flee and so does your fear, because what causes it loses sight of you and can't find you any more. It drops the idea as a bad job for a time or for good. If you thought I'm crazy, don't write to me any more. But know: I've learned how to flee, and I can vanish. I had to tell this to someone.'

'I'll write later on,' Daniel emailed when he recalled he had vanished for a whole month, too. 'I don't know when but I will.'

\* \* \*

Daniel was walking at the entrance to a garden across the way from the two-story building that housed the Eifmann gallery. Andrew had called an hour before to say he would rather meet and talk in the open after his three hours' flight. Daniel's choice of place was no accident: that was where the catalepsy episode began.

A taxi stopped nearby. A tall, skinny man of thirty-forty emerged and looked around. Daniel guessed it was Andrew and waved to him when their eyes met. Andrew responded with a broad grin, came up with benignity of his countenance and held out his hand.

'I've written and called you today. Andrew Flickbow. You're Daniel, aren't you?'

'Daniel Bertridge, the same, the one that wondered what he had on his palm.'

Andrew grinned.

'Well, the formal identities have been established. Now let's walk. I adore such tree-lined paths, long, spacious and full of oxygen—quite a strip for thought to take-off and land. True, I rarely indulge in such luxury,' he was talking gently but fast. His grey eyes spelled confidence with a slight tinge of facetiousness and bullying aided by his turned-up nose that drew up the upper lip. 'We've got to begin with someone or something to broach the subject. Are you prepared to divulge your secrets?'

'I don't know, they're not so much secrets as eerie circumstances which hold more riddles than solutions.'

'I can quite understand. The very question "What's this?" proposes a priory information quest. However, for your information, circumstances are also crammed with information, secret as often as not. Okay, let's begin with me: I'd foreseen a configuration like this. We'd better go as far as the end of this path in silent reverie, make a one-hundred-eighty degree turn and get down to it.'

They slowly walked for a few minutes without talking. It occurred to Daniel that all of it was weird ('all of it' being indefinite and having to do not only with Andrew or his conjectures—on the contrary, they were blurred and incomprehensible).

'For you to get an idea why I dashed off and got a flight to meet you all because of a picture on the web, I'll try to go back twelve years,' Andrew began. 'I was fourteen at the time. I and my friend Leo Carper went to the Grizzly Rocks,' Andrew hesitated as he stumbled on a thought, then continued: 'I should have put it a different way, so I correct the error. Leo should have come first: of

the two of us, he was the major figure, as it were. Daredevil is about him. Ringleader and photographer par excellence,' the storyteller paused and could not go on for a few minutes as he rode out his overwhelming feelings. 'I thought back to his face: it hasn't changed for it remained there in those times... Leo had long planned to take pictures in the Grizzly Rocks caves, but the grownups would have nothing of that, saying it was a continuous labyrinth with no exit. Indians were reported to have a finger in the pie, unwilling to leave their turf. But there was no stopping Leo with reasonable arguments once he had made up his mind to take those snaps. What he needed to say: "To hell with the hurdles," was an excuse. You know, for people like him, there's only one rule: where there's a will, there's a way.' (The words made Daniel wonder if Andrew was not like that, too). 'And the excuse afforded. A strange, I'd say a dreadful, thing happened. Her name was Theresa Brandon. Our beloved natural science teacher and school picnics and hikes organizer. She had probably meant to wipe out the contradiction between the kids' glances toward the Grizzly Rocks and the grownups' obstinacy. She had considered it and gone, all alone, intent on working out a route and taking the kids there... Two weeks later some rangers found her on a ledge. She sat there stock-still unresponsive to the world. Whoever had seen her reported that her aspect had quite changed... she used to love us all—now her face was petrified, with horror in her eyes. She'd lost the use of her tongue and never said or wrote a word. I visited her at the clinic two years ago—it gave me the creeps. She seemed to still be seeing what she'd run into and what had made her like that. It was no exaggeration: it did give the creeps. I looked her in the eye, and there came to life—for me—those other eyes that had haunted me in the cave. Pardon me, I wetted my pants... I wetted my pants for half a year... I, Andrew Flickbow, always the best in my school, the best shooter from the three-point area, the best runner in the one-mile event. I, too, landed in the loony bin. They did their damndest to extricate me: my father was mayor at the time. They finally did, as you can see... Leo, Leo. He was taking pictures of a cave mouth when a grizzly snuck up on us. We rushed to the passage crying. Leo was tripped up and fell down. It's probably the law of existence; someone falls, someone strikes it lucky, bitter though it sounds. Leo's heart-rending shrieks are imprinted on my mind as a death knell, as fear made me get deeper and deeper. I thought I could hear the grizzly behind me. I sought out aisles too narrow for the beast to go... Everybody thought I'd gone crazy because of the grizzly and because of Leo. I wouldn't... You'll be the first to hear the truth, Daniel. Some time later—it's hard to keep track of time when a yard takes as much energy as a mile—some time later, I found myself in a cave. I flicked on my flashlight (I'd been saving the batteries in my flight, flipping it on and off). What I saw and experienced at the moment is hard to fit a word to. Was it fear? It sure was... But there's fear and fear. Some of our fears are there at genetic level. You may debate it, Daniel, but I'm sure that the fear of getting a bayonet stab in the belly is precisely of that provenance. It had been passed down the generations ever since our ancient forefather first ground a lance head and stabbed another forefather with it. Another example. A baby in its crib with a sinister octopus monster suspended over it by a web, whose very aspect says, "Fear me!" Facing us, or, rather, on the baby's face, is

fear, acquired fear. You'll agree that by the age of fourteen we've been more or less conditioned to those fears, both the first and the second kind. But... In me as in Theresa Brandon, there was no defence mechanism, no defence reflex to be ourselves the moment I saw what I saw. Tell me why, Daniel, please.'

'People don't seem to have encountered what you're speaking about.'

'Exactly. I saw what no human is conditioned to seeing. Seeing it is unnatural for the human eye or his reason. I switched on my flashlight—the stones below and on the walls had blobs of weird, seemingly fleshy, structures. It wasn't as if the stones had grown moss. The moment you saw them, you had no doubt they'd occupied the stones, settled there, that the cave was their lair. There were eyes staring out of them, out of their sockets, staring at me, all of them. Those were not beasts' eyes; they were people's eyes. The eyes of a different species of 'people.' That was the way I perceived them at the time... If a grizzly advances on you, you experience fear. Your mind, your very skin, tells you the grizzly will tear at you... Those eyes were staring at me, and I grasped I wouldn't be there in a jiffy, there'd be nothing left of what we call identity. I had time to realize there was no will left in me. Not even a cry: I couldn't protect myself with a cry. What was left of me was the trembling of a human body at stool. Walking by your side is a person, an identity; it's hard to imagine that what was left of me was the trembling of a body in the process of bowel movement, bereft of the notions it had accumulated in the course of fourteen years. The notions were taking leave of me without resistance like feces. What saved me was what we are used to being afraid of—darkness: the batteries were dead. I don't know, don't remember what happened next. There was just an impression of quaking in my whole body and motion on all fours in pitch darkness. The impression haunted me for a long time returning in nightmares—the crazy motion on all fours in total darkness... What had happened to my consciousness in the cave was there in it; it's what I call dread of the eyes that aren't there. I think with me, with Theresa Brandon, perchance with someone else, humanity has acquired yet another species of fear... You and many others will enter a cave, fearful of claustrophobia or bats. Have you a dread of bats, Daniel?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. I'm afraid of snakes. I hate caves for precisely that reason. I happened to be there as a school kid. I made myself go not to be thought a wimp, each time feeling awful: what if a snake emerged out of a crack? Frankly speaking, I hardly know why: I've never run into snakes in caves. It could be my granny.'

'I'll enter a cave if I have to (if I have to, now) with dread of the eyes that aren't there (oh, I know they are there). And this dread is there to stay... But it isn't as bad as all that. I emerged from the cave with a positive experience to last me a lifetime. It's an experience that amounts to confidence. The upshot is: no matter how solid the walls of the three dimensions are, there's another world with a life of its own and with eyes all its own. It's closer than we believe when observing the universe through a telescope. Which brings us to the object in question, Daniel. A year ago, my colleagues and I clambered about—what do you think?—the Grizzly Rocks. What brought us to the fateful place was the vanishing trajectory or, rather, the simulated extension of that trajectory. Had you told me

yesterday that you're an astronomer, physicist or mathematician, I wouldn't have talked to you, let alone met: what if the priority of the discovery was at stake? But you as a humanitarian and Danby Bushtunts's grandson are entitled to a bit of the secret. What's the vanishing trajectory all about? The answer's in the name—it's the trace in the cosmos left by what we call the impulse of eternity. The impulse is so weak it's impossible to observe, and so high are its physical parameters' values (density, gravitation, velocity) that it absorbs everything on its path, including light—everything vanishes. Hence the name—vanishing trajectory.'

'Sorry to interrupt you, Andrew.'

'You're welcome.'

'I've a question. Are impulses of eternity to do with black holes? Don't they proceed from black holes?'

Andrew smirked.

'It would be convenient to explain impulses of eternity away as a splash from black holes. But such a hypothesis would contradict the scientific knowledge (meager to date, but still) about black holes. When tracking down vanishing trajectories, we've observed that they're cut short... for no good reason, leaving behind no distinguishable effect. I mean the twosome—collision-explosion—that are as thick as thieves. The question arises: what happens to the impulse of eternity? It's yet another fundamental question alongside its fellow—where does it originate? This brings us to the Grizzly Rocks. One of the vanishing trajectories (its calculated extension) suggested that the impulse of eternity which had left behind the trace of vacuum that resulted was to have met with the Earth, with the inevitable catastrophic consequences. The likely rendezvous spot is the Grizzly Rocks area. Look here, Daniel: the impulse of eternity sort of goes out of existence. The evidence is that the trace (the vanishing trajectory) is cut short. There's no collision. What's there to look for? Considering the distance and time, I answer in addition to what I've said: nothing! Or confirmation of the hypothesis I've advanced; hence the trace of the impulse of eternity that's vanished.'

Daniel stared at the storyteller with curiosity. Andrew took notice.

'Yes, Daniel. My colleagues had no reason to scale mountains, for they knew nothing about the cave, while I had never forgotten that experience. The hypothesis in a nutshell. The impulse of eternity doesn't vanish altogether. On its path, it'll probabilistically (call it chance) sooner or later come across a medium (let's call it medium X). Thanks to the qualitative characteristics and parameters of medium X, the impulse of eternity meets another, you could say a parallel world. Medium X is not governed by the laws of 3-D space, so the impulse of eternity is sort of lost: witness the vanishing trajectory being cut short. I supposed that a certain side-product moving on momentum was evolved as the impulse of eternity interacting with medium X. It could emerge on the Earth if we talk about the specific vanishing trajectory I've mentioned, unless it's burned in the atmosphere. It could, in principle, find its way into a parallel world—but this unreal reality is beyond us so far. Fate has given me a present, Daniel: I've found a by-product such as has reached the Earth or (more likely) such as has evolved

over its stay on the Earth. It's an extraordinary bead, same as you put on your palm in the sketch through no accident, I believe.'

'Have you got it on you?' cried Daniel.

'What are you talking about, Daniel? It's in the lab and nowhere else, and access to it is rather restricted. The research and its results are classified, but that's by the way. Our precious bead isn't all that keen on disclosing its secrets. I can quite understand that you're eager to learn something.'

'Andrew,' Daniel interrupted, 'sorry, but you don't. I'll tell my story as soon as you've said all you want or are allowed to say.'

'Okay, you've spurred me on, Daniel. I'll tell you two things. One is of a general nature; the other is more like childishly probing a fascinating object. Our bead is doubtlessly of alien origin and won't come to terms with three dimensions, to all appearances. Look. I mean, look here. Imagine that I'm holding it in this, my left, hand while touching it with my right, thus testing it for strength, as it were. I experimented with it like this while still at the Grizzly Rocks as soon as I discovered it. At some point, the forefinger of my right hand fell through inside the bead... Daniel? Are you all right, Daniel? Hold up!'

Andrew managed to catch Daniel as he was about to fall. He then seated him on a bench nearby and called, holding him steady:

'Come back, Daniel. You hear me?' (Daniel opened his eyes). 'Good. Are you all right?'

'I'm all right.'

'Okay. We'll consider that part of your secrets has been revealed, won't we?'

'Andrew, I don't remember it, any more than what's been going on for the past month. But when you started demonstrating... I sort of found myself... I don't know where, and there was that bead in my hand. I tried to push my finger into it—and it didn't emerge on the other side. Is that what you haven't said?'

'Excuse my question, Daniel. Have you seen the doctor? If I understood you right, you've amnesia?'

'Yes, I saw a shrink the other day: I'd frightened myself shitless with catalepsy. It looks like I do have a chance to remember, but there has to be a prompt, like the experiment with the fingers. Truth to tell, the sketch I posted on the internet is a frame from my dream. I could feel the bead was a lead, and now I'm happy I know it.'

'How did you come by it and whose hands is it in? That's the important thing,' Andrew wasn't so much asking Daniel as wondering. And there was in his tone and his eyes something that was changing; there was jealousy of sorts in them, jealousy that had been aroused by a compliment to a woman he adored.

'The doctor suggested I'd spent the month with some sect.'

'Sect... ? Well, I don't know. Indians,' said Andrew with confidence, 'is where you ought to look for your forgotten month. They're very partial to their relics. What if your bead is one of them? Those guys like rarities. And, pardon me, they could have drugged you—you wouldn't put it past them—in pursuit of their aim: they know a thing or two about that. Indians,' he repeated.

'Andrew, I'm aware that I've learnt a lot without giving you anything in return. It would've been more honest to have warned you in advance when I answered your message. But I snatched at the opportunity to learn something.'

'What's done can't be undone, Daniel. There's no point in strewing ashes over your head, the rather that our meeting's been essentially positive.'

'I owe one to you, Andrew.'

'I'll take you up at your word, Daniel. Now that you've mentioned it, I want your word that you'll inform me as soon as you recall or learn something about the bead. Promise?'

'I certainly do, Andrew.'

'Here's my hand on the deal.'

Daniel and Andrew firmly shook hands. That said, Daniel felt relief in the faith that the lost part of him was sure to be restored to him.

That meeting wasn't as useless as all that, thought Andrew Flickbow on the way back. That Daniel's not a bad guy. But one concern was gnawing on him: Who's got that priceless gift of the worlds?

## **Chapter Four**

### **'May there be eternal sleep!'**

There was a knock on the door about seven pm the next day. Nothing of significance had happened in Daniel's life since his meeting with Andrew Flickbow the day before. No new messages that hooked the imagination in his inbox. What could hook it after the mind-boggling cosmic version of the origins of the bead on the palm? Sign-dreams, even if they hovered over the world nearby, had been lapped up by the merciless impulses of eternity into which Andrew's endless words turned, leaving behind nothing but vanishing trajectories, before they reached Daniel's eyes and ears.

'Evening, Daniel Bertridge. Of course, you can't know me.' (A shade of suffering or benighted rue clouded the black eyes of the man across from him. One could divine in them the moment one saw them they could read your countenance better than you could, that they had grasped as much about your soul as only you know yourself. He looked about fifty. The stark highlights of silver here and there in the black hair that flowed down to his shoulders seemed to have been touched in by the jerky hand of an inexperienced colorist. One could suppose leaving error its faint-hearted percentage point that fate had not always been good to a man thus marked. But could one distinguish in that warped man the sign of the moments in which lightning joins life and death?) 'I'm Felix Thornton.'

'Felix Thornton! I'm happy to see you. I've been to the exhibition at the gallery—I was thrown by your pictures. Come on in.'

'Wait a moment, Daniel. I hope we'll meet one day and talk about my pictures, and more. But it isn't what brings me here today. I'm not alone. Waiting

in the taxi outside is a girl who wants to see you very much. I've a prior commitment and will have to leave you. Come, you must see her.'

'Why, sure.'

Thornton came up to the car and opened the door. (Daniel had stopped three paces short of it.) A girl emerged, black-haired, in a violet frock... and, having brushed Daniel's with her green eyes, smiled cutely. The green-eyed witch, flashed in his head, the girl of the dream, Leuely. Thornton was saying something to her, she was answering. But Daniel could not make out a single word, for the excitement obviously that had snuck on him.

'Farewell,' snapped Thornton and hopped in the car.

Leuely addressed Daniel.

'Danad,' she said in a low and excited voice all atremble. 'I missed you. (She stroked his hair and his cheek, pressed her head against his shoulder and cried.)

Of all the words he heard, only one made sense—Danad, and he realized she was a foreigner speaking her tongue. But the touch of her hand and the look that held the familiar sadness and tenderness restored the feeling for the girl named Leuely.

'I dreamed of you, Leuely.'

Leuely shied and looked questioningly at him.

'Danad, you don't speak my language?'

Daniel took her hand in his and pointed to the door he had left open.

'This is my house, Leuely. I ask you to come in.'

'House,' Leuely repeated. 'I could understand what you said. You want me to come in. (She spoke indicating with her hand what she was speaking about. It was easy to indicate 'me,' 'you' and 'house.')

Daniel took her to the living room and motioned her to a chair as he remembered the clean-up undertaken by the optimistic boy. Leuely sat down. He moved another chair to sit next to her.

'Danad... We were worried about you. Mat was beside himself that you were not with him. Do you understand me?'

Daniel made out only two familiar words, Dan and Mat. Did she say Mat was worried about him? Or was she worried about Mat for some reason... who was back there? Why was he back there? Why?

'Leuely, you're in my house, do you understand? You're in my house.'

She nodded understanding and said in her tongue:

'Yes, I'm in your house.'

'Leuely, what about Mat? Why isn't Mat in my house? Why didn't Mat come with you?' he was asking, his arms and hands doing awkwardly the same (rather more awkwardly and worriedly than Leuely's).

'Mat doesn't know where you are. No one knows: not Falafy, nor Malam, nor Semimes. I wish you knew how worried Semimes was. He could have kicked himself because they'd neglected you. He was full of reproach for himself and all of us, and snorted frighteningly. I never knew he could snort like that.'

'Leuely, I don't understand. You're talking of people in your community. I know nothing about you, I don't remember a thing, I don't remember a frigging



thing. I wanted to know where Mat was. Tell me if you can. Why isn't he here? I mean why Mat isn't here, in my house?' (Before he knew it he had started yelling under his breath).

Leoely got up, knelt in front of him and took his hands in hers.

'Dan, no one knows I'm in your house,' she said quietly, let his hands go and repeated, helping herself with her hands. 'No one knows I'm in your house. Mat doesn't. No living soul must know about it: I've broken the law.'

Daniel smiled.

'I understood, Leoely: Mat doesn't know you've come here, you're in my house. It means you couldn't even tell Mat,' Daniel fell to building some logic into the problem, mostly for himself, not for Leoely. But he was reasoning things out loud for want of a better method. 'It means your community's against our relations, yours and mine. They didn't like something and they got rid of me. They erased my memory and got rid of me. But why do they keep Mat?'

'Dan, Mat doesn't know I'm in your house,' Leoely repeated.

'I got you, I did. Please, rise,' said Daniel as he got up from his chair and took her by the hands to help her up.

Leoely got up and they found themselves close to each other. Daniel found himself thinking (as he felt yet again... in a dream or in reality when he was in the community) incongruously that he had never felt anything like this for Christine. He released her hands and came up to the window: he could not afford to let this barely manifest taste for closeness dupe him.

'I've an idea, Leoely: I want to show you around the house. You'd like me to, wouldn't you?'

'Dan, I don't get you,' she said and waved her hands so vigorously that he did make out the words 'don't get' along with their meaning as it waved its hands, shook its head and popped out its eyes.

'Leoely, I want you... to walk around my house... enter each of the rooms and have a good look,' Daniel was saying and 'explaining' his meaning with his hands and even feet. 'In the meantime I'll wait for you in the chair.' (Daniel returned to his chair). 'Look around. Go look at the house.'

Leoely smiled: she had been pepped up by this funny pantomime accompanied by illegible sounds (save for those that were strung up into the word 'house') but it was her joy that was actually to blame... the joy of being with Daniel again.

'I seem to have got it all, Dan. You want to show me your house.'

'House, house. Go and have a look. Do it on your own. I'm sitting down in my chair. (Daniel plopped in the chair.) See? I'm sitting. You go look in the house.'

'A pleasure, Dan, I will,' said Leoely as she turned and made for the door.

Daniel followed her with his wondering eyes. How do I tell her? he thought.

It was not ten minutes... before suddenly (Daniel started) Leoely's agitated voice came:

'Dan! Come here. Danad?'

He ran into his room and grasped it all at a glance: she had been startled by the bead on a palm on the screen. There was joy in his eyes: She knows!'

'Why is the Tear... there?' Leuely asked motioning at the picture, her eyes full of concern and reproach staring at Daniel.

'What's wrong, Leuely? What did I do wrong? I can see from your eyes I've done something wrong. No... you don't understand me. What's this? What's this bead? Can you explain to me what it is? Leuely, what's this?'

'Ask me again, Dan. I think I got you. But ask me again.'

'What did she say?' he wondered aloud. 'What did you say?'

Leuely did not answer.

'Leuely, this,' he waved his hand around, 'is my house. What's this?' He came up to the monitor, poked his finger at the bead and repeated, 'What's this?'

Leuely pressed her hands to her face, her fingers over her eyes. He doesn't know, why doesn't he remember? she thought. She moved her hands off her face exposing her eyes, just her eyes... no countenance about the eyes, no hands... just the eyes... Despair. Daniel saw despair in her eyes.

'Did I lose the symbol of your community? And they robbed me of me and banished me? And will hold Mat until I've restored it? Leuely, I haven't got the bead.' Daniel spread his arms. 'I don't know where it is. You see? I,' he poked his chest with his finger, 'haven't got,' he poked at the bead on the screen, 'it.'

'I got it, Dan. You,' she touched him with her hand, 'haven't got,' she indicated the sketch, 'Her.'

She sat down in a chair and closed her face with her hands. What'll become of us? she thought. What have I done? Falafy dear, whisper a word of advice to me—I'll hear. What do I do for the best? Think of something, do. Why did I let the artist go? Why did I take him up at his word? He would've helped us. He was the one to help us.

This is what brings you here. You've come to collect the bead... the symbol of your community. You're here while Mat's there. You want the bead in exchange for Mat. You want Malam the humpback to pronounce me worthy or at least let me communicate with you. You're here under the rose. You want to be with me but don't want to break with the community: the bond's sacred for you. I want to be with you, too. But I was banished from the community... Where are you from? What country did your community move from? Eastern Europe, most likely: I haven't got a single word from your tongue in my head... Those were the lines Daniel was thinking on until he stumbled on an idea.

He sat in front of the computer next to Leuely and ran his fingers over the keyboard... There were pictures—the first views of a far-away country.

'Look, Leuely, do you know it? It's your country, isn't it? Is it your home?'

She shook her head, no.

'Why, sure, poking your finger at a globe isn't the best way... I never asked whether you used a computer?' said Daniel helping himself and Leuely with his hands.

'No.'

'Well, of all that's wonderful... You did right to move here. Okay, let's apply logic. Leuely, my name's Dan, yours Leuely. Give me the name of your home... the name of your home.'

'Ah, I got it! Dorlief.'

'Dorlief?'

'Dorlief.'

'I seem to have heard it somewhere. We enter Dorlief... Hmm, nothing. We'll spell it differently: Dorlef. No geography. A poke at a globe is what remains. Not to worry: we'll get to your home... How do you like these snaps? Are they like your home?'

'No,' she said in her language.

'I see. Let's go on... Look at this fine bridge. Did you go across it?'

. . . A variety of views changed one another. Leely kept shaking her head or saying no.

'Wait,' she said suddenly and touched his hand. She took long over a landscape: a mountain gorge, boulders, forest on both sides, a trail vanishing amid grey crags.

'Warmer, isn't it? It's Slovenia. Is your home in Slovenia?'

'Dan, this isn't my home,' said Leely in Daniel's language and looked cunningly at him.

'Well done, Leely. We'll have no more use for sign language in a few days.'

She covered his hand with her palm several times when they were on views of Slovenia, and he thought that one of them would cease to be just a picture and Leely would sound it in Daniel's language: Home, home! Daniel suddenly saw a tear drop on the table. He leaned over to look Leely in the face: the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

'Don't, don't look,' she said.

He got it and moved aside. He had guessed the meaning of the words, but was at a loss about the tears. Leely was engrossed in the game Daniel had thought up, and it dawned on her at some point: He doesn't remember. He remembers nothing. He doesn't remember walking down our streets, just the two of us. He doesn't remember saying to me, 'I, too, can run fast' and me saying, 'Then race me.' He remembers nothing...

\* \* \*

Daniel and Leely were coming back home under the street lamps past midnight.

They had had dinner at The Last Chance accompanied by the words that were all too important and garnished the same dishes with a variety of appetizing sounds and smiles to suit any palate arising out of put-down misapprehension, playing the fool and feelings that were oblivious of... the bead. Then they roamed the city: Daniel with Leely (and a ghostly dream in his soul), I with Daniel (and rue in her heart), the dream and rue being all important this time rather than words. They then stopped by a bar, one of those... and the barman recognized Daniel and congratulated him on his finding what he had been looking for, appreciative and respective, as he welcomed them with drinks 'on the house.'

'We're here. My home. You've got to say: Your home. Please, Leely, say: Your home.'

'Your home,' she said in the language of Daniel.

'I'd be happy to hear you also say: My home... no, better still: Our home. It's a good thing you don't understand all I say or me all you say. Otherwise you

might say: My home's my community; we revere above all our round little icon symbolic of our bond with the universe. And this bond determines the rest of the bonds. And it is up to old man Malam, as the link between the universe, the icon and man, to decide...'

'Did you say Malam, Daniel?'

'I said Malam. And a good thing he's not with us, blast him. Let's go inside our home, Leoely.'

'Our home,' Leoely echoed in Daniel's language, and it was anyone's guess whether she understood what she'd just said or not.

. . . While Leoely was taking her bath, Daniel decided to check his inbox. He was surprised to see a message from Andrew, so soon after their meeting. Andrew said: 'Hi, Daniel. I've considered at leisure ways of coming by the second bead (which, to all appearances you were holding in your hand). Try to find out what Indian reservations there are in the vicinity of the city. Look them up: you might stumble upon some prompt. Then we'll play by ear. Should it be favorable, we'll do some scalp-hunting. Write on.'

Daniel answered immediately: 'Hi, Andrew. Here's the latest news. It's both good and bad. Good news first, for I can't help it. Today or, rather, yesterday, isn't it, a girl arrived to see me (her name's Leoely), and she knew the bead right away. She's no Indian, though. I think she's from Eastern Europe. She speaks nothing but her mother tongue—I don't know which—and we make do with sign language. Her community must be somewhere nearby. She arrived by taxi with no luggage and no papers. She's with me at the moment. I might talk her into staying for several days. The bad news is: the bead's gone. It looks like my doing, but I don't remember the circumstances. The community has a grudge against me. That's all for now.'

What if I talk Leoely into going to see old man Malam? He might relax and give me a chance; he's no beast. Daniel came up to the room where Leoely was to spend the night. (When still a kid, his father's sister visited him on occasion, and the room had always been at her disposal. But no one had stayed with the Bertridges for quite some time, them being rare guests in their home, and the room was vacant.) He could hear Leoely's sobs. Daniel knocked.

'Can I, Leoely?'

'Yes,' she said in his language.

She was standing at the window. She was wearing the T-shirt he had given her as a makeshift nightgown. He stopped a pace shy of her. She looked back—her face was tearstained.

'It isn't as bad as all that, Leoely. I've a plan: let's go to Malam tomorrow. You and I to Malam. Yes?'

'No,' said Leoely.

'Won't he budge and talk to me?'

Leoely saw the hurt in his face and came closer.

'You don't understand,' she said in Daniel's language only to switch over to hers: 'You've forgotten everything. Everything's very bad. We have no way out... we never will.'

She cupped her face again and cried... Daniel stroked her on the head... Leuely put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek next to his lips. His lips, like the rest of his body, seemed to have been waiting for just that: they made use of the heady atmosphere and open feelings and gently lay on her lips...

\* \* \*

After stopping by a couple of shops, Daniel came up to his house at a quarter past nine and grinned as he remembered yesterday's 'Our home.' Holding in one hand the still hot fragrant contents of the carton, he let himself in with the key in his other hand.

'Leuely?' he called. 'You awake? A fresh pie's waiting for you in the kitchen. You'd better make haste.'

No answer. He then knocked at the door which he had closed noiselessly an hour before... Only to rush out into the street five minutes later looking desperately left and right like one obsessed, to catch a glimpse of a violet blur in the variety of colors.

'Hi, Danny,' a man cosseting a furry lap dog on the lawn next door said loudly.

'Hi, Kevin.'

'I think I know who you're looking for. She left. Half an hour ago, she hopped in the taxi that the suit and tie had come by and left. There's nothing else I can say about the guy.'

'Which way did they go?'

'That,' Kevin motioned with his hand.

'Thanks,' said Daniel and made for the house.

'Wait, Danny. There's something else if that's any use. I walked my beast at six, and the taxi was a hundred yards from here, over there. The suit was out smoking and stretching his legs. That's that, now.'

'Fiftyish with long hair?'

'Thirty at most and blond with a sensible haircut, slender.'

'Thanks, Kevin,' Daniel said in obvious dismay and thought: Neither Thornton nor Andrew (I wonder if he's emailed me?)

'Not to worry, neighbor: tell yourself there're more fish in the sea this one comes from and forget it.'

. . . It's as clear as day: Malam's missed Leuely and sent the boys in search of her. The blond proved nimbler than the others... The stinker! Wouldn't even let Leuely say goodbye to me. And all because of the frigging bead. I'm a black sheep for them. But all isn't over yet: she'll come. I love her, and she'll come back... I wish I could find the bead: it looks like the way to Malam's heart. But to do that, I'll have to look for the beginning which could be anything, thought Daniel as he looked at the black screen...

There was a message from Andrew: 'Daniel, write if you recall other members of the community.'

Daniel wrote: 'Andrew, I remember three names: Malam, Semimes and Falafy. The last one is feminine.'

The answer came immediately: I dare say these aren't real names. They're tied up to the bead, the thing they hold sacred to all appearances. The bead's round, and so are the names. It'd be no surprise if their interrelations are tied up with the bead and amount to general responsibility cover-up. Their leader benefits by it naturally, for the bead is the argument in favor of this principle and its justification. What about a daring guess? You were most likely called Danad. It isn't as simple as all that, one reason being that you got amnesia after communicating with them. In a word: take care!'

Quite some head, thought Daniel, to have arrived at Danad. Then he wrote: 'Your guess is right, Andrew, I'm Danad for them. As concerns "take care," this morning in my absence someone took Leoely away in a taxi. I'll have to get some composure and look for her. I'll find her, sure thing.'

Daniel waited for Leoely all day and night. The next day, at four in the afternoon, there was a phone call. Daniel snatched the receiver.

'Hello, are you Daniel Bertridge?'

The unfamiliar feminine voice swept him with anxiety: there was denial in it.

'Speaking.'

'It's the Immigration Service, Department of Homeland Security. I have to report a tragedy involving the girl you gave shelter to.'

Daniel went limp and atremble in his whole body in a matter of a moment.

The voice went on:

'Her name was Leoely, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know her last name?'

'No.'

'We've been unable to find out anything about her, either. She produced no papers, just gave us her name, and never said another word.'

'How's she? Can you tell me?'

'She fell to her death out a six-story window at two in the afternoon. Until we establish her identity, her body will be in the mortuary. If you have documentary information about her, please, inform us. I'm sorry, goodbye.'

Daniel fell down to the floor... and squeezed his head for all he was worth to stop the treacherous cracks that had let in that dispassionate voice... that impossible voice. He was filled with a new and unbearable feeling—the feeling of the impossibility of what had just happened... the irreparability of it... the irreparability of Leoely's death... the impossibility of seeing her, talking to her... the impossibility of the love that had stirred in him... the impossibility of being. The feeling rent Daniel, and the sobs convulsively jerked his flesh and his wordless voice...

... Daniel was taking a shower. The tears joined the water jet, all thought lost in the noise. It was the thought of parting with the impossibility.

'Pardon me, I wet my pants for half a year,' the water hissed in the voice of Andrew Flickbow.

'You know now what it means, wetting your pants. Your not being a wet-a-bed doesn't mean a thing: you wet your pants nevertheless. You've been wetting

your pants for four hours now. You'll always wet your pants. You're a wet-a-bed for all eternity. You'll wet your pants each time the phone rings. You'll wet your pants each time you hear an unfamiliar voice saying hi on the phone. You'll wet your pants the moment you run into Leoely's reflection in any object, in space, whether awake or asleep. My home—you wet your pants. Your home—and you wet your pants. Our home... our home...

'I call what happened to my consciousness in the cave and was entrenched in it dread of the eyes that aren't there,' whispered the water in the voice of Andrew.

'What got lodged in you last night in your home and Leoely's is dread of the day that isn't there. It's the dread of tomorrow. How do you progress to it if Leoely's not in it... just a ghost of her? It's impossible. The impossible is dread.'

... Daniel sat on the living room floor with his back to the wall.

Yesterday, tomorrow... what does it matter if what happened today... no, not today, at a moment today. Only that moment, only it matters something. Everything matters. Only for it, for this moment, on the scale of time, you were born... because it chose between the possibility and the impossibility of everything that had happened to you before and would have happened without it. And opted for the impossibility.

Like what that guy said, James Hogstein, 'There're instances of fear you can't allay. The only way out is flight: such that you've fled and will come back once you feel you can. You can feel the moment, I know. You flee and so does your fear... If you thought I'm crazy, don't write to me any more' No, James, you aren't crazy: I know it now... Moments. You say moments. But on this scale of time, there's nothing but the moment. And I don't feel like going back to it; I don't feel like tasting it: this taste is dread of the day that isn't there. The main thing is: you vanish, and so does your dread. So this is what fate gave you to me for, James Hogstein. But I could've binned you... No, this means I couldn't.

Daniel got off the floor and moved on woolen, whimsical legs to his room, determined to begin and end everything as soon as possible.

'James, I want to vanish. If you meant it, help.'

A couple of minutes later, the reply came: 'We could try. When? Here's my address...'

There can't be a mistake: coincidences like this just don't happen; this is fate, thought Daniel and emailed: 'I'm four blocks from you. I'll be on my way in ten minutes.'

The answer arrived immediately: 'I never thought we were in the same city. What about tomorrow? Somehow I, like, am not ready as yet.'

Daniel punched in, exasperated: 'It's now, or I'll do without you.'

'Sorry. Expecting you,' James replied.

It was eleven twenty-seven pm. Daniel dwelled on the palm with the bead (To hell with it!), shut down the computer, changed, turned off the light, shoved his mobile in his pocket, counted the taxi fare and went out into the street. The street... It immediately revived the impressions of the night before... his and Leoely's night... He raised his eyes skyward.

'Good God,' he appealed to the Almighty, but could not say another word; he clenched his teeth to contain his feelings and ran...

Daniel knew the area James lived in well and soon found his house. He meant to ring at the door, but jerked back his hand when he heard a voice inside. He waited. It was a man's voice. There was some irregularity in the way he spoke: now he was arguing something tersely, unreservedly... now he started telling somebody off impulsively, spitefully... now he ranted something morbidly... now he called someone in vain... now he hollered threats... The voice did not stay in place: it roamed the house as if in pursuit of whoever would not answer his call, but had to finally return and repent and make amends...

James! Where's James? Daniel thought. He wrote of his dread... The voice frightens him... (Daniel had only just noticed the door was ajar.) He'd left it like this for me. And hiding.

Daniel shoved the door and entered. A dim table lamp was on in the spacious room. He looked around and saw a rectangular door at the edge of the left wall with a small bronze handle that was supposed to blend with the wall but had finally lost the guise of a dummy. A cellar, he thought. There was not a moment to be lost: the persecuting voice was nigh. Daniel ran up to the door, pulled the handle and, after his eyes had adjusted to the semi-darkness, stepped on the staircase. He descended. Long and high shelves were fitted to the side walls. There was a flashlight on one of them three paces from him whose light illuminated the riddle: for one thing, James was hiding here; for another, it let Daniel detect that the shelves ended here leaving room for a niche between them and the back wall of the cellar. He's there, Daniel thought and headed for the niche. What he saw prevented him from calling to James (he seemed to have gone numb): James was slowly going deeper and deeper into the stone wall (there was just half his body outside) and vanishing... without trace (his other half seemed to have evaporated). Daniel took a moment to perceive himself and recall Leoely and say:

'May there be eternal sleep!'

He caught James's hand and followed him...

## **Chapter Five**

### **'Break off a piece'**

Daniel no longer needed James's hand as soon as he felt he was part of the blackness, and he let it go. Our lots are different, he thought: you'll be back while I... He never thought it up to the end. The thought seemed to melt in a benign wave that swept over and sucked him in. Daniel was happy to be one with it: he heaved a great breath... and gained a new perception—the perception of lost space and time and what had happened to him in that space and time. He recalled... recalled everything as if experiencing it anew.

\* \* \*



Tapping, soft and frequent, invaded his dream. It would not cease and instilled anxiety. Daniel suddenly grasped it came from the outside and was not part of his dream, and woke up... Someone was tapping on the window frame. He sat up. Darkness, still potent, hid whoever was introducing anxiety into the serenity of the night through those sounds. Daniel thought that it was more an appeal supposed to be secret. Leuely! it occurred to him. He got up in no time, pulled on his jeans and came up to the window. The tapping stopped, and a moment later someone's hand beckoned him and a barely audible voice called him:

'Danad, Danad.'

'Leuely,' Daniel whispered and flung the window open—lilac semi-darkness opened up before him...

He climbed outside and closed the window. There was no one near the house any longer.

'Danad!' called a whisper clearly audible in the night.

Leuely was retiring toward Lake Werent. He followed her at the double... She stopped, waved her hand and minced on. He grinned: the wave of the hand had struck him as playful—she had scooped up a handful of air and cast it toward him, Daniel thought... Some time later, Leuely turned off the trail, approached a spreading willow, leaned her back against the trunk and waited. When there were just five paces between them, she raised a hand and waved it in the air as if clearing a hoar-clad pane.

'Leuely?' he said in surprise.

The scales he had taken for a morning mist dropped, the ghost of Leuely vanished as commanded by the hand, and he saw a woman barkycrook from the Emptied Lake. Daniel recoiled. The sight of that inhuman countenance that a universal horror had transformed to look somewhat human for its purposes—to send shivers up one's spine, the cavy eyes (that retained the secret of the Roosh Cave) petrified him.

'Lord Trozuzort needs you, you'll fly with me,' she said in a hushed, strained voice, and her words sounded as if she had squeezed them before letting them loose.

Daniel backed off.

'Sus!' she hissed jerking up her head impulsively and weirdly (her warped face puckered up even more as the result).

The willow crown shook violently. The gorhoon had left it to alight on the ground right in front of Daniel. Its nostrils made the air tremble, and it turned its blind aspect as it sniffed human presence. Daniel recognized it. It was the monster that had sped over the travelers' heads making their way to Dorlief the other day. The walleyes, though blind, as they penetrated the very soul to instill fear, had been imprinted in Daniel forever. Sus was ready at a moment's notice to set its red jaws to work. Sapha mounted it and ordered the man:

'Get on if you want to live on a bit.'

His mind a whirr in search of a way out of a hopeless situation, Daniel suddenly remembered the Tear... and the Word... and thought it was worth a try. He approached the gorhoon.

'Sit behind me and hold on to the rope that girdles me.'

Daniel mounted the resilient back of the winged beast, gripped the rope with his left hand and left his right one free for his daring plan. The gorhoon's body shook as it was boosted making the riders' motions unsensed; Daniel opened his belt pouch and took the Tear, careful not to drop Her in all that shaking. Within moments the gorhoon was airborne and gaining altitude. Daniel, breathless, thought back to the Bushtunts swing and was very nearly crying, 'Cool!' except that he was a prisoner. The flight was soon level, and Daniel looked down: below them was Malam and Semimes's house. It's time, he thought, took the Tear to his eye and peered into Her directing Her forward and a bit down. Suddenly he heard a cry and looked in its direction.

'Danad! Danad! Danad!' Semimes, hoarse in the throat, was screeching. Following him were Matthew, Sawasard, Groyorg.

Sapha squeezed Daniel's hand (that was gripping the rope) with her left and hissed:

'Sit still lest I scratch out your eyes for you.'

It remains to be seen who'll win the upper hand, he thought. Oh, that the Tear would work!

They were nearing the Shiwun Forest. Daniel, eyes on the Tear, repeated like an incantation the entreaty to the Crossroads: 'Admit me, Crossroads. Admit me, Crossroads.' Waiting though he had been for the portal to the Path, he shuddered and recoiled when he saw the gaping crevice and involuntarily pulled at Sapha's rope girdle before he let go. She looked back and dashed after the prisoner who had sprung off the gorhoon. Her beastly nimbleness was such that she caught him by the foot and, jerked by his weight, came a cropper falling with the man into the blackness that was not to be seen in the sky above Dorlief.

\* \* \*

Sapha came to sooner than did Daniel's soul as it breathed in the bliss of the Spirit World and was still in doubt whether to leave it or find refuge in it. Sapha got up to her feet, looked around, growled and turned away from the fireball as it lashed her eyes with its blinding whip. She greedily sniffed in with her nostrils the variety of smells, detected the one she liked and rushed toward it over the fern... She stopped stock-still: Daniel lay motionless in the grass a few paces from her. Fury had the better of Sapha: the prisoner had outwitted her, and she now saw herself as a beast, a beast in a trap. She took the distance at a leap, fell over him and closed her hands over his neck. All of a sudden... She sat up and listened to make sure she had heard right... and clearly made out human voices. The next moment she rushed into the thicket. When she was a safe distance away, she hid behind a tree watching. She had to get back home to the tower by all means to tell the Lord the good news that the man who endangered the Emptied Lake would never again tread their soil. She was sorry she had not collected the eye he had in his hand when they were dropping. She grasped that it was the eye that had indicated to him the entryway to the black tunnel into the beyond, and that it would tell her the way back.

. . . Daniel opened his eyes: Looks like I'm alive, he thought... People of sorts... Who are they? One as tall as the sky. Aren't you God by any chance? Frowning. What did I do to make you frown? Or are you just a ranger, as grave as they come... ? And another one... Jesus!

The senses that had started stirring in Daniel backed off: they had been frightened by the warp, an uncommon warp, before his eyes—something like two faces, like two halves of different faces. One for real, living, responsive to the world. And the other... about which, echoing your senses, you would say: Whatever for? It shouldn't be there. It shouldn't be born in the first place, because whatever's born is there to embrace life, not repel it, not clam up, not frighten it, not for it to repel the born, not one about which you would say: He's stamped with life's anti-sense. And the secret of the other face was hidden inside that 'something' there, instead of the left eye. And this 'something' was looking out of the eye socket as a bunch of black filaments that made whoever looked at it shudder.

'Uncle Samuel, he's blanked out again.'

'No, sonny, he's just frightened. Something has frightened him, so he's afraid to come back.'

'Frightened? Hmm... Frightened he's still alive,' Martin smirked. Then he bent and shook the stranger by the shoulder. 'Rise, buddy. So much for your fright: you're with us now. You hear?'

'I do,' said Daniel without opening his eyes. 'Who are you? Tell your new buddy.'

'Uncle Samuel, our buddy's found his voice. What about his eyes?'

'He'll open his eyes when he learns who we are. We're foresters, man. Here you are lying about on our grass. Since this is the case, be our guest and hopefully our buddy—the word's out.'

'The ball's in your court,' Martin added.

'What's your name, buddy?' asked Daniel with his eyes still closed.

'I'm Martin.'

Daniel opened his eyes and said tremulously:

'Martin and Samuel... You can't know how glad I am to see you. I'm Daniel... Dan. As a friend of mine once remarked, "Dan's just right for the nearest and dearest,"' said Daniel, sat up and, resting on his elbows, inspected the grass around him.

'Lost anything, Dan?' said Martin.

'Yes... a small thing. I must've dropped it when I crash-landed.'

Martin produced from his pocket a turquoise bead and twisted it (Samuel looked at his partner in surprise).

'A strange thing. Is this it?'

'It is.'

'A strange thing,' Martin repeated (a wave of pleasure swept the right side of his face). 'Stone is solid, while this bead's... hmm, like air in your hand. Take it, Dan.'

'Thanks, Martin... Is this stretcher all ready for me?'

'You, like, blanked out, so Uncle Samuel did his best.'

'I'm all right.'

'Okay, try getting up if you're all tight,' Martin held out his hand. 'Let me help you up.'

'To tell you the truth,' Samuel began, 'as rangers, we'd like to know what's so special about our turf for you and your buddy, the one that keeps fleeing and hiding?'

The benignity in Daniel's face was replaced by visible anxiety.

'You've seen her? Where's she?'

'She?' Samuel looked questioningly at Martin.

'It's a she, Uncle Samuel.'

'Of all that's wonderful...' said Samuel wondering either about a stranger suddenly turning into a woman or his nephew having held it out from him.

'I was in doubt, Uncle Samuel. She...' Martin hesitated.

'Her aspect is such, it's easy to doubt,' Daniel chimed in.

'What was the contention, Dan? Was it the trifle Martin found?'

'One can put it like that,' Daniel said and cast his eyes down. Then he patted his breech pocket as he remembered the other 'trifle.'

Samuel and Martin could not help feeling their guest was being evasive.

'Martin, go home, you and Dan. I'll roam around,' he said and bent over the stretcher.

'Let me carry it since it was meant for me.'

'Thanks, Dan, but no, thanks: the folder's got used to my back and vice versa,' said Samuel actually meaning: If you don't feel like being a buddy, don't be one.

'Samuel, Martin, I just don't feel like telling lies. But I can't tell you the whole truth: it isn't mine alone. No offence meant... I'll tell you one thing, though: she wants the Tear...' Daniel found himself spilling his guts but decided against evading: no reason why he should estrange them; it was not the done thing. Besides, it was a trifling let-on. And he explained, 'My friends and I call the bead that.'

'Tear's cool,' said Martin. 'It sort of poured itself out on to the palm when I held it.'

'Sorry, Dan, but there's one thing I must be sure of one hundred percent, and I'll put it point-blank: Are you in any way in the drug business?'

'No, Samuel, I have nothing to do with drugs or crime. And the woman you saw is no criminal. It's something else again. But she's dangerous. She'll not be leaving here without the Tear, and she'll try to get Her. Pray, take care.'

'Thank you for nothing,' murmured Samuel and added, 'Stick by Martin.'

'Uncle Samuel, we'll wait dinner for you. Come along, Dan.'

Martin and Daniel were three hundred yards or so from the fateful and yet lucky place. They were walking down a path Martin knew: he ahead, Daniel trailing. There, in a clearing of ferns, Daniel had never dwelled on the guy's face. Were it just a scar or a blemish, he would not be curious, but...

'Sorry. Martin?'

'Is it the eye?' He looked back on the go.

'Yes, guide,' said Daniel: it was not a chance misstatement, for thought had taken him to another forest trail down which he had been led by another guide also marked by fate. And it made him wonder.

'It's a secret, you see?' said Martin with a smirk. 'As distinct from yours which isn't yours alone, mine's mine, but it's still a secret. Let's swap them. We can do it piecemeal.'

As cunning as Semimes, Daniel thought.

'She's following us,' said Martin (Daniel noted there was no trace of anxiety in his voice). 'I can hear her footfalls. I meant to ask you: Is she a shapeshifter?'

'D'you think they exist?'

'I had not believed in those fairy tales until today. We stood a couple of yards from each other and were all eyes. She's no beast, nor is she a human.'

'She's no human, Martin. Nor is she a shapeshifter. A friend of mine, name of Semimes, thought up a name for the creatures: barkycrooks.'

'Creatures?'

'It's just that I take you up on your business proposition and let on: creatures and barkycrooks.'

'That friend of yours would call me a barkycrook, too... and justly so.'

'No, Martin. I've said he calls them and we, his friends, call those creatures barkycrooks, not people. Don't call yourself a barkycrook.'

'What brings you to my forest, smart aleck?' said Martin. 'Tear, barkycrooks... Isn't that a frilly game by any chance? Bring me up to speed: I seem to have fallen behind.'

'Break off a morsel,' said Daniel as if by the by and out of turn.

'Come again?'

'Break off a piece.'

'Oh, I got it. It's my turn to break off a piece of my secret... It was prepared to kill me. Have you ever seen a beast ready to kill?'

'I've seen barkycrooks prepared to kill. And it was no game. Nor is it now.'

'I say. What part of the Earth's globe? Are you that kind of traveler? You don't look like one.'

'A deal's a deal, Martin.'

'A diplomatist, aren't you?' Martin shook his head.

He would not have sustained a conversation to do with his disfigurement in any way. He would have made short shrift of the man. But today... after the encounter with the barkycrook, after Uncle Samuel's revelations shrouded with mystery he felt part of something beyond comprehension, and that troubled and drew him in... to bring forth a different Martin that was lurking at the bottom of his soul.

'You left off where it wanted to kill you,' Daniel suggested.

'What was it in me that wouldn't let it do it? I could see its fury leave its countenance. And it let me go. Why? Tell me, if you're that much a diplomatist?'

'It must be your eye.'

'I knew as much, wise guy. But what did it see in it?'

'I think there's something in it that doesn't exist, in a manner of speaking...'

'But exists for it, does it? The strange thing is that—'

'Wait, Martin. You've just said a very important thing. I felt it the moment you said it. I don't know for sure but it seems to do with life over there.'

'Where there... ? Out with it, Dan.'

'I can't, Martin.'

'You're a good guy, I'm a good guy. What's in between, diplomatist? Why can't you?'

'Let me think,' said Daniel and asked in a minute, 'How did it happen, Martin? You weren't born like that, were you? No offence meant.'

'I was, as a matter of fact. Lightning killed my mother before I was born.'

'What do the doctors say?'

'Enough is as good as a feast, Dan. Let's keep silent and consider it.'

This 'keep silent and consider it' kept them off it until that night...

. . . Martin sat on the porch waiting for Daniel. They had been talking nonsense, all of them: himself, Uncle Samuel and their guest—and he was sick of it. When Daniel emerged, he broached it:

'If you don't take me where the barkycrooks are, I'll be like these trees here: stay a lifetime and rot away. You agree, don't you?'

'I've been considering your words... about what's between us. There's nothing between us, Martin. But for you and Samuel, I wouldn't be sitting at table with you and eating this wonderful toast with strawberry jam on it. What links us at the moment is convivially eating toasts with strawberry jam on them, laced with endless ranger stories (you know what I'm talking about, don't you?) Now it's a secret between you and me and the lamppost. Do you want another morsel of the secret between you and me? Samuel showed me my room and asked, "How's your new lodgings, sonny?" I told him, "Couldn't be better, Uncle Samuel" and added, to myself: "With a view of the forest."'

'I thought you were a good guy, but you're a dyed-in-the-wool cynic or, not to beat about the bush, a blackguard.'

'I'm a diplomat, aren't I?'

Martin and Daniel burst out laughing.

'My late grandfather—'

'At it again, aren't you?'

'I'm no cynic. Listen before I think better of it. My grandfather had two names. One was Danby Bushtunts. That was the name he went by here. The other was Natan. It was the name they gave him at birth at a place called Dorlief. Dorlief is not on the planet our asses are on with a porch and bench in between.'

'A parallel world?'

'What else?'

'And that's where you came from today?'

'Mine is a return trip, if you know what I mean.'

'We're on a reading spree here, in the forest, Dan: no man-made din's in the way, you see. Okay, go on.'

Daniel produced the Tear from his pouch.

'One can get to those parts through the Tear's agency. My gramps left Her to me... No, he told me to bury and forget it. I forgot Her in dead earnest. But

eight years later, my friend and I unearthed Her. And found ourselves in Dorlief. Mat is still there and that's where I should be. I'll go tomorrow.'

'You meant: we'll go. After what you've told me, I can't stay here.'

'I know, Martin.'

'Except we'll go the day after. Samuel and I will go on the rounds of the forest, and then I'll take you to the Upper Lake.'

'It's a deal. Oh, and think of your new name in the meantime. It must be... mirrored. In Dorlief I'm Danad. You might be Martinitram.'

Martin laughed.

'Couldn't it be shorter... ? Say. Marram?'

'Marram it shall be. Semimes's father's Malam; you'll be Marram.'

'I'll be damned! What about Martram?'

'Even better.'

. . . There was no one in the house: Martin and Samuel were on their rounds of the forest. Daniel thought he would have a walk and look for the right place—it was time he did. Give him another day—it could be seen how glad he was of the new experience—and go back there. He went out on to the porch, his face enjoying the freshness of the air wave, his soul the novelty of hope, and jogged off. Jogging warmed up his feelings and thoughts: both were far, far away, this 'far' beginning somewhere here for them. He was about to find out where... When he was some four hundred yards from the lodge, Daniel stopped, lifted his hand and unclasped it. The nimble shadow that ran into him disturbed the light next to his attenuated silhouette on the ground—a sudden pain and, along with it, sudden darkness.

Sapha cast the stick of wood aside, picked up the secret eye Daniel had dropped and put it in her jacket pocket. She then turned Daniel over on to his back, looked him over and blew sharply at his face. On seeing the shiny chain she pulled at it, released it from under his collar and tore off the handmade feather. As a parting gesture, she pulled a hair out of his head and, looking left and right, headed briskly for the fern thicket, the one she and her prisoner had landed on from the Dorlief sky through the black tunnel. She would have robbed him of life, but had been quick enough to think that she might not be able to manage the secret eye on her own...

Sapha knew the place: the trampled grass and the human smell were a giveaway. She wasted no time as she raised her hand and canted:

'Biteoff, biteoff, catch the wind, whirl in the whirl, confuse the head where your follicle is planted, let the dream obscure reality, give memory a beginning without an end, and let it forget the one that gives you potency and release.'

Five times on end did she repeat the words of the incantation coiling them round the hair. She then blew at her palm to help it on its way with the wind.

Daniel experienced a nudge and came to. Where am I? Grass. Why grass? He got up to his feet. Here was a buzz in his head. He looked around. Shit! Looks like a forest... I'm in a forest. How come I'm in a forest? What the hell? Thornton will be the death of me. Can I have hidden here from one of the inside views? Joking apart—I have to get out of here. You live only to find yourself in a forest. Spooky... Is it one of the Thornton tricks? Daniel listened. He thought he could

hear... Buzzing... where? If it wasn't in his head, it was there. Then he belongs there. The legs move—so I'll get there... Head's aching fit to split. Whyever? It must be the frigging sleeping pills. Can I be here because of the pills? Forgot myself and went sleep-walking? Morning? Looks like I've been roaming all night and dropped down in my sleep.

Daniel walked around in circles wondering, asking himself questions and finding no answers. He got out of the forest at last. Right in front of him was a wide grey strip that extended left and right...

## Chapter Six

### The Microscopic Turquoise Speck

Daniel found himself in space-time. He was on the Path driven by time in tune with his heart. The Crossroads had restored what memory had lost, and he remembered everything, beginning with Christine's morning call. The Crossroads had spared him oblivion and kept him out of the Spirit World. The Crossroads had left him with heartache and a feminine name, Leely. Daniel knew why he was on the Path: destiny had decreed that he deliver the Word to Dorlief.

'Rouse, Daniel... Daniel, rouse,' an unfamiliar voice was calling.

Daniel raised his heavy lids: there was a face above him.

'What a good thing you're back. I had waited for you all night, dozing off and waking up, and no you. I had started worrying: what if you wouldn't get out?' the face was saying, keen on a life of feelings, with goodness among them to the fore as if doomed to being good at birth until the last.

Daniel knew the cellar. Except it was now lit by an overhead bulb and no longer looked like a twilight cubicle designed to hide a stray soul in one of its crevices. The talking face glowed... glowed with welcome.

'Hi, James,' Daniel put in his word edgeways. 'It isn't just your back I know now.'

'Why yes. It's a good thing you snatched my arm. I'd been waiting for you but could wait no more. Did you hear? It's unbearable, isn't it?'

'Your father?'

'Yes.'

'What's wrong with him? What does he expect from you?'

'Not me—mother. He keeps looking for her at night, wants her back.'

'Did she abandon you?'

'Dead. He can't come to terms with it. He's all right by daylight: comes home from work, talking to me, joking. We watch telly together... And then toward night he drinks himself silly. He's afraid of night... because of mother. Roaming about the rooms like a loony, calling her, begging her to come back. It goes on until daylight.'

'Dread of the day that isn't there,' Daniel mechanically supplied under his breath.

'Come again.'



'It's something to do with me. Sorry. Is your father away at work?'

'Yes, gone.'

'I've something to ask you, James. Have you ever tried to go in deeper, all the way to darkness?'

'I can't, Daniel: I'm sorry for father. I can't abandon him... let him down—he'd be all alone. You see, I think if I go deeper, I won't be back. So I just take one step. And forget myself there. Should I venture further, I'd forget myself for good. I can feel it... and I crave it... Let's go up and have breakfast.'

'Sorry, James, I must be going. But I wouldn't mind a cup of coffee.'

\* \* \*

By nightfall Daniel had made it to the place his soul craved. He was twenty yards from the forest-cosseted house when Martin emerged on the porch.

'Aren't expecting company today?' Daniel cried, and the words he had let loose made him feel good: the way ahead was long and monotonous, and the words he said to himself had felt stifled and hot.

Martin leapt down over all the stairs to meet him as if the long days of injured feelings and resentment had never been there. He approached Daniel and stretched out his hand.

'Sorry, Dan, I thought you'd left without me. You must know: when I say sorry, I'm really sorry. The first two days after you fled (I really thought you'd said: to hell with him, and fled), I hated you. Sorry.'

Daniel shook his hand, listened to him and said:

'I forgive you. You had every reason to think that. That morning I had meant to look for the place where the Tear would show me the Path. She (you know who I mean) stole a march on me and blanked me out. She must've gone... there.'

'You haven't got the Tear?' whispered Martin soulfully. 'How are we to leave, Daniel? You haven't changed your mind, have you?'

'I can't change my mind, Martin. When I was coming here, I had all sorts of ideas, but I said to myself, "It's the first step that matters. You'll consider the next step later on." The first step is to put the journal of my granddad in this pocket. It's been its refuge ever since I laid my hands on it. I'd been reading it when I'd gone to bed that night, and I'd left it on the bedside nightstand.'

'It's still there.'

Samuel came out on to the porch.

'Dan's back, Uncle Samuel.' (It could be seen from the way he said it that Samuel's life had been one hell all through the guest's absence—facing a nephew who had no time for the treacherous world.)

'I did say he'd be back. Welcome, buddy. Be our guest for as long as you wish. Or else be partner ranger.'

'Thanks. I'll consider it.'

'Uncle Samuel, Dan's hungry. You are, Dan, aren't you?'

'Haven't had a bite since morning.'

'Hasn't had a bite since morning,' Martin echoed for Samuel's benefit.

'I'll rustle something up immediately.'

'Dan?' said Martin without giving vent to his thought.

'There's a buddy. When he has his fits of dread, he tries to hide away. When he reaches the limit, something's triggered in his head and he sees the entryway to the Path.'

'Nonsense: it can't be true. Anything goes as said. I have faith in you. I have faith in the Tear: I had Her in my hand. I'm not prepared to have faith in any old loony. Don't, Dan, either, and keep your secret under lock and key.'

'I followed him tonight and got there. So it isn't nonsense.'

'You mean it's our chance?'

'Yes and no, Martin.'

'Why not?'

'Dread lies in wait for loners. If we are by the side...'

'I see. How did you, with him?'

'He never saw me; I did half of him, and held on to it.'

'Look, Dan. What about me frightening him? I may have been born for precisely that?'

'Come on in, Daniel, Martin!' Samuel called loudly. 'Dinner's on the table.'

'We have to consider it thoroughly: he's hiding in his cellar. But dinner first: I'm ravenous.'

. . . When the words in the ranger's lodge felt they were tiresome while the emotions forgot all about their brio and went their sundry ways, Daniel opened Danby Bushtunts's journal to one of the eight pages that held the secret and read... in the sole language it could be read:

*Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning*

*To ashes wordcircle's burning.*

*Natan*

'Sorry, Leely, I'll restore the sacred Word to Dorlief. I won't be able to restore you, though.'

. . . At the same hour of the evening that Daniel was nearing the lodge of the ranger and his helper, but a day later, Martin crossed the threshold of Daniel's house. They had decided not to put off their departure for Dorlief and try to make use of James's unique ability.

'I'll go in and send an SOS to James. Will you come with me or stay here?' Daniel asked Martin (who had become crestfallen, withdrawn into himself the moment they entered the city).

'I'll stay here with my barkycrook thoughts.'

'What thoughts?'

'I don't like anyone. As I was riding about the city and looking through the glass, I saw a face, and another... also eyes, and I was so depressed I no longer felt like looking out... And thought you were a traitor.'

'Do not concern yourself...' Daniel hastened to say but found nothing worthy of an addition. He would not tell lies for his or Martin's benefit the way poor teachers do.

'Do not concern yourself is a mere disclaimer. But I need nothing. You ask, I answer. Go, Dan. I'll stay here awhile.'

'Okay. If you feel hungry look in the fridge in the kitchen.'

There were two messages in the inbox that he could not but open: one was from Andrew, the other from James. Daniel hesitated for a few seconds: which one to begin with. One option was to begin with Andrew's and get it done away with in order to find out how James was doing and arrange a meeting, and then...

Daniel opened the message and read: 'Hi, Dan, and goodbye. I'm trembling all over my weak essence. Father's pointed a gat under his chin, walking about the rooms and begging mother to come back. But she won't. And I don't want to know what'll happen. I'm going for good. That's that, Daniel.'

The message had been written at two-fourteen in the morning. But it was just a possibility that... The fingers shuddered: they were poised over the characters back of which there just might be words capable of stopping James. At that moment Daniel felt for a certainty that his soul was at peace...

When the wave of emotions abated, he went to the living room to see Martin.

'Martin?' His voice was all atremor.

'Are you all right, Dan?'

'James is no help, Martin: he's gone there to stay. And there's no other chance. Nor was there. It was just fancy.'

'Stay, Dan!' Martin hollered. 'We aren't budging, are we? We aren't?'

'We can't budge.'

Martin's countenance had somehow changed: he clung to the idea that had occurred to him.

'Dan, you said yesterday you couldn't change your mind. Now you say we can't budge. You're merely echoing me, meaning nothing, nothing of what I mean. You say that not just because it's us, because we're so cool? There's another reason, isn't there? I can see there is. And I'm asking you: Is there another reason?'

'I answered your question then; I answer it now: There's a reason... an overwhelming reason. I've got to take the journal, my granddad's journal, to Dorlief. I can't but do it... Swear you won't let on if you learn the main thing.'

'I swear.'

'Held in the journal is the Word, the sacred Word. It's there to save the Dorliefans.'

'Cool! So cool, it's worth living for. Even for one like me. I wish I could have a look.'

Daniel produced from his pocket the book and opened it to the right page.

'Here.'

Martin peered his only eye at the words he could not understand.

'This—'

'This is the sacred Word. It's in the Dorliefan language.'

'Do you understand it?'

'So will you, too, when you're there.'

'I will?'

'Don't fret: you'll open the journal and read it. Just as I did. And Matthew.'

'Read it in our tongue,' Martin asked returning the journal to Daniel.

'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning  
To ashes wordcircle's burning.'

'Cool and incomprehensible, though. Keep it.'

'From now on, we'll keep it, both of us. We both are Word Keepers... There were eight of us for starters. Five left. Now... only two for now.'

'So it isn't for nothing that we've been in practice,' said Martin as he patted the bag on the chair seat next to him.

'What's that you've got?'

Martin produced his stone and bounced it a few times on his palm.

'It's a cobblestone,' Daniel said bewildered.

'I'll mark your calling it names, and so will you... What next?'

'You go to the kitchen next and delve in the fridge. I'll try another tack.'

'Is there?'

'Not strictly speaking.'

'Okay, try it,' said Martin with a smirk.

Daniel went back to his room and opened Andrew's message: 'Hi, Daniel. What's new? How's Leoely?'

'Bigger off!' Daniel exploded. He punched in: 'Leoely's dead. I've total recall. The bead's lost irretrievably.'

A new message from Andrew a minute later: 'Dear friend, I'm sorry. Dying to know what you've recalled apropos of the bead.'

Daniel could not miss out on the chance and wrote as he thought back to Martin's recent game: 'A tradeoff: my mind-boggling information in return for your bead.'

Andrew replied: 'I've told you before and I tell you now: the bead's of value scientifically. It's in a secret lab, not in my pocket. What you suggest is crazy. I must remind you of the word you gave me. Honor it.'

Daniel wrote: 'I also mean its scientific value. When I gave you my word, I remembered nothing. The thing is: this knowledge doesn't belong to me alone. I've no right to share it with anyone. So I renounce the word I gave you and will only disclose the secret in exchange for the bead with you attached (not the other way around, considering the importance of the bead). This is a mutually advantageous condition.'

Daniel smiled as he read Andrew's reply: 'Of all the brazen cheek! If Danby Bushtunts were alive, I'd squeal on you to him. I'll consider your suggestion.'

While Daniel as looking through the other messages, Andrew's other one arrived: 'Daniel, let's take a fresh start, meeting at the same place and treading the same path. We'll look in each other's eyes and try to argue our point as grownups. Agreed?'

Our path, grownup arguments... tricky, Daniel thought. It would hinge on the hypnosis of the first meeting... and the scholar guy's iron-clad logic. I'm supposed to be a wimp according to his scenario and let on... The strange thing is that he's not too sure. What's the upshot? Could the Tear be removed from the lab under some pretext? Or is it just a trick in the game he's up to?

Daniel wrote: 'Sorry, Andrew, but no. Yours is scientific research, mine's exclusive information on the bead. You're the better judge of how to treat me: as a grownup argument or as a teenage visionary.'

What else do I tell him to whet his appetite? Daniel thought and added to what he had written: 'Answer yourself how you look at the youth from the Grizzly Rocks from on-high as a grownup and established scientist. You might then be able to entrust to me your bead and yourself. You have my word you won't be sorry.'

I wait for five minutes—then off to the kitchen, he told himself.

Suddenly there was a shrill cry from the kitchen... Sitting on the floor there was Martin. His hand covered his left eye, his right, full of fright, stared at Daniel. Daniel could see that Martin wanted to tell him something but had to gain composure first... Finally, he spoke falteringly:

'I don't often go to look at myself in the mirror, you know... No, you don't. How would you? I mean, I came up to the mirror to look at myself... I hadn't done that to admire myself in a long time, you know...'

'Stop beating around the bush. Out with it.'

'Look what's wrong with my eye,' said Martin and pulled his hand away from his face.

'It looks all right. I mean, nothing's changed. What's up, Martin? Can you explain quietly, in so many words?'

'I *am* quiet, but it's broken up. I looked in the mirror, and there it was, broken up... and so was the head. I landed on my ass with fright. And covered the eye with my hand, afraid that my brains would pour out. Only to think that the mirror had broken up and sprayed my face with splinters.'

'Martin, the mirror's in one piece; look for yourself.'

'Not another word, Dan: I'm ashamed,' said Martin in a low but strained voice, and the right side of his face was warped as if in an effort to look like the left, and this petrified warp and the warped eye let on that he was fighting off his weakness that had become manifest: he hated being afraid—and was afraid.

'Not another word,' Daniel echoed and looked away, aware that a look from the side would only make things worse.

'Better tell me how's our chance which isn't there.'

'We're still there at the moment. There's a man, a physician. He's got a Tear. His lab has. They're researching Her. As far as I could understand, they know nothing as yet. To cut the long story short, we need the Tear; they need information about Her. That's the upshot.'

'Let me think.'

'Have you eaten?'

Martin did not reply.

'Let's go think in the kitchen.'

'Let's go hence—anywhere, if only the kitchen.'

'The café, then? It's called The Last Chance.'

Martin smirked.

'Aren't you afraid, you joker, you, that I'd eat somebody up?'

. . . Martin and Daniel sat in the kitchen drinking coffee with wafers and thought hard.

'Couldn't he be lured over there with a ruse? Impress on him the idea of experimentation and all that jazz. That's what he needs, come to think of it, rather than relying on people's stories. And rob him of the Tear once we're over there.'

'Rob?' Daniel echoed (the unexpected suggestion embarrassed him).

'Rob. Lest he take an army to your Dorlief there. You don't want that, do you?'

'Martin, understand: I've got to deliver the Word to Dorlief. I've decided to break the Dorlief law and take you there. And I'm justified in doing that: you've rescued me.'

'I can't deny that.'

'But we haven't got a Tear while Andrew Flickbow has. The army hadn't occurred to me. But I know: sooner or later, they'll uncover the secret in the lab or elsewhere. Suppose he agrees to go with us. We can't get to Dorlief any other way. But I can't use force to rob him of Her. It's his Tear and he's won the right to Her. I say that because I happen to know a thing or two about the man.'

'Sorry, Dan, but your reasoning is that of an earthling, not a Dorliefan. I'm sure this physicist of yours wouldn't think twice before eliminating you on his way to fame.'

'What about options, smart aleck?'

'We might arrive at some if we try... You might tell him you'll write a paper for a scientific journal and supply facts repudiating his priority. How's that for blackmail? What it takes is telling.'

'That's bluff... On the other hand, as the grandson of a renowned astrophysicist, I might...'

'That's precisely my point.'

'Are you a forester or what?'

'Let's email him right away.'

Five minutes later the message was ready: 'Andrew, how would you like a story entitled *The Secret of the Turquoise Bead* to appear in a popular science magazine over the signature of Danby Bushtunts's grandson. I mean the priority of the discovery?'

'Wait a mo, Dan, don't send, it won't do,' Martin had his doubts. 'It's occurred to me that if we had a video of the experiment, it'd be a boon, but we have no Tear—so no video.'

'And Andrew knows as much,' Daniel chimed in to give weight to the doubt.

'He'd laugh it off saying, "Impostor," or some such. We'd better send this write-up into oblivion, not to leave evidence of our folly to the earthlings.'

'Shit, Martin! I clicked the wrong option!'

'What d'you mean, wrong?'

'I clicked "Send."'

'What you do next is write a paper for the magazine,' said Martin jokingly on momentum, and faltered, aware it was out of turn, and both fell silent: it would cut no ice.

'Look, another message for you in your inbox.'

'I'd say: for us,' Daniel objected.

Andrew had this to say: 'I can only take it as an unfortunate joke. Do you have the first idea what a scientific discovery is all about? Little did we think when first we met that the bead that had brought us close would be the bone of contention between us. Think better of it.'

'Think better,' Martin echoed wagging his forefinger. 'No less. We'll have to reply to this...'

'This' is good enough,' Daniel cut in.

'Be good enough to reply to this, or shall I?'

'I'd better do it myself. I reply: 'I know what a discovery is all about because I've made one. My memory was restored to me yesterday, and I made one. Who cares whether it's scientific or otherwise—it's yet to become a formula. The main thing is it's mine. Not for mankind as a whole: the price is too high. To repeat, Andrew: I need a bead for that.'

'Dan, this smacks of being cool—send it.'

'We're on.'

\* \* \*

Martin's facetiousness of the day before was replaced with gravity. The friends munched in silence the cheesecake Daniel had just brought from a shop that had become their haunt. At last Daniel broke it:

'What makes you so sullen, ranger? What ails you? Any ideas?'

'How are you for ideas? Or did you send the last of them to your physicist?'

'It was yours as far as I can remember. I got one though at night straight from the living room.'

'So did I, and it's still buzzing in my head.'

'Shall we swap them? If only piecemeal.'

Martin replied with a smile:

'It's the merest of morsels, but bags you first.'

'What about simultaneously? The idea in a word. On my count of three. Is it a deal?' Daniel suggested.

'Done.'

'One, two, three. Eye!' Daniel shot.

'Mirror,' Martin managed within the same second.

'Do you know what happened to Matthew when he saw the portal to the Path through the Tear?'

'I can just about guess.'

'I'll tell you anyway,' Daniel went on. 'You may guess wrong. You landed on the living room floor in fright; he landed on the grass in the lawn. That's the difference.'

'D'you mean I saw the entryway to the Path in the mirror?'

'I'm fantasizing because I have to get to Dorliel by all means. I'll fetch the microscope to test an idea.'

Daniel was back a couple of minutes later.

'It's mine, the one I used in my school days. Just face the window: I'll look in your eye.'

Daniel was riveted to the eyepiece as he adjusted it to see what was in Martin's left eye socket, searching in the bundle of blackness for anything but blackness... Martin was frozen, waiting...

'I got it. I got it, Martin!' Daniel murmured as if in contact with something arcane and fearful of losing it... and again: 'I got it. I got it.'

'If you say "I got it" once again without telling me what it is...'

'It's a microscopic... turquoise... Tear! It's inside this blackness... It could indeed be an invisible speck from outer space that found its way into your mother's womb, with your ill-starred eye in the way.'

'Shall we go to the living room... to the mirror?' There was resolution in Martin's voice. 'What do we care for the blackness thing?'

They made for the mirror in the living room. Daniel stood a bit to the side to leave Martin alone with his reflection.

'Stand the way you stood yesterday.'

Martin slowly moved to the mirror. If you take fright again, you'll get it hot, he mentally warned his reflection. You get me? He stopped at what looked like the same distance from the mirror which made the invisible warp manifest; he had a strange feeling he could not put his finger on. Looking with his sighted eye at the reflection of his left one, Martin started moving his head ever so slightly to the right... He suddenly took his hand to his left temple and clenched its wrist with his right one to help it manage the...

'Da-an!' Martin murmured in rasping tones (Dan came closer while staying back and to one side and saw the mirrored Martin, his face a lump and violently trembling). 'Da-an, I can see a rift... It hurts... hurts. You see it?'

'I don't, Martin,' Daniel murmured and stood by his side. 'No, I don't. Not from here. No, I don't.'

Unable to stand the pain, Martin dropped on his knees... The pain abated and he got up.

'I think it's the entryway to the Path,' he said. 'Now we have no need of your physicist.'

'And a good thing, too. But we must make sure. What the mirror does is reflect the rift that opens up for your Tear. D'you see?'

'You mean, the entryway was not in front but back of me?'

'Looks like it.'

'Let's test your version,' Martin suggested in impatience. 'What are you looking at me like that for? I'm all right.'

'What if it gives you pain again?'

'I'll stand it... to turn the tables on the physicist.'

Daniel stood with his back to the mirror as close to Martin as he could; Martin was facing Daniel.

'This was the spot,' said Martin. 'Now look for the rift. My eye's at your service.'



'Thanks, but you should have said: my Tear. You're now a Tear owner. For your information, in Dorlief, it's only Keepers that are entitled to wearing Tears. They can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Okay, back to business.'

Daniel leaned forward, peering into Martin's left eye.

'Nothing as yet. Try turning your head to the right, but ever so slowly... Stop! I can see it. It's the entryway.'

Martin recoiled.

'It hurts, doesn't it?' asked Daniel.

'It's subsiding. Write to the physicist to say we've no need of him or his Tear.'

The boys went to Daniel's room. A Letter from Andrew was waiting for them.

'Open it,' Martin said impatiently.

'What if he's accepted our conditions?'

'If he brings his Tear, let him come with us. We'll play by ear. Open it, don't procrastinate.'

Andrew wrote: 'I trust you'll see reason today, and we'll come to an agreement. My suggestion: your information or, as you choose to call it, your discovery. On my part, see the attached file.'

Daniel opened the file—and jumped up to rush out of the room seemingly to take the news to all the Daniels in residence in the house:

'Alive... alive... alive!'

Looking out of the file at Martin was (Isn't she a beauty!) a girl. He could hardly pull away from those green eyes before Daniel was back.

'Martin, Leuely's alive!' he declared in wonderment and joy.

'Who's Leuely? I know nothing about her except that she's very beautiful.'

'Didn't I tell you?' Daniel was surprised. 'She's a Dorliefan. She came to fetch me. When I went to buy a pie, she was spirited off. I know now who it was. Just imagine, Martin, I thought she was dead. They called me to say she'd jumped off the sixth story to her death.'

'Who called?'

'A woman, allegedly from the immigration service. A pack of lies!'

'He's a bigot, this physicist of yours...'

'He isn't mine.'

'He's crazy. He's prepared to do anything for the sake of a discovery.'

'You're right. But Leuely... I'll disclose everything to him.'

'Bugger him. He'll come with us.'

'Martin, I don't care whether he does or not so long as I get my Leuely back. You can hardly know what she means to me.'

'The stinker must've figured it all out. You can't possibly call the police: she's from a parallel world. No papers. And she speaks an incomprehensible tongue, doesn't she?'

'Yes... We'll have to reply to him... What makes you silent?'

'Give me five minutes, Dan.'

A minute later Martin sat at the computer and wrote: 'Andrew, I agree. Come to my place, Leuely and you. Put on your hiking things, get some food and

drink to last you two or three days. I'll point out the place where the bead works. You'd better take it along to see everything with your own eyes.'

'Shall I send it, Dan?'

Daniel nodded approval.

It took Andrew two minutes to reply: 'Taking a flight with Leoely tomorrow morning. Will be with you by eleven. Can't collect the bead from the lab as I've already repeatedly stated. Leoely's happy to be able to see you again. Don't think ill of me: she's been my guest, not my hostage. It's been nothing but scientific quest on my part.'

'The rascal,' Daniel murmured.

'The rascal will get his due, Dan. I'll knock him out the moment he shows up. We'll be away when he comes to.'

'No, Martin: I gave my word. The main thing is Leoely's alive.'

'If I had a girl like that...' Martin said tremulously, stumbled at his fancy, paused downcast and was back to reality: 'Then we'll take him along, lest you be sorry if we don't. And not another word of that world. Is it a deal?'

'It is. Is it?'

'What d'you mean?'

'Well, just is it?'

'Okay, it is.'

'Then off we go to the place where it all began... where a missing Dorliefan lived his whole life—Natan, alias Danby Bushtunts.

## Chapter Seven

### 'If it isn't the end, it's a beginning'

Everything was ready for departure by half past ten the following morning. Parked next to Daniel's house was the SUV of the ranger of his acquaintance (Martin had called his uncle late the night before after the friends had spent some time at a place that would not let them go from its breathtaking clutches). To help matters, it had been decided that Samuel and Martin would wait in the car. So Daniel had to kill the intervening time all alone.

At last a taxi pulled up nearby and he stepped forth to meet Leoely and Andrew. Leoely was wearing jeans, an aquamarine blouse and sneakers. Andrew had a weighty backpack in his hand. Daniel gave him a curt nod at three paces on the go, saying:

'Andrew.'

'Hi, Daniel,' he replied with overtones of friendliness for Leoely's benefit.

Daniel then talked to Leoely (in a language Andrew did not understand):

'Hello, Leoely. My dear Leoely. (They embraced.) I missed you... an awful lot. As you see, we can talk rather than using sign language: I've had total recall. We'll soon be back in Dorlief, our Dorlief.'

'In our home?' she asked in Daniel's language and smiled.

'In our home,' he replied.

At Martin's request, he did not make do with just a greeting but fell to talking in Andrew's presence. It was to be bait for him. Had there been no such request, he would still talk nineteen to the dozen, spurred on by the feelings. But Martin had requested that and had every reason to believe the proceedings were going on to his plan.

'Dan! I'm happy. You can't know how happy I am, I am happy to see you and know you're Dorliefan again. But Dorlief... You said we were going back to Dorlief. But how? How can we leave this world without a Tear?'

'Don't fret. It'll soon be settled: you'll see. My friends are in that car over there. We'll leave with them in just a moment... to get back to Dorlief... Martin!' (He had emerged from the car). 'Martin, come here... Martin, meet Leoely.'

'How are you? Sorry to have made you think back to barkycrooks.'

'Come off it, Martin, I won't translate this. I did ask you, didn't I?'

'Translate it: I only said what I meant to.'

'What did he say, Daniel?' Leoely wanted to know. 'He said something to me.'

'He's worried his face might have frightened you... Here are his words: "How are you? Sorry if I made you think back to barkycrooks."'

'Don't let that worry you, Martin,' Leoely said gently looking into his face.

'Dan?'

'She asks you not to call yourself a barkycrook. Just relax.'

'I had a dream of you the night before last,' Leoely went on. 'I know now it was you. Your right eye was the color of your sky while your left was turquoise. We were crying for some reason, you and me.'

Daniel translated what she said word for word, and a vague question was hung up between her eyes and Martin's eye.

Andrew stood stock-still a pace away from Daniel and Leoely. He seemed to be looking into the distance... unable to make out objects, soaking up the unearthly sounds that captivated his mind and left no room for anything else. In those moments he was in a state of wonderment (Martin's bait had worked).

'Martin, take Leoely to the car. I won't be a moment,' said Daniel and addressed Andrew: 'Andrew, we go in that SUV with the ranger and his helper. They come from the place we have to get to. It's a long way. One of them will be our guide on arrival. Join us if you don't mind.'

'Daniel, how can I mind what I've just heard?' I'm entirely in your power.'

'You'd better ask yourself then if you'd like to talk in that language.'

'Ask myself? I've been asking myself the question whose answer is the same as the implications of your task's solution.'

Leoely waited for Daniel near the car. They let Andrew through ahead of them. Daniel turned to his house and said in a low voice:

'My native land, goodbye.'

. . . Leoely told him on the way that she had lived in Andrew sister's house all the while. Angela had been very kind, showing her 'pictures' of their life, shopping together with Leoely (she had chosen Leoely's clothes) and watching 'animated pictures' at night. Andrew had visited them. Each time he had asked about the Tear showing her the sketch she had seen in Daniel's possession. Such

tenacious curiosity had alerted her, and she had stonewalled pretending she did not understand him.

The ride soon lulled her and she resigned herself to the World of Dreams. Andrew whispered in Daniel's ear that she had spent a sleepless night and had not slept a wink on the flight, fearful. Daniel had to postpone until a vague 'later on' the question that had haunted him ever since his memory was restored to him: why Thornton? What was that weird rebirth all about? He resigned himself to his thoughts that blended into drowsiness by and by, and he did not know how much time had passed when he heard suddenly:

'Daniel?' It was Andrew's voice. 'I'm answering your question: I'm dying to speak Leely's language. There, take it.'

Daniel accepted the turquoise bead... and it took him a minute (he was surprised as much as moved, unexpectedly) to say:

'I'm much obliged to you, Andrew. You must know: they call this a Tear, and as they keep Her, they safeguard their peace.'

'There's nothing like the scientific truth for me,' Andrew said under his breath and added, 'I don't know which prevails in it: the light or the darkness. Forgive me for Leely if you can.'

Leely opened her eyes, saw the Tear and whispered just one heartfelt word:

'Dorlief.'

. . . What is it... ? I seem to be floating over the Earth... Feeling so light... as if I had no body... Once, in my childhood, I've experienced this. I remember the nurse's hands habitually playing with the syringe as if it were a doll. The needle sniffing at the skin, my life plunging into the barrel—and I lose track of myself, space and time... only to have them restored to me in a moment. I'm ceiling-high, involuntarily watching the proceedings. I see myself, two women in white coats as they bend over me...

I'm soaring on-high even now... The SUV is on its side by the side of the highway, totaled. The truck across the lane, damaged. Vehicles traveling either way stop. There are two ambulances and two police cruisers. There are people fussing all around the car... Who's that? Samuel. This is Samuel: he's having his head dressed. He's waving his hand, explaining, violently, insistently—he's not himself. Two people—paramedics—leading Leely with their arms tucked inside hers. She's hollering, looking back, trying to get back to someone at the car. She's hysterical... The medicos lean over Martin. I can hear his heart start. The Earth can hear the throbs and shudders in time with them; and so does the air. His right eye's open but it's unseeing... Unseeing... Another two bodies... Andrew. The black bag's for Andrew. And another bag... for... no, no, no! What're you doing? No! I'll be back! I'll be back... like that time in my childhood when the blood from the vein... Sounds, sounds, a cacophony of sounds like that time in my childhood...

'He's come to,' Daniel heard a feminine voice. 'Come along please, but no more than three minutes. Take this chair.'

'Martin,' it was the voice of the ranger, like that time in the clearing.

So Martin's alive, Daniel thought as he opened his eyes: Samuel was sitting next to him. Daniel looked left and right. There was no one but Samuel and himself on the small ward. Where's Martin?

'How do you feel, sonny?' asked Samuel looking him right in the face.

What the hell? thought Daniel and feebly uttered the question he had got no answer to: 'Where's Martin?'

'You're in hospital, sonny,' said Samuel, unfazed by his nephew saying Martin rather than 'I.'

Daniel closed his eyes... and felt he had closed just one eye, the right one. He opened it, only to realize... that only his right one was an eye. He closed and opened it again.

'What about the rest?' he asked though he feared in those seconds the answer to that question the most.

'Andrew and your friend Daniel died on the spot.

A cold shiver ran over Daniel's body. Good God, let this not be true! Let it be a dream. Let it be the devil in Samuel's guise, confronting me in the World of Dreams, he hollered inaudibly.

'I was at Daniel's funeral,' Samuel went on. 'So was his girl, Leoely. She lived with us after the crash. She wailed day in, day out, bemoaning him. She left after the funeral.'

'The turquoise bead?'

'She took it as a keepsake.'

'Good.'

'His parents came for the funeral. They're archeologists. Good people. Only pity they saw him rarely.'

The tears rolled down Daniel's right cheek.

'Have a good cry, sonny. It was a good friend you found in the forest... only to lose again. Have a good cry.'

'Our backpacks?' asked Daniel mindful of the globes Martin and he had taken a flight to his birthplace for, his earthly birthplace (he also looked back to Bushtunts's journal, but decided Samuel had no way of knowing about some sort of book).

'I took everything home. You'll sort it out yourself when you're back.'

'Your time's up,' said a feminine voice interrupting the visit, though Daniel did not mind: he wanted to be alone.

'I have to be going, Martin. I'll be back tomorrow. I'll find out what you can have and bring it to you. The forest misses you, sonny. Well, see you,' said Samuel and paused for a second in the expectation of his nephew's reply. But Daniel did not—could not—utter a word.

. . . Time passed. For Daniel it was dragging into nowhere. He lay on the hospital bed, feeding himself with the truth: truth for breakfast, truth for dinner, truth for supper. It's the end, the end of everything... Time was you wished to get lost; your wish's been granted: you're lost. You can talk yourself into the world being the same with you in it. You can see it, you can hear it, you can touch it. You can find or think of a new dainty morsel of this world. But you are unable to condition this world; you can't cheat it, this materialistic, essential,

seeing world. It doesn't see you, nor ever will... either with Leely's eyes or with Matthew's or with Christine's. You've let them down. You used to be a big hunk of their lives. They'll find out soon, and there'll be blackness in their souls. Leely's had a taste of this, as the ranger who calls you his sonny said: bemoaning you, eating her heart out. Now Leely, Matthew and Christine will eat their hearts out for you... 'Danny Bear, though small, must know: there's no dicing with death,' as your granny once said. You wouldn't heed her wisdom; you've been calling for it... Then there was Martin; Leely appeared out of nowhere; you became a Tear-owner again. And you no longer wanted to get lost. You felt Danad and passion in you. But you'd been calling for it... and the verdict was: you're no more. It's the end.

. . . Daniel had lived in Samuel's house, in Martin's room for four days. For himself he was still Daniel; he went on perceiving the outside world and thinking as Daniel. It was just his body that was not his. It had assimilated to his will, which was prone to lay demands not so much on life as on the imagination, just as Daniel had adjusted to that body, naturally strong and charged. For Daniel and Martin to come to terms with each other, he began by buying new jeans, three T-shirts, a denim shirt and heavy-duty boots, to hide his new face in the forest the way Martin had.

Samuel remained for Daniel a stranger, but he responded to him with consideration and called him Uncle Samuel. And Uncle Samuel was pleased as Punch when he followed him on his rounds of the forest for the first time after the accident.

Late at night on the fifth day Daniel drove up to the house he had said 'My native land, goodbye' to. He took the key out of the plain secret place that was in fact a hollow half of a brick to the right of the entrance, let himself in and entered the living room... to make sure he was Daniel. Everything was even dearer to him than usual. He went into his room and turned on the light—looking at him from the wall was the Daniel he had often seen in the mirror. My face, why have you forsaken me? I never wanted to swap it for another. Your eyes are a part of Dorlief, a part of those nearest and dearest to me. They are dear to me. Now I've got eyes... Wait a minute, wait a minute, Dan. He returned to the living room, flicked on the light and stood in front of the mirror. You've just spoken of another eye, somebody else's eye. But this, left one... It's a Tear instead of that other, the first one, accepted from granddad's hands. Your eye is a Tear of Shwarrawsh veiled in darkness, in a bundle of blackness... through which you are to take the Word. This eye, same as your former eyes, links you to Dorlief. I know what I am to do now... Now, which am I to be, Danad or Martram? Should I reveal myself or not? I know who'll answer this question. He headed to his room again. He pulled out the table shelf. Thank God, the journal's here. Thanks, my dear forefathers.

Daniel folded it on itself the way the Daniel that looked down at him from the photo had done and put it in his jeans pocket. 'Cohan's business card. You're the one I need now, Job Cohan. You'll tell me who I am.'

He sat in front of the computer and switched it on. 'I've a feeling that nothing has happened, he thought and cried. But Leely's alive; she's back in Dorlief. Of course, she is; and that's the main thing. I wish you knew how much I

want to see you. You can never so much as think it now because I'm dead and there's no me for you, nor ever will be. I'll see you yet and look, look, look. And I'll be happy. And I'll wish you happiness. And pray that God grant it. He got another account and wrote: 'Hello, Mr Cohan, Daniel Bertridge has recommended you to me. You may know he died in a crash. I have to get an appointment with you ASAP. It's to do with Daniel, too. Yours sincerely, Martin Garber.'

The reply arrived ten minutes later: 'Considering this is Daniel's last wish, I'll see you tomorrow at 10.'

. . . He had put the sleepless night behind him. The street... looking as if it were not there at all. The door...

'Hello. I'm Martin Garber.'

'What's wrong with your eye, young man? Please take this chair and speak,' Cohan said curtly.

Daniel felt good at once: the voice, the gaze, this office from his past life filled with the energy of this fiery man that went to his soul, recharging it.

'I was born like that. Lightning killed my mother a few minutes before I saw the light of day,' said Daniel nothing daunted.

'You wrote to say Daniel Bertridge was to do with your visit.'

'Yes, that's the case. But for him, I wouldn't have come.'

'How old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen?'

'Seventeen.'

'Never seen an analyst before?'

'Never.'

'Very good. I feel your current problem's not to do with your eye. I'm listening.'

'Doctor, I'll tell you without preamble. I'm here with a specific request. Will you see your way to granting it? Please induce me into hypnotic sleep the way you did Daniel, the objective being finding out who I am.'

'Just like that? Rather forward of you. Let's talk first and find out what you know about yourself. You do, don't you?'

'Just this and that. What's important to me is not what I know about myself, not the facts of my life but what eyes can't see or biography reveal. And I wish you'd answer my question—who I am—without going on my talk about myself. You'll realize what I'm talking about if—'

'Very good. I'll play by your rules, meet your challenge... if you would. Just read and sign this.'

Daniel filled out the form and signed it... only to cross and black out his signature.

'What are you doing... Martin? What's wrong?'

'I... got it all wrong.'

'Take another one.'

... Daniel sank in the familiar chair. In the lilac twilight of the air above him the turquoise snake appeared. He smiled involuntarily.

'Martin, concentrate on the snake and my words...'

About half an hour had gone by.

'Daniel... Daniel, rouse yourself.' (Daniel opened his eyes). 'Is this what you wanted to hear from me, Martin or Daniel?'

Looking for a beginning, isn't it, doctor? That's what I'm here for.'

'I answer without reservations. Daniel and Daniel again. Were I a PT instructor, I'd say Martin. Since I'm Jacob Cohan and you're Daniel, let's go and have coffee.'

Like before, both accepted from the doctor's assistant's hands a cup of coffee each. Nearer the end of the recovery procedure—coffee drinking—Cohan asked Daniel:

'Why didn't you call me? It was total recall, wasn't it?'

'Did you learn it in the course of the session?' asked Daniel out of mere curiosity.

'As I venture to pump for information, as it were, including of intimate nature, I stick to the point. That's work ethic, young man,' Cohan spoke swiftly as if afraid to be late, his injured feelings choosing the words.

'Sorry, doctor, it never occurred to me—'

'That's justification enough,' Cohan interrupted him.

'I must say I didn't call you because the beginning you'd advised me to look for has proved to be what I've no right to speak of to anyone.'

'Corporate ethic,' said Cohan, mollified, 'it can't be helped. Very good. Well, we've finished our coffee—back to our muttons, business that is. An old friend of mine has a practice in Africa, in the South African Republic. We correspond—that is to say, he writes on, I hardly ever write back. In the course of nine years' work, he's had two cases of reincarnation, similar to each other. Cardiac arrest, near-death experience. A quarter of an hour later (in the second case, over twenty minutes) no cerebral response. There's the moment of truth for you: one life cut short, to all intent and purposes, the other, waning, has just a chance of getting a donor heart. But no, the medicos go on with their efforts to restart the heart: the relations are breathing down their necks. Suddenly the heart starts pumping again (it happens). The amazing thing is that the brain catches on as the instruments unflinchingly suggest. The medicos are shocked... the way I was on your account today. Although we aren't supposed to be by definition... Some time later, the body—come to life—confronts my friend to say it's somebody else's, the result being that that's the case. The curious thing is that in both cases a white man's soul had planted itself in the body of a black... I wish I knew why I was telling you this. Probably essentially because I don't know what to tell you.'

'Doctor, do you think I should disclose my identity?'

'God forbid!' Cohan cried. 'That would land you in a load of shit that you'd never extricate yourself out of. Tell me, as Martin Garber... are you okay? Finances, prospects?'

'No problem there.'

'Very good. The eye? Who cares? They don't feel like looking? They needn't. Martin's seventeen; he's bright. Let him delve into study. But on no account should he reveal his identity: some might think you a schizo; others a wacky liar. I'll warrant they'd look the other way and detest you. Like any other living creature, man's given to keeping albinos on the sidelines. Your relatives, that is



Daniel's, would look askance at you for the rest of your life, because a Daniel like that is not on their cards. Would you like all that?'

'I got it, doctor. Thank you. Thank you for your time,' said Daniel, rising.

'I've a request to you, Daniel. Could I describe your case to the "African"?''

'Why, sure,' Daniel said without hesitation.

'Always yours to command,' said Cohan stretching out his hand. 'All the best.'

\* \* \*

Late that night Samuel was expecting his nephew on the porch, nervous despite his conditioning, and all on tenterhooks. The moment he heard the footfalls from the still trunks with the path to the lodge among them, he rushed to meet him... Daniel could see at a glance that, on top of his welcome, there was something else... something that would not let him stay in place, something urgent. And his guess was right.

'Hi. How are you, sonny? Something keeping you late?'

'I'm fine, Uncle Samuel. Are you?'

'We've company,' he said under his breath. 'He says he's our Dan's friend. He's been to the cemetery at his grave.'

'Matthew?' Daniel blurted without thinking.

'So you know him?' Samuel was overjoyed.

'Dan mentioned him.'

'I see. He means to collect some globes. He said he was acting on behalf of a Margaret. D'you know her?'

'Yes, she's Daniel's granny. Daniel and I visited her.'

'I know nothing about that. What globes? What Margaret? I told him to wait for you. He's in Dan's room now, looking for a scrap book... probably the one that was on his table. Don't be cross with him: he looks like a good guy. Okay, run and meet him.'

The last remark was very much to the point, for Daniel could not wait to see Matthew...

He opened the door to the room and said, with Danby Bushtunts's diary held out:

'Is this what you're looking for, Matthew?'

'It certainly is. Let me have it.'

Daniel gave him the book.

'You Martin?'

'The same. I've been kept posted,' said Daniel nodding toward the journal, joviality on his countenance (he was experiencing a surge of joy, forgetful of Matthew's pain at the loss of his friend, forgetful of him being Martin, rather than Daniel, for him, a stranger who could irk him for having come Daniel's way). 'Dan told me... about Dorlief, about the Tear, about the Word.'

'I can see as much. I also need the globes, and I'll be going: I've overstayed my welcome,' said Matthew, barely hiding his feelings.

'We'll set out tomorrow morning.'

'What? What did you say? You're going... together?'

'Dan promised. And I'm going to Dorlief.'

'I warn you: don't rely on me, I'm not taking you along. If you're intent on going, go—but without me... if you can find the way.'

'Why not?'

'Because Dan is no more, and I feel awful. Not that you'd understand... adventurer. Better let me have the globes.'

'Matthew, do you hear what I'm saying? Dan promised to take me to Dorlief,' Daniel intimated with his tone that he had caught on to Matthew's tone of 'his truth.' He said and repeated, enunciating each word with feeling: 'Dan promised to take me to Dorlief. Do you hear? It's anyone's guess who's to be beyond the most.'

Matthew came closer to him.

'Now you listen to me, you sticky plaster, and try to get the situation straight. Dan's no more. I've lost him, and so have you. But... I lost my best friend; you lost the pass beyond. You insinuated yourself into his confidence to get a pass to Disneyland. I'll tell you in secret: Dorlief is no Disneyland. That's for one thing. And for another, I'm not going to be your pass, no matter your words. Now let me have the globes, and I'll be gone.'

Something had been thrown in Daniel's soul: he could no longer stand Matthew as he was and let him stay the same Matthew through vampire, blood-sucking omission. Without stopping to think of the implications, of the impossibility of cancelling out what he said, he let loose the motto, his voice quavering:

'Mat, most of all at this moment I'd have liked you to say, instead of all that, "I know one thing for sure: I'm with you."'

It was all Daniel could do to keep his balance (thanks to Martin) at the punch on his jaw. But he kept it and repeated:

'This notwithstanding, I'd still like you to say to me as before: "I know one thing for sure: I'm with you."'

'You freak, if you don't shut up, I'll make mincemeat of you!' Matthew said, beside himself for fury and despair, and hissed through clenched teeth as he spread his fingers ready to get at Martin's throat: 'Better spare me the sin of manslaughter and bring me the globes, you sneak. Dan had meant to take them to Dorlief. I'll do it now... for I touched those globes when Dan and I were kids this small. And that's that.'

'Both you and I touched them the day after you rescued me from being drowned in Our Lake. Even if you kill me, I won't renounce the fact that I'm Daniel Bertridge, your friend, in the body of another man, one that had been disfigured by lightning.'

Matthew could hardly stand listening to that. Daniel continued:

'It's the truth: Martin Garber is a freak as you put it. But he also rescued me from death and I couldn't but let him in on our secret... It all ended abruptly. We were traveling here all together: me, Leely, Martin—'

'I know that much: Leely told us about it.'

'You don't know, and neither does Leely. I, Daniel Bertridge, my soul, the soul of Daniel Bertridge, my mind and my memory go on living in the body of

Martin Garber. You don't know how I felt when Samuel gazed at me in the hospital and said "Martin" to me, when I found myself immured in his body. I didn't mean to injure your feelings with an admission, didn't want you to feel awful, worse even than when you learnt about my death, because I've experienced this preternatural truth, this repulsive truth.'

'This divine truth, Dan,' said Matthew, knelt and wept. Nor could Daniel contain his tears as he caught the bug.

It was a long night, voluble and happy. Daniel told his friend all that had happened, beginning with the early morning when he, tempted by Leely's image, snuck out of Malam's home. He then spoke about the past, with two boys, Dan and Mat, living next door to each other and went on pearl-diving to make their feelings quaver and intimate beyond any doubt in those moments, minutes and hours that they were still Dan and Mat. Then they recalled... and recalled...

By morning they had decided they would not disclose the secret of Daniel-Martin to anyone in Dorlief—for the sake of Leely, for she had given her heart to a different Daniel, to other eyes, to another smile and another voice. How could she be made to look for, and think up, all that in a new Daniel? But they decided he would give his name as Danad in Dorlief which for everyone concerned would be in memory of the late friend.

'Okay, Mat, I'll go catch some sleep, and off to Dorlief in the morning.'

'Right, I'll go catch some, too. I'm drowsy as it is: my eyes keep closing.'

Daniel turned back at the door.

'Did granny tell you how to find Martin?'

'Cybil.'

'Oh yes, she knows and remembers everything. It's a good thing you've found me... Us are us again. This will take some getting used to,' Daniel said as he traced his face with his palm.

'I have.'

'And one last thing, Mat, I'm forgetting: how's granny? On the other hand, I shouldn't have asked... She's as well as can be expected.'

'She doesn't wear all too well,' said Matthew and cast down his eyes.

'What a pity Christine's away: she'd go and comfort her; she's got an aura unlike anything. I've experienced it.'

'I called her yesterday, Dan, and talked to her mother. She hadn't heard from her yet. She gave me her phone numbers. She'd found a scrap of paper on Chris's table with my mobile number, Margaret's and one more. After our sudden departure she'd called my mother, and your granny, but there was Cybil to talk to. She'd been trying to find you.'

'What number? Let me take a look... I know the number: it's Timothy Bail's. He was the one who told me why my granddad died and gave me his diary.'

(The copybook sheet Christine's mother mentioned when Matthew called her had mug sketches in pen with captions under them. One of the mugs had 'sweet smirk' written beneath, and 'shelved tranquility' under another one. Matthew and Daniel were sketched as manikins carrying a spade between them, with a query over its cutting edge and the word 'bastards' under the manikins, suggestive of her bitterly ill feelings. She thus gave vent to her emotions as she

was looking for them. One mug had an innocuous caption and thus stood out: 'the last best hope.' It referred to Timothy Bail. Also there was another sketch: something shapeless with three exclamation marks by its side and the deciphering caption underneath: 'a ball of paper.')

'What's this supposed to mean?' Matthew was roused on hearing of Timothy Bail whose telephone number Christine wanted for some reason.

'He seems to know something about Chris. I feel he's the one who knows. I'll call him.'

'Oh Dan, it's nighttime. You were going to catch some sleep, weren't you?'

'I've an idea: the so-called sonny will go and rouse Uncle Samuel, and he'll take us to my place. We'll sleep on the way. I'll then call Bail on a fresh head. We'll leave our gear at home and take a taxi to him. What do you say, Mat the Vital?'

'Off to Dorlief from your living room?'

'That's right. We'll learn where that invisible door... I had no idea of at nineteen... leads.'

'I wish we could land in Malam and Semimes's living room.'

\* \* \*

The names of Daniel and Christine were like magic for Bail.

'I'm yours to command at any time,' he all but hollered excitedly into Daniel's ear next to the receiver.

The street door was opened by himself: he must have been looking forward to seeing them.

'Hello, Mr Bail. My name's Matthew Feather; this is my friend Martin Garber.'

On seeing Martin's face who was a bit behind, Bail visibly shuddered, recoiled and whispered, with his hands, palm to palm, cupping his mouth:

'My dear Lee, you have genius... you have spooky genius... you have clairvoyant genius.'

Then he neared Matthew and, holding him by the shoulders, addressed the guests:

'Pray not another word, friends... to spare you your "excuse me" for insincerity.'

'What the hell do you mean, insincerity?' Matthew could not contain his indignation. 'We're Daniel's and Christine's friends, and Martin told you as much on the phone. You didn't hesitate to agree to the meeting.'

'Wait a minute, young man,' Bail said gently. 'Pray don't fly into a passion. You got me all wrong. I probably led you to misinterpret my words. There's no doubt: you're Daniel and Christine's friend: I know as much from her words. Excellent. But pray don't talk about your companion whom you've introduced as Martin.'

'What's this raving?' said Matthew, bewildered, and looked at Daniel.

'Wait, Mat,' Daniel said and addressed Bail: 'Please go on, Mr Bail.'

'Not just yet, my friends. If you don't mind, we'll go on in some forty minutes and keep silent the while.'

The friends glanced at each other, and Daniel said with a shrug:

'Suit yourself.'

'Wonderful.'

. . . Bail stopped the car near an old apartment building whose façade was all the worse for wear. The crumbling staircase Matthew and Daniel ascended trailing Bail, the chapped banisters and walls—everything was forbidding to the touch and eye and suggested poverty and lack of care. They stopped on the third floor.

'I first used this door when I was fourteen to immediately find myself in the time-space that I can only describe as the happiest in my life. This way,' said Bail and let the guests through...

The walls and ceiling seemed to be plastered with old mirror fragments. Each fragment reflected somebody's or something's... life or death as the case might be... or life as it was followed by death... or death as it was followed by life... Fragments, fragments... fragments of what eyes could see or skin could feel; what intuition could capture and the imagination touch up; what a soul, a pure soul, a morbid soul could perceive...

Bail dropped not a single word for a while: he was waiting for the eyes of his guests to have had their fill and, most importantly, for one of them to see, as if in a mirror, his new one-eyed guise, with the other witnessing it and realizing why that gentleman had uttered the word 'insincerity.'

'Come, Dan,' said Matthew without a care for calling him by his real name. 'Look,' with a nod toward one of the pictures).

Daniel froze in amazement: a mirror fragment painted on the wall seemed to have reflected and captured the crash that had robbed him of his erstwhile aspect. And his soul yet again floated over the motorway, over Leoely, Martin, Samuel, Andrew, Daniel himself, over his body indifferent to the touch of life. And a close-up above—he would not have imagined anything like that before—but was now seeing, and it was not an optical illusion, for he could look and see and feel it: over the dead and the quick, there were two faces; one of them his, Daniel's, misty, with folds like those of gauze... acquiring the features of another's, Martin's, which were about to weave together into a coil of flesh, a living coil of flesh... And Daniel's eyes, as if presented by the folds of gauze, looking from beyond this world, and Martin's—one real, like a living reflection in a mirror, the only one that was real, with a soul the color of sky-blue; the other like a sinkhole on the mirror sheet, like a black abyss lost beyond the looking glass.

'Now I know it not through your words alone,' he heard Matthew say and roused himself to address Bail:

'So you knew right away I was Daniel?'

'What do you think? Things like these,' Bail waved a hand around the walls, 'are stamped on the memory once and for all. I saw these crazy and wonderful creations as a kid dozens of times. They both drew and frightened my mind and my feelings. Yes, I realized it as soon as I saw you. I seemed to see your former face, without which there's no other, your present, face in the mirror fragment. Now I feel... or I think I feel your character... the character of Daniel, not Martin. Thornton's quick portraits, always accompanied by verbally scratching the

original's soul, have taught me to distinguish the soul's stirrings behind the facial features.'

'Mr Bail, excuse my insincerity,' said Matthew in an admission of Bail's just remark on meeting him.

'Our insincerity,' Daniel cut in.

'Oh no, young people, there's nothing to excuse: you'd been driven by circumstances,' said Bail gently and used the word to change the subject: 'Yes, circumstances... Thornton called me about a month ago. I'd come to terms with Mo and Lee having gone their separate ways. Would you believe it? He was calling to say sorry... for the last meeting. (You will remember, Daniel, my telling you and Christine of that ill-starred meeting.) He was sorry he'd lost Lee somewhere on the way, the part of himself that he held dear. And I was pleased when he told me he would restore Lee to himself. He said he was going to the Crossroads to appear before the Supreme Court. I don't remember the particulars and to what extent what he said was figurative.'

In the car on the way back Bail was the one to recall and speak of the main thing, of what had brought Daniel and Matthew to him.

'I don't know where to begin... I think in those troubled times Christine and I had become friends. Your abrupt and secret disappearance made her rush hither and thither (there's the coercion of circumstances for you), and that brought her to yours truly. Obviously, I'm also to blame for Christine's disappearance—let's face it—for she'd got lost in much the same way as you had.'

'Lost?' Matthew echoed, puzzled and anxious.

'Isn't she traveling? We've hoped that—'

'Wait a mo, Daniel, I'll try to explain everything... Christine told me at the time that you and your friend, with a spade between you, were off to unearth that thing, the one that had taken me to Danby Bushtunts. I had the ill fortune to guess and blab out that you'd left for the country that's not on the Earth's map. I then introduced to her my schoolmate Godfrey Leif. The thing is that two months previously his son had vanished—vanished in a strange, incredible way, by stepping off a Ferris wheel cage into the air, into nothingness.'

Daniel and Matthew exchanged glances: they had thought of the same thing. Bail went on:

'The boy's kid sister and Godfrey's girlfriend witnessed it. Can you guess what the boy had in his hand and what helped him go?'

'I was about to ask it,' said Matthew. 'Or, rather, verify my guess. It's clear now.'

'They called it a gaping stone. Fortunately or unfortunately as the case may be, Christine got the second stone that used to belong to his sister.'

'And she left? The same way?' asked Daniel (the insatiable, tenacious idea, the sort that perseveres the more you chase it away, feeding on anxiety and fear, had found its way into his head, as it had into Matthew's, that kept whispering: 'Chris is neither here... nor there.')

'Right in front of my eyes. I arrived at the last minute. Her cage was nearing the invisible door. I cried, called to her... I don't know why. It might have been a fatherly feeling.'

'I think, Dan—'

'As do I, Mat: we'll use the Ferris wheel to leave. Mr Bail—'

'Timothy,' Bail interrupted Daniel. 'Christine had seen a friend in me and called me Timothy. Sorry but I expect you to do the same.'

'Timothy,' Daniel stood corrected with ease, 'will you show us the spot?'

Bail grinned and said:

'Only after you've had dinner with us. It's my condition. I've promised Cathleen and Jenny, my wife and daughter, that we'll be having company today.'

'We've got to go back to your place, Dan,' Matthew was recalling, 'to collect the globes and make the Ferris wheel before the rides close down.'

Timothy made a U-turn with the words:

'You'll make it before they close down. I promise. But promise me to be my guests, too, however briefly.'

'It's a deal,' said Matthew.

Little did the friends suspect how overjoyed Timothy was to take this chance of being of service to Daniel and his companion. It meant to him rather more than it actually did. In actuality, it only meant going to collect the globes. To him, it was yet another chance of making amends to Danby Bushtunts's grandchild. He had been on that guilt trip for quite some time.

\* \* \*

The huge wheel seemed to be weary of the day of monotonously carrying portions of human curiosity, and now that the other, remote, wheel, reddish with the work of heating and lighting was about to set, it turned with stubborn laziness. There were three people in the cage, only two of them looking forward to the moment and impatient of time's leisurely progress. The third had a lot of patience with the minutes, burdened with the onus of seeing people off: the pretence of quietude and the closeness of leave-taking. There were also two backpacks in the cage. It had taken their owners a quarter of an hour to convince the ride attendant that those were not parachutes and show him the contents in support of their arguments.

Bail fidgeted at last which was a telltale sign, sat up and looked around, matching what he saw in space with what was imprinted on his memory from the last time.

'Get ready, friends, we're almost there,' he said in undertones, wary of attracting chance witnesses, even though the cages on either side were vacant.

Daniel produced the Tear from its leather pouch (he had found that pouch suitable both in shape and size and asked Samuel for it. Samuel had kept in it his flask of hydrogen peroxide, something an experienced ranger should always have on him).

'Get down to it, Dan, lest we miss on it,' said Matthew.

Daniel got up, turned to the cage's left side and took the Tear to his eye. Matthew and Timothy held their breath... Daniel abruptly recoiled, pressed his temple with his left hand and groaned briefly and shrilly. He extended his right hand with the Tear to Matthew.

'Take Her, Mat,' he said with his teeth clenched.

'Are you all right?' Matthew asked, composed.

'Sit down, Daniel,' Timothy said in mincing excitement. 'Sit down, dear. Are you in pain?'

Daniel sat down on the bench. He rode out the pain and then answered:

'It's what I told you about: Martin's in me, his left eye.'

'Are you in pain?' Bail repeated.

'Not too much. That's strange, for I was looking with my right.'

'It must've been what's in your left one,' Matthew guessed.

Timothy looked wonderingly at Matthew, and then at Daniel, at his left eye.

'There's a gaping stone inside,' Daniel explained with a smile.

'You saw the entryway to the Path, didn't you, Dan?'

'We'll do a parting lap and be gone.'

'Let me be the first while you hold on to my backpack. Hold tight and follow.'

'Never fear: I won't be lost.'

. . . The boys shouldered their backpacks.

'Bye, Timothy. Thanks for everything,' said Daniel, and they shook hands.

'You're a friend; I mean it,' said Matthew and shook Bail's hand, too.

'I've a request: should you meet Chris, remember me and my family to her (Jenny has formed quite an attachment to her). And tell Andy Leif, should you have a chance, that his father and kid sister miss him a lot.'

Matthew, followed by Daniel, stood on the seats. Daniel suddenly recalled that recently despair had made him say to himself, 'You're no more: it's the end.'

'If it isn't the end, it's a beginning,' he thought out loud. 'I'm going to Dorlief.'

'End... beginning... I know one thing for sure: I'm with you... Dan, I can see a crevice. It's getting bigger. Hold on to me. Go!'



## **Part Seven**

### **Returning to Dorlief**

#### **Chapter One**

##### **No One Knew**

All the while Daniel, after rousing in the Non-world, had been looking for the beginning in the tangled ball of his fate thread, the life of Dorlief and environs—that had for centuries followed an invisible course which made it now quiet and balanced, now turbulent, unpredictable and scary, now exhausted and doomed to death—had taken a sharp twist.

That long night in Samuel's lodge when the words and tears had helped the friends to regain one another, Daniel had learnt from Matthew that a new wave of deathly scare from the Emptied Lake had swept over Natlief, just as the impregnable stronghold erected by Palerard forestmen was ready to stand in their way and the fierce fight that had taken place between Malam and Trozuzort. But neither Matthew, nor Daniel, nor anyone else knew about the three conversations that had taken up so little space or time but had played for Dorlief and its neighbors such an important part.

The first conversation had taken place half a year before Daniel, Matthew and Semimes had met in the Harshid foothills the humpback in a black cape.

On the floor of the Emptied Lake hollow, near the tower that pierced with its top the grey veil, the two were standing: Zusuz and Tronort (they had not yet become a whole—Trozuzort—but were on the way to). Two nutheads had taken to them a forestman, torn and tortured: his clothes and flesh had intermingled and stuck to the bones, hanging in reddish rags. His stare was parting company with life. The other day the nutheads roaming on their Lord's orders the nearby mountains and forest had run into the fiery-haired on the Hamruth slope and flung a net over him. He had been stalking an ibex and, in his hot pursuit, had lost all sense of danger. It was a lucky strike for them—a forestman from the Natlief stronghold.

Zusuz's head movement and stare suggested the question to one of the guards. The guard shook his head: no. Then Zusuz addressed the prisoner:

'Two days and nights of pain haven't untied your tongue. That has been the pain of the flesh. Let's see, fiery-haired, if you can stand the pain of the soul as well. I've flown astride my gorhoon over the fortress—through whose walls you watched out for invasion—on a number of occasions. Never once have I spied a loophole: its structure looks impregnable. I've also heard of the robust adhesion of the stones in its walls erected by forestmen, those offerers of worthless bric-a-bracs. My men have had the ill fortune to be bogged down and die a dreadful death in the quagmire that is the earth around it. I ask you again: Is there a flaw in the Natlief fortress? Now listen to my condition before answering.'

The forestman tore his eyes away from the ground and looked into the humpback's blackness of the eyes.

'Bring three of the latest women prisoners,' Zusuz ordered his men.

'What about this one?' asked one of them.

'This one? What can he do to us? It's his strands that are fiery—his warrior spirit has expired. Let him stay.'

Tronort stood by making a sketch of the prisoner. He had a heap of quick portraits—not faces, merely eyes. One could guess right away: those were prisoners' eyes, there was nothing in them but the prayer to be gone forever; those were the craving to die for the sake of the only one, the eyes of jealousy, the eyes of Sapha; those were the eyes looking into the eyes opposite to them that you had no hope of staring out, for your legs gave way...

'I hate to make a prisoner of war depend on his heart,' Zusuz said to him.

'What's he to depend on?' Tronort asked.

'On the beastly love of life and honor—whichever outweighs.'

'What about your warriors? I suppose beastly love of life's strong in them.'

Zusuz smirked and said:

'Life provides the opportunity to kill, and that's their love of life. Their love of life is their love of death.'

The nutheads were leading three girls whose steps were hindered by fetters. As they approached, the space possessed of dread and despair seemed to quaver and shrink.

'Let them be taken away,' said the forestman.

'Take them back to the cave,' said Zusuz giving the prisoner to understand that he was prepared to honor his part of the bargain in word and in deed. 'I feel the fiery-haired wishes to speak.'

'Zusuz...'

'What is it, forestman? Speak.'

'Why wouldn't you be the Natliefans' good neighbor? You have power. No one has power over you. All around there are woods, rivers and lakes. They provide a lot of food. What's there wanting? You aren't a blood-thirsty monster, are you, that smacks its lips on sniffing blood?'

'If a dog or a ferling is prepared to serve you at a whiff of meat or a lash, it doesn't necessarily mean you've got power. Lord Tronort will agree, won't you?'

'It's hard not to,' said Tronort only to explain, 'What this bouquet's wanting is a whiff of an idea that would captivate thousands and repel thousands to give the claimant a halo of Lord.'

'What idea urges you on, power claimant?' asked the prisoner with a smirk that was hard to detect in his eyes (unless it was Tronort's pencil that had captured and dropped it on to the face).

'My idea's plain and devoid of lies. I told myself long ago: "Get inside and subjugate." Man has essentially to be above others whether in his craft or in hunting or in sketching. They'll be subjugated and follow me—to subjugate and be above others.'

'Perhaps, you're obsessed with the ideas of being above them all because your stature has always made you look up to them all? But I know a man of your kind who gets along with his neighbors and with himself. His name's Malam.'

'So much for your gibberish, forestman,' said Zusuz (there were firmness and tranquility in his voice: he had passed his soul's quavering to the stick and the stick had passed it on to the earth). 'We're about to see whether you get along with yourself. Listen to my condition: tomorrow morning you'll disclose the flaw in the Natlief fortress, something that would let us overrun it with few losses. If you say no, the girls you've just seen will be ravished and torn under your very eyes. Should I detect perfidy in what you say, they'll be in for the same lot.'

'The Natlief stronghold has no flaw: our best stone masons and warcraft experts have given it of their very best. Kill me but touch not the girls.'

'Don't be in a hurry to die, forestman. You have until tomorrow. I'll let them go if you stumble upon a bright idea in the blackness of the night.'

'My bright idea is in the word you won't understand: Palerard.'

'Take him away,' Zusuz said to the nuthead guards, 'and tie him up so he wouldn't be able to kill himself.'

The conversation resumed in the morning.

'Do you have many words in your verdict on the Natlief and Cradlief girls, fiery-haired?' 'The stronghold doesn't have a flaw,' the forestman said in a low, strained voice and paused: it was unbearably hard for him to turn thought diluted with darkness into word.

'Men, get the women prisoners here!'

'Tarry awhile, Lord Zusuz. He will speak up,' said Tronort. 'His features are disdainful of himself today. Look.' (He showed him a fresh sketch: the forestman's morning eyes).

'Hmm. The pencil lines do betray it,' Zusuz said and called after the guards:

'Wait! Not so soon.'

'Our stronghold is flawless,' the forestman repeated. 'But those behind the walls... do have a flaw... not that of a warrior but that of man.'

'Speak up.'

'Fire and stones. Packed and tarred bales once set alight would make them flee the heat and the fumes. Fleeing means disposing of. Scores, hundreds of catapults must day and night continually hurl the four tiers of the fortress around the tower with fiery bales. But that's merely attrition and a ruse. Your men's forays would have to pursue the same objective.'

'Speak up.'

'The main thing is the stones, hollow stones. Hundreds of them must be hurled at the fortress along with the fiery bales. Not to crush the walls—they can't be—but to fill with them the four tiers. There'd be no heat or fumes in them: there'd be no point in disposing of them outright. But your warriors would be there in the hollows, waiting for their chance. When the fortress is tired, you should pretend you're retreating, weary and in need of rest. As soon as both parties go to sleep, there'd be a signal to charge that'd make the defenders cling to the battlements and peer into the darkness that'd crawl with the charging Emptied Lake warriors. It's then that the bastards of the darkness would crawl out of the hollow stones.'

Zusuz roared with laughter.

'I've told it all. Kill me now,' asked the forestman.

'Let the three women prisoners go. Not a hair must shed off their heads,' Zusuz told the guards and, having given the forestman a moment of the triumph of life, crashed his stick on him, thus ridding him of the suffering that his soul, the soul of a traitor, would have felt the next moment.

The intervening time between the conversation and the siege of the Natlief stronghold was over half a year.

Neither Ragogar, head of the stronghold, nor Tlanalt, head of the Dorliefan force, nor Ewnar who headed the forestman troops could grasp why the ten thousand-strong force of darkness, close enough to storm the fortress, had been inactive four days. Nor could the barkycrooks of the Emptied Lake grasp it. They waited and waited, incessantly growling their obedience to the will and to a foretaste of blood. As did the whole of Natlief assembled on the premises for sheltering the villagers, waiting in obedience to hope.

Sapha's hurried and vicious tread as she ascended, burning the stairs, made the gorhoon writhe bodily. The door to the Trozuzort room was flung open.

'I could hardly wait, Sapha. I've been at a loss.'

The last stair behind her, Sapha held out her hand and said:

'The foreign Dorliefan's gone and no longer in the way, Lord. I tore this off his neck.'

Trozuzort's eyes shone and he enveloped with his fingers the feather and its silver chain.

(The barkycrook woman could not bring herself to part with the secret turquoise eye that had spirited her off from the alien World, saved her life and was now her new passion. She suppressed that part of the story.)

'Crush them, Lord!' She had invested the words with all her spite, mindful of her dead and unavenged father.

'Go to your room, Sapha and have a rest,' said Trozuzort, and hissed in the same breath, filling his sounds with fury: 'Sus!'

The fury grew as Gura, the barkycrook commander, had the stones with the deadly payload inside hurled at the Natlief fortress, followed by the burning bales.

Three nights and three days did the space between the troops of darkness and the tower run riot. On the fourth night the barkycrooks retreated a thousand paces back, and there was a lull. The ravaged space, exhausted and impotent, was lost in sleep.

When the wild call of the gorhoon invaded their sleep, the people were stunned rather than frightened. The next moment, the stones that were all over the floors of the tiers around the tower sent forth hundreds upon hundreds of barkycrooks thirsting for human blood, much as viper eggs might hatch vipers. And a massacre ensued, followed by a violent assault...

Three quarters of an hour later, Ragogar, Ragogar the Violent whom no force could stop and who would stare out the stone humpbacks had to admit to himself: 'It's all over.' Before knocking out the secret beam that would bring the fortress down in its entirety and being buried along with the barkycrooks under the ruins, he said to Ewnar:

'Friend, take a score of your men, open the secret hatches and lead away the Natliefans. Farewell.'

That was what came to pass. The Natliefans (with two of the three women prisoners whom Zusuz had freed), having left the fortress, fled to the Shiwun Forest through the tunnels and on to Dorlief: it had not been for nothing that Malam had told Ragogar to take the rectangle that stood for the fortress elsewhere on the map drawn by his stepson. ('It isn't just the walls erected by warcraft masters that can save lives but also the invisible paths we've been endowed with by nature.')

Fallen in action were: Ragogar, Brarb (his stepson), Tlanalt, Novon (Lutul and Falafy's son) and nearly all the defenders of the Natlief stronghold. That was the end of the conversation between the Lord of Darkness and a forestman prisoner.

\* \* \*

At the beginning of next day's tittle-tattle, the air in front of Lutul and Falafy's house suddenly erupted with excited and continuous ferling calls that stirred up the masters. Lutul, followed by Falafy, rushed outside and gasped: wobbling to meet them was Geg. He was dragging the left leg and had his head to one side. The brown spots on the chest and wings bespoke an angry flame.

'Geg darling, come here. What's happened to you? What trouble was that?' Lutul was saying in a sweet voice, stroking his head and neck (his hands were a giveaway of his quavering heart stirred by an anxious thought). 'What's the news?'

'Lutul, don't loiter, open it,' Falafy urged him.

Lutul opened the pouch attached to the collar and removed a Tear with a trembling hand. The Tear was yellow and orange, similar to Falafy's, and he handed Her to the Dorlief Keeper.

'Is there no message, Lutul?'

'There is,' he said as he unfolded a sheet of paper and read: "'I'm about to bring our stronghold crashing down. Sorry to have failed to save Novon and everybody else. Ragogar.'" Falafy dropped on her knees, pushed her face into the ground and wept. One could hear through the sobs:

'Novon, our dear sonny...'

Falafy arrived at Malam's like one lost. Never before had he seen her like that. Time alone kept the dreadful moments of Shwarrawsh ravaging the cellar with the little Faly inside and nearly robbing her of her wits. Malam realized that the despair in her eyes was not just the pain of a mother's heart that could not be allayed—it had a foretaste of the trouble ahead for Dorlief. He would not pump her for information, but led her to the living room, seated her into a chair next to the fireplace and waited, saying in his mind's voice: 'Give your rue to fire.' The fire did melt away her petrified soul and bring her back to life, and she handed Malam the sheet of paper with Ragogar's last words as she roused herself. He mouthed the writing, went outside and sat down on a porch step. He tapped his stick on the tramped ground, closed his eyes and peered into the unseen distance.

When he heard his visitor in the doorway, he said without turning his head:

'Falafy dear, we have to banish the soul's upheavals with works, lest they affect Dorlief. Dorlief will look to you and Gordrog, our surviving Word Keepers, for guidance. My stick has heard the brisk and scared footfalls of numerous crowds—in six days, the Natliefans will emerge from the Shiwun Forest. We have to receive them. Let's have a general assembly and guide the people in the ways of hospitality. My stick has also sensed other footfalls, firm and in step: Trozuzort's six thousand-strong troops will by morning be approaching Dorlief.'

'Malam dear,' Falafy cried, bewildered. 'How come?'

'We had too much reliance on Natlief, and the barkycrooks have outwitted us: while wave after wave rolled on to the stronghold from the Emptied Lake, yet another of Trozuzort's wave rolled on to Dorlief on another course.'

'How are we to receive the refugees from Natlief, Malam dear, if we don't know if we'll remain alive?'

'What has to be done, dear Falafy,' the Carroty continued, unmindful (seemingly unmindful) of her doubts, 'is to ask the forestmen for assistance and amass a troop by nightfall. Once we do, we should march for the Shiwun Forest and wait, crouching by its edge. I'll immediately depart for the place that my bitubular will indicate. It seems to me it has heard its kind and is eager to meet it. Now make haste, Falafy.'

'Thank you, dear Malam. I'll do as you say. Pray take care.'

After sending Falafy off, Malam returned into the house and wrote a few lines for Semimes. It began as follows: 'Sonny, drop everything and follow me on the road to Natlief. I'm off to fight the villain you and your new friends met in the Harshid foothills. Now Zusuz has not only enlarged his name to Trozuzort but also combined the strength of two. To win the day without bragging and risk-taking, I have to throw in cunning on top of what my stick is capable of...'

. . . Four hours had passed out of the eight earmarked by the Dorlief clock's dial for night, when the darkness that had consumed the trail between the living and the dead villages was shattered by a belligerent cry that rang above its hoarseness:

'Trozuzort, I'm here to fight you as we fought as kids and teenagers... with a bitubular in the hand... without a care in the head... and caring nothing for bodily pain... the way Elle, our amber mentor, taught us! Command yourself not to hide behind the troops as I am not. If the Zusuz is still there in you, the one I used to know on the Hidden Side in the good old times... advance from your protection by three hundred paces. Let's light our torches and begin!'

Trozuzort raised his hand, without looking back, to stop the barkycrooks he was leading astride the gorhoon.

'I can hear you, Malam,' came a return roar fit to put a bear to shame and frighten the life out of the Shiwun Forest. 'I had to live this long to hear this call... for you to leave behind your goat in the care of your foster son who's half human... Here you are ready for a manly effort. I'm coming to meet you. Place the torches. I'll fight to kill. You've been calling for that!'

Semimes, who was crouching at the edge of the forest, tightly clenched his stick and his half-human jaws.

'You've had a resounding voice since you were a kid. I can hear this strength is still there. Let's see if your stick's as strong when welded with wrist and will,' cried Malam as he stuck two torches in the ground on his either side and lit them.

Soon Trozuzort appeared in the torchlight. He stuck into the ground and lit two more. Then he flung off his cape and said:

'You're a bit off color, I see, Malam. So you've decided to court death before seeing what happens to Dorlief, haven't you?'

Malam also took off his cape and pulled his stick out of his girdle.

'It isn't Zusuz's former aspect that I can see. So much the better, I think, for my bitubular will have no doubts in its deadly venture.'

Trozuzort pulled his stick in a rage.

'Burning in me today is the enhanced fire of Black Lightning. Beware, Malam.'

'I have to warn you, too: I've also doubled my strength. Beware!'

Both of them, looking into each other's eyes, tapped their sticks on the ground. The Earth, on receiving the two bitubulars' currents of unknown energy that had been released with the hands of two little humpbacked handymen, shuddered at the clash (Semimes clenched a shrub, fearful of being cast aside and found out), shuddered over and over again—the neighborhood was quaking, and some of the barkycrook party dropped down unable to rein in the upheaval. But neither Malam nor Trozuzort would let the other see their wobbly legs: both stood stock-still fighting the craze in them that had invaded with the earthquake. A few moments later, their sticks were hefted aloft, cut the air with a lot of swishing and started tearing it to pieces, the passion for battle in them... Trozuzort was advancing, Malam fighting him off. Each of the Lord of Darkness's strikes was deadly in its might. And each parry, each evasion of the Carrotty brushed death aside and cheated it. Semimes, who had been on the verge of letting his stick loose hundreds of times, was only checked by his father's words in the note, unable to disobey him: '. . . No matter how great your fear for my life, don't give in—join in when we are quite worn out by the fight.' Malam was advancing, Trozuzort fighting him off. Semimes could see that his father's charges were artful without being crushing, deliberately so. What's the strategy behind those feints? he asked himself and answered: There must be some.

By the time the pitch darkness high above the waning torchlight had abated to reveal the violet waves, the strength of both Trozuzort and Malam had been drained with each charge. But the adversaries kept on fighting like drunken bullies eager to prove their worth at any price; fighting in the face of shaky space—a sure sign of enough being as good as a feast. And still each strike might have been their last... Semimes was all eyes watching for the moment mentioned in the note. He could see: his father was getting weaker than his adversary, his charges fewer and not so forceful. 'Burning in me today is the enhanced fire of Black Lightning. Beware, Malam!' he mentally quoted the words of the villain; then Malam's words: 'I have to warn you, too: I've also doubled my strength. Beware!' Father meant my stick, he caught on: Don't let him down, Semimes the Conqueror. And just as Trozuzort's stick jumped up in order to come crashing on

Malam's head, Semimes's bitubular cut the ground, the neighborhood abruptly quaking. It took half a jiffy to distract the Lord of Darkness, but enough for the Carroty to fetch a daring one on Trozuzort's chest and fell him. The next moment Semimes was petrified with horror: a black lash spun off Trozuzort and soared lightning-like into the air, compressing the air and all around with mighty force. There were three of them dropping to the ground: Zusuz, Malam and... a man neither Semimes nor his father knew by sight—the one who had once come to the Emptied Lake to win unbridled power.

Malam had trouble getting up, assisted by his stick. He neared Zusuz, leaned over him and said in a feeble voice (not even Semimes could make out anything):

'I know you can hear me, Zusuz.'

Zusuz lifted his heavy eyelids, his look responsive to the question, and Malam was aware as to which.

'Yes, you're Zusuz again. Which makes things simpler between us: we go way back, and we used to hear each other's intents with our guts.'

'It's true, Malam,' drawled Zusuz in a whisper. 'I know even now what you're up to.'

'That you might, but, weak as you are at the moment, you may overlook something. So let's stick to the words for what they're worth.'

'Shoot.'

'As it happens, as warrior to warrior, I could do you in and take away your life.'

Zusuz winced: the truth was gall to him. Malam continued:

'I therefore appeal to you not as a warrior but as a former friend. I'm mindful of granting you life in return for time, Zusuz. Withdraw your troops forthwith to the Emptied Lake and give half a hundred days to me and Dorlief. And consider meanwhile what road to take.'

'I've taken mine following the motto: Get inside and subjugate. I'll still follow it. Those are my words to you as a warrior...'

'You'd have said: Kill me,' Malam guessed.

'... kill me. But I say to you as a former friend: Get thirty days, and expect no mercy from me. The power of the Emptied Lake will be wherever Sus can take me on its wings. Consider, you say, Malam? I'll tell you this as a parting gesture: Where's your visitor today? You've lost him, as you have your hope for a miracle. Let's part on this note.'

Malam had nothing to say to those words. It was the bitter truth: he had not taken good enough care of the Salvation Word Keeper.

'So be it: thirty days,' he said, turned about and staggered home, leaning on his stick and newly found hope.

(That was the second unheard conversation that saved numerous lives.)

Semimes took his time before he joined his father. As soon as the two humpbacks were without eyeshot of each other, Malam heard in his left ear the screech he knew so well:

'Father, why didn't you kill him?'



'If I'd done it, sonny, thousands of barkycrook footfalls would've been trampling the ground we're treading now. And another thing, Semimes, now you mention it: if I'd had it in my mind to kill him in battle, I wouldn't have resorted to outside help, not to feel ashamed the rest of my life.'

'As I followed you through the forest, I wondered what would become of that other one.' 'The black force escaped him under your very eyes, sonny.'

'I did see that viper.'

'It's up to him to decide with an unveiled mind which way to look.'

\* \* \*

There was a hard knock in the early tittle-tattle on the door of the house where Rablbary lived with her granddaughter Leoely. Leoely answered the door.

'Good tittle-tattle, dear Leoely. What a good thing you're in,' Lutul began, but one could see at a glance he had something important to say.

'Hello, dear Lutul, come on in.'

'Oh no, I'll only say my piece and go. As the man recently burdened with the care of the clock, I've been in the habit of checking from time to time whether it was all right.'

'Is anything the matter?' Leoely sounded nervous.

'It isn't the clock, it's what's near it,' Lutul said and hesitated.

'What's wrong, Lutul?'

'Now I've begun speaking I found my words uncouth and thought I'd bothered you for no good reason, dear Leoely.'

'Lutul, be so kind as to speak without doubt, if you've come.'

'There's a man near the clock... a stranger, weird... Could be a tramp or a traveler from afar. He's been on his knees for an hour or so, weeping with no tears or words.'

'I'll go to the square and see right away. You go home and don't worry,' said Leoely (the thought of Danad flashed through her mind for no good reason), saw her visitor off and ran to take a look at the strange man...

The moment she saw the stranger—from afar—the question or, perchance, an answer and a lively curiosity heated by the question arose, leaving her not a jiffy to hesitate. She came up to him and said:

'Are you the artist who sketched the clock for Faryraf?' (He raised his thought-tormented eyes). 'Pray arise: I find it awkward to talk to you like this. And tell me what your name is, if you can.'

The stranger arose and said:

'My name's Thornton, but I'm known as Tronort hereabout. What's yours?'

'Leoely.'

'Sounds fine... Your eyes are beautiful, too. Tell me, Leoely, how do you know the secret of the Dorlief clock? Is it Faryraf?'

'He's my grandfather, but he never intimated anything to me. We have sketches of clocks in our living room... your sketches. My friend Danad had spotted in them the artist whose pictures he'd seen before, in the Non-world.'

'Oh, I see. The grandson of that old man...'

'The old man's name is Natan; he hails from Dorlief.'

Thornton grinned and said in a low voice, feelingly:

'The placeless place. It's as simple as this, hailing from here.

'When a Dorliefan told me about a strange man at the clock, I somehow thought of Danad... not that he was the one at the clock, but thought anyway. Do you know anything about Danad?'

'Alas, I do and have to break the ill news. Sapha, maid to humpbacked Zusuz who lords it over the Emptied Lake, had given him a stone feather and a silver chain...'

'A feather? Did she kill him? Did she say so?' Leuely's voice, previously calm, was anxious and frightened. 'I gave him a feather of asnardat.'

'Must I repeat the words she uttered as she produced the charm?'

'I want to know the truth.'

'Sapha said Danad was gone and would no longer hinder the Lord.'

Leuely could contain it no more. She cupped her face with her hands and walked away...

She was ascending the steps to her porch when the thought that had previously found its way either as a question or as a vague answer was back at her with the word she had been echoing on the way: Gone.

Leuely found the artist on the same spot. He stood, deep in thought.

'Why are you here?' she asked. 'You were there.' (She pointed in the direction of the Emptied Lake).

He stood silent for some time, looking into her face all of an impulse. Then he answered:

'I'm here to feel the time the Dorlief clock tells... in order to find myself in this time. I'm henceforth going to the Crossroads.'

Leuely was struck by his last words. She could not bring herself to interrupt him, but her look was a giveaway.

'That isn't what you're wondering about. Out with it, Leuely.'

'What Tear have you got?'

'The Non-world?' Tronort was taken aback.

'Will you help me?'

'I'll take you to the Non-world and all the way to his home. But this won't bring him back, unless Sapha...'

'I want your word that you'll help me to find him.'

'Just his home, Leuely.'

'His home. And then you'll go to the Crossroads. I want you to go to the Crossroads and regain yourself.'

'I'll be as good as my word. I promise.'

Such was the third conversation in Dorlief's time-space that no one knew about.

## Chapter Two

### The White Room

Ozuard stood at the window, his gaze directed at the jutting crag that looked like a ferling's head and beak, waiting for the news. He had been waiting for the news of late. The guards showed in three Palerardians. Two of them were carrying a burden: an injured man was on the stretcher draped over with a gneiss cape. Seven days previously, wounded Efriard had been thus brought in. Ozuard, spurred on by a vague foreboding, came down and briskly stepped forth to meet the new arrivals.

They stopped level with him.

'Greetings, Ozuard. It's all over, I'm afraid,' said one of them.

'Greetings, friends. Who's the poor thing?'

'He isn't one of us, nor is he a villager, though he gave his name as Danad,' said the second one and hesitated. 'He's...'

'Go on, Gontear.'

'To all appearances, his father's a barkycrook.'

'I know Danad of Dorlief. Remove the cape,' Ozuard said, only to be fazed the next moment: the disfigured face, the eye coiled with the Worlds' darkness layer by layer, the burnt and bloodied body. 'This is not Danad. Why hasn't he been executed and is now here?'

'We were quite prepared to finish the barkycrook off: he'd wounded Gontear. But his lips whispered 'Palerard' and Ewnar told us to take him here.'

'I'll investigate on my own since this is the case. Take him to the infirmary.'

Estean was waiting for her father next to the street door to the palace.

'Who is it this time?' she asked tremulously. 'Do I know him?'

'He's a stranger... and not a man, not quite a man to all appearances. You know what I mean, daughter? This is a danger.'

'Yes, Father. But why did they bring him here?' Estean asked incredulously: each Palerardian had known as a kid that strangers were nonexistent for Palerard whoever they were.

'The word said by him made Ewnar doubt.'

'Palerard? Did he say Palerard?'

'Good guess, Estean,' said Ozuard with a smile and added: 'Also, he gave his name as a human one.'

'He comes from the Emptied Lake, doesn't he?'

'Yes.'

'How could he give his name as human? What name, Father?'

'Danad.'

'Danad?' she echoed the familiar name and could not contain her excitement (she knew that Danad had died in the Non-world: it was the secret Leoly and she had in common). 'May I look at him?'

'You'd be pained.'

'I don't frighten easily, you know: I've watched Efriard help Feltraur operate on the wounded on many occasions.'

'Pray wait till tomorrow. And I must warn you: he'll be executed if he's an enemy, which he is, most probably.'

'I know as much, Father.'

The next morning Estean headed for the infirmary, a two story building next to the chief Palarardian healer's abode. Feltraur allowed her into the room with yesterday's prisoner in it. She was confused on seeing his face and took her hand to her mouth as if afraid of her own words of the moving sounds that she might let drop and bother this creature. His head and shoulders were dressed, as was the rest of his body most probably that was under a light cover. He opened his right eye and fixed it on Estean. She thought that in a matter of those brief moments his morbid wistfulness was replaced with benignity. She neared him and asked:

'Are you Danad?'

He barely nodded in reply.

'But you aren't Danad.'

This time he shook his head.'

'You're funny though...' she was nearly calling him a barkycrook. She winced and thought better of it: 'Even though your face has the stamp of the Emptied Lake.'

The prisoner's eyes were glued to her. She felt embarrassed.

'Is it all you can do, nodding or shaking your head and staring?'

His eyelid dropped.

'Suit yourself,' she said in dismay and made for the door.

'Er...'

She thought he meant to pronounce her name, but overruled the thought as a mere figment (it could not be otherwise). Nonetheless, she turned to look at him.

'Can you talk? Or is it just "Er" and nothing else?'

'I'm a talking barkycrook. But I'm afraid of my words.'

Estean was startled: she was that much surprised to hear him speak. It struck her as welcome, his being able to speak, but she contained her feeling.

'You should beware of words under the circumstances,' she said. 'They drop on the scales of life and death... I'll be going: they only allowed me a brief visit.'

Estean went out and ascended to the top floor to see her brother. She learnt he would be able to go back to the palace and ran to tell the good news to her parents.

The next day Estean again opened the door behind which the prisoner was whiling away the time in confused thought. She was drawn, curious that the living eye of this Emptied Lake creature, unveiled by the shadow of the other one, was too human. And the few words he had uttered were anything but straightforward and seemed to be concerned with a secret, his secret.

'Did you miss me, prisoner?'

He nodded.

'Will you be afraid of words today, too?'

'What's your name?' he asked in his still weak voice.

'I thought yesterday you knew my name. All right then: it's Estean.'

'Estean,' he echoed... and his eye became moist.

Estean remarked the stirring of his soul.

'Does my name sound as bitter as that?' she asked pointedly.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

The prisoner closed his eye, paused and answered:

'I close my eye, say: Estean, hear: Estean... see the stones, multi-colored stones and feel like crying.'

Estean grew pale and creepy. She asked tremulously:

'Is there bitterness in stones?'

'The bitterness is in the memories of the stones that the fingers, gaze or words touched.'

'Don't, prisoner!' Estean cried and rushed out of the room.

\* \* \*

Another three days had gone by. The prisoner regained his strength by and by. The wounds healed and scarred. The burns, too, however grudgingly, yielded to the healing powers of Feltraur's unguents and slowly gave way to the cells of living flesh. Herbal infusions injected a burst of energy, making him feel life in himself and around him. He had twice gotten up and walked about the room.

Soon after breakfast, Ozuard's aide arrived to fetch him. He had been told to take the prisoner to the palace, to the White Room (it was on the first floor in the palace's left wing).

The aide came up to a door, opened it and said something in Palerardian to whoever was inside, and then addressed the prisoner:

'Go in: they are expecting you.'

The White Room was as good as its name—all white stone and a white rug underfoot. In the middle of the room there was a narrow bow-shaped table, with, near it (on the outside bulge), four white wicker chairs and four white sheets of paper and four black pencils of eiril. And yet another white chair inside the semi-circle of the table. There were white benches along the left and right walls. Standing next to the chairs beyond the table were four Palerardians in white gowns.

'Danad, take that chair,' said Ozuard, pointing to the chair in the center of the semi-circle with its back toward him. 'Pray sit down, friends.'

When everyone was seated, he continued:

'I'm Ozuard, Lord of Palerard. On my right is Ewnar, head of the unit that took you prisoner, next to him is Feltraur, our healer (you know him), on my left is Retowal, mentor to Palerard's young warriors. We are here to find out who you are, who your intentions and activities had been directed against up to the moment you were taken prisoner. You may answer our questions or stonewall; you may tell us the truth or hide behind lies; you may ask questions, lodge requests and call for witnesses. We'll collate the facts, the words and ideas and pass a verdict essentially to the effect of whether you live or die. Are you clear about what I've said, Danad?'

'I am.'

'You're not to leave Palerard in the course of the inquiry. You'll reside in the room next to the White Room. You'll be brought food four times a day. You may walk about the city and communicate to Palerardians should they so wish.'

Whoever sees you will be aware you're under inquiry. The white band you're to wear on your right arm will tell them as much. Do you understand it?'

'I do.'

Ozuard rose from his chair, came up to the prisoner, asked him to rise and put a white armband just above his elbow, fastening two buttons of stone. He then resumed his seat.

'Be seated, Danad. We'll now get down to the inquiry. You've given your name as a human—Danad. I used to know Danad of Dorlief. What do you say to that? (Ozuard's speech was even-paced and calm. There was nothing in it to smother the prisoner's will; nothing of a victor's superciliousness in his eyes.)

'I'm human. I also used to know Danad and assumed his name in his memory,' Daniel replied.

'Is Daniel dead?' Feltraur asked. 'How did it come about?'

'He didn't die in action... It was an accident.'

'How exactly did he die? We want to know the details,' Ewnar cut in (there were overtones of doubt in his voice). 'And where were you at the time?'

'I was by Danad's side. That's all I can say in reply to this question. (Daniel's impression was that he was locked in a vicious circle with no way out, even though the table in front was anything but closed and... disparate in the expression of the eyes focused on him.)

'We hear of a semi-barkycrook named Cruda who posed as Semimes, son of Malam. He, too, had found himself next to the real Semimes... to stick a dagger in his chest,' Retowal said with a smirk, exasperated that the prisoner would not reveal the truth.

'I didn't kill Danad; I was his friend.'

'Still, give us your real name,' asked Ozuard to give the prisoner a chance of sincerity.

'Martin.'

The Palerardians exchanged glances.

'So you aren't a villager, are you?' said Feltraur.

Oh, how Daniel wished he could say: I'm as much a Dorliefan as you're forestmen. But he remembered: when still *the* Danad, he had given his word to Ozuard to never tell anyone of Palerard.

'I'm of the Non-world,' he replied.

'It's the best policy for a semi-barkycrook of the Emptied Lake to pass for a visitor from the Non-world,' said Ewnar.

It flashed across Daniel's head: It's best to withhold nothing, not to land in a trap. This is no game. What must remain under lock and key is that I'm Daniel. Should I reveal my identity, no one would believe. And remember: Leuely should never know! But should I tell them I'm Danad of the Non-world?'

'Are you tormented by doubts, Martin?' asked Feltraur.

'I must ask each of you to refer to me as Danad. I've explained why.'

'So be it,' Ozuard made up his mind.

'I've just wondered if I could say that Danad is also from the Non-world.'

'It's a good thing you've told us that,' said Feltraur contentedly. 'But what made Danad return to the Non-world?'

'As far as I know he had friends and business in the Non-world,' Ozuard chimed in.

'It so happened that Danad was captured by a barkycrook. Not to land in the Emptied Lake, he used a Tear of Shwarrawsh, and both of them found themselves in the Non-world. The barkycrook would've killed him, if I hadn't chanced to be nearby. I chased and fought her.'

'Her? Did I hear you right? You said you chased her, didn't you?' Ewnar was alerted.

'Yes, but I hadn't grasped outright it was a woman-barkycrook. I knew nothing of barkycrooks until Danad told me what was what.'

'Stay, prisoner,' Ewnar cut in again. 'Isn't she the woman-barkycrook that was felled with an arrow by one of us?'

'It's her.'

'But you nearly killed one of my men, defending her. Did you fight her in the Non-world only to defend her at the Emptied Lake? You've landed yourself in the soup, prisoner. (In his heart of hearts, Ewnar rejoiced: he had wished death on each of them since they had killed his brother Lawuan). 'You may have been in collusion with her,' he said, implying a supposition rather than a question, without a shadow of doubt to it.

'I was defending myself at the Emptied Lake in much the same way as I had been defending myself from her in the Non-world,' Daniel countered and mentally repented: What good is the truth that's to your detriment?

Did you get back from the Non-world with her?' asked Retowal.

'No.'

'A likely tale!' Ewnar commented. 'He was with her in the Non-world—he blabbed out as much himself—and at the Emptied Lake—nor does he deny this. A strange coincidence, if coincidence it is.'

'There's a witness to my returning without her.'

'What's his name?' said Ozuard.

'Matam.'

'Matam? Danad's best friend?'

'Yes. They'd been friends since they were kids,' Daniel said only to feel sorry he had said one thing too many.

'What proficiency!' Ewnar commented. 'You must have asked Danad and Matam a lot of questions. You killed the first once you'd pumped him for the information that would let you pose as his friend. What did you do to the other? Where's he? Say outright what brings you to the World you don't know from your World?'

'It's a lie. I didn't kill Danad. I became his friend and a friend of his friends. I'm here to finish what Danad had not.'

'Do you mean the failed march?' asked Ozuard to make sure the prisoner was as well versed as all that.

'That, too.'

The reply being that definitive, Ozuard thought: He's either Danad's friend indeed or the Emptied Lake Lord's accomplice who'd insinuated himself into Danad's and his friends' confidence.

'Who else can confirm you're a friend, not a foe?' he asked.

'Malam, Semimes, Groyorg, Sawasard.'

'Sawasard?' echoed Retowal.

'Sawasard.'

'My friends and you, Danad, I think we should adjourn. We must listen to the witnesses. We'll summon you, Danad, when we need you. And remember: you shouldn't leave Palarard.'

\* \* \*

Daniel entered the room for a white armband man and... paused, not knowing which way to step. Thus it was that that his incomprehension had gripped him, abruptly, unaccountably, and invaded his mind and senses. What was he to do for the best? Which way to go? In order to win a victory over a barkycrook, the barkycrook that the four of them see in him? Where could he look for help? Danad could look for help, that Danad with eyes the color of Dorlief's sky... But this Danad whose eye was clouded with darkness...

The misty blue was benign and attractive. It seemed to circumscribe the room's space. And a circular mirror surface looked frozen in the blue opposite the door. The floor was covered with a richly green wall-to-wall. There was a bed at the left wall. A small table tinged with a foggy blue under the window at the right wall, and two dark-green wicker chairs. And a white water jug with a white mug on the table. Left of the door was a small blue wardrobe in a mist, same as the interior of the door.

Daniel came up to the mirror... extracted his gaze from the inside, the part of its wave to do with thought and feeling, and directed it inside the reflective surface... only to see Martin's face (it had become blurred in his mind's eye) and recalled... and thought: Oh, that I could use the turquoise speck in your crooked eye (I'd call it a turquoise Teardroplet of Shwarrawsh at this point). I believe You'd help me, Teardroplet. But for that, one has to be in Dorlief while the ferling beak is closely guarded. How I wish I could fool these... smart forestmen and make myself scarce. I'd settle with Samuel and roam all over the forest until the memories are dulled...

There was a tap on the door and no answer... and Leuely and Estean came in.

'Leuely!' Daniel's sounds were packed with feeling.

'Hello, Martin,' said Leuely (the greeting was full of tranquil joy).

'Is that him?' Estean asked her.

'Yes, this is Martin.'

'So you're Martin of the Non-world,' Estean smirked and ribbed him when no reply was forthcoming (Daniel did not seem to have heard those words). 'You look at Leuely with your human eye as if you were the one you'd said you were, to me.'

'Shame on you, Estean.'

It was only now that Daniel came to his senses and realized that the riot of his feeling was a giveaway that he was Daniel.

'Estean, Leuely, take these chairs. I'm not quite myself. Sorry.'



'We can see that,' said Estean cattishly.

'I mean I'm under an inquiry, and it rather robs me of reality,' he said to justify himself.

'This is reality,' Estean countered. 'If it weren't for the inquiry you wouldn't be in this room.'

'What are the charges, Martin?' asked Leely.

'The charges? They seem to be taking me for the guy who "remembered but forgot,"' said Daniel only to turn his back to the company and cup his face with his hands. The idiot! I've done it, he thought. Quiet, quiet. Anyone could have told me about him, even Semimes.

'Are you all right, Martin?' Leely was anxious. She rose and touched his shoulder.

She doesn't seem to have caught on, he comforted himself mentally and told a lie.

'It's as nothing: just the eye hurting.'

'You ought to see Falafy.'

'It might be a good idea to get out of the hospitable Palerard.'

'Don't forget I'm Palerardian, or have you forgotten I'm here, sweet Martin? Or Danad? What do I call you now?'

'Suit yourself.'

'I'm leaving, Leely,' said Estean in a huff and made for the door, full of injured feeling.

'So am I. See you, Martin.'

'Delighted to see you again,' he whispered very, very softly... because he wanted her to hear him and hoped she would not.

Leely paused.

'What did you say... Martin? You've whispered something.'

'It wasn't me whispering.'

'Who then?'

'I don't know.'

'That was a poor joke in bad taste,' said Leely and left, leaving behind a wistful whiff.

Estean headed briskly for the lake and sat down on a bench. She was flushed, her bosom was heaving—it was not the brisk walk, it was a surge of feelings. Leely came along and sat down, too, by her side.

'Estean dear, why did you keep ribbing him? He has enough to make him suffer... his looks. Why those absurd innuendos: Martin or Danad?'

'Are you content to call him Danad?'

Leely cast down her eyes. Then she answered:

'There's only one Danad for me. I haven't taken leave of him; nor do I know whether I ever will.'

'Sorry, Leely... Would you believe it, but when I'm next to him I feel he's Danad. I'm aware of the absurdity of my words, but I can't help it.'

'You were just carried away by Danad. Sorry.'

'Danad liked you better... and this... Did you remark the way he looked at you?'

'Don't be silly,' said Leuely... only to recall his whisper: "Delighted to see you again" and add: 'I don't care.'

'Do you know what he said about the stones?'

'The stones?'

'About the memories of the stones.'

'Everyone must've seen stones at some point and have their memories.'

'But not everyone feels them the way Danad does.'

'You're at it again... It's because of your stones room.'

'Greetings, Leuely,' came Ozuard's voice from behind, from the direction of the palace.

Leuely rose.

'Good day, Ozuard. May I ask you of the one who's whiling away his time in the White Room?'

'Ask away, I'll reply.'

'Is he in for something? What's his crime against the Palerardians?'

'He almost killed our man at the Emptied Lake before he was taken prisoner. The inquiry will throw light on his activities and designs. But why would his fate be any of your concern, our dear Leuely? Do you know him? I thought it wasn't mere curiosity.'

'Yes, I know him.'

'Then I must ask you to present in the White Room. I think your words might help us get to the truth. I'll assemble the panel immediately.'

'Good, I'll be there.'

\* \* \*

Daniel opened the door to the room he least wanted to: his gut feeling was that the black, not even its shadow, would not get lost in him; but white... how stark must it be? He could see Leuely at once on the bench to the right. Isn't your hair black, green-eyed witch? he thought.

Danad, take your place,' said Ozuard. 'We'll go on with our inquiry. Leuely...' (She rose). 'You don't have to rise: we talk sitting down here. Tell us: are you acquainted with Danad?'

'Yes. But his name's Martin.'

Ozuard did not like her answer, his eyes a giveaway.

'What's he... a villager, an Emptied Lake dweller or a visitor from the Non-world?' asked Feltraur.

'He's of the Non-world.'

'Where did you make his acquaintance?' Ewnar asked.

Leuely lowered her eyes.

'Can you answer this question, Leuely? Or is there anything in the way?' (Ozuard had guessed the reason for her silence but wanted her to uncover the truth).

Leuely made up her mind.

'Ozuard, you once allowed me to come to Palerard on condition no one would know of the forestmen's secret. I met Martin in the Non-world. But no one

in Dorlief is to know I was there. It'll come time when I'm prepared to tell everything to the Governing Council.'

'I can promise, Leuely, that your words will stay within the walls of the White Room,' said Ozuard.

'Weren't you frightened by this guy's appearance that could easily be taken for a barkycrook offspring?' asked Ewnar.

'But he was with Danad, mind you, and Danad had us meet. Also, Martin said...' (Leuely faltered).

'What *did* Martin say?' Ewnar was quick to cut in, aware that the unsaid words had given her fright.

'He apologized for his face, for it might inadvertently put me in mind of barkycrooks.'

'My first learners debate whether it's best to reveal themselves and get the enemy in a trap or clam up in anticipation,' Retowal chimed in (he was the one to know what was what in attack and defence). 'The prisoner seemed to have chosen the former.'

The Palerardians exchanged glances. Ozuard had grown noticeably grim.

'Leuely, do you remember what language Martin was speaking?' asked Feltraur (faithful to the hidden truth, he was looking for the answer that might, within moments, decide in favor of the prisoner or against him).

'He was speaking in the Non-world language,' said Leuely (her countenance content, for she had inadvertently helped Martin).

'Esteemed Feltraur,' Retowal persisted, 'we mustn't forget that present at the Emptied Lake was one who could pass on the tongue of the Non-world to this semi-barkycrook who's now posing as a man.'

'Are you speaking of the one whose secret force joined him to the Emptied Lake Lord?' asked Feltraur.

'Tronort?' cried Leuely, averse to Retowal's argument. 'He couldn't! I don't believe it.'

Retowal smirked. Ewnar was quick to use Leuely's faux pas:

'Tell us, dear guest, what you know about Tronort's fate.'

'He accompanied me on the Path to the Non-world and took me to Danad. He then went to the Crossroads: he'd promised both to himself and me.'

'Didn't he go straight to Martin and tell him to become Danad? You didn't accompany him to the Crossroads, did you?' Ewnar said, looking at those next to him.

Leuely bent her head and said in a low voice:

'He couldn't.'

'I'll trouble you with another question, my last one, I hope,' Ewnar was still at it (he thought the prisoner was about to be found out). 'Do you know how Danad died?'

Leuely sighed heavily.

'Do you or don't you?'

'I do... We were traveling in a self-propelled vehicle. There were five people in it.'

'Just who were these people? It's important,' said Retowal.

'Danad, a person of Danad's acquaintance, I, Martin and the man Martin lived with, named Samuel.'

'Samuel's my uncle,' said Daniel.

'Go on, Leely, we are listening,' Ozuard said gently.

'There was a mighty hit and I lost consciousness. Everyone was down save Samuel when I came to. Danad and his acquaintance had died.'

'Could it have been engineered by Martin alone or with his uncle?' asked Retowal and added: 'Take your time: let your answer be a weighed one.'

'Samuel's a kind man. I'd spent several days in his lodge.'

'Leave your feelings by the side: we need the truth. Feelings do nothing to make words more credible,' said Ewnar.

'I don't believe it could've been engineered by Martin,' said Leely and looked at Daniel.

'Do you believe that your father and mother had an accident as they stepped on the phantom ledge?' Retowal asked a question no one in the White Room had expected. The question was to reveal just how much Leely's 'I don't believe' had been suggested by feeling rather than knowledge.

One could see Leely was at a loss. Everyone was waiting for the answer...

'I never believed their death was accidental. Nor would I talk about it.'

'You've said it all,' Ewnar commented with pleasure.

'Ozuard, I've something to say.'

'Speak, Danad.'

'There was a collision between two... wagons. Ours was steered by Samuel. But he was not to blame. The man who was steering the other wagon was to blame. The inquiry in the Non-world has ruled as much.'

'That was an apt explanation,' said Feltraur.

'You're entitled to saying whatever crosses your mind,' Ewnar ventured.

'Any other questions?' said Ozuard and, having obtained no from one quarter and silence from another, thanked Leely and let her go.

## **Chapter Three**

### **'Execute him'**

Daniel was blindfolded. In another moment he felt a Palerardian hand on his shoulder.

'Go,' the Palerardian ordered.

Daniel knew that stepping on the Path along with him would be Ozuard, Retowal and four more men armed with daggers and bows. He had been warned that an important meeting was to take place in the Sadorn Forest. Retowal's answer to the question: with whom, was succinct: 'You'll see.' And now his imagination (his enforced blindness conducive to this his soul's whim) was shuffling through the faces: which... which of his friends would he see? It was not just his destiny being decided. He would soon know what had become of them.

The trail temporarily relieved him of his thoughts and feelings... Time on the Path is no longer subject to perceptions: it no longer accompanies you, for it sort of gets lost only to manifest itself again and march alongside, always all of a sudden... All of a sudden, Daniel sensed a whiff of a forest. Sadorn! he said to himself, and fragments of memories crossed his mind in the few moments, and there was a lump in his throat: There's no getting anything back!

The blindfold was removed when they had left the exit from the Path. Daniel knew the forest: that was the trail Leoly and he had followed on their way to Dorlief. He heard a conversation ahead.

'Falafy!' he whispered as he made out her voice (he had no time to think he was Martin and was not supposed to have met her).

Both Ozuard and Retowal could not help remarking the stirrings of feeling in him, but they kept their guesses (tapped with questions) to themselves.

'Greetings, esteemed Falafy,' said Ozuard as he stopped two paces short of her and Ewnar who was accompanying her.

'Greetings to you, esteemed Ozuard. I'll do all I can to further the inquiry that my companion's told me about.'

Daniel looked at Falafy (his nearest and dearest) who had merely glanced his way... and was eager to burst into smithereens all over the Sadorn. And the Sadorn rustled as it heard him and whispered shrilly as if drawing in the smithereens. Daniel succumbed to the feeling, shoved the nearest warrior away and fled back to the Harshid. The Palerardians gave chase to him...

Daniel was a good runner, but his forte was the short event. Martin's legs, on the other hand, were prepared to run full pelt as far as the Harshid, as far as... The Loner! he thought, seek refuge with the Loner! Tell him everything... Or else leave them behind and hide in the crevice. And... But that would take a mirror. He had hardly savored the delight of a saving run after a momentary dream when he felt a burning pain in his left leg (just below the knee) that arrested it immediately. He dropped headlong on the ground. He composed and rolled over to his side: four fiery-haired were around him. One of them squatted near him, took off his canteen and poured the contents over the wound after having removed the arrow. Then he dressed it with some tape obviously meant for the purpose. The heftiest of the four surrendered his bow and quiver and slung Daniel over his shoulder...

Falafy and Ozuard along with Ewnar and Retowal were waiting. Daniel was propped against a tree trunk. Retowal gave him a sip from his canteen. None of them had asked him why he had fled.

'Danad, this is Falafy, healer of Dorlief. She'll help us understand you better,' said Ozuard and addressed her: 'Pray begin.'

'Can I look at his wound first, Ozuard?'

'You're free to do whatever you choose.'

'Lie on your tummy, please, Danad: I'll look at your leg and help it revive.'

She put her hand against the bloody dressing... About a quarter of an hour later she asked him to rise and walk. He took a few paces with no gimp. The Palerardians exchanged glances.

'No pain?' Falafy asked.

'As if there'd never been the good forestman's arrow in me. But I'd better sit, not to keep the troop alert,' Daniel teased the fiery-haired, sat down and leaned against the tree.

'He could've killed you, for you're a prisoner.' Ewnar could not contain himself.

Falafy came up to Daniel and said, touching his shoulder:

'Why did you call yourself Danad?'

'Because I *am* Danad and no one else!' There was a challenge in his words: he had succumbed to the feeling that seemed to be urging him on: Much do you care!

The answer put off Ozuard and Ewnar and Retowal, but none of them said a word: they were afraid to spook the prisoner and interfere with his disclosure. Falafy calmly went on:

'But Ewnar's told me that your real name's Martin.'

Daniel leered at her with his living right eye and said:

'Falafy, be so kind as to tell me: a Danad like this had better be Martin, hadn't he?' (He circumscribed his face with his hand). 'Or someone else?'

'But a name and a face are interconnected, aren't they? Unless some sorcery has been performed?' (Her eyes spelled a question).

'Go on, test what's been done to me... or what's going on. You can, can't you?'

'Danad, I'll next do what Ozuard's asked me to do.'

Falafy raised her hands above her head palms down and entrusted herself to their seeing power, fending off the rest with her drooping eyelids... A few moments later, Daniel started and groaned shrilly. His hands jerked upward and adhered to his left eye. His whole body shook. Falafy immediately stepped back. Her face was visibly burdened with an idea that her hands had divined and that now found vent in words.

'It'll pass. It's my eye, my freaky eye,' Daniel feverishly word-minced. 'I'm feeling better.'

After another wait, Falafy asked:

'Tell me, Danad, have you experienced this pain before?'

'It happened.'

'Tell me about it.'

'I don't know where to begin. It just hurts... here and here,' Daniel indicated with his finger where it hurt: the dead eye and the temple.

'When does pain come? What triggers it?'

Daniel looked down.

'I see you're in no mood to speak about it,' Falafy said calmly (it never occurred to her to reproach with a word or a look whoever resigned himself to her healing powers).

'That's what it amounts to, doesn't it?'

'Can you stand it a little longer? I must make sure what I first felt is right.'

'I'm quite prepared to suffer it for the sake of the truth,' Daniel said with a smirk.

The pain made him writhe: this time he persevered as long as he could, but it was not long.

'Sorry, Danad, for making you suffer and for what I must now disclose to those who hold your destiny,' she said and addressed Ozuard. 'Can I speak with everybody around?'

Ozuard told the four warriors to retire and asked Falafy to say what she had found out.

'My hands have detected a dark part to this youth. It countered the kindly current from them and that gave him pain. It's powerful in him and urges his mind and feelings to do ill.'

The words stirred Daniel's memory to another admission: I don't like anybody. Driving across the city, looking through the windshield, seeing a face and another... eyes here and there, and I feel all wrong. Better not look at all...

Falafy went on:

'But this dark part in him is balanced in Danad (or Martin) against another entity as yet inaccessible to my mind. It sort of distracts the fire of evil from his soul onto itself. My hands also detected a familiar warmth: they'd touched him before. I can't be positive whether it's his original essence or... the shadow of another person he's soaked in.'

'Whose shadow did you divine in him, esteemed Falafy?' Ozuard asked.

'Esteemed Ozuard, I've no right to argue what gives rise to doubt. I'm sorry, but I'll reserve that doubt for the time being.'

'Is it the shadow of Danad he's done in?' Ewnar let loose his own truth.

Ozuard glanced at him curtly: there was reproach in it.

'What's happened to Danad? My friends? Why done in? Is he dead?' Falafy asked, bewildered.

The Palerardians were silent.

'He's alive, Falafy!' Daniel hastened with a saving grace (mindful of Natan and Novon).

'But you said he's dead!' Retowal was outraged.

'Cut it out, Retowal, and try to control your temper: it might sear feelings. We're to sort it out first,' said Ozuard, appealing not only to their good sense but also to charity. And then addressed Falafy: 'Thank you, esteemed Falafy. Ewnar will see you off.'

'I don't have to be seen off. Pray no, Ozuard.'

'As you wish.'

'Ozuard, will you let Danad step aside with me: I have things to ask that have no bearing on this inquiry.'

'Danad, you can talk to Falafy in private.'

They stepped some two dozen paces aside.

'Tell me, young man, if you believe that Danad's alive,' she asked, excitement in her voice.

'Better ask yourself if you believe what your hands have suggested,' Daniel said, turned about sharply and went back to the Palerardians.

\* \* \*

Ewnar, signal our men to deliver the prisoner,' Ozuard asked.

The horn twice intruded on the habitual polyphony of the Sadorn. Soon, from behind the trees from the Mirror Pool way, a small unit of Palerardians emerged. They were taking a barkycrook, tall, sturdy, broad of shoulder. He was wearing a carapace shirt with the hallmark of the Zusuz troop—an orange arrow piercing a black circle. A rope was tightly wound about him, hands down. His face, like an implacable aspect of a barynth nut, frightened and suppressed whatever stumbled over it by design or nonchalance. His eyes were scornful of the lot of a prisoner who was in for an imminent execution. Daniel knew him at once. The men took the barkycrook to Ozuard.

'Lord, this is the prisoner I told you about the other day,' said one of them.

'Danad, do you know this barkycrook?' asked Ozuard.

The barynth nut came to life with a resounding laugh.

'Yes, I know him. It's Gura, the Emptied Lake Lord's right-hand man.'

'You, too, seem to have met Danad before?'

Gura laughed again and then said:

'This is Martram.'

'Tell me, Gura, what links you to Martram?'

'Nothing. He isn't one of ours. He arrived at the Emptied Lake, fleeing from people. They were chasing him. And they got him. But we attacked them and fought the visitor off.'

'Why didn't Zusuz's warriors kill him?'

'He was looking for Sapha. He knew her. As she him, the moment she saw him. And the Lord found him after his taste. Zusuz tested him, and he proved devoted to the cause.'

'Sapha? Who's that?'

'The Lord's maid.'

'Do you know why the people chased him?' asked Retowal.

'He'd killed the real Danad. The real Danad had what the Lord wanted to get.'

'And Zusuz got it... from Martram?'

'Martram had nothing on him.'

'What makes you betray to us Zusuz's accomplice?' Ewnar asked the barkycrook.

'I've a guess of sorts, but I'll take it to the Eternal Darkness Lake with me.'

'Execute him,' Ozuard ordered the men who escorted Gura.

Daniel started as if burnt by the word 'execute.' He thought it might refer to him. No, he would not be executed in a few moments, like this villain. But it was an omen... an omen of what would happen suddenly. In a string of words he would make out: 'Execute him.'

On arrival at Palerard, Daniel was allotted time for a meal and rest. Then the inquiry went on in the White Room. Ozuard opened the hearing:

'We now know for a certainty that you're a visitor from the Non-world rather than a barkycrook offspring from the Emptied Lake, as some of us thought. But esteemed Falafy told us beyond a shadow of doubt—in us or in herself—that you have a dark part to you. Do you admit it?'



'Who hasn't?'

'Danad, I must remind you that we're assembled in the White Room not to discuss the controversial nature of things. Pray speak to the point.'

'I guessed as much.'

'We know now that the dark part of you took you to the Emptied Lake that your designs and intentions were hitched to.'

'I did have designs, but not the kind you think.'

'But Gura had no point in lying,' Retowal said.

'He didn't. There, at the Emptied Lake I had to resort to all kinds of devices to do what we had a mind to do in their lair.'

'Then why did you flee at the sight of Falafy?' said Ewnar and was tempted to supply the answer: 'Wasn't it because of the revealing truth?'

Daniel considered it...

'Give us a sincere answer, Daniel: it would be for the benefit of all of us,' said Feltraur.

'I don't know why... Probably, because you wouldn't believe me, Ewnar. And not just you.'

'We have faith in facts. We have to believe facts above all,' Feltraur explained, his voice imperturbability itself. 'But as it happens, the facts are against you, your words alone being in your favor.'

'Isn't what happened at the Emptied Lake the day before you took me prisoner a fact for you?'

'But who is there to corroborate that you were on our side. Which of the living?' asked Retowal. 'None of those you've mentioned have shown up.'

'Also, according to Gura, these people were chasing you,' said Ewnar and added tartly: 'So far your tongue alone is of the same mind.'

'Then execute me right away!' said Daniel looking into Ewnar's eyes, a challenge in his. Or else, let's fight one on one: you with your bow and arrows, I with stones.'

'You'll be executed in three days!' cried Ewnar and added: 'Beginning with tomorrow... if those at the table are of the same mind.'

'It stands to reason,' Retowal did not hesitate to join him.

'We'll have a show of hands if in the course of the three days no one speaks in favor of Danad,' Feltraur moved.

'I'm for a show of hands in three days,' Ozuard made up his mind. 'So far, it's two for a show of hands in three days, two for execution.'

'Good,' Ewnar cut in (it could be seen that the warrior in him when parrying with Daniel and getting better of a judge's impartiality was no longer in evidence). 'A show of hands in three days.'

## **Chapter Four**

### **Memory: Tahl Lake**

Daniel spent the rest of the day in his room. Door to mirror... mirror to door... one step after another... innumerable steps... as if salvation was in store for him at one of the stretches of the long blind way...

What can save you, Danad's shade? What? Is it Groyorg's croak that would suddenly be heard behind the door: Lil'un-to-the-rescue? Oh, Groyorg the Square, do fly into a passion as only you can and crush the stone abode of whiteness to the smithereens of unheard words... Or you, Mat, perchance? You know you're always there for me. I'm drowning again, feather. This time I'm in a deadly whirlpool. Get me to my native shore... always provided you've got out of the barkycrook pit... Or else you, Sawasard the Bright? Time was you said to Natan the Nervy you could sense the light in darkness. The light in darkness is about me. Come and tell your fiery-haired brethren that there's light behind the blackness of my eye... Or else you, Malam? Let your stick hear my voice and signal to you I'm in trouble. With you, there's always more than meets the eye. You may have seen the Danad in me, the one that lived in your house? Even the deaf could hear you... Can I expect salvation from you, Semimes, Malam's son? I have three days. 'Were Semimes a whole man...' What would you say in my position? I'm God-knows-what now, too. Where are you, Semimes the Conqueror? Why weren't you with us? What if none of you is alive?

What else can save you, Danad's shade? Flight? Another flight? Seek an excuse to find yourself in the Sadorn? It'd never occur to them you'd take another risk. In case you succeed... in case you succeed, there's Samuel's lodge in store for you: you'd peer into the mirror and make a conqueror's grimaces to spite fate... and talk yourself a thousand times into your reflection being that of Daniel. Just to spite you, Samuel would for the umpteenth time tease your soul: 'Martin, Martin!' And the Palerardians would forever remember you as Martram, a cowardly accomplice to Darkness. And no one would ever know what it was in actual fact.

Door to mirror... mirror to door... step by step... Daniel knew nothing of the stretches becoming stretches of another path... a path that had begun over the edge of the Ferris wheel cage...

\* \* \*

'How are you, Mat?'

'Not too bad: it isn't my first.'

'Not your first, but like a first. Except the sky is violet,' said Daniel, and the rue in his voice had the light-blue look of Martin's.

Matthew lowered his head: he had recalled the eyes that had an imprint of that sky. But the rue was no help, and he found something that was not a first, either, but took you away from the rue:

'The backpack makes a slow snail of me.'

'What did Chris think when she came to among these crags?'

'She thought she should walk this way or that. Up we get and go in Chris's steps, Dan.'

'It calls for gut feeling, rather, to keep track of her.'

'That's precisely what I meant. You're forgetting something though...'

Daniel considered it.

'Don't dig, do you? I'll supply a prompt: you are to ask... This time you're to ask.'

'Oh!' Daniel caught on. 'Let me have Her.' (He pointed to the pouch on his belt).

'Here. Let it be the way it was at the time.'

'Which way does your gut feeling suggest, Mat the Vital?'

'Let's do it both at once, Dan the Sorrowful. We shut our eyes and poke our fingers after the fugitive gut feeling on the count of three.'

'Everyone plays that game with me.'

'What was that?'

'Forget it. I count: one, two, three.'

The friends opened their eyes and found their forefingers pointing different ways.'

'Let's follow yours: your and Chris's liaison goes way back,' Matthew said with a grin.

'What liaison? We've been friendly since...' Daniel played along.

'That's what I mean, friend: no point in circumlocutions as if you've been caught in the act.'

'Liaison! Liaison! Some liaison!'

'Telepathic, sure. What other liaison can there be between friends?'

'What's the point of babbling if you've decided to go?' the familiar screech came their way. 'I've been listening to you without interfering but could stand it no more.'

The friends started and looked around... but did not see whom they expected to see.

'Hey, Semimes,' Matthew called. 'Come out of the Invisible Niche lest we think we've called a ghost. We're dreaming of having it like the first time around. Do come out, there's a good boy.'

Semimes emerged from a vertical crag jut.

'Don't talk rot, buddy: there's no Invisible Niche here. This is no Harshid. This is Tusul. Your Dan's somewhat different, I see,' said Semimes as he approached the boys and addressed Daniel: 'What do you say in reply, visitor?'

'Good tittle-tattle to you, guide,' the friends said in unison: Matthew with a view to pacifying Semimes's belligerence, Daniel to show he was no stranger.

'What's so good about it? Hollering as if on cue. This is no good time, you know, Mat. And I'm no guide for you or for your new Dan for a while.'

'What's "for a while?"' Matthew wanted to know.

'I'll put it like this: I've no quarrel with you, for you've been tested...'

'So have I, too,' Daniel hastened to say. 'I've been tested, very much so. Look!' (He hastily produced from his pouch the Tear and the Bushtunts journal from his jeans pocket). 'These are Sufus and Safasy. Remember?'

Matthew looked at his friend as if he were talking out of turn. However, Daniel went on in exactly the same way:

'This is the Word whose Keepers we are. Dan handed it to me and told me all about it. As to the name, I borrowed it... with his approval... for the Word and the Tear to be in concord.'

'Concord,' drawled Semimes, mimicking him. 'I can see all that. Don't fuss like Spaps at the New Light celebration. Has he told you about Spaps?' (Semimes's searching gimlet eye peered into that of the news-fangled Dan with a smirk).

'I'm telling you: he's told me everything. The Spaps you're talking about had his sluisy-tree installed in the square, and he has a voice like a broad.'

'Gave you, told you—to squirm out of the responsibility of a Word Keeper?'

'Tarry awhile, Semimes,' Matthew interfered to save the honor of Dan whether old or new. 'Don't go on like this about my friend, and yours, too. Better let's have it out about Dan... and explain all about Dan.'

'You tarry awhile, Mat. Dan and I know this trick of yours. I used squirm as a question, not as a slur.'

'A question in the sense of nosing out, isn't it? Did I get you right, Semimes?' asked Daniel.

'Right, Dan, very much so. Now put away the Tear and the Word, and don't boast them in vain if Dan chose to pass the buck and shifted the onus of safeguarding Dorlief on to you. You're a heftier guy than he is. We'll see if it's for the good or an empty boast.'

Daniel put away the Word and the Tear.

'I say! Dan seems to have passed on his habits as well—the Word in the breech pocket, the Tear in the pouch, the rue for an apt word.'

'As concerns apt words, Mat takes the cake.'

'I'd say so. But Mat's words are like hiccups: they proceed from his gut; yours do out of your head, like so much cunning.'

'Where do yours proceed from?' Matthew asked.

Semimes considered it for a few moments and then answered indirectly, the answer attached to another thought, one that kept digging for the new Dan:

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say our Dan had left his soul as legacy... to you, Dan... or whoever you are, I don't know.'

Daniel and Matthew exchanged glances: it would be hard to withhold the secret from such searching eyes.

'You never answered my question.'

'That I did, Mat, but you wouldn't listen.'

'Well, you know better. So much for soul-searching. What brings you here, guide? Are you here to meet us halfway? Was it the smart stick?'

Semimes shook his head.

'Why, Mat, what do you think? What could have taken Semimes so far from home, all the way to Tusul?'

'Faddaf?' Daniel guessed. 'Looking for Faddaf?'

'Well done, Dan. Will you come with me?'

'So I will, as you know: the eight-petal flower.'

'What about you?' Semimes looked at Matthew.

Matthew found it funny Semimes playing up the obvious, but answered in earnest—after a fashion:

‘We’re Word Keepers, not Spaps.’

Semimes frowned.

‘I have this to say: Dorlief has been overrun by barkycrooks. The people have left: some for Nefenlief, some for Parlief, some for the Tanuth Mountains. My father and I stayed behind in our house, for Zusuz wouldn’t touch us: father had granted him his life; he had had to. Only father knows I’m off to look for Faddaf. We chose the underground way, through the Red Hole and down the Companion-giving Tunnel. This time I had not been surprised by a double of the Emptied Lake.’

‘What about Groyorg, Sawasard?’ asked Matthew.

‘Dan the Sorrowful was away with his saving Word. You know that. The Dorlief Governing Council and the forestmen decided to wage war in sudden forays to cut losses. Sawasard went to the forest to join his men. Father said about Groyorg: “Night thoughts have called him home. It can’t be helped, for barkycrooks are everywhere these days.” They had settled on this: should the Word come back, they’d arrive the moment father calls them... Aren’t your backpacks weighing you down? They bulge fit to be filled with New Lights handsels.’

‘There’s a handsel for a wise Dorliefan and his smart son,’ said Daniel. ‘I give you three guesses.’

‘I’m not one for guesswork,’ said Semimes, contentment spreading over his face.

‘Barkycrooks!’ Matthew whispered abruptly, pointing with his hand.

Barkycrooks appeared from behind a crag three hundred paces from the Word Keepers who had lost all sense of danger over their chat.

‘Four of them,’ said Daniel.

‘I thought I’d given them the slip yesterday: they had not been on my trail. So they’ve caught up. Don’t panic, friends. Go hide yourselves behind the ridge that had hid me. I’ll have to engage them,’ said Semimes, pulled out his stick and stepped forth to meet the barkycrooks.

The boys backed off to the jut. Daniel tripped up and fell down. As he leaned against a stone to get up... he felt a new sense in his hand and thought back to Martin’s words: ‘I’ll remember what you called him, and so will you!’ He got up quickly, slung off his backpack, snatched the chance boulder and... felt obedient to his hand: the hand took the stone back and, assisted by his toes, his thigh and his body’s motion, pelted it like a lash at the barkycrook’s head. The barkycrook was already aiming its crossbow at Semimes. The next moment, the boulder, charged with Martin’s daring impulse which had been imprinted on his sinews and muscles, found what it was looking for—the solid object in space and in its way. A hit, and that was it. It crashed through the solid object and toppled the barkycrook over. The arrow which had been let loose hissed over Semimes’s head.

‘Load it!’ Daniel cried out, stretching his hand out to Mat (the palm open upward mutely but unmistakably suggestive of ‘Load!’).

Matthew, swept by the heat of fighting, playfully picked up and bounced—as if testing it for the purpose—a weighty stone and put it in his partner’s catapult of a hand and a psychic charge into his ear:

‘Shoot!’

Another barkycrook fell down dead (along with his pole ax) thirty paces from Semimes whose fury had been laced with a measure of incredulity. He looked back and... saw it all.

‘Load!’

‘Shoot!’

‘Load!’

‘Shoot!’

When it was all over, Matthew looked strangely at his friend and asked:

‘You all right, Dan?’

‘I’m all right: it’s Martin in me. Nothing but muscle work,’ said Daniel and supported his words with a joke: ‘Nothing personal.’

Matthew grinned.

‘Yes, I can quite understand it’s Martin, that’s why I’m asking.’

‘I’m comforting you and me.’

Semimes neared each of the felled barkycrooks one by one, none of them so much as touched by his stick. As he walked back, he shook his head, muttering: ‘Of all that’s wonderful! There’s Dan the One-eyed for you!’ He joined the friends and said:

‘I can see, Dan, you’re hefty not for boast alone.’ (He nodded at the barkycrooks). ‘It looks like Lutul’s job with his chisel over there... Well, so much for things past. It’s time we set off to Faddaf’s: it’s past mid-tittle-tattle, I think. On with your backpacks and off we go. And don’t expect me to say things that would make you grin silly. When on the trail, step in my footsteps, grip what I grip.’

Daniel and Matthew glanced at each other’s forced smirks and set out.

After skirting the jut that had produced Semimes they stopped.

‘Unless Semimes is much mistaken, the ground drops off within six hundred paces, giving way to the Dark Waters. Father used to say that one uninitiated could take them for a lake and give in to the temptation to dive, unless alerted by its murkiness. He’d be given up for lost.’

‘I wish I could have a look.’

‘The ridge would take a lot of strength, Dan; nor is time ripe for curiosity. If only on the way back. We’ve got to make for this fissure. (Semimes produced a torch and lit it.) I was exploring this slope in the morning in search of a convenient trail to take me to Lake Tahl but found none was believable. I had spotted this fissure just before I heard your voices. It may shorten our way.’

Semimes, followed by Matthew and Daniel, stepped inside the crag to find themselves in a world that made even the shadows subdued and frightened.

‘Do you remember taking us through a similar fissure to the abode of the Loner, guide?’

‘I do, Mat: it’s imprinted on my memory. I’d put it like this: it’s one thing saving your skin on a trodden trail and stumbling upon a friend’s abode; and

quite another, shouldering a bagful of human fates and looking in strange mountains for a seer that you're not sure anything's been left of save for his word... and a son named Sawasard.' (Semimes grinned). 'To be honest, I'm taking parate to Faddaf. Father said he's fond of our tea.'

'Why Lake Tahl of all places,' said Daniel.

'Father and I believe that, given that you live among barren crags, you'd rather live where fish are plentiful. It was my idea about fish. Father said: water. It goes without saying: where there's water, there's a fish stock.'

'Living near fried fish isn't a bad thing either,' Matthew contributed to the guide's idea.

'You've turned it around in a yummy way, Mat the Vital, very much so.'

'As you put it before, everything proceeds from Mat's gut,' Daniel said.

'Before, you say?' (Semimes tapped his stick on the stone underfoot). 'Mind the stone and tell Dan to. Before, you say? You promised before to tell me the secret of Dan and Dan.'

A silence fell that was anything but brief: about a hundred paces long. But it could not last forever.

'Semimes...' Daniel began and faltered.

'What was that?'

'You've uncovered it all, Semimes,' Matthew tried to help him out. 'The details aren't all that important.'

Everybody fell silent again.

'Did it hurt, Dan?' someone's screech carefully scratched the air.

'No, Semimes: I could feel nothing. It hurt later on... when I came to and a man I knew called me by a different name.'

'I say... Say nothing to father. I'll talk him into eschewing Dan questions. I'll tell him to solve the problem for himself.'

'Don't breathe a word of it to Leoely.'

'Why, Mat, a thing like that could only be said to Semimes's back. Shame on you, Mat.'

'I stand corrected.'

'On the double, friends, very much so: we've a race against time.'

They walked long, excruciatingly long, though not quite as long as that time toward the Red Hole. The travelers' feelings and minds were not entirely in thrall to the impertinent shades and ghosts as, on that occasion, to the impertinent redness come to life...

Over Tusul, the peak of the peaks of these mountains, a densely violet darkness had descended when they left the fissure. They soon found a suitable cave for camping.

'No brushwood for the fire nearby—we'll have to make do without heat, killing the night. My torch's run down, you see. We'll still manage a bite in its light, but we'll have to sleep without light, each with his bogeys. I'll save the other two, to light when the need arises: it's anyone's guess how many days we're to trek yet,' Semimes said and produced from his backpack the smallest bag. 'Now for a bite. I've got huckleberry pies here. They come from Darrad and Pliip's, sure thing. Peaceful Dorlief's last pies.'

Daniel and Matthew meanwhile had opened their backpacks, too. Matthew put on a small ledge in the wall three cans of tuna, a bag of rice doughnuts and three cans of apricot juice. Daniel produced a thick black paper bag bulging with its round contents.

'Inside this bag is a present for you and Malam,' he said.

'Open it before my eyes pop out for curiosity.'

'On your count of three.'

'Three's fair enough: one, two, three.'

On the count of three, his eyes shone with a lilac glow, and in another moment, his gaze was happily delighted. A few more moments—and he was all atremor, whispering quite out of breath:

'Friends! Mat, Dan... you've given Semimes a piece of your sun!'

'In fact, Semimes, it's a lamp shaped as a globe, in the shape of a scaled-down Earth, the huge globe we live on. The lamp was made by Natan, Daniel's granddad and Falafy's brother. The globe has a rest in the daytime only to shine in the dark,' Matthew explained.

'Like the luminous stone of the Dorlief clock?'

'Precisely, Semimes, except that a stone is fragmented nature while a globe—'

'Is a fragment of Natan's soul,' Semimes interrupted Daniel, quite out of patience.

'Just as the black horse on your shelves is a fragment of your soul,' Daniel added.

'My friends, my fireflies, enjoy your bite without me. Have a nice hunger. I'll venture outside to calm my spirit and heart.'

'We'll wait supper for you, guide,' said Matthew.

Semimes looked back.

'It was only the real Dan that could spin the black horse thing,' he concluded and left the cave.

It was on the third day of their unexpectedly happy night camping, in early tittle-tattle, that the travelers hit Lake Tahl surrounded by crags and ruggedly skirted by scrubby grass, rhododendron bushes and numerous bushy firs and spreading pines. The boys had a swim first thing, not just to wash away the weariness of the way.

'Our water antics will draw the eye and ear of whoever inhabits there parts, always provided anyone does,' said Semimes as the three of them plunged into the water on cue.

Daniel and Matthew heard the continuation of what it was all about when they were back on shore.

'Right, fireflies, you've been bait enough; we'll now crouch and wait. The way father put it: "Once on the lake, sonny, choose a hidden place, crouch like a mountain cat and peer for all you're worth, peer your damnedest."'

It did not work however, and not a living soul in man's shape showed up until dark. The friends stayed for the night in a cave in the wonderful light of the globe Semimes had produced from his backpack and flung a cloth over to smother the shine...



Hardly had the light of the sky made the air visible that neither Daniel nor Matthew was yet aware of in their dreamy state, when an urgent screech invaded that state to shoo the dreams away:

'Open your eyes, fireflies; you're about to see something rather more fetching than dreams.'

'Faddaf?' It was the first thing that occurred to Daniel.

'Faddaf?' Matthew exclaimed as he sprang up to his feet.

'Though not Faddaf, the man's not a chance arrival,' said Semimes as he set off at a run toward an old felled tree the travelers had spied the day before to serve them as shelter and vantage point. The boys followed the guide.

'D'you see the laddie in the boat? It seems to have glided out of the crag across from us.'

'The boy has a pole in his hands,' said Matthew.

'That's just my point: he isn't here for nothing, fishing early in the morning. Fish soup for dinner. And a boat handy. Do we have boats in our backpacks? There, you see?'

'Looks like he lives nearby in a cave.'

'That's just it, Dan: in a cave. Did you live in a cave when you were this small? Or engineer a seaworthy boat like this?'

'Not that I remember.'

'It means he's not alone here,' Matthew caught on to the drift.

'That's what I mean. Just take note of his ways; he's not scared at all. Which means he's used to being safe here. Did you see him casting it?'

'Casting how, Semimes?'

'Peel your peepers, Mat. He cast it as if it weren't Tahl, a mountain lake, but a pond next to his place, with all the fish in it his and his cat's.'

'Let's put a stop to it, cry out to him,' Matthew suggested as if in dead earnest. 'Leave some of them to us.'

'Crying's out of question: we might spook him. He'd pull on his oars and go.'

'Go complaining to Faddaf,' Matthew added.

'You talk nothing but rot.'

'Look, Mat,' Daniel was in a flurry. 'His threads aren't what the locals wear. I've only just taken notice.'

'Right. Denim and a baseball cap. Did it occur to you that it's the boy who had made it here from the Ferris wheel? Chris might be here, too.'

'Andy,' said Daniel as a recollection came to him. 'His name's Andy.'

'Andy. That's right.'

'Do you know him, friends?'

'He looks like the boy from our World that a man told us about,' said Daniel and added: 'What if we called him by name? He might not pull on his oars.'

'He's hardly likely to be spooked by his name. But see you don't frighten the living lights out of him with your throats,' the guide said.

Daniel and Matthew emerged from their shelter, neared the water and cried, waving their hands:

'Andy! Andy!'

The boy looked the way the cries were coming from, rose and waved his hand. He then sat down again, handled the oars, turned the boat about and started going off.

'That was unfortunate, buddies: calling to abort the cause,' said Semimes, only to join in, contrary to his words: 'Ahoy there! Tell Faddaf Malam's messengers have arrived... the Carroty's messengers!'

'Your father and Amery are anxious,' Matthew cried and looked at Semimes to see if he was not aborting the cause.

Semimes smiled with his eyes at him.

'Andy! Tell Faddaf that his son Sawasard's alive.'

'That was an apt one, Dan, very much so.'

The boat made a smooth about-turn to face the criers and made for their shore. Assured by this maneuver of speedily meeting Faddaf, the boys took off to fetch their backpacks. However, the distance between the oars' plashes and their reflection in the eyes of those on the shore was not shortening speedily enough, and Semimes suggested:

'Let's have a rice doughnut each, fireflies, lest our empty stomachs win the tug-of-war against the many fates as they sniff the fish soup. But we'll leave just enough nice hunger not to offend the feelings of the host with sated indifference when he treats us to his delights.'

'You mean leave some room in our stomachs for fish soup?'

'You could put it like that, Mat, provided you thought of nothing but fish soup,' said Semimes as he nibbled at his doughnut. 'I've come to appreciate your doughnuts. I think I'll have two, after all, to kill the time this woefully inadequate oarsman takes to get here.'

Daniel and Matthew also doubled the initial portion, absorbed in this pastime whether reasonable or unreasonable as the case might be.

The boat finally pulled into the shore.

'Hi,' said Andy as he stepped ashore, revealing his openness and light-heartedness with his hi. There was no apprehension or embarrassment in his blue eyes. Brown hair unused to the barber stuck out from under his cap. 'Uncle Faddaf told me of the Carroty and I wish I could meet him.'

'That's my father: I'm Semimes, Malam's son.'

'Nice to meet you,' said Andy and extended his hand.

Semimes was a bit flustered, but he shook it with feeling and hastened to distract the attention from himself:

'These are my friends.'

'Hi, Andy. I'm Mat. This is Dan.'

'Hi. Don't let my eye spook you: it's a mark left by lightning.'

'It's cool.'

'Dan and I, like you, stepped off the wheel cage.'

'Cool, wasn't it?'

'Yes, except your father's anxious and your sis misses you,' said Daniel in assent and dissent. 'Planning to get back home, aren't you?'

'Not just yet. I have the run of the place here... also Uncle Faddaf. I love the mountains, besides.'

'We've got to see Faddaf, Andy, very much so,' Semimes screeched. 'Will you take us to him?'

'Hop in the boat. Only...' Andy hesitated.

'What's wrong, my friend?' Semimes asked.

'The boat's small, too small for the lot of us.'

'Would you mind if we tried to get in, backpacks and all?' Matthew asked.

'I wouldn't—so long as the boat doesn't sink.'

'It won't,' said Semimes. 'If it does, I'll jump overboard and swim alongside.'

'The water's cool, buddy,' said Andy with a smirk. 'I run straight to the fire after a swim.'

'We had a taste of your lake yesterday,' said Matthew. 'The water was just right.'

'Who'll sit at the oars? I'd hardly cope.'

'I will,' Daniel offered, stepped into the boat and took his place. 'Throw in your packs.'

The backpacks in place, Semimes and Andy squeezed in between the sides onto the other bank next to the stern. Matthew was perched on the nose.

'Deep in, but it won't ship water,' said Semimes with confidence. 'Get going, Dan.'

'Andy, tell me if I'm off course,' said Daniel as he turned the boat about.

'You're just the least bit off to the right... turn it leftward.'

'Phew! Those turns have got the better of me. It's quite some time since we plied across Our Lake, Mat.'

'You're right on course. Just row on,' said Andy.

'Is your abode in that crag over there, Andy?' asked Matthew.

Andy grinned and said:

'I thought as much when Uncle Faddaf took me across. You'll see for yourselves: it'll be better fun that way.'

'You haven't taken across a girl named Chris, have you?'

'No, Mat. Has she got lost?'

'She has: she stepped off the Ferris wheel and...' Matthew said wistfully, twisted his body the other way and peered into the slowly approaching crag as it rose from the water.

'She'll turn up yet,' said Andy. 'I have.'

With just forty oar paces to the promised crag, Matthew cried out suddenly:

'Look, it's gone! It's gone, Dan!'

Daniel looked back in wonder, Semimes sat up and peered. The moment their eyes (first Daniel's, then Semimes's) crossed the invisible border in space, the stone slab melted in the air, with a flat stone-strewn shore emerging in its place that extended some fifty paces from the edge of the lake only to drop off sharply. Further, beyond the bluff, were the mountains.

'Of all that's wonderful!' Semimes breathed out his wonderment and plopped back on his bank, almost shoving Andy overboard.

Andy laughed and mimicked his bankmate:

'Of all that's wonderful!'

'Are there mirages all around us?' Daniel spread his arms.

'Only that crag's a phantom. The rest can be touched. Uncle Faddaf had tried many caves before he found the place. Dan, Dan, turn right now. There's a pool behind the boulders. We park the boat there. Take care though: it's narrow.'

Daniel maneuvered aptly, navigated the narrow passage between the shore and the boulders without hitting either board.

'I take it your cave is nearby,' Semimes screeched as he stepped ashore.

'How d'you know? It can't be seen,' Andy said.

'Well, it can't, but I can smell flat cakes. The smell's savory. Where does Faddaf get the flour?'

'Dunno. I've seen the bin but never asked where it comes from.'

'Which way now, Andy?' asked Daniel.

'Toward the bluff. We'll have to descend.'

Everybody neared the edge of the ground with a deep gorge between it and the mountain. It was a steep descent.

'Do we go there?' Matthew poked his forefinger at the abyss.

Andy grinned again.

'Yes and no. did you hear what Semimes said? The cave is nearby. Just follow me and mind your feet: there're stairs of sorts. It's only scary for starters; you'll get used to them in time.'

The descent proved to be less formidable than it looked. The height made it scary, the cave waiting for its lodger (who proved to be Faddaf) as if to spite it, some two human statures from the bluff edge. There was a small, pace-broad ledge that extended either way from the cave.

Andy jumped down on to the ledge, stepped into the cave and announced:

'We've got company, gramps, one of them the Carroty's son. They know all about Sawas. Come on in, Semimes. Meet Semimes, gramps.'

'Greetings, Faddaf. I'm Semimes. Son of Malam.'

'Nice to see you, Semimes, son of Malam. I used to know your father. How's he?'

'Father has one concern these days—the fate of Dorlief overrun by the barkycrooks.'

'These are Semimes's friends, gramps.'

'Good morning, Faddaf. I'm Danad.'

'I'm Matam.'

'Greetings to you, Danad and Matam.'

Confronting the friends was a man that they knew three things about: for one thing, he was the first Dorlief Keeper; he had fought humpbacks and had the reputation of a hero; he was a prophet and had prophesied the advent of the saving Word. A lean, grey-haired man with a parched stony and furrowed face that was no longer animated by his soul's stirrings. But there was something in it that foreswore condescending pity—his eyes, with the lucidity and will therein.

'My friends, off with your packs and sit down at the table. Andy and I—consequently you, too—have flat cakes with herbal tea. We'll lace the repast with the chat you're here for.'

Andy put on the table a wooden bowl of flat cakes, a teapot and cups the shortage of which he apologized for (three):

'No more cups, I'm afraid.'

'Dan and I have ours,' said Matthew as they produced theirs from the packs. 'This makes five—just right.'

Andy poured out the tea and all except Semimes sat down at the table. Semimes rummaged about in his pack and came up with an orange bag and a small fine box of the sort forestmen make for their flashes.

'Dear Faddaf, father told me to give you this.'

Faddaf accepted the gift and asked:

'Weren't any words attached to these?'

'Father had this to say: "A good memory's always timely: it shortens the distance between hearts."'

'That's it, dear Malam, so it does. I know this box.' (He opened it a crack). 'Still some flashes left. And some parate in the bag, isn't there, son of Malam?' There was tenderness for his old friend in his words.

'Parate, sure thing. Nice hunger to you, Faddaf. Nice hunger to you, Andy, Mat and Dan.'

'Have a nice hunger, Semimes,' Andy beat everyone to reply.

*Have a nice hunger* was sounded in three more voices at the table.

'Tell me, Semimes, "barkycrooks" is what you call the villains of the Emptied Lake, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'I saw them at the Hawur foothills. Did you say they've overrun Dorlief?'

'So they have. As they have the three villages beyond the Shiwun.'

'Are you and your friends from Dorlief?'

'I'm from Dorlief. My father and I live there. The Dorliefans have left their abodes to take to the hills and far-off villages. Danad and Matam are from the Non-world. They've brought the Word that you once told us about in your prophecy. "No amount of patience, toil or goodness will suffice to cope with this trouble. But a Word will be said... The Word granted man by the World of Dreams; the Word that will not get lost in the Non-world; the Word that will not melt in the Spirit World; the Word that will fathom Shwarrawsh's mourning and close the cycle. And the Word will cope with the trouble."'

'So it's come to pass,' said Faddaf softly and was lost in thought...

It was cozy and warm in the small cave. In its depth opposite the cave mouth, a good fireplace met the appreciative eye. Wickerwork beds covered with skins were to be made out by a close gaze. Along the wall to the left of the mouth there was a table and benches on its two sides. Hanging over the fireplace were strings of mushrooms and bunches of herbs. The few shelves on the walls held simple kitchenware: bowls, even two pots and a pan, with, in the stone niche on the left, half a dozen wooden pots with some sort of stocks, and the bin on the floor that Andy had mentioned. There were buckets of water on both sides of the cave's mouth.

'I'm glad to report that your son Sawas was back from the Crossroads five years ago. He's since lived with the forestmen and been known as Sawasard,'

said Semimes, his voice tremulous with the importance of what he had touched upon.

'Thank you for the good tidings, my friend. I've been looking forward to it my whole life. Do you know my son's walk in life?'

'He's a warrior who has no equal when wielding two short swords. He has many felled barkycrooks to his name.'

'Cool!' Andy reminded them of himself (he had been all ears for the words floating over the table as he nibbled at the flat cakes).

'Have you been to battle with him, Semimes? Or are his martial feats mere hearsay?'

'We've fought barkycrooks shoulder to shoulder. It's a joy to watch him hefting his swords... your swords, Faddaf.'

'Yes, my swords... Do you have any news of his mother's fate?'

'She's at the Crossroads at the moment.'

A brief pause let Semimes get down to the crux.

'Faddaf, may I speak of the Word?'

'Sure, Semimes.'

'The sacred Word has defied even the wisest of the Dorliefans. And the Governing Council decreed to turn to you for clarification and chose the right people to have them journey to Mount Tusul and find you. Sawasard was among them, too. But there was a traitor in the Governing Council and we had to retire to Dorlief with some losses. Sundry paths had brought me and my friends to Mount Hawur where we united to progress further. So here we are. Pass on the Word to Faddaf, Danad.'

Daniel opened the Bushtunts journal.

'Here's the Word. It's reiterated on seven more pages. It was written down by my grandfather, a Dorliefan by birth, named Natan. He found himself in the Non-world as a child and lived his whole life there.'

Faddaf read the rhyme to himself, gave the journal back to Daniel and recited it:

'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning  
To ashes wordcircle's burning.'

The silent wait grew heavy over the table, and there was Faddaf alone to relieve it.

'My friends, the lines I saw have had no response in my mind to suggest what we have to do to get the Word to serve as a saving grace. I'll spend the day in reflection to lend thought to the words and get down to its meaning. It'll let me take the Word to my dreams and, should the World of Dreams Lord be as benevolently minded as of old, he'd come up with omens that would disclose the Word's secret meaning.'

\* \* \*

'Who are you?'

'I'm you. You are me.'

'Who *am* I?'

'I don't know... don't know... I've no way of saying.'

'Aren't you scared? How high you are! Nothing but the sky around. All the peaks are down there.'

'I mean to assault this one, the tallest of them.'

'Look: there's a nest on the ledge. Will you look inside?'

'Yes, it's curious enough.'

'What can you see?'

'There are eggs there. A dozen or so. They've got... they've got signs on them.'

'What sort of signs?'

'I can't make them out. They are about to hatch. A shadow... a shadow has covered them. Wherefrom is this shadow? Is it their mother's wing? I've got to read the signs.'

'No, it isn't their mother—it's a thunder... thundercloud. I've got to take shelter. No shelter here—you're in thrall to the thunderstorm.'

'It's as nothing. It's nothing but a thunderstorm.'

'Flash! Oh, what a flash! Lightning! Aren't you afraid of lightning?'

'It's just lightning. The nest has to be covered. I'll cover it. Ouch! Ouch! I've been struck by lightning! I'm blind. I'm blind.'

'Open your eyes. Perchance, you aren't blind? You may have been dazzled by lightning. Raise your eyelids.'

'No! I'm blind. I'm blind in one eye. The fledglings, I mean the eggs, have to be covered. It'll burn them.'

'Nay, stay! Take your hands away from the nest. You've got the fire of the lightning in you.'

'It's too late: they're on fire. The shell's burning; the fire's consuming the signs.'

'Careful: their mother's coming.'

'What shall I do?'

'Jump down the fissure.'

'I can't... I can't... Oh, she's huge... It's not a bird. It's...'

'Jump!'

'In a moment... In a just moment... The nest's down. She'll kill me.'

'Jump!'

'I'm falling... falling...'

'Are you in one piece?'

'I think so. It's misty here. The mist overshadows the bottom. I'll try to find the eggs. The young are just about hatching. There may be life in some of them.'

'Light a torch.'

'A mo... I still can't see anything. Nothing to be seen through the mist.'

'Bend low.'

'I can see... I can see... The shell's burning out. The fledglings are alive... They are different colors. They've caught on fire. They're all aflame. All aflame... Fire... The mist's on fire... My eye... It's on fire... Everything's on fire... I'm dead. I'm burnt down. I'm no more... There's nothing any more...'

'Open your eyes... your eye.'

'Where am I? Dead fledglings... all around... This is a valley of dead fledglings. All around... nothing but dead fledglings... dead multi-colored fledglings.'

'Touch them.'

'I can't.'

'Touch them. See if they'll respond.'

'They're petrified. They're cold. They're dead.'

\* \* \*

'Over the morning tea, Faddaf told the Word Keepers about his dream, interpreted it and instructed them. What had been revealed to him and what could be seen as if through a mist, instilled in the souls of Semimes, Matthew and Daniel both hope and anxiety.

The travelers' onus was supplemented with two pleasantries. One was spiritual. It was Faddaf's desire to see his son by word of mouth. The other was meant to humor both the flesh and the spirit. It was a dozen flat cakes baked early in the morning by Faddaf and Andy. As they accepted the bag of flat cakes, the friends exchanged glances, and Daniel said:

'Thank you, Faddaf; you share with us what the crags around have none of.'

'Fret not, my friends,' Faddaf said. 'We aren't robbing ourselves, Andy and me. A good man named Lodidol of Pratlief, which is beyond the Hurun Forest, brings me flour and salt twice a year. I wait for him in the Hurun. Several years ago I had saved his life; and I don't mind this urge of the heart in gratitude as he gives what supports life.'

## **Chapter Five**

### **'He's Danad'**

Daniel emerged from the sleepless night with words. He had faith in words. He loved words and had faith in them. Some have faith in act and words fitted to act immediately. But Daniel was immediately hypnotized with words without knowing it.

Daniel emerged from the sleepless night next to the White Room with the belief that someone must say 'He's Danad.' Someone must say it to himself, and then to the White Room. Three days before the words 'Execute him' someone should manage to say 'He's Danad.' The hope of hearing these words uttered by one of the dear voices that had recently whispered through the mists of the Emptied Lake was far-fetched. The voices might have gone silent like that of Natan the Nervy... Oh no, don't you dare think that. They're still there far away in space and they need time, more time to be next to him again. But it so happened that you haven't got the time. And you need another voice... a voice that belongs to the space you want to leave but can't, a voice that had once found it a satisfying experience to string the sounds together to pronounce the consonance:



Danad. I know that voice. It doesn't repel—quite the opposite... And I'll let my voice play with that voice, gyre with it in this space... and the space will let me go.

Daniel was sick and tired waiting for the messenger, and soon after breakfast he went to the lake. He strolled down the embankment looking now at the grey sky overhead, now at the grey sky underfoot, leaving behind step by step—in his heart of hearts—the lack of freedom and his unaccountable resentment of all and sundry that tore him apart... Many times had he come level with the swing before he finally realized it would relieve—if only for a few moments—the lack of freedom and resentment in him, relieve him of the Dan that had become so dependent on things. He could not take a skyward swing (Bushtunts's rig alone could have given him that), but he could leap into the sky underfoot. He gained momentum the way he had as a kid—for all he was worth... Yet another push—and he would capture, his memory would, the moment he could unclutch his fingers and leave the seat to take flight... as far as possible...

'Hello, prisoner.'

No, thought Daniel, clutched his fingers and stayed on the seat. Like hell you will! He stopped the swing and came up to her.

'Morning, Estean.'

'I thought you were about to spring off. The water's cold, mind you.'

'You keep thinking things.'

'Father says there's no barkycrook blood in you, you come from the Non-world... as they're used to calling it in Dorlief.'

'It's common knowledge. And be so kind as not to remind me of the inquiry. Better still, chat about it with one of the fiery-haired, say Ewnar.'

'You want me to leave, do you?' Estean's eyes and lips suggested injured feelings.

'Estean,' Daniel said under his breath and paused (he managed both: said it under his breath and let the air still—deliberately—to provoke in her a wait, vague and fanciful)... 'Estean, take me to the stones room.'

He saw the gooseflesh on her forearms. She could not reply outright.

'Or is it off limits to prisoners?'

'Come,' she said finally, took a few steps and asked: 'Did Danad tell you?'

'You're in a position to answer that question. Just take your time.'

'Talking in riddles, aren't you?'

'You're the one for riddles.'

'What are you talking about, Danad?' The unbidden 'Danad' was off her lips, the result of sudden agitation.

'Danad did tell. The redheaded girl will show you the stones and speak in riddles, he said. Just tell me why, she'd say—'

Estean did not let Daniel finish. Spurred on by a surge of mixed feelings (puzzlement and resentment of facetiousness and some other importunate and vague feeling that, magnet-like, drew one another) she turned abruptly and made off. She had taken three steps before Daniel caught her up, snatched at her arm and pulled her to him (without meaning to). She peered into him, her breathing ragged.

'I know I'm ugly,' said Daniel in a tense whisper.

'I only thought you ugly at first... You aren't. Half your face is disfigured, but you aren't ugly. But for your disfigurement, you'd be handsome.'

Daniel suddenly saw two Palarardians some fifty paces off: they were rushing to help Estean, for they had probably thought something untoward was happening.

'Tell the guys, Estean, to get lost before I rid them of their heads,' he said as he bent to pick up two weighty stones.

She briskly stepped forth to meet them, saying something in Palarardian. She asked him when back:

'You must be beside yourself to say things like that.'

Daniel tossed a stone violently. It soared high overhead and, before it started falling, Daniel hurled the other at it: a moment later the two met.

'Beside myself?' he echoed and answered with a smirk: 'I'm sure I am.'

'We are going to see the stones, aren't we? She made the words crowd one another in her haste to leave the space with its frightening experience.

'I haven't much choice: it's either the stones room or back to the White Room with your father in it.'

Estean opened the door and they found themselves in semi-darkness that would have been darkness but for the luminous stone.

'You're... like it,' Daniel said gently.

'What was that?' asked Estean, lured by the mystery all his words were shrouded in that day.

'Wait, don't light the candles. Let the stones sense my soul... All right, light them now.'

At first, same as that other far-off time, three pairs of lamp hands opened up the stones on the right table, over their white cloth, then on the left, over their red one.

'The palms seem to be coddling the stones with their warmth. "Fear us not," they seem to be whispering in their velvety voices...' (As Daniel said the words, Estean took her hand to her face in excitement). 'Tell me, Estean, what must follow these words.'

She was at a loss, unsure that the strange... the perfidious prisoner meant what she thought at the moment.

'I don't get you,' she said.

'Okay, don't.' (Daniel bent his head over the left table and started touching the stones). 'An avalanche of stones.'

'You're trying me?' Estean cried. 'Why are you trying me?'

'I don't get you,' he echoed Estean's previous answer.

'Danad couldn't have told you everything. It just couldn't have been. Those details. It just can't be. Tell me at last who you are,' she cried, succumbing to her surge of feeling.

'It can't be,' Daniel said deliberately as he stroked the stones with his hands and his gaze. Then he talked to them again: 'You knew me, didn't you? You... knew my soul? I can hear you with my fingertips' nerves.'

Estean was two paces away and silently sobbed her unheard tears.

'Rue not, Estean. Better ask me why one of the cloths is white, another red, and black under the luminous stone...'

Estean came up to him and touched his shoulder. He turned to look at her... She planted what she meant for his lips on his cheek and ran out of the room.

'Stones, you've witnessed what I've done to Estean. I wished so much someone would say, "He's Danad." Well, she said it to herself and admitted as much to me without words as she gave me the kiss of my past life, the life in which I didn't have to prove I was Danad and conceal it from others. Stones, I'm sorry I didn't act like a stone.'

Daniel snuffed the candles, sat down on the floor with his back to the wall and let the semi-darkness melt first his gaze and then his thoughts as they resisted till the last the loss of meaning. The last thing that crossed his mind was Semimes's: 'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that there was one yesterday but there will be many tomorrows.' When he, too, vanished, Daniel succumbed to repose... from life... as he hid from it...

Estean's voice brought him back to the semi-darkness shafted by the tentative light through the door open a crack.

'Get up, Danad: I'm here to fetch you.'

'Where are you going to take me from this adorable room?'

'Come, I'd rather not get the words to go before my idea. You'll see for yourself. You're hungry, aren't you?'

'I won't say no. Aren't we bound for The Flying Ferling by any chance?'

It was Daniel's first in a long time that he heard her laugh from the past. They went outdoors.

'There's no way of telling the time by your sun.'

'It's mid-tittle-tattle.'

'That's the first day gone by.'

'Why first?'

'Thank you for it.'

'Why first, Danad?' Estean asked again.

'That's why.'

'Don't make fun of me,' Estean was outraged without anger. 'Why that's why? All right, if you won't tell, don't. We are here.' (She flung open the door to the palace). 'Follow me.'

Daniel was curious what Estean was up to, and he let her have her way.

'There's my surprise behind this door, both for you and those behind it,' she said (as it crossed Daniel's mind that his friends had shown up), opened the door and let him in before her.

Daniel was stunned: he had no room in his head for this absurd situation.

Seated at the big round table were Ozuard across from the door, Lefeat to the left of him, then Efriard with Leely next to him; on Ozuard's left was Feltraur. Ozuard arose abruptly, resentment in his motion at what he saw.

'Good evening, my dears. I'm a bit late for supper. But I believe my surprise will be apology enough in your eyes.'

What's on her mind? Daniel wondered.

Ozuard had no trouble composing himself, for he was by nature neither supercilious nor authoritarian nor biased.

'Good tittle-tattle. Pray sit down at the table,' he said addressing both arrivals... in order not to say: Danad.

'Have a nice hunger,' Daniel said and sat down after Estean (she had taken a seat next to Feltraur, Daniel next to her).

'Nice hunger,' said Leoely (she had to fight the embarrassment in her).

'Nice hunger,' echoed Lefeat (her face shining with welcome, for she was apt at hiding her curiosity) and Efriard unfazed by the prisoner's arrival.

Feltraur remained dispassionate and considerate at once.

'A useful meal tag,' he remarked. 'I believe what makes nice hunger different from ill is that it leaves room for a chat.'

It was a plain board: efsurelle stewed with milk-caps, efsurelle bread, efsurelle pastry baked with goat's milk and efsurelle pies stuffed with strawberries and huckleberries topped with goat's milk and herbal infusions that tasted like maple syrup to Daniel's palate.

Some time passed, with chat none the wiser where to start, which made Estean's surprise all the more absurd... Each felt all the better for the words that finally graced the table.

'Martin, sis told me—'

'Pray, Efriard, call him Danad,' Estean interrupted him.

Efriard looked at Leoely.

'If he likes it better...' she said in a low voice, nodding at the unbidden guest.

'I stand corrected: Danad, I'm aware that sister has shown you the collection of stones. How did you like her brainchild?'

'How? I must admit I could admire it for hours, particularly the ones on the red cloth. They win me over hands down. I thought at one point I could live among them... as one of them.'

'I never felt anything like that when I looked at the collection. I dare say.'

'It's quite some time since you last condescended to see my gems. You can't imagine what feelings they'd arouse in you now.'

'I quite agree. I'll have to put it to the test. I'll look in tomorrow.'

'Take me along, son,' said Lefeat.

'They brought me an olidate several days ago. Its healing properties are negligible. But it's a very rare and beautiful stone. If you have none in your collection, drop in tomorrow, and I'll give it to you.'

'Thank you, Feltraur. I've heard of the stone and dreamt of getting one.'

'It isn't anyone who has a rare stone suitable as a charm that will part with it easily,' said Ozuard.

'I know whom you mean, father. He told me about the olidate, but would not show it. He was probably afraid to get me charmed to distraction.'

'Oh yes. And right he was,' Lefeat said.

'Estean?'

'Yes, Danad?'

'Leuely's green eyes have just given me an idea.' (At these words of Daniel's, Leuely cast her eyes down).

'I wonder,' something had changed in Estean's tone: a jangled nerve vaguely sounded in her voice.

'What if your collection was supplemented with the rarest and choicest stones that hide from human eyes in the mountains around Dorlief?'

'I quite agree, dear Danad. We should scale the Harshid slopes. But do you know what's occurred to me? That last time you spent three days in the stones room, but the Dorlifan friend of mine drew your eyes even more, so the idea never occurred to you.'

'Estean!' cried an indignant Leuely softly. 'I've told you. Do keep your fancy in rein.'

'My dear, don't let Danad's new guise confuse you. I can assure you he's our Danad. He's your Dan,' she parried.

'Estean!' Lefeat's tone was meant to make her come to her senses.

'Mom, as an exception, ask father after how many days our good guest will be executed.' 'Estean, I'm as sorry for Martin as you are,' Leuely said, moved. 'But what makes you believe he's going to be executed?'

'That they will, for there's no one to intercede for him.'

'But, my dear Estean, you can't use the name of a person who's dear to me, for the purpose. Not to me alone. Why are you silent, Martin?'

'Tell them, Danad. Tell them the whole truth,' Estean cried.

'Estean, no offence meant, but facts must intercede for me, as you put it—only facts and the words of other people, rather than my own, which could prove to be false or true. What price are such words? No one needs them.'

Estean felt at a loss and fell silent.

'You speak as if you didn't know who you are,' Leuely was outraged. 'Speaking like that in my presence! It was Dan had us meet. Tell us, Martin, tell the whole truth. Didn't you say... say in my presence in the White Room... ?'

'I'm speaking... for the benefit of those who will hear: the Dorlifans are wrong in believing milk-caps are only good enough for salting down. I join the Palerardians in saying efsurelle is good when stewed with milk-caps. Thanks for the treat, Ozuard. See you in the White Room,' said Daniel as he rose and made for the door.

Leuely was so nervous she dismissed his words about efsurelle and milk-caps as of no importance or consequence. She was to look back to them later on... before going to bed (sleep would defy her that night) as she went over the mealtime conversation at the Palerard Lord's palace episode by episode, recall them and move in her mind's eye to another date: Danad and Ozuard were strolling down the embankment. And the words had been uttered by... Ozuard. Only two people had heard them.

Estean ran outside and caught up with Daniel.

'Sorry, Estean.'

'Why didn't you explain anything to them?'

'I give you three guesses.'

'At it again, aren't you?'

'Let's go boating. Bags I pull the oars.'

Estean stopped. She immediately recalled the words she had once said to Daniel and Leely... and continued with the words she had said at the time:

'Let's go for the one with green sides, shall we?'

'Precisely. But it can't be seen from here.'

They laughed and ran toward the quay on the embankment.

. . . No one saw their nighttime kiss save for the sun, ever on its watch over Palerard. Estean asked Danad to swap banks with her, for she felt like some exercise to get warm. It was an awkward trade off, she finding herself prisoner to her own passion, he to the first of the three days of his lease on life...

They made it ashore their several ways: she by boat... getting cool on the oars; he, swimming. He had jumped into the water not to be in thrall to another kiss independent of lurching legs... not to let down the words that had sprung up from somewhere and rang in his head in the language of the Non-world: 'Our home.'

\* \* \*

The inquiry was resumed the next day. It began with a surprise: on the bench which had recently been used by Leely in the White Room he saw Estean. When he entered she did not look his way.

'Take your seat, Danad, and we'll go on with the inquiry. I say "Danad" by your request. To repeat: we honor your wish to go by your late friend's name,' said Ozuard. He then addressed his daughter: 'Estean, you're here to have your say. Pray go ahead.'

It was clear Estean was nervous. For a few moments she could not utter a word, not because she was stringing a phrase together, but because she'd suddenly lost the daring she commanded in debate. Finally...

'He's Danad... You've got to get your minds around that... He's Danad... not Martin, nor anyone else,' she faltered along. 'I mean Danad's his real name, not his friend's name as father has just suggested.'

'But, Estean, the man you're referring to was the first to suggest that,' Retowal countered calmly.

'Retowal,' Feltraur cut in, 'in the Sadorn, however, when meeting with the Keeper Falafy, he said he was Danad.'

'Retowal, he thought you wouldn't believe him. Who would? One Danad becoming another like this.' (Estean nodded at Daniel). 'And another thing... On the other hand, I'll say it to him alone. I guessed it, Danad. You told me you gave me three guesses, and I've guessed. The same man made you jump the boat.'

'What are you talking about, Estean?' Ewnar asked her gently.

'That's none of your business, any of you.'

'Pray speak about what concerns us,' Ozuard said.

'All right, Father.'

'Why do you say, Estean, that this man with Martin's face is Danad?' Feltraur said.

'Last morning I showed him the stones room. (It concerns you, don't you worry, Father). He'd been there before. I could see right away he had. He knew

everything. He knew every single thing. He knew about the lamps above the tables, and he asked me not to light them up right away. There was no telling there were lamps overhead. He said: "Let the stones sense my soul." But those are my words. I had said that to that Danad... to the Danad who'd brought to Palarard Falafy's wounded son.'

'He could've wormed them out of the real Danad,' said Ewnar.

'He said "an avalanche of stones" exactly as the first time around!' Estean shot.

'What's that about an avalanche of stones in a room, Estean?' said Feltraur.

"The stones have a way of falling down your soul to its very bottom where its finest nerve is." Those are Danad's words.

'Said in the true spirit,' said Feltraur.

'He could've wormed any words out of the real Danad if he had a mind to,' Ewnar persisted.

'Why should he?' Estean cried in her defence of Danad.

'He wasn't choosy about what to worm out; he wormed out all he could,' said Retowal and summed up: 'As we can see, it's come in handy.'

'But those words... those words came out of Danad's very soul when he saw the stones, when he felt them. It was an up-to-the-minute enthusiasm, a passion. There's no relating a passion: it's poured out when the soul is brimming with it.'

'This is hard to debate.'

'Thank you, Feltraur.'

'Look at this guy, at his eye,' Ewnar pointed to Daniel's left eye. 'There's bundled darkness there. The Keeper Falafy warned us that there's a dark part to the prisoner. His eye tells me as much. Perchance, he penetrated with the invisible part of this gaze into the real Danad's head and robbed it of everything. The knowledge now helps him fool us. I'm afraid we're ill-equipped to unravel the ball of darkness, but we can execute the one it's hidden in.'

'But why would he fool you?' cried Estean, wary of the sinister word 'execute.'

'In order to escape death,' said Ewnar. 'Sooner or later, the darkness will out to rebel against light. Isn't the Emptied Lake enough for you?'

'Sadly enough, Ewnar's words do make sense as the reality suggests,' Feltraur explained.

These words frightened Estean more than those of Ewnar.

'Natlief alone has lost six hundred Palarardians and a half,' Ewnar suited numbers to what he and Feltraur had said.

'You said, Retowal, there were witnesses.'

'There are, Ozuard,' said Retowal, went to the door, made sure they were there and showed them into the White Room.

Two people entered. Both Daniel and Estean saw they were Estean's would-be rescuers of yesterday.

'Runuan and Eltiard will tell us what they chanced to see yesterday morning,' said Retowal. 'Sit down, friends.'

'We're listening, Runuan,' said Ozuard (his face grim, for he did not know what the two would tell about, but he knew that the previous morning Estean and Daniel had walked together).

'My friend Eltiard and I were on our way for a class with Retowal when a commotion drew our eyes some fifty paces from us. We saw that Estean was trying to escape from this guy. He caught her up, gripped her by the arm and started insinuating something to her. We thought we would make inquiries and help the girl if need be. His white armband spoke against that guy. But Estean said it was all right and we desisted.'

'Eltiard, would you like to add anything to what's been said?' asked Ozuard.

'I can only corroborate Runuan's words.' 'Would you, too, say that the chap in front of you was trying to impress something on Estean?'

'Runuan fished for the right word. I'd say: demanded. Yes, this chap was pushful. He wouldn't let her go. Caught her by the arm and pulled it. I think it hurt.'

'Yes, he would have his way,' Runuan added. 'Or else we'd have gone by, greeting Estean only.'

'And another thing,' Eltiard recalled something. 'The chap picked up two stones and looked at us as if he was going to pelt us.'

'Tell us, Estean, did Danad pick up the stones?' asked Ozuard, beating the rest to the question.

She cast down her eyes.

'Yes, I did,' answered Daniel instead of her.

'Yes, he did,' echoed Runuan, 'even though we had our bows across our backs. But for Estean, he'd have got it hot.'

'Shall we put to the test which of us would've got it hot?' Daniel could not contain himself.

'Calm down, Danad. It's all wrong to display your temper in your position. Your maiming Gontear at the Emptied Lake is bad enough,' Ozuard appealed to his reason and addressed his men: 'Any questions to Runuan and Eltiard... ? Thank you. You may go.'

The moment the door was shut on them, Ewnar said:

'Far be it from my mind to assert anything, but what the boys have said has suggested an idea to me. Sorry, Ozuard, you, too, Estean, but I have no right to withhold it from the panel. I think Estean is here not of her own free will. She must've been willed by the black eye of this monster.'

'It's a lie!' Estean cried as she jumped up sharply and ran out of the White Room.

'That's...' began Daniel and paused.

'Speak up, Danad: we're here to speak and listen,' said Feltraur (he did not sound as if he were fighting off the black eye).

'Judge for yourselves,' Daniel had decided against the word 'lie' as he recalled that his and Estean's game had been to get her to say first to herself and then to those in the White Room, 'He's Danad.'



\* \* \*

At the appointed hour in the late tittle-tattle Daniel arrived at the area behind Retowal's house where Palarardian warriors exercised. His was the last house in the same street as the Lord's palace and he had no trouble spotting the place. Ewnar, whose idea it was to challenge Danad, was waiting.

'I don't say good evening to you, alien, for I don't wish you good.'

'Good tittle-tattle to you, Ewnar, or, rather, good night, for it's coming. A beautiful view you've got here. If I lived in Palarard, I'd choose a spot for my house on the wasteland behind this site.'

'The site is for Retowal's learners, and that's where we go.' (There was a stone valley all the way to the crags). 'I see you keep thinking of life rather than death. However, death alone can give you eternal refuge on that wasteland.'

'I still think of life.'

'Are you that sure of your hand?'

'Enough to resign myself to its wont.'

'Let's stop here. The conditions are as follows: three arrows against three stones. My arrows are behind my back. You choose the stones and tuck them behind your girdle. The distance between us is seventy paces.' (Considering the swiftness of his arrows alone, Ewnar could have suggested a hundred paces or even twice that). 'We start on the count of three. Agreed?'

Count of three again, Daniel thought and smirked.

'Agreed. You count.'

'All right. Choose your stones. "I'll back off and we'll begin.'

Ewnar counted seventy paces and turned to face Daniel. He then unslung his bow and lowered the hand that gripped it. His second hand hung down along his torso and thigh. Daniel followed suit and let his hands down, too. The two stones he had chosen and put behind his jeans belt pushed against his abdomen: he had been unable to accommodate a third.

'Ready?' cried Ewnar.

'Count!' Daniel said and suddenly felt he was shaking all over. The shaking seemed to have stolen a march on him, hugged him and made him preoccupied with what life was about for it—shaking. 'I wish I had your uncircumspection to boot, Martin,' he added to himself.

'One.'

This shitty shaking!

'Two.'

Don't shake: you aren't mine, Daniel was saying to his hand.

'Three.'

Daniel pulled out a stone, swung it without thinking the way his eye was looking. Ewnar had let his first arrow loose a moment earlier. A moment—and Daniel felt a sharp hit on the abdomen. He looked down in fear to see the arrow in his flesh, only to hear it drop on the stones underfoot and realize that the arrow had hit the stone that had saved his life. He gripped his savior, pulled it out of the jeans' hug and caught sight of Ewnar: Ewnar had his right hand pressed to his chest mincing in place.

'You alive, Ewnar?' Daniel called.

Ewnar detached his hand from his chest, fighting the pain, swung it behind his back bent at the elbow and pulled an arrow out of the quiver. But each movement gave him anguish and fought his automatic procedural memory. However, he loaded the bow, and there was nothing for it but for Daniel, whose body had quite forgotten the shaking and was back to business, to hurl the second stone... The next moment Ewnar was toppled over on to the florid stone carpet. Daniel ran up to him. He was prone, unconscious. The blood was seeping from the ragged wound on the forehead. Daniel shook him by the shoulders.

'Ewnar! Ewnar, you alive?'

Ewnar roused himself in response to the shaking rather than the words and groaned (the ribs fractured by the first stone gave him pain).

'I'll call Retowal, and we'll take you to Feltraur,' said Daniel.

'And yet, who are you?' Ewnar asked despite his pain.

'I'm Danad... the Loner's great grandson. Have you heard of him?'

'I know him.'

'I'm Danad... in Martin's body. He was a ranger and liked hurling stones. He died and left me his nimble hands and black eye.'

'You could've chosen a weightier stone,' Ewnar said in a low voice, and Daniel thought he had detected a weak grin as it fought for room on his face.

'Good of you to be aware of that at least. I'm off to fetch Retowal.'

Daniel ran to Retowal's house, the tears coursing down his cheeks: I almost killed the Palerardian... forestman... forestman...

## **Chapter Six**

### **Memory: Together Again**

Semimes knotted the two ropes securely, his and the one he had in his backpack, to get the right length. Faddaf fixed one end to the ledge in front of the cave and dropped the other downward following it with his exacting gaze.

'Just right,' he said.

'Very much so,' screeched Semimes as he bent over the precipice. He then called his friends who were saying goodbye to Andy. 'Dan, Mat, it's time.' (The guys peeped out of the cave). 'You'll find the purchases and fingerholds: you're big enough to. Wipe that simper off your face, Mat. Get your wits about you and remember: an unassaulted mountain's contrary while an assaulted one's vengeful. Thank you, dear Faddaf, for the words that are Dorlief's saving grace. Hey, Andy, goodbye.'

'Tell the Carroty I'll visit him.'

Semimes backed off to the precipice, his palms about the rope, and started descending... soon the rope came to life as Semimes waved it to tell the boys he was safely on the ledge. Daniel went down next after saying to Faddaf by way of leave-taking:

'Sawasard will soon get the good news of his father. I promise.'

'Thank you for the good tidings of my son.'

When it was Matthew's turn, he thought he should say something in parting, too.

'He'll sure do it, Faddaf, with our help. Goodbye.'

Faddaf followed him with his gaze in silence: he might have doubts at the moment as to the success, his hope waning and him afraid of the words that might let them in on his doubts?

. . . It was in the late tittle-tattle that the Word Keepers, following Faddaf's suggestions, made the Dark Waters after an endless descent and found nearby what could shorten and safeguard their way to Dorliel—the Companion-giving Tunnel or its mouth. It was an overgrown and barely visible hole in the ground.

'Weary, aren't you, fireflies? Cut out your whimpering: I can see you are. It won't be any better further on. We're in for a lot of nervous walking underground, very much so. We'll spend the night next to the rock, on its other side. In the event of danger, we'll dive down the Tunnel. What is it, Mat? I've hardly had my say with you eager to cut in.'

'Eager indeed... It's just that I thought—'

'Faddaf did your thinking for you—what you do is plod along following your gut feeling while your legs serve you.'

It was clear Semimes was the worse for wear and needed a show of character.

'We seem to be almost there. I wondered how it was that no one had set foot down that Tunnel if no one's been here in the Tunnel in a hundred years, as you say?'

'What's the question, smart aleck?'

That was the question.'

'There's no footprint in the grass.'

'You, too, Dan. Father used to say, "Sonny, the Tunnel has two arms. The left one will take you to the Hawur Mountain Cave; the right to the Dark Waters. Use the left one: it's safer. Faddaf had followed it at my bidding... and had made it." As did I. No one but the companion the Tunnel grants us knows. All right, settle as best you can and sleep. We'll eat in the morning, bask in the light and—down the Tunnel... for ten days or so.'

After a while, Matthew's voice scurried, toned down:

'Semimes?'

No answer. Matthew tried again:

'You've seen him, then, guide. What was he like, your companion?'

'So I did,' Semimes screeched (his voice no longer tense—it was content, rather). 'You'll never guess who it was.'

'Malam, wasn't it?'

'No, it wasn't, Mat. Hey, Dan, if you're still awake, try your guess.'

'May I have another guess while Dan's racking his brain?'

'Smart aleck, aren't you, Mat? Shoot.'

'The one who knows the Tunnel—Sawasard?'

'No again.'

'Somehow I thought of Natan,' said Daniel.

'It was Faddaf, fireflies... but not the old man he is now—the young Faddaf as he was once walking down the Companion-giving Tunnel. He'd been waiting for me there... Once he saw me he waved his hand and beckoned me on: follow me.'

The conversation broke off. The travelers were dreaming...

'Fireflies,' Semimes whispered, 'are you still awake?'

'We are,' said Matthew.

'So am I,' said Daniel.

'Let's have thinks the way we do at New Light. Let's voice our thinks as to who will be our companion in the Tunnel.'

'I can voice mine right away. It'll be Malam. He took Groyorg and Sawasard down the Tunnel, so he will us, too, tomorrow.'

'The soothsayer Gushugy,' Daniel drawled in a loud whisper.

'That's a joke in bad taste: you'll be courting trouble,' said Semimes gravely.

'Count that out. It looks like Mat's right: Malam will take us to Dorlief.'

'Your think next, guide?'

'Father'll take us home, sure thing. He's the only one left there out of all Dorliefans. Malam alone as revealed by the Tunnel will be the one to be our companion underground; the real one will meet us at the hog's head stone... Did Faddaf drop down the rope, Mat?'

'Not to worry, guide, I've got your rope secure in my backpack.'

What do you mean, mine? It'll be yours as well as mine... and Dan's. We'll follow... one... another in... the Tunnel,' Semimes was clearly dozing off. 'Spaced three... to four... paces... bound by... your... my ro...'

\* \* \*

'I can't see a thing, guide. What about a torch?' Matthew said as he dropped down the Tunnel and felt he was blind turning his head this way and that. (The feeling was a sudden childhood revival. He had once woken up at night and seen no trace of light, not a single one. He had not found the window even though he knew where it should be. The window had always responded to his gaze as a glimmer against the blackness, the pale glimmer to suggest he was still alive, he was wakeful, for it had always been there for him. That once he had seen no window, thought he had gone blind and it had frightened him a great deal.)

'It's a good thing you can't: no companion will be there if there's light,' Semimes's voice comforted his stirred memory.

'We would find the way on our own with a light on.'

'That's frivolous of you, Dan. I didn't mean to scare you, but I'll have to now if you force me to reveal more than is good for you. The air in the Tunnel is all wrong and clouds the mind. Its walls are full of holes into unknown abysses. The eye has no business to see that. Whoever sees it will have a hard time of it: his own head will provide the holes with such as will make you potty... I therefore say: Dan here's the rope. Have you got it?'

'I'm holding it.'

'Step back about four paces, not to tread on heels, wind it about you the way I did when we were up there. Did you mark that?'

'So I did, guide, nothing simpler.'

'Knot it and pass the rope on to Mat.'

'I've done it. Passing it on.'

'Mat, be so kind as to do the same without asking to light a torch for it.'

'Well, no: I've no desire to go potty,' said Matthew, only to add in exasperation: '. . . any more than feeling purblind.'

'You'll have to forebear a bit longer, Mat. Have you knotted it?'

'I have, guide. We're all set to go.'

'Not just yet,' Semimes countered, 'forebear a bit, I say. We have to wait for the companion. Better still: keep silent while I tap my stick on the floor to signal the companion. (Semimes's stick worried the stone underfoot and the tap broke off into sound that spread every which way). 'Now peer for what you're worth.'

'Are there a hundred tunnels around us?'

'Precisely, Mat, and as many aisles, with just one right. You hear? The tap's coming back.'

'Where's our Malam?' each of the three travelers had the same question as the one Daniel asked.

'Stay, Dan! Stay! Where're you going? Come back!' Matthew suddenly cried, rushed after Daniel and knocked down him who was next to him.

Daniel was retreating with the bundle of light he had suddenly found himself in. Matthew took several more steps—the rope tautened and cut his progress short. He looked back and saw nothing but blackness.

'Semimes, where are you? Dan's going away. Don't be so obstinate. Let's go.'

'Mat, come to your senses!' Semimes screeched. 'It's the companion. Dan's by my side. That one's the companion.'

'I'm here, Mat,' Daniel's voice burst out after Semimes's and his hand touched Matthew's. 'I'm here, feather. I'm here. That one's a ghost.'

'A companion,' Semimes corrected him. 'Calm down. Let's follow him lest we lose him. I'll lead... you do, Mat, since you're there. Dan, you follow, for we've no choice—we'll follow the rule of the rope. All right, off we go, fireflies.'

Marching ahead of them, looking back from time to time and beckoning them with his hand, was Daniel, the Daniel Matthew had been friends with since childhood. The reverie inspired by the likeness come to life carried him away more and more, with nothing more to see except for Dan that he now ran to Our Lake with, now walked down forest paths, now ascended the stairs to Bushtunts's office... He would be seeing next the placeless place... There it was! Matthew's head was spinning; it was not just his gaze but he himself was being drawn inside the microscope. What's this? Where's the placeless place? Where am I? flashed across his head. And suddenly an abyss opened up in front of him. A whirlwind! There was a whirlwind inside the abyss. It caught up with Matthew and started whirling and winding about him patches of cold darkness. As it swathed him, it compressed his bosom ever tighter and tighter...'

'Don't let him go, Dan... pull along; I shan't be a moment.'

'I can hardly manage. Hold on to it, Semi! Let's heave.'

'Heave-ho!'

Matthew found himself in darkness.

'What's happening? Am I blind... ? Blind?'

'Never fear, Mat. That you aren't,' Daniel said as quietly as he could. 'We're in the Companion-giving Tunnel. All of us are purblind. Do you remember?'

'I've just recalled it. What's happened?'

'You veered off the way, Mat, and got in a hole. But for the rope, you'd have got lost.'

'It's all right: it's blown over, Semimes. "But for" is beside the point.'

'Mat, do you know what Dan called me at the height of the battle for you?'

'Semimes the Conqueror, wasn't it?'

Semimes grinned.

'I wish... Do you remember what you called me, Dan?'

'I don't seem to. What was it, Semimes?'

'All right then, fireflies: meet Semi.'

The darkness smirked in an unseen but obvious way.

'Where's our companion?'

'It got lost while we were playing tug-of-war with the abyss,' screeched Semimes. 'Mat, Dan, take off the rope, will you? You'll trade places. And no arguing!'

'We have,' said Daniel as he followed Matthew in relieving himself of the rope.

'Mat, wind it about you again and pass the end on to Dan. I'll lead, with Mat in between.' 'Babying me again, are you?'

'Yes, we are,' said Semimes firmly. 'You seem to be at odds with darkness.'

'I'm afraid so,' Matthew conceded.

'Since that's the case, there's no point in your being roped with it, very much so. Here's a flat cake each courtesy of Gramps Faddaf,' Semimes sounded somewhat relaxed. 'See you remember where your mouth is, Mat. That was a joke.'

'Semimes, what if the companion doesn't show up again?' Daniel said. 'How would we extricate ourselves?'

Semimes did not deign to answer, but one could hear him stop munching.

'Hadn't we better turn back before it's too late and... ?'

'And what, Mat?'

'Dunno... Opt for the other arm of the Tunnel from Hawur or else hit a forest or mountain trail?'

'Dan, Mat, my friends, fireflies, I must tell you we can't: behind us are the same treacherous aisle traps as ahead, like the one our Vital landed himself in. Tempt not yourselves with what's unfeasible—that will land us in the soup. It's the Tunnel's wrong air that leads our minds astray and makes our tongues confuse our thoughts.'

'What do we do, guide?' asked Daniel.

'Do is right, rather than wag our tongues,' Semimes said firmly and, after a moment's consideration, found the solution in his head and gave a resolute tap on the ground with his stick, sending the smithereens of the tap on their way to look for the vanished companion.

'Look! Dan's there again. Let's go,' Mathew whispered excitedly.

'I can see as much. Rein in your feelings and follow me,' screeched Semimes in a new way, as he got the same feelings, for beckoning him was the visitor whom he had once met in the Harshid foothills, who had since become his friend and whom he would never see again.

\* \* \*

The travelers got outside when twilight was barely in the offing. How many days it had taken them to pass, they had no knowledge. How much strength the Companion-giving Tunnel had consumed, they only realized when they breathed in the fresh air: they had none left. Rather than getting up to their feet, they moved their exhausted bodies on their knees and hands to the nearest stone that looked like a better shelter than the hog's head and fell asleep all around it, caring little for the screechy suggestion of one of them:

'Looks like mid-tittle-tattle. We'd better catch some sleep before it's quite dark, very much so.'

Moments later—that had taken up hours—the same screech brought them back to life:

'Dan, Mat, peel your peepers and unplug your ears: it's all I can do to wake you up.'

'Dark again,' Matthew pretended indignation.

'This is Dorlief dark, not quite dark, which is just as well, very much so. You hear me, don't you, fireflies?'

'We can, quite, guide,' Matthew said.

'I seem to be awake, too.'

'Then listen hard. I'll now take you to the Fleiss across some scree. There're sinkholes in the ground—no getting through without my stick. You'll make it home without me further on. The barkycrooks are in Dorlief, so you'd better take care. I'll head for Tanuth where our people are. I'll tell Falafy the good news of Faddaf.'

'Not a word about me to anyone.'

'All right, Dan, it's all been agreed. Which is right, considering: there's no point in telling them horror stories. And I don't mean your face—have another think coming. It's just that you aren't you, as it were.'

'Will Sawasard and Groyorg go with us?' asked Matthew.

'I'll try to drop a line to Sawasard—summoning him. He's a Word Keeper, nor will his swords be out of place. As for Groyorg, I'll have to ask Father.'

'Semimes?'

'What is it, Dan?'

'Look up Leely and ask her to get in touch with Sawasard. Let her tell him that—'

'I know what to say. But why Leely of all people?'

'Because she'd be soonest summoning the forestmen.'

'Cunning you: getting your message across saying nothing. But I've got your meaning... very much so. Well... there was something else I had stirring in my head. Aha, I got it. I've told myself: Important to me but not all that important for the fireflies. It's all about Faddaf's flat cakes. I'll take the rest of the flat cakes. You'll quench nice hunger at home. Take the globe to father; let him admire the marvel. All right, fireflies, off we go: you follow in my footsteps.'

. . . The moment they left the scree behind they saw some twenty paces off the figure of a man so small that they knew it was Malam right away.

'My stick divined you long ago. I've been waiting for twilight lest the barkycrooks spy me and get suspicious. They give me a wide berth though, courtesy of the childhood friend of mine, I should still take care... with you now twice as careful.'

He came up to Semimes and hugged him saying:

'So you're back, sonny. I'm ever so happy. I can see you've got our...'

'Greetings, dear Malam.'

'Let me give you a hug, dear Mat. We thought we'd lost sight of you. Now you've turned up.'

'Greetings to you, Malam,' said Daniel and waited excitedly.

On hearing an unfamiliar voice, Malam stood still peering into the face of the chap.

'I see my stick is never mistaken figuring out strange footfalls next to the known. Sonny, could you dispel the confusion in me?'

'I'll have the say I say.'

'As is the wont between us, sonny.'

'Father, call our friend Dan. He's got the Tear and the sacred Word. He took the Word along with Mat and me to Faddaf. No one else but he has the right to be called by that name. We don't have another Dan so bound to the Dorlief cause, nor ever will.'

'Greetings to you, Danad. Come home, boys. You'll tell me everything there.'

'Wait a bit, Father. I'm on my way to Falafy. The forthcoming march calls for it. Faddaf pointed out the signs to us that would lead us on the Path destined for the Word and its Keepers. Mat and Dan will tell you about our meeting your old friend. I must be going.'

'Have you got water in your canteen, sonny?'

'If you've got any, let's trade.'

Malam unsheathed his canteen and gave it to Semimes.

'Take care, sonny.'

Semimes put the canteen in his all but empty pack and ran off.

'Dan, Mat, come home,' said Malam somewhat sadly.

\* \* \*

The Dorlief nights were given to playing with the light, here flighty and spry, there tender and benign, the light that flared over the house domes and seeped through them shooing off the dark, teasing and stirring it, and after it had



had its fill playing, died down as it conceded its authority. Today there were fires in the black and violet night, hundreds of vehement fires. They gnawed at it breaking it apart. Those were not the fires that ushered in a new life after Shwarrawsh's invasion. Those were fires that made fun of life leaving burns and injuries in its space. They consumed parks and avenues, they swept over homes in their fury likening them to themselves and leaving nothing but ashes to the Dorlief land. And they craved more.

It was just a strip of that night that escaped ravishment over Dorlief. It was washed in a tranquil and benign lilac light thanking it for something, that something being their secret. The lilac light issued from the globe. Malam had not put it away before bedtime. He was expecting a tap on... the door... or the window as the case might be... Daniel and Matthew shared his lot, sitting by the fireside—in the chairs that had got used to them—and listening for untoward sounds...

'Do you hear?' said Matthew in a low voice, seemingly afraid to drown out the sound.

'Sounds like my window.'

'Go to Dan's room and let in Semimes and his companion,' said Malam nimbly getting off the sofa. (Daniel cast him a questioning glance). 'There're two of them today.'

The boys rushed out of the living room into the passage and made the window in a few steps (spurred on by a repeated tap) after pushing open the door. In another moment, Semimes and Sawasard stood before them. Semimes had on a new protective shirt—the forestman's present—under his cape.

'Hello, fireflies. Got used to the long-forgotten nest, have you?' Semimes was clearly in high spirits.

'We feel as though we never left it. Relaxing by the fireside day in day out,' said Matthew (Daniel thought it a poor policy to enlarge on the long-forgotten nest).

'Greetings to you, friends,' said Sawasard. 'I'm glad to see you again, Mat.' (Sawasard and Matthew embraced). 'I'd like to shake hands with the one that's let us hope again.'

'I'm off to Father. Come to the living room: our present there shines like anything. I bet you've never seen anything like it, forestman,' said Semimes and went out, leaving it to Sawasard to test Dan without interference, but covering his stratagem with words that did not have to be searched for. Matthew followed him, wise to his plan.

Sawasard would not let the stranger's hand go for a long time, his eyes asking why Dan?'You look at me as if I were to say something to you.'

'Well, do... to set my heart at ease each time I pronounce the dear name.'

'Before setting off on his first journey, Dan asked you what word you'd say to him. "Palerard," you replied, the word being your secret... that of a forestman. And it sort of opened up to him. Now's your turn and I say: Palerard.'

A silence fell, and there was a moment in that silence when Sawasard found himself plunged again into the blackness of the Crossroads and experienced pain,

a spiritual pain. But it was not his... He returned back into reality and recognized the pain for what it was, and his eyes watered.

'Dan,' his soul's tremor pervaded the sounds and he embraced Daniel as an old friend would after a long separation.

. . . An hour later, there were five of them at the round table in the living room: Malam and the four Word Keepers. Semimes removed from his girdle and put on the table, in its center, a gneiss bag Falafy had given him.

'Falafy used to keep barynth nuts in it,' he began. 'Now there's something rather more valuable in it...'

'The Tears!' Matthew could not restrain his feelings. 'You've got them, haven't you?'

Mentally, Semimes found the Vital's vivacity in bad taste but never showed it because his exclamation ('You've got them, haven't you?') quite outweighed the vivacity with its correctness. So he went on gravely:

'Inside is what we are to keep and safeguard from now on and, should death be imminent, entrust it to the crags or stones in the belief that no gaze would tell them apart. Now count the Tears of Shwarrawsh, Dan: each of us is to make sure there are that many of Them.'

As he took the Tears out one by one, Daniel seconded what his eye saw with his voice:

'One. Black.'

Semimes, as a true Dorliefan who knew the story of each, helped him along.

'The black Tear. Tlanalt entrusted Her to Gordrog at the secret Council that pronounced us Word Keepers.'

'The second, white with a violet tinge.'

'This Tear was found by Leely and passed on to Sufus and Safasy. I've merely mentioned what makes this Tear special. Remove the third one, Dan, don't loiter.'

'Yellow-and-orange.'

'The Tear's been kept by our dear Falafy ever since Father entrusted Her to the girl-healer Faly. She told me about it. Don't loiter, Dan.'

'Number four, also yellow-and-orange.'

'Shouldn't She be orange-and-yellow, since there's one yellow-and-orange?' Matthew joked.

'Things of the sort call for gravity, Mat, not happy-go-lucky behavior. She may have belonged to Falafy. But, since they're alike, let the one I told you about be hers. Ragogar took leave of Her before death. He was a Keeper from Natlief, a defender of the Natlief fortress. He sent the Tear to Falafy with a ferling named Geg. A very rueful Tear.'

'Yet another white one with a violet tinge.'

'Speak sense, Dan. It's the second time you've lost count.'

'I stand corrected, Semimes: number five.'

'That's better: it's clear to everyone. More gravity from now on. This Tear comes from the forestmen. Is that right, Sawasard?'

'Right you are, my friend.'

'Let's have the next one, Dan.'

Daniel undid the pouch on his belt and put his Tear on the table.

'Number six, turquoise.'

'She comes from afar, very much so. A Dorliefan named Natan had kept Her his whole life. He was Norron's son, brother to Falafy and grandfather to Dan.'

'Two missing,' said Matthew.

Semimes abruptly got up after a brief silence.

'Wait for me here; I won't be a minute. I'll use your window, Dan, do you mind?'

'Go ahead, Semi.'

'Joking apart, Dan, don't you be twice silly by repetition. It wasn't all that silly for starters, for you had assaulted our ears in great excitement,' Semimes screeched as he made for the door to the corridor.

He came up to the willow behind the house that he was fond of sitting under, looking toward Lake Werent and dreaming. He knelt... pushed aside the stone... removed from the burrow a lilac bag... and, shaking off the sand, produced...

'Alay,' he whispered and froze: he suddenly felt like the Semimes he had never known before and shook violently, uncontrollably... 'Alay,' he whispered, 'this is the end... the end of our friendship... the end of our happiness... the end of everything... I wish I could... but I can't help it: I must part company with you. Without You, I'm no longer me. I'm a nobody without You, the nobody I was before, before I met You. It's the end of everything. I'm letting You down, Alay. I'm letting myself down... How do I part from you without parting? Were Semimes a whole man, he would say that if you can't part from one you can't help parting from, part from yourself... part from yourself... part from yourself...'

On the way back Semimes failed to stop by the pen to say goodbye to Nuruny. He simply called as an aside:

'Sorry, Semimes is no more.'

Glances of wonder met Semimes when he was back: he was pale as one dead and grim as a shadow. Whereas an hour before his eyes had been as joyous as those around him: his father's, his friends' as they reflected the lilac wonder. Later on, he laced the evening repast with talk of two meetings (with Falafy and Sawasard) and guesses as to which of the two was the happier for hearing the news of Faddaf. The thing was that Semimes proved to be the happiest, for he had made them happy with that bountiful happiness.

'What's up, sonny?' Malam asked, frightened.

'Are you all right, my friend?' Sawasard asked, for Semimes was not himself.

Semimes replied to neither of them.

'Number seven,' he screeched, his soul torn apart.

A violet Tear lay on the table.

'Don't fret, guide: just one missing,' said Matthew. 'We'll borrow Her from Andy. The boy's made his choice: he isn't all hot about getting back home.'

'Yes, one of you will have to stop by Faddaf to collect the eighth Tear,' said Semimes, his 'you' being anything but a misnomer. But no one paid attention.

'I'll go to father,' said Sawasard.

'Sure thing,' Semimes concurred curtly.

'Fetch the skillet from the kitchen, sonny, the one with the broad bottom, and a candle. Now, you, Dan, produce the journal and separate the eight pages with the Word in. Leave the eighth as it is.'

When Semimes was back, Malam continued:

'We'll now do Faddaf's bidding: wrap each Tear in a page and burn it.'

The eight hands wrapped the Tears in no time and put the paper wads on the skillet. Semimes took the candle to one of them—the wad flared up like fifty flashes, making everybody recoil. The next moment the Tear drew in the flame with just the ashes dropping on the bottom of the skillet.

'I've never seen ordinary paper blow up like this,' Daniel said.

'What about the flame drawn in?' said Matthew with a glance at Malam: he might know the reason?

'It's the spirit of the Word breaking through and the Tear sucking it in. She's got the knowledge now. Set the other wads alight, sonny, for the knowledge to enter each of them.'

When the Word penned on the seven pages got its new abode, Semimes said:

'Dan, put the Tears back in the pouch and fit it to your belt about you.'

'This is what I've bethought myself, my friends.' Malam got up and stepped on one of the paths beloved of him—bordering on the fireplace on one side and on the door on the other. 'Two ways are open to the Emptied Lake these days: through the Companion-giving Tunnel...'

'Oh, not again!' Matthew lodged an objection as if in joke.

'The boys will find it hard, very much so, Father,' said Semimes. 'It's one thing negotiating the Tunnel on their way to the easy chairs, and quite another, to the Darkness lair.'

'Still, if one were to negotiate it, one would have to choose the arm that'll take one to the Hawur Cave. That was the way you took, sonny. Spend a couple of days in the cave, and then off to the Emptied Lake.'

'Father, I proceeded from the three-petal stone flower: it's much shorter. Also, the way from Hawur to the Emptied Lake isn't safe at all, what with barkycrooks' troops abroad. They followed me all the way to the Tusul foothills. Dan felled them all.'

On hearing that, both Sawasard and Malam looked at Daniel and then at Semimes.

'A stone in his hand is the same as a bow and arrow in yours, dear forestman.'

'Come off it, Semimes, stop singing my praises.'

'Stones are a good resort in a deadly fight, should they be subdued by hand. The arrows in a quiver tend to peter out, while stones are there for the asking in these parts,' Malam said.

'You said there were two ways, Malam,' Matthew reminded him.

'Yes, Mat, there's another way, just as secret and barely trodden. You'd be hard put to it to negotiate it without me.'

'What way is that, Malam?' Sawasard asked.

'Anything, so long as it isn't the Tunnel,' said Matthew, somewhat cheered up.

Malam croaked a laugh and said:

'Through the Wild Woods. Only two people have made it through, one of them Faddaf.'

'The other being you, Father?'

'Me, sonny. However, I suppose my mentor, amber Elle, never disregarded the Wild Woods.'

'Amber Elle?' Matthew's eyes shone.

'He would depart from our parts on occasion, mine and Groyorg's. When once he came back after that secret mission, he called it the Hidden Side. I'll tell you all about it some day.'

'I think it would be right to go through the Wild Woods: the Tunnel clouds your reason and drains your stamina,' Sawasard ventured. 'But how do I get to father to get the eighth Tear?'

'All in good time, my dear Sawasard.'

'So we're off to the Wild Woods tomorrow, aren't we?' asked Daniel.

'We set off for the Wild Woods at daybreak. We'll start out when it's still dark. So you'd better catch some sleep.'

They were suddenly alive to a loud snort, and the foursome's eyes quickly spotted the culprit: Semimes was eager to say something and he snorted without being aware of that and thus announcing a deed deep in his heart and his words.

'Semimes?' Daniel said.

And Semimes screeched:

'Were Semimes a whole man, he'd say that there was one yesterday and there'd be many tomorrows.'

Malam's face was shadowed with anxiety: Semimes would not speak of himself as a different person in his presence. Malam had suspected something untoward, but thought he would ask him at a later date, when in private.

'Malam, I'm wondering: the Wild Woods being there, and the Emptied Lake over there,' Matthew waved his hand both ways, bewildered.

'I can quite understand your confusion, Mat. I'm going to take you to the Hidden Side, which is where Groyorg, your friend and mine, will join us.'

'Great!' Matthew was overjoyed. 'All together again, like on the first journey.'

'I quite share in your feelings, my friend. I miss you all,' said Sawasard.

'It's a good thing, being together. Now, give up your souls to the World of Dreams Lord,' said Malam.

'What do we do about the present? Shall we hide it away, the way we did the one Dan has reserved for Falafy and the Loner?'

'No, sonny: it belongs in the living room. Let the barkycrooks think I'm here. This marvel is a timely arrival in our home.'

'It's timely, and very much so, Father.'

When everybody with the exception of Sawasard, who settled on the sofa in the living room, departed for their rooms, there was a knock on Malam's door. He answered it. It was Semimes clad in gneiss cape, his swamp bitubular stick in hand.

'Father, I can't join you,' he screeched in a low voice.

'Sick, aren't you, sonny?'

'No.'

'What is it, then?'

'I'm leaving,' Semimes both replied and did not, turned on his heels and made for the exit.

Malam never said a word: for the first time in his life he did not know what to say or think. He sat down on his bed and buried his face in his hands... He sat thus long, considering his son's unaccountable behavior that bordered on denial. But what it was that his Semimes's soul was denying, Malam could not find in the spinning space of his thoughts. Mindful of the wave of emotions his friends were to be swept with when they learned of his departure, he found the words that would alleviate the wave: 'My friends, as often as not, man hears an outside call that leads him off the dedicated path and that he is powerless to resist, no matter his will power. He who follows the call may, on occasion, encounter signs with room in them for outward vacuum and innate emptiness. Even though the signs are there to show the genuine path.'

Malam, Daniel, Matthew and Sawasard walked to the Wild Woods in silence. The dark was conducive to livening up Semimes's image in each of them and thus shorten the distance between himself and Semimes, courtesy of the almighty words and unbridled body English.

'Here we are on the doorstep of the alien home. And just in time, for day's breaking,' Malam began. 'Mind you, now: we'll form no file; rather, we'll walk in a way that makes it possible to see one another out of the corner of our eyes. I'm telling each of you as I'm telling myself: don't be scared by outside noises or respond to them with your body or soul. Use your voice to call your friend, but eschew the calls of the Woods. Don't look back on any account. Should the treachery of the Wild Woods have the better of you, don't panic but freeze, shake off the awe and step forth. Once you panic you'll no longer find the way out, no matter how you try. I tell you once again: should you happen to look back, freeze, overcome your fear and step forth without looking back again in order to have the past returned to you, for there's no recovering it: it'll have got hidden. And no fidgeting in panic.'

'Malam, is there no Companion-giving Tunnel nearby?'

'A happy-go-lucky attitude to life might be a boon, dear Mat, but pray be serious in this hour, for the distance between frivolity and awe is too great to negotiate it when the latter comes to replace the former in no time at all.'

'Gotcha, Malam,' said Matthew as he scowled, to mean anything from abiding by the Carroty's warning to being shy of the distance between frivolity and seriousness.

'Dan, stand on my right; you on my left, Mat. You'll walk left of Dan. All right, friends, step forth all at once. My stick will tell us the direction.'

A few paces later the friends felt the cold and dark of the space they had found themselves in. Tall, dark-grey trunks crowded them.

'Dan, Mat, can you see me?' asked Malam.

'I can,' said Matthew looking askance at Malam.

Daniel turned his head a bit to the right.

'So can I, Malam.'

'Sawasard, my friend, don't get ahead. Slow down a bit.'

'Will do, dear Malam, force of habit, you know.'

Another forty paces later, Malam again reminded them of himself, and each of them again responded to his call.

What disconcerted them was that the merest turn of the head or gaze suggested to them that the trees were on the move in space: either the trees were moving or the space, with the forward view changing the moment they reverted to the original direction, and it was impossible to find the tree which had served as a reference point theretofore.

'It's weird,' said Sawasard. 'I can hear neither the rustle of the trees nor the bird chirps nor any activity whatsoever.'

'Same here,' said Matthew.

The travelers went ever deeper into the unknown forest, increasingly aware of someone's presence at every step, as if someone was playing unending hide-and-seek with them.'

'I can hear a whisper,' said Daniel. 'Can anyone else?'

'I can, but thankfully can make out no words,' said Matthew.

'So can I, Dan,' said Sawasard.

'The forest arrests our attention span. Resist it,' Malam reminded them, his voice serene and grave in equal proportions.

'Sawas, sonny,' his mother's voice called Sawasard (it was coming from somewhere back of him), 'I'm back: the Crossroads has let me go.'

'No... no,' Sawasard whispered (anxiety and suspicion crept on to him).

'Yes, sonny. I've been told you're on your way to the Wild Woods, so I trailed you: I haven't seen you for ever so long. Wait, Sawas, I can't keep pace with you.'

Who told her? thought Sawasard, no one could have. No one knew.

'Won't Faddaf be glad when he sees his wife and son! He'll say, "Lelean! Sonny!"' the tender voice he had not heard in a long time went on ingratiating itself with him: 'You meant to go to him alone, but you'd have brought sadness along with joy.'

She can't possibly know that it's my lot to collect his Tear from him... unless, of course, she's turned into lilac light the ball produces that they call globe. No, no, I won't let my reason be affected.

'My friends,' he said loudly, 'I've just heard my mother's voice. You have to know not to give in. Don't.'

'Father, wait for me. I've decided to join you. What side do I stand on?' (Malam did not reply). 'Sorry, Father... and embrace your Semimes. Wouldn't you even look at me as if I weren't yours? No ill feelings, though, for I am not your son... May I carry my Tear?'

Malam stopped: he suddenly thought Semimes might indeed have changed his mind and caught up with them. He was ashamed of what he had done and was repentant. I must give him a hug, he thought.

'Malam, no!' Matthew cried.

Malam roused himself.

'How did you know, dear Mat?'

'You slowed down and whispered something under your breath. I thought you'd be looking back the next moment.'

'Which I would have. Thank you, my friend.'

'Well-done, feather,' came Daniel's voice on Matthew's right. 'Let me shake your hand.'

Matthew turned his head in the direction of the voice.

'No! No! No!' he cried, dropped to his knees and cupped his face with his hands. 'You're no longer there! You're no longer there... you don't exist.'

'Are you all right, Mat?' Daniel's excited voice invaded the space left of Matthew.

Malam came up to him and helped him up to his feet.

'Open your eyes, Mat. Can you see me?'

'I can,' Matthew whispered. 'You're Carroty? Aren't you?'

'The same, don't you doubt. It's blown over. Let's go on. Don't lose sight of me.'

'Did you dream of Dan?' asked Sawasard.

'Yes, Dan... from our past.'

There were hasty footfalls behind Daniel. He could guess what it was. The footfalls came closer, and a dog's gasping breath. He had guessed right: Leoely and Rodor.'

'Yes, Dan, it's me. I've got Rodor with me,' Leoely's voice left no doubts. 'I met Semimes and he told me that your friends are off to the Wild Woods. I couldn't resist it: I've something to tell you. But don't look back: you shouldn't.'

'What did you mean to tell me? Say it.'

'Don't look back, it's embarrassing.'

'Speak, Leoely.'

'I'm expecting. Do you remember *our home*?'

Daniel looked back. He could not help it and forgot it all. He only wanted one thing—to see Leoely, his Leoely.

'A-a-a-ah!' he yelled to drown his horror, for he found himself at the edge of an abyss. Standing beyond was Leoely, a swaddled infant in her arms. He forgot all about the warning not to panic, not to look back in order to return a past moment, about the saving step forth that one had to take for all the horror. He had no time to think of anything. But he suddenly remembered... that there was an abyss between him and Leoely. And, to cancel it out if only for the last moment he stepped forth to meet Leoely only to rouse and find himself on the outskirts of the Wild Woods. The witchcraft of the Wild Woods, he thought, I've given in. Think, Dan, think hard. Find the place we entered the Woods. We were proceeding in a straight line from Malam's. Malam's place. He turned to face Dorlief to find his bearings.



'Good for you, Dan!' he heard the Carrot's hoarse voice. 'You did as I said, overcame your fear and stepped forth.'

'Malam dear, am I glad! Happy as can be. You're here.'

'The thanks are due to our forestman: he saw you turn around and vanish, and alerted us. I followed you. I'm afraid you'd have gone astray looking for us, but for my stick. We've got to go at the double but keeping one another in sight. I told Mat and Sawasard to go along at a third of their speed. I think we'll catch up with them before midday. All right, step forth all at once.'

They progressed as they had before, calling out to each other and verifying with the eyes... without falling in with the Woods' tricks. When his stick heard the familiar footfalls ahead Malam asked Daniel to call out to the friends. Soon they heard Matthew's dear voice respond:

'Dan, Malam, over here!'

When they were level with one another and fell into place, they went on their way... It was a long hike through the Wild Woods as they resisted the tricks of the unknown space. Finally, instead of the umpteenth warning, Malam declared:

'My friends, my stick says we're almost there.'

'The Hidden Side?' It was a joyous comment rather than a question.

'It's bad news, I'm afraid, Mat, along with good. Beyond the trees is not the Hidden Side but a secret passage to it,' said Malam.

Another two dozen paces later, the travelers arrived at a forest lake. It could be seen at a glance that it was unusual. The water in it was murky and grey to suggest the absurd idea that it was a sinkhole that had had the mists of the Wild Woods sunk in.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, Semimes was counting his paces as he progressed over a narrow mountain ledge:

'One, two, three... He was like, "Only one missing." He never so much as took notice of the seventh, the most unexpected, the most promising of them all, as if it was yet another nibble on a hunk of bread that he stuffed himself with at dinner without thinking. Three... or was it four? Better get back and start counting the paces again... One, two, three... He was like, "Are you all right, friend?" What's the point of asking if you see I'm all right? If you see I'm not, you have no business to ask. Asking nonsensical questions without detecting a lost soul, very much so. Not a single one of the three of them. No such luck. And none of them thanked me for the most important Tear turning up as if She had always been there on the table, waiting for one-eyed Dan to snatch Her up. That smart aleck, that, was like, "Just one, number eight, missing." That the seventh had been snatched up by the one-eyed one was immaterial... Lost count again—I'll have to back off and start again... One, two, three, four, five... No more need of a guide, is there? They've got all they bargained for. If it's a success story, the glory goes to them. Father's with them and Sawasard and Groyorg the Square will soon be joining. If it's a success story, they'll trade my Alay, who's there without love or a kind word, for the glory. And they'll wallow in that glory like so

many hogs in a load of shit. He was like, "Just one missing." That a man had been bereft of his own erstwhile self as they had robbed him... Why yes, they had robbed me of the Mirror Pool... yes, the Mirror Pool with the hundreds of mirrors that he could look in only... "Semimes, Semimes... those are your friends! They call you their guide because they have faith in you. They call you their friend because they trust you." Why does no one say that to me? Alay might the way She did before, but they separated us with my own hands... Was it five or six? I'll have to go back again... not to return again... One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. There it is, the Invisible Niche. No one will see Semimes again any more than they can see it. If you can't part from one you can't help parting from, part from yourself.'

Semimes stepped into the Niche and raised his eyes: the black shimmering spot, like one alive, was still suspended where it had been that last time (except he had been here with two intruders). The Loner's words occurred to him: 'Venture not into the darkness in the Niche, however it called you, lest you want to get lost without trace.'

'What if one does want, very much so... ?'

Semimes clambered up the wall. It gave him the evil creeps. He thought back to the spot where the Vanishing Waterfall got lost.

'The Vanishing Waterfall,' he whispered.

'Vanishing Semimes,' the Niche whispered.

Semimes pushed with his foot off the jutting stone he had been leaning on and plunged into darkness... and felt his senses and thoughts melting in it. This is what it means, parting from one's own self, he just had the time to think.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Malgusia**

#### **(The Hidden Side)**

'As it happens, my dear nephew Yvidar, this letter, these words meant for you, and your thoughts in reply, will have to be a substitute for meeting vis-à-vis. However excited you are at what I have to tell you, however you wish you could debate it, do not come to see me: time is short for all of us, and you are well advised to spend it on the other things. It is the other things that are of the essence now.

'I am now prevented from working in the Overcloud City. I should have foreseen it and, true to the cause, suppressed what I had witnessed in the World-assembly Sphere the way I had Ellentelur when I made a present of it to you, thus making it first your plaything and then your friend. I could have hardly imagined that here, over the clouds, you lose perception of yourself as a cosmic particle that was my wont. Now I know for a certainty that being a cosmic particle is immeasurably more important than being a particle of society. The cosmos is the be-all and end-all for me... It means they have robbed me of everything...

Well no, not exactly: otherwise I would not be dropping these lines to you. I've got Lestinal, I've got you. And the clouds that hide my genuine home cannot hide away your eyes. I've got them in front of me even now. And I can see your faith in me in them. I therefore have no doubt that you will do what I ask you to in every particular. The time is short: only two days.

'They would not believe me: none of them would look in the World-assembly Sphere. Olehar, head of the Senate Committee, has called the Sphere "a hallucinating visionary's bead." One can quite understand the Committee members: the dread of seeing with their own eyes a force that makes catastrophe and perdition nigh has made them resort to self-delusion. They believe that, once they consign the Sphere in a sarcophagus and banish the visionary to the Overcloud City, they are well rid of the cosmos... No, Yvidar, I am straying. It's just that the cosmos is something very far away; as particles of society, they are doing all they can to take care of their society. My banishment for them amounts to their care of society, too.

'The upshot is that in two days' time, my beloved planet Entelur and I will die. Nothing seems to matter any more. But something is sure to have a chance to escape death. Whether for the cosmos or for thought that travels about it or for civilizations, it matters not! Otherwise—should nothing be left—the cosmos, thoughts and civilizations make no sense. Perhaps they do not make sense, but the very idea of the senselessness of being is foreign to me. I therefore ask you: go immediately to my and Lestinal's house. She may have left it and is on her way to meet me. You will find the key in storage cell F-787: I trust you still remember the code. Go up to my office, say hi as if I were there. Do you remember doing it as a kid? It's important. You will see the rest with your own eyes. The thing hidden from sight will indicate to you the path to salvation. To you and Ellentelur. You would take your friend along anyway, but, as you can see, I could not resist reminding you of it. Ellentelur is the best thing I have created in my lifetime—not so much created as assembled, aided by the Sphere. Ellentelur is as much my brainchild as it is of the cosmos. The cosmos gave me the ells while I combined them as a whole and shaped them to suit us, people. Who would have thought that in the few days the wonderful space boy molded from ells and seemingly capable of just echoing your words would turn into an ancient elder, wise and knowledgeable because of the ells which had been tapping the cosmic information fields over the billions of years? Ellentelur must not get lost. Where are you to go? I cannot answer that question because I don't know the answer. The World-assembly Sphere cannot access that World, and it does not show it. It may be the flip side of the cosmos. What is it like? Is it your and Ellentelur's salvation? You are about to head for uncertainty. I wish it would accept you.

'You should go out on to the balcony. There, behind the sarnan bushes (I haven't slipped up: behind the bushes, hence behind the railing), I discovered an invisible door. Keep holding your new acquisition in front of you. It will open up what your gaze perceives as nothingness. This is the door that, I hope, will have your home behind it. Hold Ellentelur's hand tightly with your own. Neither the

uncertainty nor fear nor the loss of perception should sever the living bond between you.

'That's all, I think. There's no time for other words. Farewell.  
Tuwisar'

'Dozing, aren't you, oldie?' said Iwidar to the old man in his easy chair. 'It's time we did something useful on the uncle's instructions.'

'You mouthed it so loudly I could hear it all. I never let on because you were crying.'

'Me crying? You say I was crying? Did you see my tears? I last cried when I was—'

'Six. You were afraid I'd died and cried. I remember the day very well.'

'Yes, indeed. Except you were fast asleep.'

'You were crying without tears, but crying, still.'

'It doesn't count as crying, oldie... I wasn't crying: I was just sorry for the uncle... not just for him, naturally.'

'I know. In two days, Tuwisar, like all the Entelur dwellers, will turn into space dust. I'll tell you in so many words, Iwidar: it's no great shakes, turning into space dust, it's a far cry from being living flesh among the likes of us.'

'There's something you don't quite understand, Ellentelur: the uncle's not sorry for himself, for he's always thought himself a cosmic particle, and this transformation's no great shakes. What makes him suffer is that a planet populated by living beings will be consigned to nothingness.'

'No, Iwidar, what dismays your uncle is that he won't be able to stay in the Overcloud City and watch the nearing object through his Sphere until the last.'

'Come off it, object!'

'I'd rather be called oldie: being a friend, not an object, even though this frivolous reference to me as an object is fair enough in part.'

'Don't be a bore, oldie: you've never been an object for me—a subject, rather, while I am, for you...'

'Fair enough.'

'Precisely. It's time we went to the uncle's house... vacant, much to my dismay.'

'Mine, too: from a thousand ells, Tuwisar has created one I like when looking in the mirror.'

'Uncle has created a cosmic boy while you're a cosmic wreck.'

'You wanted a plaything—I'd rather be a wise man.'

'I dare say.'

'It's not a matter of your saying, my young friend; it's a matter of your uncle's writing.'

. . . An hour and a half later, Iwidar, accompanied by his unfailing companion, entered his uncle's study.

'I must now say hi to him, oldie—not all that easy a thing to do with him away.'

A picture came to life in his mind's eye: Aunt Lestinal kissing his cheek and poking her finger upward, which meant that Tuwisar was upstairs in his office.

Iwidar clambering up the steeply resistant corkscrew stairs helter-skelter and bursting into the study without a knock.

'Hi, Uncle Tuwisar.'

The uncle spins to face him in his swivel chair, presents a pop-eyed grimace and his right hand, which Iwidar smacks with his.

'You're crying again without tears.'

'Pray don't refer to all my feelings with just one word. It's just that I'm despondent.'

'Then do what the letter says: it's easy with all those palms on the walls.'

(The walls of Tuwisar's office were papered over with hundreds of palm patterns, fingers up, to suggest human upward endeavor to reach the sky and the stars.)

'This is where you're mistaken, oldie: try to find uncle's among the multitude of hands, as you put it.'

'Less the forefinger phalanx,' added Ellentelur, raising his right forefinger.

'Just a small phalanx short. Just help me if you're sure that's all that easy.'

Ellentelur looked over the office walls and poked the same finger toward the object in question. Iwidar ran his eye over the imaginary trajectory and rested it on the shortened hand.

'Thanks, oldie. We can now perform the rite of passage.' (He came up to the wall and slapped his palm on his uncle's). 'Hi, Uncle Tuwisar. I've done what you wanted. Now for your secrets.'

An outline of a square appeared about the palm; the square somewhat deepened and moved smoothly outward as a drawer. Resting on a black cushion inside was a small beige bead that could be held between the forefinger and thumb.

'Look, Ellentelur... Looks like an ordinary bead,' said Iwidar and removed it from the drawer. 'Oh no, on the other hand, it isn't all that ordinary... The hand delights in it. It sort of smoothes the hand with its breath... It sort of pours out onto the palm but doesn't.'

'That's what we are all about, cosmic playthings.'

'Do you remember what uncle had to say?'

'Exit to the balcony as per instructions,' Ellentelur replied without hesitation.

'I don't mean that. I mean the bead. What did he say about the bead?'

'It will indicate the path to salvation.'

'Indicate the path to salvation,' echoed Iwidar, weighing up the words in a measured way, and concluded: 'It's like uncle's World-assembly Sphere, only small.'

'It stands to reason. But I understood Tuwisar to mean that it doesn't assemble the Worlds as much as open up the Nether World.'

'The Sphere opening up the Nether World can be accommodated in my hand. The Nether World in my hand! How do you like it, oldie?'

'There's a grain of truth in what you say, and to make sure, we have to go out on to the balcony.'

'You go. I'll follow you in just a minute. Have the bead, oldie.' (Ellentelur took the bead and made for the balcony). 'Remember? On the left beyond the sarnan bushes?'

Alone with himself, Iwidar sat down on the sofa, closed his eyes and was transferred in his mind's eye into the space of this dear room of twice fifty years before...

'Iwidar?' Ellentelur's voice brought him back into reality with a snap. 'Come! Quick! I've found it.'

Ellentelur stood leaning forward with his head through the sarnan bushes pushed apart.

'Let me see.'

They swapped places, and a few moments later, Iwidar, full of excited wonderment, whispered richly:

'I can see... I can see... The secret way to the Nether World. It's the maw of uncertainty eager to swallow us.'

The impulse of the moment almost made him change his mind but he overpowered the wave of passion.

'My dear Ellentelur, my devoted friend. Good man oldie...'

'Cosmic wreck,' Ellentelur looked back at his newborn nickname.

'A cosmic wreck that's dear to me; I must say I'm staying... because I can't leave behind my nearest and dearest. Should I do it, I'd be saying day in day out: I'm crying. And there'd be a grain of truth in it.'

'There sure would,' Ellentelur conceded aloud, since he was in the habit of assessing his young friend's statements in these terms pronounced out loud.

'You agree, you see? My own shame would remind me of it every day. My solution is plain: I'll share the fate of all of the Entelur living beings, and there'll be no compunctions when I'm a cosmic particle. I'm now going to Uncle Tuwisar and Aunt Lestinal. I'll try to help uncle get back under the rose to the Overcloud City. He has no access to the World-assembly Sphere; however the rooftop telescope here is just right for him to be at the last what he's always been. Oh, poor Ellentelur, you're crying, aren't you... with no tears, of course?'

'No, my young friend, I'm crying tearfully, except they can't be seen I can't have any.'

Iwidar gave Ellentelur the bead.

'It's all yours, oldie. Go to the Nether World: someone must safeguard the memory of our planet. I'll follow you with a parting gaze.'

\* \* \*

The blissful blackness Ellentelur had disintegrated into a thousand ells in was suddenly cut short and he found himself in a water whirl that swept him along: it was vehement and had no time for resistance. He again felt he was what he was used to being as created by Tuwisar—a whole creature capable of feeling and thinking like a man. But he had not been to the manner born. He was the result of ells internalizing and assessing the information as Ellentelur communicated with people and the environment, both physical and spiritual.

Once he found himself in the whirlpool he started shipping water or thought he did. He could not choke on water like a man but nonetheless experienced all the symptoms of one short of breath at the moment. It made him pull himself together and once the right idea arrived, exhale the water and ship it no more... bearing it out in the hope that he would again find himself in a space filled with life-giving air some time. The 'some time' came soon enough. He was forced ashore, and the first thing he did as a human was to draw in with a nasal hiss enough of the transparent substance (along with the herbal fragrances his nose was against)—as much, in fact, as the human lungs of a man of his stature could hold. He looked around... and said to himself, since there was no Iwidar or Tuwisar nearby:

'I should get away from the mountains and go in search of such as I could bandy sensible words with.'

He then skirted a crag, left behind the malicious water, having imprinted on his memory its visual image: 'Dark Waters.' He said 'waters' because he had classified the offending whirlpool as currents clashing. After a look at the green hilly space convenient for motion, with forest and mountains on either side and a cream-colored wavy sky above, and strode to the forest edge where the answer to the question was probably waiting for him, the question being how far it was to an encounter with those whose primary joy in life and indispensable prerequisite of humanity was chat. The forest edge he wended his way through was welcoming enough to provide him with two handfuls of strawberries and some sappy sorrel leaves (the data on these, theretofore unclaimed, was stored in Ells' memory). Ellentelur was leaving the edge with yet another prize: a weighty and knotty club over his shoulder, for he had twice encountered on the way from the Dark Waters in the heaving ground, among clumps, fierce reddish mugs (first two, then three). They had aimed their greedy nostrils at the unarmed traveler, took in their share of air and retreated underground. Ellentelur guessed they were after blood-veined flesh and retreated when none was available.

'And yet I'll feel better, club in hand, as I get deeper into the Nether World,' he said to himself.

It was getting dark. The cream-colored waves in the sky grew denser and brown as he recalled the cake at Lestinal's recent birthday party: the cream rose buds, pink and chocolate-colored... He mounted a hill to look around and saw afar lights—scores, hundreds of tiny lights. Dwellings, he thought. Ellentelur could not make out the houses but thought that nonetheless. The lights were unordered and formed no rows; on the contrary: there were clusters of them hanging at different heights. His eyes shone—not with the lights but with the nearing joy that alerted the Ells. He strode faster... only to stop short. It was not the dark that had stopped him but an eerie air movement in the space in front of him—he looked around—and around, too. Manifest in the air were the folds he had not seen before—somewhat like crumpled translucent paper that looked resilient. The folds righted and showed cracks in them, the cracks filling the entire space about. They had not become a solid immovable given—they expanded and opened up to Ellentelur's gaze...

'Worlds!' he whispered in wonderment.

He felt that the Worlds... each of the opening Worlds was calling out to him, drawing him irresistibly. He felt each of the Worlds overpowering him. He increasingly felt the desire to step onto one of them... several of them... all of them at once. It was the pull of the ells he was composed of. But, as Ellentelur, as a whole, as a human simulacrum, he knew he was to stay in the Nether World and come to know it.

Not to get lost in one of the Worlds or in many of them disintegrating into ells (in another few moments he would have had no resistance left) Ellentelur made himself do two things: shut himself off from them by dropping his eyelids and freeze in place. It was thus, with his eyes shut, he stood stock still until the pull of the Worlds was nil. He opened his eyes: the light of the celestial waves was filling the air as it lost its dark density and became cream-colored.

\* \* \*

Having stuffed himself with rabbit stewed with vegetables in a hurry, Felclef rushed out of the tavern without touching a single stair with his feet, and found himself under the broadest imaginable orange mushroom cap. Why all that hurry? He was looking forward to telling his cronies who he had been gawping at as he had put away his dinner. What was it that had made the thirteen-year-old finish off his meal when the news was so hot and his spry legs itched to be given rein? The thing was that Felclef's father named Bloib was the mine host who appreciated order, calculation and reason. If a stew bowl was under Felclef's nose as a meal, it was to be emptied by Felclef. Also, his mother kept reiterating day in day out: 'Aren't you skinny, sonny! As thin as a stick. As a feather! Skinnier than a willow leaf! Just look at your father and brother, with you skinnier than the skinniest!' His father, indeed, was round, hefty and strong, while his older brother Bolob took after his father, to all appearances, much to his parents' joy. Felclef, though unable to play the fool at table, was tall and skinny.

The At Bloib's establishment was in the Orange Field where the Blob family lived: himself, his wife, two sons and a daughter, who, after she married, lived in her own mushroom, though she still worked in her father's flourishing tavern, having added to the staff her husband's hands and head, in that order, for a different head was in charge.

Felclef was rushing down the high street that linked all the Fields on the River Malgus's right bank.

From time immemorial the land on either side of the Malgus had been built with dwellings shaped as wooden mushrooms. They grew in clusters as mushrooms largely would: the extended family, friends, acquaintances, acquaintances of acquaintances kept building theirs next to one another. Thus it was that small villages of scores of mushrooms sprawled. Someone called them—in jest or in earnest—Mushroom Fields. The name had the run of the place and came to be commonly used, the Mushroom part of it dropped. The first two Fields were called Right-bank and Left-bank, robust logic clearly in place. The dwellers in the Field near the Right-bank one were all for attaching that appellation to their village, it sparing them mental energy and debate, but had to come to terms with their role of the less nimble-minded, and called theirs Neighboring Field before



someone robbed them of that option as well. The dwellers of yet another village down the Malgus did not rack their brains either: tradition has it that Blobb's distant forefather opted for nothing smarter than painting his mushroom cap orange, the color of his frequenters' skin, his neighbors and the neighbors of neighbors following suit. The Orange Field alone has since boasted no different color, a boast of being one such in Malgusia. Another Field was called Remote, a lament for fate's outrage on top of its direct sense. The name Mill Field was self-explanatory, for that was where almost all Malgusia corn was stored and milled. The way it was pronounced suggested now envy, now pride, now superiority: All of you depend on our services, don't you? Finally: Raspberry Field. There was nothing to the name but proximity to a growth of raspberry bushes all the way across the Ravineland to the Barynth Woods, and levity as it had first dropped from someone's tongue. And of course, the Upper Field, which emerged much later. Did it have any advantage of its own? Absolutely. A full two: the shortness of the walk to the Good Woods' gifts and to the virgin Malgus waters.

Felclef barely noted that he had left behind Orange Field and Neighboring Field—the news was still in front of his eyes in the At Blobb's tavern, the news that had bereaved him of his senses and he could see nothing either in front or around him. Felclef hardly noticed how he found himself at the mushroom he lived in thanks to his legs which knew their business...

'Malam? Malam? Come out. I'm on my way to Groyorg's. Hurry up!'

'Don't,' Malam's voice came from the mushroom cap. 'He's in here.'

'Don't,' echoed Groyorg's voice. 'He's here.'

Following their voices, Felclef's friends descended the stairs in that order: Malam and Groyorg. The first was round-faced, nimble-eyed, snub-nosed and bright (his brightness constituted his features as much as his roundness, his nimble eyes and his snub nose); he had a mop of crinkly straw-colored hair on his head; like Felclef, he had turned thirteen, but he was a head shorter than his friend. The other, Groyorg... he also had crinkly hair and his as round a face had the stare of a bully and a brightness that was given to asking out loud head-on questions which had not been born of a clear-cut thought, and to supplying answers of a similar kind. He was smaller than Malam, though the word 'smaller' was hardly apt: he more than made up for his lack of stature with his extremely broad round shoulders and back. Groyorg was two years his friends' junior, which circumstance, however, did not make him a milksop in their eyes or his own, for that matter (in his own, he was not their junior, as it were).

'What's up?' said Malam, aware from Felclef's look that something was up.

'Up, up,' he muttered, still out of breath. 'Let's go to Zusuz—I'll tell you there, lest he take offence.'

It was not for nothing that Felclef dropped his 'lest he take offence.' The other day Zusuz had said in a similar situation: 'If we're friends, what do you mean by saying one of you comes from the wrong side of the river?'

The urchins traversed the Right-bank Field, ran down to the river, crossed the Malgus bridge in a jiffy and at a slower pelt (not of their choice: it was too steep) hit the nearest path to the mushroom Zusuz lived in. they did all that in

silence, even though Felclef could not wait to tell and Malam and Groyorg to know.

Zusuz had spied them out the window, come down and was waiting. Neither skinny, nor round, nor square—he was none of that. He was... just different. At first glance, and a second, and a third, what struck you was a certain incongruity in his features, there was something wrong, as if one thing (whether it was the eyes, nose, mouth, cheekbones, forehead or chin) did not match another (whether it was the eyes, nose...) or else was misplaced somehow. But what exactly was to be altered or replaced, no one could tell. Nature had also done something to his voice. His voice displayed a force, not the kind you would call 'loud' or 'resounding' or 'sonorous.' No, it was a different force. The timbre was responsible for that, of course, its coloring, but what gave rise to it was a clash such as of thunder or lightning. The clash took place in Zusuz's soul, and hence his voice was like a bolt from the blue, when the boy was in a passion. And those around him were stunned... Zusuz was also known for his perspicacity, in which respect only Malam, perhaps, was his match in this quickness of the eye, ear, whatever.

'Zusuz, Zusuz! Felclef's got the news that'd rush you off your feet,' Groyorg beat them all to the crux.

'How d'you know?' Felclef was outraged.

'How? Bugger it! I never said I knew.'

'Well, don't if you don't.'

'Well, out with it before you shit in your pants,' Malam interceded, not on behalf of Groyorg exactly but curiosity, rather.

'Out yourself. You know who's sitting in father's tavern... ?'

The three mouths were soundlessly agape. Felclef teased his friends and himself with a pause and continued:

'Bolob had brought him by boat in the morning and straight to father's.'

'A stranger!' called Groyorg.

'A stranger?' Malam echoed Groyorg's impatience with a question.

'There's strangers and strangers,' Zusuz remarked, delved into the news monger with his gaze and added: 'That right, Felclef?'

'You bet. No one's seen his like in Malgusia: a silvery cape, blue shirt, grey pants all pockets, and black top boots laced criss-cross with twine.'

'Who's that him?' Groyorg was impatient to cut to the chase.

'The one that father had seated and served.'

'Who was that he seated and served?' Groyorg was at it again in all fairness.

'You have more questions than bits of rabbit in my stew.'

'Just one so far. Sitting there and seeing nothing.'

'I bet it's the man of the trousers and the top boots,' Malam applied his logic.

'I wish,' said Felclef. 'That's why I don't know how to put it: I've never met such people before. Tall, taller than the tall by two heads. There isn't such another in Malgusia.'

'You beanpole, you,' Groyorg objected teasingly.

'What's wrong with height in a man?'

'Did he speak?' asked Zusuz and added: 'If he did, he's a man.'

'He talked with father quite like a man. Thanked for the meal father served (father had served him himself). For the room, too (father had offered him a room).'

'He's going to rob the silvery cape blind,' Groyorg said.

'He isn't going to charge the traveler,' Malam objected.

'He won't charge him, to charge for him,' Zusuz said.

'What do you mean: won't charge him to charge for him?' Groyorg was puzzled.

'Would you like to see him?' Zusuz asked him.

'You bet.'

'So will Malam. As will I. Dig it?'

'You bet.'

'Father's no fool: he knows what's good for him. The stranger will have to be kept in and humored, lest he go to another tavern. No charge for the room, no charge for the meal—and he's ours.'

'Won't he charge a single chanterelle coin?' Groyorg asked incredulously.

'You bet he will! Bolob will turn a profit, except he'll charge those who come to gawp at him,' Zusuz explained the landlord's designs.

'Cool,' Groyorg summed up.

'Bolob's smart: stopped angling for the sake of the stranger, to hook him. I wouldn't have thought of it,' Felclef boasted vicariously for his brother.

'What's so special about the stranger, to give up angling for his sake and have such designs on him?' Malam returned everyone to square one.

'Out with it!' Groyorg seconded him curtly.

'Didn't I tell you?' Felclef said incredulously (as if in earnest), gleaned the blank looks and fell to telling: 'There I was sitting at the table and eating my stew. And suddenly I saw right in front of me, two tables away... I could hardly believe my eyes... I bet he was carved out of a solid piece of resin, a hunk so huge no one had ever seen.'

'Didn't you say: in a shirt and cape?' Zusuz remarked.

'Stop finding fault, like Groyorg, or I won't be telling. I could see from his face he was made of resin... also his neck and hands. All of him is like that, I tell you. All of him, I tell you.'

'That you have,' Groyorg saw his opportunity to get his own back after a reproach

'What about the eyes?' Felclef countered, offended, 'and the hair?'

'Well?' Malam was impatient to learn about the stranger's eyes and hair.

'Well?' So were the other two.

'His eyes aren't like eyes, but they are alive, looking.'

'Did he look at you?' Zusuz wanted to know.

'What do you think? Would I say it if he hadn't? They seem to be molded of resin. How's that for starters? Is he a man or isn't? And long fine threads of solid resin for hair. And the mustache and the beard—nothing but resin. If you'd seen his beard and mustache...'

. . . Groyorg was the first to get up the ladder and poke his head through the open hatch to look inside the tavern. A few moments later, his head was back.

'The silvery cape is there,' he whispered. 'Get up.'

Once in the dining room, the four friends occupied 'their' table. Felclef surrendered the three vantage seats to the guests (his position as son to the landlord obliged; also, he had seen the one they had come there to see): they would not have to look back to see the stranger. Malam had the best vantage: he did not have to twist his head at all. It was he who was the first to exclaim (in a whisper though):

'Amber oldie!'

'Amber oldie!' Zusuz echoed, opinionated though he was.

Groyorg's eyes also shone like amber, as if there were more amber at the table than silver.

'I dare say,' he shook his head.

'What did I tell you? Now tell me whether he's a man or not,' Felclef whispered.

'He isn't,' Groyorg said outright and explained: 'No hunk of resin turns into a man. Or does it?'

'The answer is inside, not outside,' Malam voiced a guess which had not looked inside yet.

'He wasn't born a man,' said Zusuz.

'What, then, if he sits at a table eating and drinking?' the landlord's son countered, even though he had his doubts.

'He was never born,' Zusuz said confidently.

That assertion made Groyorg laugh hoarsely.

'Precisely, Zusuz. My sentiment exactly,' Malam agreed.

'Mine, too,' Groyorg said jovially.

'He's looking at us as if meaning to ask us something.'

Malam had an unerring eye: the stranger raised his hand and beckoned the boys.

'Oh my, I'll get it hot today from father,' Felclef whispered leaning forward. 'We shouldn't have gawped.'

'He looks grave. So does his stick as it leans against the chair,' said Groyorg, alarmed, and felt with his hand for what was always in a leather sheathe across his back. It was a plain oak club meant for protection against the hungs. (Three of his friends had pointed sticks they took with them when venturing far from home. Almost all the Malgusia dwellers had such sticks, though Groyorg preferred to wield his club.)

Malam and Zusuz exchanged glances and stepped forth in the direction of the stranger who was still eyeing them.

'Take a seat, boys,' said the oldie (he pronounced the words distinctly, but there was something unnatural about his voice: it seemed to jangle with an echoing sound).

The friends looked at one another again and shyly sat down opposite him. The oldie went on:

'I hope you'll advise me,' there was something attractive about the voice, too, even appealing. 'I need four pairs of good eyes, four pairs of spry legs, four pairs of strong arms and a bit of quick thinking.'

It was not just the voice but the face of the oldie also that grew on Zusuz and Malam. It was the face of a doll in the guise of an old man, miraculously come to life—wise, grave but never cross—with a twinkle in the eye.

'Should you and your friends,' the doll nodded at their table, 'be thus equipped, you could offer your services, and I'd be glad. Go and consider it.'

Malam and Zusuz plopped on their chairs at their table and exhaled their enforced muteness.

'Well?' said Groyorg.

'Four pairs of good eyes and all the rest with a bit of quick thinking—that's what the oldie's spied around our table and then beckoned with his finger,' said Malam.

'What does it mean?' Groyorg said.

'The amber oldie wants our help, that's what it means,' Zusuz explained.

'Mine, too?' Groyorg's eyes had grown even wider.

'It's only three pairs of everything without you,' Malam said.

'What does he need so much help for? Is it to establish a tavern?' the future multiple-generation landlord opined.

'Sturdy legs to hike long distances,' Zusuz said within reason.

'Long distances are all about hiking into the night and getting lost,' argued Felclef.

'One can see he needs four pairs of good eyes not to get lost in foreign parts,' Malam countered.

'If he needs my eyes, I'm game,' Groyorg made up his mind. 'My club might come in handy, too.'

'He won't be able to fight a lone hand against the hungs without your club and our lances. I'm game, too,' Malam said resolutely.

'The moment he talked to us, I thought it was providence: he isn't just any old man—no other amber oldie like him,' Zusuz reasoned gravely.

The three stared at the fourth, for Felclef seemed to have lost the use of his tongue.

'Your dad would be only too glad if you strung along with the stranger, like Bolob: he'd want to know what the stranger's up to,' Zusuz suggested.

'You can say that again. I'd like to.'

'Well, make up your mind,' Groyorg urged him on.

'It's just as I say: I'd like to. It's worth a try.'

'I'll ve waiting for you outside, boys,' the voice of the oldie, who had emerged at their table from nowhere, made the four of them start.

The boys followed the old man through the hatch and down the stairs. What made the tavern different from other dwellings was the huge cap, not unlike that of a red-capped scaber stalk that had outgrown its welcome as compared to kid ones. Apart from the oak trunk of a stem, the cap had also six supports over the perimeter.

'Come and introduce yourselves, boys,' said the oldie in a lively manner.  
'What's your name?'

'I'm Groyorg,' said Groyorg, glad to be the first.

'What about you?'

'Zusuz.'

'You?'

'Malam.'

'You?'

'Felclef, Blolb the landlord's son.'

'Is the chap that gave me a boat ride this morning your brother?'

'That he is,'

'Well, my name's Ellentelur.'

Could Groyorg expect to hear such a mouthful and a raucous giggle to roll out of him?

'There's a grain of truth in that, considering your names,' the oldie said.

'In what?' asked Groyorg suspiciously.

'In your giggle. In that my unusual name should cause a laugh in one of you. Therefore, from now on my name's Elle. Will it do?'

'Amber Elle!' Groyorg whispered.

'You bet,' said Zusuz with just a shadow of injured feelings in his voice, for he also thought: amber Elle; but it was just a thought while Groyorg had said it out loud for all to hear.

'I wish I could sit by the river. Never before have I been at a river as its waters run between its banks,' Elle said.

The bewildered boys exchanged glances.

'Let's go down by that willow at the Malgus bend,' Malam suggested. 'We often sit there after supper.'

They were descending in silence, Elle reflecting on something, the boys shy to address him, for they had not yet got used to the mysterious oldie. They sat down under the willow and silently looked at the 'running waters.' As they ran away, they somehow did not carry away time (it had sort of stopped). Perhaps, because they stayed put as they ran away, immutable, such as you do not follow with your gaze as it comes and goes, but just gaze... gaze, your eyes fixed?

'It's occurred to me that I won't be able to understand a lot unless I get the answer to one question: Why do you live in man-made mushrooms?'

'It's because of the hungs,' Malam said.

'You can say it again, curse them!' Groyorg chimed in.

'Father told me,' Malam went on, 'that our distant forefathers hadn't bethought themselves to live in mushrooms. At first they built their houses right on the ground.'

'So did my mom, when I was small,' Felclef bragged.

'But the hungs made holes in the floors and got inside the dwellings. And each night they tore and devoured people. Such of them as escaped got lost in night fissures.'

'The oaken mushroom stem puts them off: there's no gnawing or breaking through it. And they don't venture outside at night because they're afraid of getting lost. So we're safe in mushrooms,' Zusuz finished Malam's story.

'Are hungs the ones that make holes through the earth with their red snouts?' Elle asked.

'We make holes in them with our lances,' Felclef blurted out eyeing his friends and eager for support. 'Don't we?'

'I let them have one on the nose with my club I have across my back: they hate it on the nose.'

'That's idle talk: the hungs are hard to kill, even for grown-ups,' countered Zusuz. 'They're too strong and nimble.'

'Sinewy and thick-skinned,' added Malam.

'They slay shepherds along with the cows,' Zusuz added seemingly envious of Malam.

'That's right: shepherds have a hard time of it,' Groyorg conceded as he recalled a shepherd recently torn apart amid a pasture, who had lived next mushroom door to him.

'Tell me, boys, if the hungs attack people near their dwellings.'

'It happens of a morning, if you're careless enough not to take notice of the ruricks wheeling over the ground, then they may attack you. The ruricks're always alert,' Zusuz explained.

'Ruricks?'

'The small birds that nestle in the willows next to our mushrooms. They sense hungs when they force their way to the surface but can't be seen yet. They thus warn us of the danger,' said Malam.

'They sort of dive down and then soar up,' Felclef added (he whose father had given bed and board to the amber oldie who was now pumping them for information, he thought he was no inferior to the others). 'Lots of times like that. That's when you have to be on the ball.'

'If a rurick goes crazy, get your club or lance and wait for hungs to poke their snouts,' Groyorg concluded contentedly: he was mostly on the beginning or adding end rather than the concluding.

'Elle... you asked about red snouts. Have you seen hungs?' asked Malam.

'So I have, my young friend. On my way to Malgusia, I twice saw their snouts poking out of the earth.'

'Did you let them have one with a stick?' Groyorg was in his element.

'They would have nothing to do with you, Elle, wouldn't they?' Zusuz ventured a guess and added, without meaning to, what had been haunting him: 'You aren't human, are you?'

Elle's gaze rested on Zusuz, then he looked into the eyes of the three others.

'It isn't far from the truth, Zusuz. I'm no human and the hungs wouldn't touch me because there's no blood running in my veins. But then again, I'm a man, because I cry, laugh and can put in words what makes me cry or laugh.'

Each of the four surreptitiously touched amber Elle with his gaze, seemingly to make sure he was still not a man, which was rather more important to them than that he was a man.

'I look at the nice creatures grazing beyond the river,' Elle twisted his head this way and that, 'and find no mushrooms big enough for them.'

The boys rollicked with laughter as they imagined, seemingly, the cows climbing up ladders to their gigantic mushroom caps.

'There's a grain of truth in that,' said Elle. 'But who will tell me how they keep safe from the night fissures, if they can't fend them off with walls, like people, or the earth's thickness, like the hungs?'

'When night comes, they lie down on the grass, cover their eyes with their ears and stay that way until light breaks,' said Malam.

'I can quite understand. Last night I became aware how hard it is to resist the call of the fissures by dropping my eyelids. It isn't everyone that can manage the trick.'

'It isn't for nothing that they have ears the size of burdock leaves,' Groyorg added. 'I wish people had them like those.' (That made Felclef giggle). 'What makes you giggle, greasy spoon? Afraid that would cut your earnings? The likes of you would stay in the tavern the whole night: eating and drinking and counting your chanterelle coins.'

'Nit-picking, aren't you? I'm not to blame for the safety of At Blolb's in the nighttime: it's every man's choice.'

'Do night fissures get hold of people, boys?'

'That they do,' said Malam. 'If one happens to stay late at the tavern or on the lake and then awakes to the danger: the day's about over; time to get back home. They hurry up but don't always make it home.'

'They get hold of them almost every day,' said Groyorg in frustration.

'The rymals, who live in the Eghar Mountains, are rather better off: they hide their heads in their humps from the evil nights,' said Zusuz.

'Rymals? What are they like, Zusuz?'

'They're... the size of a bear, and their stature, when they're upright, is like that of a man. They're very strong: they've driven the hungs out of their caves over there. They're horrible-looking, but they don't attack people of their own accord. Whoever has seen them fighting hungs says that no beast is fiercer or more dreadful than them.'

'I think a bear would overpower a rymal one on one. I wish I could pit one against the other!' Groyorg said in response to a chance idea.

'Groyorg!' Malam snapped as he thought that was making a serious conversation frivolous.

'I see you're about to say something, Zusuz?' Elle said.

'I wish we could tame rymals: they'd protect the cattle and people from the hungs.'

The boys stared at their friend with curiosity: they'd never heard him say a thing like that before, nor had an idea like that occurred to any of them. Elle's gaze, too, dwelled on Zusuz, for he thought there was a strange link between his



features and untoward ideas, neither accessible to a superficial glance or understanding. He said:

'You'd be able to do that, my young friend, when you have power over yourself, a power that would bring you closer to the rymals; when you think an idea like this worthwhile on the way to the goal you've set.'

Zusuz bent his head: he would have no one, not even his friends, witness the triumph that his soul was full of at the time and that his eyes would have betrayed. No one had ever said such words to him before... words that had something important to them, other than the idle talk and the care of the grownups that he was sick and tired of.

'I'll mark your words, Elle.'

'I know now what we're to look for, friends.'

\* \* \*

A hundred paces separated Elle from the Malgus, and as many from the lake with a very apt name, Water Paw. He waited for the advent of night. He was all eyes for salnute, the plant he had spied the day before, when he and his four new friends were boating down to the lake. Scores of variously sized orange cups stood up in the grass along the mouth of the Malgus and around Water Paw. Thread-like sprouts flowed and spread down the cups. Elle had learned from Masamy, Felclef's sister, that on the thirtieth day the cup would fall off from the merest of stalks to start a life of its own and be fed through the threads, filaments, as they gained in length day after day—unnoticeably and year after year—visibly. But Masamy had said nothing (nor could she) of what was the most important thing for him: how salnute met night.

Elle waited... The twilight grew dimmer... Elle was aware that the folds of space made themselves manifest abruptly, and then... in another moment you would find yourself surrounded by luring Worlds, prisoner to your own complaisance...

Suddenly the salnute cups trembled: one, two... ten... a hundred... and opened up even more for a few moments, as if thirsty for light at the last. Then they started closing over the rim. Elle followed them in closing his eyes only to feel how difficult it was to resist the force that emanated from the night warps that opened up the Worlds and drew out of him a gaze, daring and insatiable and born sighted.

Elle had stood all night listening to space. There was in it a whiff of a wind with the rustle of the tree leaves in response and the whisper of the scrub. There were in it the pacifying permutations as the Malgus chatted with Water Paw. There was in it the frightened muteness of the hundreds that had hidden away whiling away the evil night... There was in it yet another sound inaccessible to the human ear but known to the ells. It proceeded from afar and was a sign of perpetual motion fed by the energy of the Worlds and pervading the World of Malgusia. Mindful of his position in the space of this World, Elle mentally determined the direction of the place where the inaudible sound originated.

In the morning Elle bent over the salnute. Its cup had already bloomed and opened to the light. He touched it with care: its thick wall was pleasant and

velvety to the touch. He tried to close its edges—the salnute obliged with reluctance manifesting its resilience. Elle lifted the cup and whispered tremulously, the way Iwidar had done when delighted:

‘Salnute!’

Eight days later, at daybreak, Elle, Malam, Groyorg, Zusuz and Felclef set out on a long hike, to track down the origin of the strange sound that the Marshland hid, to all appearances. The shortcut—through the Barynth Woods—was cut off by the Ravineland, the hungs’ headquarters, with the paths made by the nut-lovers strewn with bones and overgrown. They decided to take a detour through the Ernock Woods. The idea presupposed camping on the way for the night, perhaps for several nights; and the hikers were determined to confront the evil darkness without hiding from it in a cave. They had been getting ready for it for seven days and the one night that they had spent outside their mushrooms for the first time in their lives. They walked briskly chatting care-free. They were sure they would hit it off, for marching alongside them was their mentor—amber Elle—boasting orange hoods on their backs which would forewarn them of the advent of night and whisper, as it were, It’s time, before closing up after a parting gulp of light. And it would mean it was time to stop and pull them over their heads. The next morning, when the salnute cups opened and the space gave itself up in its entirety to the World of Malgusia, it would signal to the travelers to follow their example.

It would be barely a year before orange hoods became an indispensable part of everything orange in the Malgusia dwellers as much as whatever else nature had bestowed on them at birth. The small kids would have them put across their backs like backpacks, and they would grow up along with the filaments, getting used to each other and never parting.

It was seventy days after the hike to the Marshland that each of the four received from Elle’s hands a stick of bitubular engineered to perfection. It did not only hold one deadly blow and the capacity to detect the signs of life and death, apart from numerous other hidden tricks. Groyorg’s stick was more like a club, a source of his joy whenever he hefted it.

‘My young friends, learn to feel the bitubular as you do your own hand and listen to its calls and warnings. I’ll help you along as I master mine. And in order to march onward rather than mark time and go through the motions, each of you must have a motto of your own. I give you three days to consider.

After they had supper At Bloib’s when the term had expired, the boys and their mentor went to the bank of the Malgus, like they had on their first day, to the place they loved under the willow.

‘It’s time you embarked on the path that the word you utter out loud in front of your friends won’t let you evade. Try to heed one another using not only your ears but your minds and gut sense, too,’ Elle said and addressed Malam: ‘We’ll begin with you, my young friend.’

‘Perceive and grow stronger,’ said Malam.

Elle let Malam’s motto go down with his friends and went on:

‘What’s your choice, Zusuz?’

‘Get inside and subjugate.’

A few moments later, Elle looked at Groyorg and was about to say his name when Groyorg blurted out:

'Lil'un-to-the-rescue!'

Felclef could not contain a smirk, thus forcing Groyorg to parry this slur, wordless but a slur nonetheless, whether comprehended or not:

'It's just that in whatever I do I'll try to heed the call and warning of my Lil'un.'

'And a good thing, too, my young friend... It's your turn now, Felclef.'

'Follow in your father's footsteps and remember your friends.'

Elle looked around the boys and said:

'At daybreak tomorrow, we set off on a hike.'

Many would be the times they would hear those words from their mentor. But on one occasion he would say something different:

'Time's ripe, friends, for each of you to follow his own path. I'm now leaving you.'

Amber Elle would take nothing but his stick of marshland bitubular and the beige bead, and make for Mount Ugul.

## Chapter Eight

### Memory: 'I knew but waited for better times!'

'Dan, rouse yourself! Dan? Feather's here. Come back!' kneeling in front of him, Matthew was sending heart-rending sounds to his feelings, as if they were still locked in the whirlpool that Sawasard and he had just pulled Daniel out of. The water had been pumped out of his lungs, and it was just a matter of waiting for him to inhale life and rouse feeling in him.

Malam bent and started slapping his cheeks and saying:

'Come to life, Dan. You're the boss here. Where are we without you? Rouse yourself, dear.'

Sawasard was rubbing Daniel's palms.

'He's in the balance, our Dan, and the choice isn't his. There's no point in waiting any longer: I'll have to resort to my stick.'

'Have a go, Malam,' Sawasard said.

Malam got up and put his stick to Daniel's chest. And closed his eyes to make his fingers gripping the bitubular all the keener.'

'Work it, work it, Malam!' Matthew was whispering in excitement.

Daniel's chest heaved abruptly, he breathed in sharply... came to... and had a coughing fit.

'It works,' Matthew was overjoyed.

Malam took the stick aside.

'Cough, dear, do cough. Didn't I tell you not to resist—just obey the will of the whirlpool? It wasn't just any whirlpool. This is no reproach—I reiterate it as a lesson for the future.'

'It did give me a turn, Malam... cough-cough... It wasn't me, it was the other Dan in me, the one that was nearly drowned as a kid... garr... I took fright and started wallowing like that previous time.'

'I do remember it, that adventure of Teddy Danny,' said Malam.

'Hi, Wild Woods,' Matthew cried. 'Long time no see. You're still fooling around and making me cross.'

'Pipe down, Mat; stop frightening yourself and others. This is no Wild Woods. The Dark Waters have thrown us spot on where we were bound. This is the Hidden Side, my friends, while the forest around is the Non-woods. And the instructions I gave you before entering the Wild Woods would be superfluous at this point: you still remember them. Sorry, Dan, but I have to be strict now. Get up and form a row like before, so we could march on. You'll be all the better for exercise, so it livens you up.'

'What's all the hurry, Malam?' Sawasard asked.

'We have to make it to Malgusia before it's dark, to the village on the banks of the Malgus. We'll take refuge from the evil night in a friend's dwelling.'

'Groyorg's, is it?' cried out both Matthew and Daniel.

'We'll spend the night in his mushroom, if we hurry up.'

'Mushroom?' Matthew exclaimed. 'Do you see, Dan, what mushroom we fancied the night that Groyorg the Square arrived?'

'It looks like he thought back to those mushrooms all the time.'

'Own up, Malam: are those the mushrooms on the shelves in your living room?' said Matthew.

'With ladders to them?' said Daniel.

'Dear Mat, you mean that from now on I must call you Mat the Square? You'd better come clean about it.'

'I don't know what to say to you in reply: Yes, thank you or No, thanks.'

'Slippery as an eel, you. Well, it was a giveaway about the mushroom,' Malam grinned. 'All right, then: I'll reveal to you the secrets of the Hidden Side—to make the progress merrier.'

'We'd run all the way.'

'We'll make sensible progress, Mat: fast but sensible. Beware the voices as before. Here's a flat cake each—have a bite on the way. Here's the direction the stick suggests. Off we go, my friends.'

The progress was indeed merrier and shorter. Malam told the friends about Malgusia, about the mushrooms, about the evil nights, about the perpetual war with the hungs, interspersing his heart-felt relation with ostentatiously severe calls of 'Pipe down, Mat: this is no time to argue with Groyorg. Drive him away,' 'Sawasard, my friend, be good enough not to be silent...' 'Wake up, Dan, look outside in front of you rather than inside you.'

When they put the Non-woods behind them, Malam looked above at the thickening violet waves, mentally measured the time distance to the Mushroom Fields against the time night fell and said:

'Tiring though a fast walk is, you'll have to run to spare us the evil night. This way! Unless you deviate, you'll arrive at the bridge across the Malgus. Cross the bridge to the right bank, to Orange Field. The largest mushroom in it is the

tavern "At Felclef's," formerly "At Bloib's"—you can't miss it. Go to the tavern. In charge there currently is my old friend Felclef. Tell him that Malam asked him to put you up for the night.'

'How do you keep away from the evil night?' asked Sawasard anxiously.

'I withheld it from you for a purpose. I want you to divine the secret with your own eyes when in the Field. I'll while away the dark using a secret weapon against it. If I make it before dark, we'll meet even today at a table At Felclef's.'

'It would be great at a table,' Matthew said.

'Now you've had a breather, run on: each moment's of the essence.'

'Malam, did you say there was a bridge there?'

'Yes, there is, Dan.'

Hardly had the travelers taken ten paces when the air croaked after them:

'Stay! I'm forgetting: should hungs poke their snouts out of the earth, hit them without hesitation, for they're sly and are best kept in. If you chance on barkycrooks, spare no arrows or stones. Sorry to have stopped you short. Now run on.'

Malam's warning proved handy: thrice did Sawasard's arrows get the better of Daniels's stones twice did Daniel's stones get the better of Sawasard's arrows; and four times out of five did Matthew's voice get the better of both Sawasard's arrows and Daniel's stones, and infuriate the hungs worse than the arrows and stones.

\* \* \*

'Am I Semimes again?' screeched the darkness around Semimes when his senses were back. They singled him out of the blackness whose particle, or, rather, particles, he had only just been. To make sure, he felt himself with his hands: Darkness has put my body together again, and it is now restoring the scattered thoughts to my head. To all appearances, I haven't taken leave of myself after taking leave of my father and friends. The upshot is that I'm Semimes again. Since that is the case, I've betrayed my father and friends... The blackness flow I'm in spurs me on somewhere. But where? Must I torment myself with the question where it's spurring me? Must I resist this flow? Should I resist it, I'd never know what I'm to do except stand and resist? Should I ride it, I'd know I'm to follow it and be led to some place? Which is better, stay in place or arrive at some place? I don't know the answer. Does the flow have it?

Semimes doubted and let himself be pushed by the flow... A moment later, his soul was thrown as violently as at the time he had to part from Alay. Moments later he heard first a snort, then a horse neighing, quiet and causing no anxiety. Semimes had never seen it for real, but had a gut feeling. The black horse, he thought, my black horse greeting me! He took a few more steps and found his face sticking into the face of his black horse. The horse's whole body was convulsed: there he was, the one it had carried in its equine dreams, the one it dreamed to hitch its fortunes to. Semimes hugged him; the tears were coursing down his cheeks.

'The Blackie!' he screeched with feeling. 'I'll call you Blackie.'

Obedient to the stirrings of his soul and body, Semimes jumped on to his Blackie and pulled the reins. The horse reared and broke out neighing in appeal. The next moment a reverberating echo shook the space around him mingled with hundreds upon hundreds of hoof thuds. The blackness was deafened by human whisper. It was to be heard in this passionate, multi-voiced and heady whisper:

'Salvation... life...'

'I'm Semimes, son of Malam, of Dorlief. Who are you, riders in the dark?'

'We're men of Pasetflen. We've been summoned to the Natlief fortress. We were ambushed in the Harshid foothills. Our warlord Ramar and two of the envoys, Nawan of Dorlief and the forestman named Valear, were killed. Two thousand men ran afoul of the trick of the forces of darkness and were locked in a crag.'

'What's your name, warrior?' asked Semimes.

'I'm Taryrat.'

'Taryrat and men of Pasetflen, I want to address you.'

'Speak, Semimes.'

'The horse I'm riding had appeared in my dreams a hundred times. Today we met in blackness. But I knew and hugged him like an old friend. He accepted me. My Dorlief and three more villages have been overrun by barkycrooks of the Emptied Lake. The Natlief fortress has fallen. I'm astride Blackie on my way to crush them. Will you come with me?'

'We're with you, Semimes. Lead us on, Semimes. We'll do our duty. We'll avenge Ramar!' the voices of the Pasetflen men broke up the blackness.

Semimes pulled his stick from his girdle: it alone could have helped him find the exit from the crag. He felt its urge and, spurring up his Blackie, followed it. The stick trembled in his hand. That was its appeal to Semimes in bitubular idiom meaning one thing: Strike! Semimes hefted it and cut at the blackness—there was light ahead! The light dazzled him and the next moment the hundreds of eyes that had been bereft of light.

. . . Along the River Buruze the Pasetflen men reached Lake Newent and briefly camped. They laid in a stock of provisions at Nefenlief and made for Dorlief. On the way Semimes left his Blackie with Taryrat to go in the Sadorn Forest looking for forestmen. He struck it lucky by the end of day three: a fiery-haired one who called himself Oniard answered his call.

'Oniard, I'm Semimes, son of Malam of Dorlief.'

'I've heard of your father and you on many occasions.'

'I have in my charge,' said Semimes, and the words filled his soul with pleasure, 'a two-thousand-strong cavalry unit. These are well-trained and well-armed men. I'll win back Dorlief with them. I'd like to ask for your assistance, the assistance of forestmen, our friends. Pass this request on to Ozuard and Ewnar (he knows me).'

'I promise, Semimes. What am I to tell them?'

'Tell them that in two days I'll expect the forestmen's attack from the direction of the Sadorn Forest. You'll let loose a barrage of arrows and lure them your way. That is when my turn will come.'

'Which way d'you mean to attack?'

'We'll sneak as close as we can to Lake Werent before daybreak, wait for your maneuver and charge at their backs at full tilt.'

'Mind, Semimes, that they're at least five thousand-strong and getting stronger to march on Nefenlief and Parlief.'

'There'll be two and a half backs per my man. That isn't too tall an order, to say nothing of your men: they've been the talk of the town since their attacks at the humpbacks,' said Semimes and added to himself: I've put one of them named Sawasard to the test.

In that battle which lasted into the mid-tittle-tattle five hundred and eighteen Pasetflen men fell and seventy-three of the four hundred forestmen. The five thousand-strong barkycrooks troops stationed at Dorlief had been routed.

Semimes told Taryrat to give the men two days' rest, then march on the Emptied Lake, camp on its farther reaches and attack the forces of darkness when 'a special signal manifests itself,' as Semimes put it. A detachment of three hundred forestmen headed by Ewnar joined the Pasetflen men.

Semimes took it upon himself to make for the Emptied Lake without delay. The way he mentally outlined lay along the near edge of the Sadorn Forest, then on through the Harshid spur weakened by Shwarrawsh, and further on by Kaduhar mountain trails to the Wedolick Gorge, and on, through the Gorge, to the goal.

The victorious battle had not only given Semimes a taste of conqueror happiness but also bitter doubts. He had guessed wrong: the barkycrook commander had proved rather more cunning than he thought, for he had not dispatched his whole force to fight the forestmen. Many barkycrooks had crouched in Dorlief homes and met Semimes's riders with ringing arrows. Semimes could have burnt the houses and smoked the barkycrooks out (no one would have reproached Semimes the Conqueror, nor would Falafy) and he would have incurred fewer losses, fewer by far. But he had been sorry for Dorlief which had taken a lot of beating. And now he had his compunctions... and torment... It was not for nothing that Semimes had said in a conversation with Taryrat:

'Chances are, my friend Taryrat, I won't be back in the unit. You head it now. Pray: do your duty to the end.'

He had heard in reply:

'Semimes, you've given us a new lease on life: we were like the dead immured in a crypt. You also rescued me today in battle—I won't forget it. I've known no better warrior than you. Let me give you a parting hug.' (Semimes and Taryrat embraced). 'I promise: we'll do our duty and kill off the blackguards, all of them.'

\* \* \*

Looking around the vast area strewn with parti-colored man-made mushrooms and bug-like manikins with orange snouts and orange wings folded on their backs, some of them scurrying up and down their steep ladders to and from the caps, still others scurrying below, the three travelers were delighted... almost wordlessly, since the running had left them exhausted and emotional words would further drain their strength. And yet...

'Mushrooms!' exclaimed Daniel as if he had never seen a mushroom before. 'I've heard of them, fancied them... but not like this.'

'A city of mushrooms,' Matthew gasped, only to gasp again: 'That's cool.'

'Palerard!' Sawasard intoned with feeling, something that means in every earthling tongue: Oh, my God! It was yet another emotional meaning of the word *Palerard*.

As they neared the bridge, the friends noted that three of the mushroom city dwellers were moving to meet them halfway. They looked like humans, they could see it now. The orange snouts had become orange faces familiarly grimacing: one welcome, another curiosity, the third alertness. They stepped aside to the railing on the bridge to let the strangers pass. The travelers realized they would make it before dark and walked instead of running.

'Greetings to you,' said Sawasard followed by Daniel and Matthew.

The round faces were livened with smiles, shining eyes and mouthing after a moment's hesitation, and they heard the air ring with the brisk words.

'Greetings to you, strangers,' said one.

'Welcome to Orange Field,' another intoned.

'Provided your intent's good,' added the third.

'It's nothing but good. We're on our way to the tavern...' said Matthew and faltered, aware that he did not remember its name.

'At Felclef's,' Daniel said.

'Follow me,' the first offered to help, the one who had a welcoming countenance, and minced along up the slope.

The two others trailed the visitors to Malgusia. There was no special reason for the guidance. It was mere politeness on the part of the visitors, and mostly curiosity, on the part of the locals.

'Is it someone's advice about the tavern?' asked their guide and incommoded the travelers: could they mention Malam?

'Felclef's a friend of a friend, who recommended that we while away the night in the tavern,' said Sawasard.

'Are you on business or in transit here?' came a voice from behind.

'Transit,' said Matthew.

'Where you from?' came another incommoding question.

'From Our lake,' Daniel had done some quick thinking and decided it was best not to mention Dorlief: Zusuz's eyes and ears could be anywhere, including carried by the legs of one of the three.

Matthew glanced at him with a grin. The voices behind piped down to a whisper and died down altogether.

'Your Fields look fine from afar,' said Daniel and was sent on a guilt trip because of the lie.

'Well, we spare no paint freshening up our mushrooms every year,' the guide said with pride and added with feeling: 'Some do it twice a year. Millers excel in this respect.'

'Well, I dare say.'

'These, indeed, are affluent people,' came the supportive voices from behind, one after the other.



'Your hoods are just fine,' said Sawasard in his desire to humor the runts (a runt—particularly a runt—cannot help feeling proud on hearing flattering words about their most arresting attire).

'As fine as the mushrooms,' Matthew chipped in.

'Well-tailored,' Daniel contributed.

The guide giggled in delight and said shaking his head:

'We use them as they come and adapt them to our backs as kids.'

On hearing of the hoods, the two trailing minced well ahead and joined the guide.

'The tavern's over there,' said the guide, even though one could not miss the most outstanding mushroom in the Field.

'Felclef also paints it twice a year, same as the millers,' another one boasted as a neighbor in the Field.

'One can see that at a glance,' said Matthew appreciatively.

'Thank you, good people all,' said Sawasard in parting.

'So long as you're good: we're the way we are,' came the comment after them.

Coming down the ladder in a hurry to make their mushrooms were some seven to eight Malgusia dwellers, the travelers greeting each and getting incredulous looks along with the usual responses as they waited at the stem. Finally, Matthew, Daniel and Sawasard found themselves in the dining room. A lean man, a head taller than the runts, approached them immediately.

'Greetings to you, stranger guests,' he said. 'Wouldn't you like to use the washstand,' he motioned his hand, 'and take the table you fancy?'

'Thank you,' said Daniel, and the friends followed the obliging man's advice.

The moment they took a table, he emerged by their side and said briskly:

'My name's Felclef. I'm the landlord.'

'Felclef?' Matthew cried. 'We need most of all the man named Felclef at the moment.'

'How can that be?' Felclef waved his hands in surprise.

'I dare say. It can be, very much so, my friend,' came the familiar croak, and a square back crested with straw-colored crinkly hair was raised two tables down the row. Below the head, in place of a hump, was an orange hood and, next to it, resting in a leather pouch, the inimitable Lil'un-to-the-rescue. All of that turned about to be replaced by the bushy-browed, mustachioed, bearded and reddish-orange aspect. 'These are the sworn friends of mine and Malam's. He must've sent them along, I believe. Just let me give you a hug, Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

The friends immediately forgot all about their weariness and the satisfaction of being seated in easy chairs (any sort of chairs, for that matter, rather than running, walking or standing), and jumped up to meet Groyorg.

'Save the Lil'un for the barkycrooks,' Matthew commented.

'I *am* glad to see you again, Mat the Vital.'

'My joy's greater than yours, you being the Square,'

'I don't mind the Square part of it, Lil'un-to-the-rescue. Sawasard the Bright, my dearest friend! So we meet again.'

'Groyorg dearest!'

'Who's this?' Groyorg's eyes grew round.

'He's Dan for me,' said Matthew.

'As he is for me,' said Sawasard.

'I'm Dan the Stone-hurler,' Daniel introduced himself stretching out his hand to Groyorg.

'Greetings to you,' Groyorg dwelled his eyes on the face of the new-fangled Dan. 'Dan the Blue-eyed. We'll see what sort of stone-hurler you are. What's happened to our Dan the Sorrowful?'

'He takes his place. I've told you: he's Dan for me,' there was indomitableness in Matthew's words.

'Wait a mo, Mat: I can't have it that way. Look here, Groyorg, I'm... you know, Dan the Sorrowful, just a bit more sorrowful than ever... because of all this,' Daniel said nervously as he waved a hand at his face.

'Dan the Sorrowful?' Groyorg asked again incredulously.

'Sorrowful, not blue-eyed. It was Martin who had been blue-eyed. When I died... that is my body did, I borrowed his: he had no use for it.'

'Felclef, this is Dan the Sorrowful, my friend. He was killed, but he went and survived. And these are my friends: Mat the Vital and Sawasard the Bright. This here is another of my friends and a fixture at my beloved tavern, At Felclef's, Felclef in person.'

'Happy to be introduced,' said Felclef.

'I know what makes you happy,' croaked Groyorg with a smirk. 'Let's have your dishes right away: we'll spend the night here. There's Malam's head over there. Malam, you're just in time for the main event!'

'I barely made it,' said Malam short of breath: he must have had a run, too.

Malam and Groyorg embraced (Malam's back, like his friend's, was graced with an orange hood).

'We're all assembled now, Lil'un-to-the-rescue! Oh no, my fault, there's one missing/ where's Semimes the Conqueror?'

'Semimes wouldn't go with us,' Malam bent his head.

'Where are we going?'

'We're on our way to the lair of Darkness, the Emptied Lake. Semimes has been to see Faddaf with the boys and gotten the instructions.'

'Oh, I see. But not to worry, my friend, Semimes won't let you down: he'll think of something; he isn't Semimes, son of Malam, for nothing. You've come by way of the barrel in your locked room, haven't you?'

'Groyorg!' Malam urged him only to think better of it: 'What's the point of my calling you to order? The boys are here, with us, and me hollering as if they weren't initiated. No, through the Dark Waters from the Wild Woods all the way to the Non-woods. As concerns the barrel, Semimes and I have fitted it with a bottom and filled it brimming with the Hogleif bloody wine to stop its secret portal. Should the barkycrooks poke their noses, I'll give them a taste of the wine.'

'Does that mean there's a secret passage in the padlocked room, and we could've got to the tavern and its dainties without all that trouble?'

'Vital he is,' said Malam.

'Oh, here's the food. Well-done, Felclef! Join us, will you. Let's call it a day. There's nothing at day's end like this...'

'Chatting and eating,' Matthew took up Groyorg's words.

'When the two go together,' Daniel finished.

'When they go together At Felclef's,' croaked Groyorg (happily).

'I've another thing to see to,' Felclef said to explain why he was not seated at table with his friends, and addressed the boys: 'So you're Mat and you're Dan, just to get things straight?'

'So we are: I'm Mat and he is Dan.'

'Oh my! Me blabbing of this and that, and not a word of the main thing. Boys—'

'Groyorg!' Felclef shrieked.

'You're no Malam to stop my mouth for me!'

'It's just like Groyorg,' Felclef parried.

'All right, it's your funeral, you own up.'

'Like hell...' Felclef muttered under his breath and left.

It was only for a few moments that somebody's eyes dwelt on the narrow space between the door that was open a crack and the doorpost. And in that space of time they suddenly shone with overwhelming happiness.

'Matthew!' the call just short of hysterics made Matthew jump and swallow a piece of rich fried fish unprepared for the swallow.

Christine threw herself into his arms at full tilt.

'Mat! I'd lost all hope!' she said in her excitement and broke into tears.

Matthew was stroking her hair.

'Lost all hope?'

'Lost all hope.'

'Lost all hope?'

'Lost all hope, Mat.'

'Come, Chris, come! It's okay: you don't abandon all hope now.'

'Taunting me, aren't you? In your high spirits?'

'Well, I *am* in high spirits, Chris.'

'It's been awful, Mat. I thought I'd find you... when I stepped off the Ferris wheel to find you.'

'I know, Chris.'

'You know nothing, Mat. How do you know how I felt? You and Dan abandoning me, and me stepping off into nothingness, like the fool I am! And then it became clear you'd vanished. Those hungs, those nights! There's no getting outside... out of your mushroom at night here. I'd lost all hope of meeting you and Dan. At first, I fancied pictures of meeting you and woke up with hope every morning. But each day ended in nothing...' she could not go on, her words replaced by tears.

Meanwhile, Felclef was explaining something to Malam in hushed but lively tones.

'Where's Dan?' Christine asked after she had had a good cry. 'Felclef said he was here.'

Daniel stood a pace from his best friends and enjoyed looking at them.

'He'll tell you about Dan,' Matthew nodded to Daniel.

'Why tell? What's happened to him? Where's Dan? Felclef's just said Dan's here with you?'

'Calm down, Chris. This is my friend, and he knows all about Dan, and he'll tell you all about him. You'd better do it in private.'

She turned sharply to the one who knew all about Dan, and said just as sharply:

'Come to my room, you fount of information.'

'I'll wait here. Come back, Chris,' Matthew said after them.

Some time later, for time had lost all meaning for Matthew, filled as it was with empathy for Dan and Chris, Daniel was back, alone.

'How was it, Dan?'

'It's okay. She'll have her cry and be back. Incidentally, here's the eighth Tear, the gawping stone—no need to go to Faddaf now. After supper we'll burn the last page,' said Daniel without explaining a thing but leaving no doubt that everything was okay. He then addressed Groyorg: 'Square, you knew it all and told her nothing, did you?'

'Knew, knew! I knew you'd vanished in the thin air (the boys and I had looked high and low for you), also that the barkycrooks were about to invade Dorlief (which they did). If I told her or Felclef (he'd tell her) about you, what would she want to do? Precisely: she'd want to join you. Knew, knew! I knew but waited for better times!'

'So the better times are on us: we've met,' said Matthew, and there was in his tone approval of Groyorg's silence.

'Thank you, Groyorg,' said Daniel.

'Lil'un-to-the-rescue.'

## **Chapter Nine**

### **A Foolish Game**

Estean hurried to meet her Dorliefan friend as soon as she appeared in the ferling beak...

'Hello, darling. I've waited for you all morning.'

'Hello, Estean. Why all this impatience?'

'Did you meet Dan in the Sadorn? Our men took him some place. I think there's a new witness. I wish it would be one who knows the truth about him.'

'No, I didn't see the one you call Dan.'

'The inquiry's almost over. I'm fearful of the forthcoming verdict. I can see father's in two minds. Yesterday they had to listen to me: I'd invited myself. He's Danad for me, and I insisted on it. Leuely, you look as if I were a liar. Well, I'm not... either to myself or to them. I've no doubts now he's Danad.'

'Now?'

'Yes, after the stones room.'

'What about it?'

'It'd be all right, but two of our men saw him grab my arm and arrest my flight. Then there was that stone.'

'What stone, Estean? I don't understand.'

'When those two hastened to help me (they'd fancied something), he picked up a stone, ready to hurl it at them. They were under the impression they'd surprised him at some treacherous designs and prevented them. And now Ewnar and Retowal are sure Danad had made me say he was Danad.'

'What about you?'

'I merely quoted the words he had said when in the stones room. Those were the words of our Danad... your Danad. You'd have recalled them right away. That time he had said them purposefully, to tease me.'

'Whatever for?'

'Whatever for? He's got Martin's face.'

'That was silly of me.'

'How else is he to prove he's Danad? He can't say it outright: they wouldn't believe it; nor would he want to... because of you.'

You fancy things. Tell me what you meant to say.'

'That fancy avails me nothing but tears. I did mean to say but I won't. Guess.'

'I can now see why you've waited for me all morning. You want me to intercede for him, don't you? But I'm not that sure the chap's Danad.'

'Leuely, darling, what I ask you to do is speak to Dan. You've been to the Non-world to his home—you could test him. Why are you afraid of the truth? I can quite see why he both wants the truth and doesn't. But why are you afraid of the truth?'

'Afraid of the truth, am I? The truth is that I attended his funeral. The truth is that he was in the coffin. The truth is that he was buried. I can't overlook it. Can't you see I can't?' Leuely said with passion and burst into tears.

'Come, come, darling,' Estean embraced her friend. 'I don't mean to hurt your feelings. Listen to what I say: 'Efriard is quite prepared to believe this, as he put it, poor fish, or, rather, me when I talk about him. At my request, he's pumped Feltraur for information about those things... about death, the body, the soul. I think Feltraur is himself looking for the answer: Who's this chap with a disfigured face? He told Efriard about an extraordinary case. He thought back to something, started looking in the notes of his distant forefather, Daltruan, and found what he was looking for. Many years ago, two of ours had gone beyond the Faetre. It's dark and cold there. Only one of them had come back. He had been found on the outskirts of the old Palerard, more dead than alive. Daltruan hadn't been able to heal him, but had given him a few extra days of life. The man had thought himself not the one in whose body he was, but the one who hadn't made it back. Daltruan had put his guess to the test: he discovered that the soul of one had found refuge in the other.'

'So much for it, Estean. I'll talk to Martin.'

'Please, Leuely, call him Dan.'

'You can call him anything your feelings suggest. He's Martin for me, though.'

'You don't seem to like him, Leoely. Why?'

'It would be much simpler, if it were the way you say. But pray, Estean, let's leave that alone.'

'I promise, Leoely. But you'll wait for him today, won't you?'

'I'll talk to him today... if he agrees.'

\* \* \*

This time Daniel went to the Sadorn accompanied by Ozuard, Feltraur and Retowal. Trailing them were two fiery-haired armed with daggers and bows. When they emerged from the stone at the point where the Path was cut short, they turned to the left. Daniel's blindfold did not prevent him from being aware of that much. Looks like I'm in for meeting one I'm not thinking of. Whom I'm not thinking of at all?

'Danad,' Retowal interrupted his thoughts, 'you aren't asking why Ewnar isn't with us today?'

'I can guess, and I'm sorry.'

'I want you to know in advance: I'll take care that you hear every single word this forest hears. Doubt not: tomorrow there'll be its verdict on you in the White Room.'

'I don't mind, Retowal.'

'Haven't you got a stone ready for me, by any chance?'

'Just in case you have an arrow ready for me.'

'You'll see now what we've got in store for you. I think there won't be a trace left of your swagger.'

'Retowal, Danad, it isn't a done thing to think the tongue a warrior's main weapon.'

'Thanks for the reminder, Ozuard. But this is an inquiry, not a battle, and the tongue's not the last resort on the way to victory in this matter,' said Retowal.

'We're on our quest for the truth, not victory by any means. I therefore ask you to hold your tongues in check for a debate unmarred with malice and vengeance.'

'So be it, Ozuard. We're all after the one thing, but our eyes and ears are in the way of the truth as often as not.'

Who do I forebear thinking of? The insoluble conundrum kept haunting him. They walked for a long time. Waiting for them was a small unit of Palarardians.

'Greetings to you, Ozuard,' said one of them (Daniel knew him: it was Dowgar) and nodded at the woman barkycrook who lay on a matting of twigs and draped with a gneiss cape. 'Her name's Sapha. She used to be the Darkness Lord's maid. She's past getting up, and she won't last long. You have to hurry up with your questions.'

'Will all those uninvolved in the inquiry step aside,' said Ozuard and, when the men did, addressed Sapha: 'You know him?'

'This is Martram.'

'Where and when did you first see him?' asked Retowal.

'In the alien World. I'd been drawn in there along with the Dorliefan named Danad. Martram chased me,' Sapha was speaking in a hushed, hoarse voice.

'What happened next?' asked Feltraur.

'I came back to the Lord.'

'Did Martram catch up with you?' asked Ozuard.

'He did.'

'Why didn't you slay him?' Retowal hastened to ask, afraid the main thing would go with her life that was waning under their very eyes.

'I sensed in him what I sensed in my Lord.'

'What was it, Sapha?' Feltraur was in a hurry, too: who else was better equipped to see the marks of a near end on her face?

'The force that fed him,' she said.

'You didn't kill him. Well, what about him?' said Retowal.

'He let me go. He felt he'd arrive at the Emptied Lake. I'd sensed that urge in him. And he di-i—'

Feltraur squatted near Sapha and touched her neck with his fingers to hear the current of life in her.

'She's passed away,' he said.

'Dowgar!' called Ozuard. 'Commit the body to fire.'

\* \* \*

Daniel was in bed in the room next to the White Room. He had been warned the inquiry would continue the next day, and the neighboring room inspired spatial quite as much as temporal black thoughts. The last day. There was Sapha raised from the dead... to spirit me along. Everyone conspires against me. I'll have my back to the wall tomorrow. Ewnar would make a song and dance of her testimony: she'd sensed, hadn't she? You've stood me in ill stead, Martin, with me holding the baby. Falafy, too... sensing. Sensing the Darkness while fighting shy of knowing a grandchild of her blood brother... What is it I'm saying? Sorry, Falafy. What'll I tell them tomorrow? I'm good as gold? I've done it? But Sapha could've said the same before she kicked the bucket. I was there with her. What makes me better than her? Where are you, my friends? Dead, all of you? You aren't even in my dreams... World of Dreams Lord, have mercy on me... let me know if they are alive... I wish I'd died with them... with Mat. With you, feather! Can you hear me? I wish I'd died with you... of barkycrooks' arrows and pole axes! Not of these self-righteous bastards... Estean, Estean... your testimony's been disproved by the living truth: I did grip your arm; I did leer at you with my cursed eye and make you say I'm Danad. Your father, as the champion of truth, will say you're in love with me...

Why whimper? Eager to prove you're Dan the Sorrowful? What about killing the guards at the entryway to the forestmen abode, protecting my life? And straight for Uncle Samuel's lodge in the Non-world? What would all of that avail you? You've had a breath of Dorlief air and caught the bug. Didn't old man Bushtunts warn: 'Take it to the forest and bury it. And forget it... forever...'? It was classy while it lasted. You shouldn't disown the classy things... the classy

people... You've a whole day to consider it... and a whole night. Pick up the Lord's daughter and run to the lake with her... and swim in a sea of love.

There was a knock on the door.

There she is, Daniel thought, and got up.

'Come in, darling.'

The door opened and Leely stepped into the room. Daniel could not help laughing.

'You didn't expect me,' she said. 'But here I am.'

'Anyone...'

'Estein's asked me to talk to you.'

'Oh, I see: her Dan salvation plan's failed, and she's sent the green-eyed witch.'

Leely backed off to the door: how could she ever hear those words again? She was frightened.

'That's the limit, Martin! I'll be leaving immediately.'

'Stay, Leely, don't. You got it all wrong. Dan used to say that's what he called you. He told me a lot about you. I saw your eyes and recalled it. Pray go to the embankment with me.'

'All right, let's: I've promised Estein.'

They left the palace and made for the lake.

'I can't come to terms with it: you're somehow different, as if you go out of your way to be real. Perhaps, that's what hinders your real self,' she said and carefully pointed to his eye.

'Of course, I'm different. That, too, hinders myself.' (Daniel traced his hand over the left part of his face). 'I can't be like Dan. I wish I could but I can't. I'm not Dan, though I call myself by his name. Oh, I see: how would you protect me from the fiery-haired chaps? All these are figments of Estein's imagination. Forget it.'

'Martin, I can't tell them you're Danad,' she said under her breath and cast down her eyes.

'The stones. They are all over the place. Dan told me all about them.'

Leely stared at him incredulously.

'There's one among them that's not a stone. Dan told me it's yellow and it can't be lifted like other stones. It's easily tested.' (Daniel bent, fitted his fingers over the efsurelle fruit and tried to pull it out). 'Dan was careful of the details while I was attentive. I have to be: I have one eye that can see. I've learned to be careful of the details and attentive because of the one eye. You've got a green dress on today. When Dan made your acquaintance you had on... let me see... yes, it was the color of cornflowers—yes! Right?' Daniel was speaking casually and somewhat playfully.

'Right,' she said wistfully.

'You had a mutt name of Rodor. Right?'

Leely was silent.

'And another thing I look back to: on New Light Night, before Dan and his friends departed on their secret mission, you stopped by Malam's and gave Dan a silver feather of asnardat.'



'I got you there.'

'Got me there? You can't have... Let me see.'

'I didn't stop by Malam's.'

'Wait a mo! That's right: he was out, and you talked under the linden tree.'

'How did Dan know it was an asnardat feather?'

'You couldn't have told him since you say that. I'm looking back to my memory... Hmm, I don't remember... Oh, I do: Estean said the feather was of silvery asnardat when Dan... What did he say?'

'All right, leave it be, don't torment yourself.'

'I wonder if I can recall it. What was it he said... ? He fell asleep in the stones room, didn't he?'

'He did.'

'And in his dream he picked the stone, *the* feather. Estean said it was of silvery asnardat.'

Leuely fancied suddenly (it only lasted a moment) that the chap she was walking down the embankment with was Dan; he'd been pulling her leg all along... and he was feeling just fine because... he was with her.

'The chain? What chain was the feather suspended from?'

'I know all about the chain. You gave him a feather with a horsehair through it. Which proved to be not a horsehair but a barkycrook's hair. Then Feltraur gave Dan a silver chain. There. That's the way Dan put it.'

'Let me ask you a harder question.'

'You're welcome. If Dan told me that, it's there on a shelf in the closet.'

Leuely smiled.

'You treat your head as a closet?'

'That's what it is.'

'Funny you. All right, listen. What color was Dan's think for New Light Day?'

'He said a lot of things about New Light, joyfully and wistfully and bespattered with tears. Here's the answer: it was orange with tears... which was never the case... had never been the case as a girl put it.'

Leuely paused.

'Come, Leuely. It's a fascinating game to play.'

Leuely stopped: she now thought she hated him. He went on:

'And it makes you forget of tomorrow. Come.'

Leuely joined him again, even though a moment before she had been ready to flee when she had heard from him the words she had said on New Light Night. The doubts and an unaccountable fear tormented her soul (she could not believe Dan could have told that chap all those details: it just could not be). She fought the confusion and asked:

'What color was my think?'

'That's easy: no need to open the closet. Dan's eyes are violet. Answer enough, isn't it?'

They walked in silence for some time. Then Leuely said:

'Martin, I'm not sorry about the walk or the foolish game. You've brought to life my fondest memories.'

'More's the pity I couldn't bring Dan to life.'

After the words that made the wound rankle, Leely made up her mind to ask the question that he had not bargained for in the game he played.

'Martin, have you... loved anyone anytime? You don't have to answer, you know.'

'I won't. Let's play on,' said Daniel, aware that he would hear in reply just as sincere an 'I won't' with no pretence about it.

'I don't feel like playing any more. But I'll ask you one more thing: see to it that you give the right answer. Did Dan tell you about our home?'

Daniel thought she was ready to cross the limit, with denial of him as Dan on one side of it and belief on the other... But what was belief in him being Dan in comparison with 'our home?' He hesitated for the merest moment before he said:

'I know you live with your granny, but I've no knowledge of where your home is and what it's like. It isn't there in my closet.'

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Memory: What You Don't Expect of Yourself**

Three days later, at dawn, the Word Keepers enhanced by Groyorg and led by Faddaf's instructions and Malam's suggestions thereupon set off on their way. Their immediate goal was the Unknown Cave that had got by its name by dint of name-dropping on the part of Malgusia dwellers. The name was very much to the point though, despite (and thanks to) no one knowing where it was, well, almost no one. And the 'almost' part of it would not be there, had Groyorg not been roaming that area with his Lil'un.

The Unknown Cave was in one of the lower crags in the spur of the Margush Mountains that jutted out toward Malgusia. The spur had long been in debate, the Orange Field dwellers asserting that it faced Orange Field spot on, while the Right-bank and Neighboring Field denizens would have nothing of that supercilious attitude, any more than of the boastful arguments of each other. What it availed them as it raged from time to time now in one Malgusia tavern, now in another no one knew. However, the debate had petered out three decades earlier, for Zusuz's nutheads had started making forays into Malgusia from the spur. Zusuz had the Malgusia people work for his troops, something they could not much oppose. They stitched on clothes for the nutheads and reserved for them half of their foodstuffs, which they transported out of the Mushroom Fields toward the spur. Zusuz had promised his countrymen that his troops would not touch them or step on the Fields, provided such of them as resented a life of peace did not counter the nutheads.

For hundreds of years had Zusuz sought to get to the Roosh Cave in Mount Rafruth. He had found no entrance, for there was none. Year in year out he had looked for the sketch of the key that his stick was to inscribe in front of the stone wall for the mountain to let him inside its entrails. His pains had been rewarded, for the crag had disclosed its secrets. He had released in the Roosh Cave the Black Lightning from under the white-hot stone. One of the Black Lightning's

arrows had hit him and had the power to subjugate flare up in him, only to subside and smolder after the humpbacks' defeat. Another secret was to the effect that he would live his life a drop at a time slaking his thirst in sips. As he had explored the cave, he had run into the eyes that had made, in another World, Andrew Flickbow lose himself. It was what thousands of years previously Shwarrawsh had brought with himself after he had passed through the innards of Mount Rafruth by way of the Dark Waters hidden by the inaccessible Tanuth Mountains crags. It was what had been left of the intelligent life crushed and transformed by velocity and the World-assembly Space into an inchoate new life. Once he had discovered the growth on the cave walls with eyes that bespoke intelligence and suppressed will, Zusuz had not demolished them, but rather had them feel the power of his stick. He had no business with them on the Hidden Side, near his Malgusia. He wanted them where he had once been defeated, where he would subjugate. He had found a place in those parts where Shwarrawsh's shade was the densest, where what was inchoate would turn into his warriors. It was the Emptied Lake.

After the Emptied Lake had crawled with what people would first call nutheads and then, after a spell of time, barkycrooks, Zusuz had set about looking for a secret passage that connected the Darkness lair with a cave on the Hidden Side, a passage that had no special mark like the spot of blackness under the Vanishing Waterfall. To send his warriors to the Hidden Side, Zusuz opened it before daybreak, and the warriors had to wait in the cave until darkness subsided. They came back to the cave with provender and clothes before dark. However, Zusuz opened the passage only after the evil dark had fallen and taken its toll of uncircumspect life. He thus safeguarded his cave from outsiders.

It was the travelers' plan to take a roundabout way to the Unknown Cave: for one thing, not to be surprised by a detachment of barkycrooks, and for another, not to arouse suspicions in Malgusia people as they marched head-on to the spur, which invariably drew a lot of attention. And they followed the plan. They whiled away the night (the most useless time in those parts for travel) in the Good Woods in a dugout hastily made and covered in branches and draped with capes. They snuck on the Unknown Cave when the barkycrooks were on their way back to it.

'It's behind this jut,' Groyorg whispered hoarsely.

'Are you sure?' Malam said.

'Let me take a look,' said Groyorg, carefully approached the jut and looked behind it.

The friends kept their eyes on him and the moment he lowered his hand to his boot top, they had no doubts left: he had taken them to the right place. The next moment there was a death gasp of a barkycrook followed by Groyorg's croak:

'Just one keeping watch. Now none. Come over here.'

'Help me take away the hulk, Dan,' said Sawasard, and they lugged the barkycrook away.

'Won't you take its crossbow, Mat?' said Daniel. 'You've nothing but a dagger on you.'

'I'll hand you the stones for you to take off their heads for them. Is that a deal?'

'Done.'

'Get in the cave, quick! We've got to take shelter. They'd be alerted by the loss of their watch,' Malam said.

'Not to worry, Malam. Their chief concern would be to get back to their lair. They wouldn't put their heart into their search. I know their ways: that wasn't my first watchman.'

When all of them had passed through the long meandering aisle, Malam lit a torch and said:

'Now look for the best hiding places.'

'There's an opening in the wall just above the floor. It'll accommodate two, sitting down' said Groyorg 'Dan, Mat, get in and don't venture out without your capes.'

The moment the boys were settled in the niche, Sawasard came up to them, unfastened a small bag on his girdle, took a pinch of some sort of sand and strewed it over their capes.'

'Magic powder, isn't it? Will it make us invisible?' Matthew asked in a jovial manner.

'That's to keep the stinkers off our scent,' said Sawasard.

'What will they smell?' Daniel said.

'Mildew.'

'Will we reek of this filthy stuff long?'

'No, Mat. I wish,' Sawasard said with a smile.

'It's been my dream of a lifetime.'

'Strew some over Groyorg and me, dear Sawasard,' said Malam in the knowledge that his square friend would offer a resistance and thus anticipating it.

Groyorg snorted, but did not resist the lot of being mildew for a while with a single word.

'I'll try that ledge above. Groyorg, it's too high for me, help me up, there's a good chap,' said Sawasard.

'Not too narrow, is it, my friend? Will you manage without rolling off?'

'I will. Just help me up. You'll have to find a hiding place, too.'

'It's a tall order for a square this big.'

'What do I care for a hiding place, Mat the Vital? I'll squat behind that rock with my cape draped over me like another rock, Lil'un-to-the-rescue. Should they see through it, I'd wield my Lil'un.'

Malam made sure everyone had hidden himself, put out his torch, hid himself in a hole he had spied in advance and said softly:

'Friends, when the barkycrooks step into the passage opened by Zusuz, let me be the first to advance to the wall for my bitubular to get a chance to divine and remember the pattern of the key.'

'What's that pattern of the key, Malam?' asked Daniel.

'It's the line Zusuz's stick draws to open the passage. It could be both plain, and intricate like a pattern that puzzles the eye. Hush now, everyone, and listen for the barkycrooks.'

Some time after the Unknown Cave, accreted with living stones, had gone dumb and blind again, with its ears a hundredfold keener, a brief whisper floated from Malam's hiding place into its space:

'They're close by.'

A moment, another, yet another...

'I say, Ruga, where the hell are you? Answer lest we leave without you!' a hoarse bark came.

'Look behind that rock,'

'He isn't there.'

'We'll have to report it to Gura. Time we taught those runts a lesson: it's their doing.'

'So it is. What we do is toast two or three of them for them to mend their ways.'

'Stop babbling! It's gonna be dark shortly. Get inside, quick!'

The barkycrooks noisily filled the cave, snorting and grumbling (obviously, there were quadrupeds packed with heavy bales among them), and spooked away the saving blackness.

'Is there no one lurking here?'

'There's no lurking room here.'

'Make sure, I say!'

The heavy stomping near their niche made Matthew's and Daniel's hearts throb, ready to race at full tilt and give them a fright.

'No one there.'

'No one here, either.'

'Come close to the wall: the master will now let us in.'

'I'm starving.'

'You're making my mouth water! It won't be long now.'

'He's opened it. Go, go, go!'

As soon as the noises died down, Malam emerged from his shelter, and neared the wall through which the barkycrooks had just left the cave. Everybody left his hiding place and froze waiting without lighting their torches. They could not see Malam's stick probing the air.

'It's got it!' he whispered, let the bitubular finish, and declared in triumph; 'we've got the pattern!'

Groyorg lit a torch.

'Where's it?' asked Matthew.

'The stick's got it, and now it's in its and my hand's memory,' Malam explained. 'It's not open to the eye.'

'When do we pass that way?' asked Daniel.

'Sip some grappian infusion: it'll give you strength. And then we'll step into the lair. Ready?'

'I am,' said Daniel.

'I know one thing for sure: I'm with Dan,' said Matthew true to his principle.

'Lil'un-to-the-rescue!' croaked Groyorg.

'I'm with you, friends,' said Sawasard and mentally added: Palerard.

'Put out the torch, Groyorg,' said Malam, faced the wall again and hefted the stick.

The humidity and cold of a deep-down bottom. And hundreds of lights that turned the darkness into semi-darkness.

'Aliens! Aliens! Get 'em!' hollered one of the guards on watch on the slope of the non-resident part of the hollow.

'Those are people! Encircle them!' another one hollered.

'Phew! We botched it!' Groyorg croaked in dismay and pulled off his Lil'un.

'We retreat that way. We'll get out of the Emptied Lake and make for Hawur,' said Malam firmly. 'Groyorg, stop the ones that are descending on the left.'

Groyorg wasted no time in describing an unseen circle in the air, enveloping all the advancing barkycrooks and inserting a snake in it. He picked up the circle with his Lil'un and hurled it at the barkycrooks—the barkycrooks were stunned.

Malam went on with his snappy commands:

'Sawasard, let loose at those on the right. Dan, Mat, stick together. I'll cover you.'

Daniel caught—first with his eye, then with his hand a hefty boulder, put his entire fury of despair in it and crashed with it a huge barynth nut making their way.

'Well done, Dan,' said Sawasard (he already had four barkycrooks to his name).

'That's what you are indeed: Dan the Hurler,' Groyorg croaked.

Malam hefted the stick with both hands, tensed his body and spirit in a tight knot that his face seemed to be in, and poked the stick's crook in the ground. In a moment, the solid earth was pervaded with a force that made the part of the hollow from him to Zusuz's tower quake. Many of the pursuers could not stand their ground. Those on the slope tumbled down.

This first response by the Keepers to the 'Get 'em' call let them get ahead of the charging party, but also whetted the Darkness troop's thirst for the kill.

'No... no... no! We can't have it that way,' Daniel suddenly cried and stopped short. 'We can't have it this way, Malam! It's the last chance. Not this way!'

'Dan dear, pray let's run before it's too late. It can't be helped. Our trick had relied on good luck. We won't make the tower—they'd kill us all,' Malam was speaking quietly but with confidence.

'Sorry, Malam, I just can't,' Daniel blurted out heading for the tower.

'Stay, Dan!' Matthew cried in his rush after him. 'Stay... Stay!'

Sawasard also ran after Matthew.

Daniel stopped.

'Mat, I know what I'm doing,' he snapped. 'Push me... push me toward that rock and go away!'

'No, I'm with you... I won't abandon you... I won't... even if you've gone potty! Remember the Bushtunts swing? Ghost 1 and Ghost 2? The leader and the led? I'm not leaving without you.'

Sawasard lifted his bow and shot the charging barkycrooks.

'Go, boys! They'll kill you!' Groyorg cried, his voice breaking, and wielded his Lil'un again, stunning the barkycrooks who had gone down from the left slope of the hollow.

'Feather, please: I know what I'm doing. Give me a shove and go!'

'Mat, give him a push. I think I know what he's up to,' said Sawasard.

But Matthew stood stock-still. Then Sawasard stepped up to Daniel and gave him a sharp shove only to go down to the ground, for an arrow had hit his left leg. Three barkycrooks with their pole axes were close by. Matthew came to his senses, reached under his cap and threw his hand in front of him—four deafening shots toppled the villains down. Daniel's living eye grew round. Sawasard's stare at Matthew betrayed his momentary stupefaction.

'My step-father's "Bulldog." I'd taken it to use as the last resort.'

'Feather, you're our savior. Go now. Pray go!'

Matthew helped Sawasard to his feet.

'Can you run?'

'Race me,' cried Sawasard and limped over to Malam and Groyorg. Matthew, too, finally dashed off with a parting look at Daniel.

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Daniel fumbled in his hurry with the gneiss bag of Tears on his belt: the growls and barks of the barkycrooks nearby had made his fingers all thumbs. At last he managed to undo the knot, screen the bag with his body and pushed it as far as he could under the boulder he had arrived at deliberately. Still squatting, he hollered:

'I've come to Zusuz! I'm here to meet Zusuz! I'm here to meet Zusuz!'

Barkycrooks crowded him poking their swords and pole axes at his chest, arms and legs. They were just teasing without injuring him.

'Take me to Zusuz. I've come to save him.'

'Get up. You'll come with us,' said one of the barkycrooks.

Daniel got up to his feet and made for the tower, accompanied by three of his captors, each eager to push him as hard as it could...

Two guards with pole axes stood on either side of the entrance to the tower in the torchlight.

'The cove says he's come to save the Lord and wishes to speak to him.'

'Wait here,' said a guard and knocked on the window.

Daniel knew the face in the window right away. Sapha, too, had recognized the one-eyed visitor from the Non-world and came out immediately. The guard was about to tell her something of the prisoner but she would have nothing of that and rasped:

'I know.'

'Greetings to you,' Daniel said to her with a faint bow.

'I remember you. Let's have your name.'

'Martram.'

'Martram,' Sapha drawled hoarsely.

'What's your name? I missed the chance of asking that last time,' Daniel went out of his way to endear the master's trusted retainer. (It was clear that

Sapha had special privileges living in the tower: the barkycrooks had fallen silent the moment she spoke and regarded her as a mistress; who else on the Emptied Lake could ride the Lord's gorhoon?)

'I'm Sapha. What brings you here?'

'After meeting you, I learned from Danad about the Emptied Lake and have since been eager to get here.'

'Go,' she said to the barkycrooks, the power vested in her by the Lord in her voice. 'You, Martram, surrender your weapons if any and follow me.'

Daniel flung open the folds of his cape, took off the dagger in its sheath and held it out to her.

'It's yours as a keepsake.'

'All right,' she said, and Daniel glimpsed, if only for a moment, a look of contentment in her withdrawn countenance as he thought: Do what you don't expect of yourself. And he said to himself: If you're out to win, say and do what you don't expect of yourself.

When inside the tower, Sapha opened the door to her room, stepped in and put the visitor's gift on the table. She reemerged with a dimly lit candle in her hand.

'We go up,' she rasped and warned after leaving behind a few stairs: 'It's still dark—just mind the risers, Martram.'

Daniel soon heard the gorhoon's hushed growl that seemed to remind the visitor winding his way up the stairs: 'You're still so much flesh.' And the flesh thought: To survive, say and do what you don't expect of yourself.

Sapha gave a subdued tap on one of the three doors on the round landing.

'Come in, Sapha,' came the voice from inside. (Daniel knew the voice).

'I'm not alone, Lord.'

'Show him in.'

Sapha opened the door and they entered a small room: a bed, a table, two chairs and a wardrobe. Zusuz was perched on the bed. Standing two paces from him was a tall, hefty barkycrook, the visible heftiness merely a tool of a force that the dreadful features expressed in the juts and folds of a tremendous barynth nut whose eyes did not betray any weakness.

'Go, Gura,' said Zusuz and the creature left after dwelling for a few moments on the alien's seeing eye.

Daniel recognized in the master of the tower the humpback who had been waiting for him, Matthew and Semimes in the Harshid foothills when they had been on their way from the Loner's abode to Dorlief. But it was only the eyes that he did: they were not just black but suggested the dark tunnels that led to Darkness. His straw-colored hair, orange face, small stature and even hump under his shirt—which was not a hump but a salnute dish—bespoke his provenance as one of the people who populated the Hidden Side, Malgusia. His face was not as frightening as the knotty features of a barkycrook, but you could not hope to stare it out, for it kept evading you and withholding from you. Apart from the Black Lightning mark (the warp), Zusuz's face was a triumph of incongruity. Whoever watched him would flee and withdraw, robbed of his will.



'Lord, this is the chap from the Non-world that let me go. I've told you about him. He calls himself Martram today.'

'Tell me, Martram, what brings you to the Emptied Lake.'

'The boy named Danad who had tried to escape from Sapha told me about the Emptied Lake, and my soul has since been craving to come here for vengeance.'

'Vengeance?'

'I hate them. They called me a freak, jeered at me and thought me beneath them. I hate them!' Daniel blurted out and wondered if he had not overdone it.

'Sapha, you assured me Danad was gone.'

'May I have my say, Lord?'

'Speak.'

'Sapha has told the truth. He was on the brink of death but pulled through. I pumped him for all he knew and killed him.'

'What secrets did he reveal, Martram?'

Say what you don't expect of yourself, crossed Daniel's head again.

'The sacred Word that would help people defeat... you, Lord.'

'Is the Word on you?'

'You could put it like that: I memorized it and destroyed the sheet with the Word in it that I'd picked out of dead Danad's pocket, so the Dorliefans should not lay their hands on it.'

'That was a wise thing to do. Let me have the Word.'

'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning

To ashes wordcircle's burning,' recited Daniel in measured tones.

'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning

To ashes wordcircle's burning,' echoed Zusuz in a whisper, only to add as if in response: 'Get inside and subjugate. I'll subjugate the sacred Word.'

'The ones I was on my way with were going to kill you, Lord, and thus bereave the Emptied Lake of its head. It was their last best hope, for they thought the Word had been lost.'

'Don't let that worry you any more, Martram. Gura's dispatched five hundred warriors in their pursuit on my orders to slay them all. Does Malam head them? It was he shook my home today, wasn't it?'

'Yes, Lord. He thinks himself almighty.'

'Tell me how you wound up in his charge.'

Daniel had been trying all the while to keep his eyes on Zusuz so he would believe him and had found it hard to resist his counter-stare that went down all the way into his soul, and his voice that shattered the barrier known as will.

'How did I? That was easy. Danad's friend who had been in Dorlief with him was back in the Non-world.'

'I remember him. I've met him once. Daring, but no warrior.'

Daniel went on:

'He learned that Danad was dead and arrived for his funeral. I took advantage of his rue, ingratiated myself into his confidence and came back to Dorlief with him. They believed I was a friend and took me along to the Emptied Lake. When we arrived, I fled them to warn you of the danger. That's it.'

Sapha stepped over to Zusuz and whispered in his ear (Daniel could make out her words):

'Lord, his unseeing eye has a force that made him arrive on the Emptied Lake. You need him.'

Zusuz took the stick that leaned against the wall next to his bed and rose. He took the crook of the bitubular to Daniel's black eye—a sharp pain overtook the left part of Daniel's face. He clenched his teeth and bore it, bore it, bore it in order not to show what could let him down. Zusuz dropped his stick and said:

'A Black Lightning arrow has taken refuge in your eye.'

'I'm pleased to hear it, Lord,' said Daniel barely aware of what that meant.

'Sapha, take him to the neighboring room and feed him. I'll lie down: I'm worn out. Not to worry: Malam will get it hot for his stick's cheek that has caused me pain.' (Zusuz was still weak after his encounter with Malam).

Daniel was troubled by Zusuz's words: 'Gura has sent five hundred warriors after them.' He was also troubled by what Sapha had said to him at the last, before leaving him: 'You have to know this, Martram: the Lord needs one who would replenish his weakened strength. But he'll test you first.'

Which was what came to pass, suddenly and indirectly.

Three days had passed. During a repast he habitually shared with Zusuz along with the words that laced it, the master said:

'The bodily discomfort Malam's bitubular had caused me made me take to my bed for a long time and reflect on what keeps me from pushing back the frontiers of the Emptied Lake to extend its power abroad. The swagger you must have detected in me these days is merely from force of habit... for Malam's words have gone to my heart and keep haunting me.'

'What words, Lord?' asked Daniel.

'Here are his words: "Consider the road you're to take from now on." They torment me and give rise to doubts.'

'What is there to doubt?'

'Malam lives among people and commands them. Lives... the way they do. He's got himself a goat and a stepson who's half human. But I hear—I've heard it on many occasions in fact—that people take their troubles to him. And he gives them counsel. Which is a wise thing to do, come to think of it: his words are the threads he ties them in with and can pull when need be, much like the reins, to direct them his way. So I ask myself: perhaps people have no use for your backbreaking stick? Perhaps, they could be guided the way Malam does? Which means becoming like them, getting oneself a goat and fostering an adoptee, and enjoying secret power on top of other creature comforts (such as the wine on my, on our, table). So I ask myself: if you're born to wield power, if that fire is blazing in you, must your power be secret or forceful... bloody? What would you say, Martram?'

Daniel considered it but found no words to reply outright. But he was always aware he had come to the Emptied Lake to reply to the Lord of Darkness in other than words. And he took advantage of the moment.

'Your words've nonplussed me while you wine's captivated me, Lord. Where does it come from?' he asked even though he knew those nice kegs the size of a good fist hailed from At Felclef's.'

'I take them from Bloib, the older brother of Felclef, my boyhood friend,' said Zusuz, his powerful voice betraying the tremulous feeling in him.

'D'you keep your wine in the cellar under the tower? I wish I could take a look at your stock.'

Zusuz grinned.

'Go down and tell Sapha to take you underground... Stay, Martram!'

'Yes, Lord?'

'You never answered my question.'

'I need some time to answer it: I've never considered it.'

'All right, go down and satisfy your curiosity.'

Daniel went down and knocked on Sapha's door. She poked out her head.

'What is it, Martram?'

'Sapha dear, take me to the cellar.' (It was the second day he had called her 'dear' which worked: she'd been as kind to him as a barkycrook could be kind).

Sapha came out and lit a torch. Suspended from her girdle was the dagger he had given her. They went through the hatch down the cellar steps. Daniel noted that the cellar was not locked. When inside, Sapha lit the candles on either side of the door. The shelves extended both ways, with jam jars on them mostly (the sort At Felclef's dealt in), barrels of preserves and wine casks. There was a grey mist over the floor.

'I'll take two.'

'Do, Martram. So the Lord's put you to the test?'

The moment Daniel heard those words, he recalled her warning on his first night in the tower and did some quick thinking: He was testing me.

'So he has. So we decided to celebrate in wine,' he said and thought: I'm talking rot.

'Go, then; don't make the Lord wait for you.'

'I'm ever so thankful to you, Sapha.'

What do I say to him? he thought as he trod the steps to the hollow growl of the gorhoon. Say what you don't expect of yourself. He suddenly realized what he would say to him. He went down again and, finding Sapha at her door, said:

'Sapha dear, I've got to leave the tower for a while.'

'Whatever for?'

'I want to show the Lord what I'm capable of.'

On joining Zusuz, he put the wine kegs on the table.

'Lord, I'm ready with my answer.'

'Speak.'

'Pray come to the balcony with me.'

Zusuz got up in silence, took his stick and made for the balcony door. Daniel took a wine keg and followed the false humpback.

'Look!' said Daniel.

And Zusuz saw Bloib's keg pierce the veil of mist over the Emptied Lake and disappear. The moment it reappeared, it was smashed to smithereens with a stone Daniel or, rather, Martin had hurled.

'I don't want to have any more doubt than that boulder on the way from the Lord's will to the bloody smithereens. I want to have no regret about the smashed keg.'

Zusuz's eyes shone. Daniel went on:

'You had your doubts, Lord, not only because you've grown weak but also because you haven't been among people for ever so long and forgotten their eyes. People haven't changed. They judge of things by their outside look rather than the inside one; they call me a freak without being aware that they are conceiving a freak in their blood by so doing—the blood that a generation or two later would spatter the hands of a midwife and make her rebound the word, and the word would come back with a vengeance: "Freak!" But I'm not prepared to wait for a generation or two to be avenged, Lord. No, I've no time for doubts.'

A silence fell. He believes, I can see he believes, Daniel thought and heard as if in support of his thought:

'Martram, I can see you're not the weakling of a daubster who was posing in borrowed clothing. Pray be my right-hand man.'

'I will, Lord. It's a great honor for me,' said Daniel and added in a low voice after a silence, feigning embarrassment: 'Lord, I've been meaning to ask you... but couldn't bring myself to. A thing has been haunting me. It sort of winked when first I saw Danad and is now drawing my only eye and tantalizing me.'

Zusuz roared with laughter and said:

'It's yours, take it.'

Daniel came up to the wall and took the feather of asnardat on a silver chain suspended next to a candle-holder over the master's bedhead.

'I'll pay you in kind, I promise, Lord,' the words ran counter to the guidance the walls of the tower kept whispering to Daniel: Say what you don't expect of yourself.

'Yes, Martram,' said Zusuz curtly and continued mentally: You'll pay me back when we both enter the Roosh Cave in Mount Rafruth and come back a unified whole. When the Emptied Lake cries: Marzuzram!

At mid-tittle-tattle that day, Daniel knocked on the familiar door down the tower.

'Martram?' Sapha was surprised.

'Sapha dear, do you have a bag for me?'

'Whatever for?'

'I'll go gather some stones. I use stones to behead people. What about both of us taking a walk?' he suggested.

'All right, Martram, let's: I feel like stretching my legs,' Sapha replied (with a view to watching him in case he was up to something untoward).

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The sky at dawn looked down at the earth with the eyes of eagles soaring over the violet waves. From the Emptied Lake to the River Guiss and from the

River Guiss to the rift in the ground that extended thousands of paces along its left bank, its surface had been strewn with hunks of flesh: from cold to lukewarm and still clad in iron, releasing—or empty of—the red nectar of life. The smell of the nectar had suffused the air up to the skies and rendered what the eyes could see temptingly savory. People were crouched beyond the farther rift behind the rocks. There were four of them. The rocks alone were for them, for the people's capes made them look like the grey slabs' and boulders' congeners. And the rift created by the violent force of the bitubular postponed the moment of the last clash and helped them to remain living flesh, though bloody, drained of strength and coming to terms with their lot, but living flesh nonetheless. They did not have a single Tear of Shwarrawsh to indicate the saving Path to them. No cheery, teasing words dropped from their tongues, their mouths being dry and painful, their spirit gone, for they had bitten off more than they could chew. What was left of them was focused on death, on the kill.

One of them, the one whose strands were living fire, had his strands alone that looked living. He sat on the ground barely stirring with his back against a rock and pulled his bowstring, a spent force, to let loose an arrow that sped one life away to save another. His legs had not trodden the ground for three days (the barkycrooks' stings had rendered them immobile), nor had he drawn out his short swords, which pained him as much as the wounds incurred from the arrows, swords and pole axes of the Darkness warriors. He was very nearly saying: Should Sawasard be whole...

One of his friends was nearby on his hands and knees, the one who had spent in the first night clash his entire stock of deadly leaden shots. He had not become a burden; on the contrary—as fate would have it—he had lugged his friend. He was now a quarter shorter not because he feared death but because his back and legs refused to obey. So he was on all fours picking up arrows and handing them to the fiery-haired one. The blood flowed over his face and veiled the eyes: an enemy arrow had hit his head. His chest and abdomen were covered in blood—an enemy blade had severed the protective shirt and singed his body, and he could feel the warmth flowing over his chest and abdomen. He no longer cared for crawling and bleeding white, for expiring soon. He cared for things less than his friends, for he was aware it was all over... nothing else mattered... He could not care less for it being all over, for nothing mattering. So he crawled about picking up arrows, crawled and handed arrows, because the fiery-haired one kept letting them loose.

Two more hunks of flesh more dead than alive had adhered to a rock beyond the rift: they were waiting for the last battle of their life. They had had it to the full, but there was no regret on their blooded countenances—bodily anguish, yes, but no regret. On the first night, as soon as they had got out of the Emptied Lake hollow, the Word Keepers could have gotten away from the hot pursuit: the dark and the rocks were to hand. But they had set up an ambush and attacked. They had miscalculated though: they had been crowded not by dozens but by hundreds. Worthy and daring though the stick of one, the club of another, the swords of yet another and the 'Bulldog' of the fourth, the swords, pole axes and arrows of the barkycrooks outnumbered them, broke through their defenses,

cut, pierced and tore their bodies. And the life oozed out of the blood-thirsty iron's ravages. After four days and five nights, one thing gnawed at the souls of the two orange-faced manikins—the gaping wound in the ground. The stick of the one and the club of the other hit the ground on cue and created a rift—there was no other way out—a rift in the earth that the one had long been in love with, and that the other had come to regard with tenderness.

The barkycrooks had already made a bridge; what was left for them to do was to span the rift with it. Malam and Groyorg, without a word, detached themselves from the rock, groaning and grumbling, and moved toward the abyss, hefting the weapons amber Elle had once presented to them. The bridge dropped over the opposite edge and linked the battle grounds.

Suddenly there was neighing in the space that the soaring eagles could span. Everyone on both sides of the rift turned his head toward the call that seemed to usher in the last battle. From the Kaduhar foothills along the rim of the gasping ravage, a warrior was riding a black horse. He was hefting a stick over his head. It was the third bitubular about to come crashing on the barkycrooks' heads. A score of crossbows pinged resoundingly. The horse reared and the arrows meant for the rider were stopped by its body hot with the galloping—it crashed down on the ground. Semimes's love for his Blackie was transformed into fury; he of enormous stamina, spry and cunning in a fray (he had always been like that), marked by an unseen conqueror brand, on a guilt trip on account of his friends and eager to avenge his Blackie (such as he was at the moment), rushed into the thick of barkycrooks.

'Semimes the Conqueror!' croaked Groyorg.

'Sonny!'

Malam

rasped.

'Semimes!' Sawasard's arrows seemed to whisper as they flew at the barkycrooks.

Matthew alone had no strength left for words—the tears were streaming down his cheeks.

. . . At the height of the battle, Sawasard would be startled... not because of an enemy arrow as he might, but because of the sounds that would go right to his heart:

'Sawas!'

He would look back to the voice of his childhood.

'Father!'

'I'll take your swords.'

'Your swords, Father.'

The swords would immediately know those hands and flare up with erstwhile passion. And their glitter would glimmer in the eagles' eyes.

It'll be all over by the early tittle-tattle. And by night, one of the Kaduhar caves whose mouth was marked by two crossed swords (Faddaf had once found refuge there) would once again come feebly to life, a life that could hardly be felt in the hunks of flesh brought there out of the eagles' reach.

\* \* \*

It's time, Daniel told himself, when the night was dense enough to be blind black. He produced the gneiss bag of Tears, suspended it from his belt with a bow tie, so he could detach it at a pull, covered it with his cape and left the room. The gorhoon seemed to sense something untoward and hissed a growl. The night before the hissing growl had surprised him on the stairs halfway down, scared him, made him go back to his room and leave his valuable burden. He had decided to see if he could manage what he was up to without the bag of Tears, just to play it safe.

Daniel, careful as usual, groped his way downstairs without a candle and reached the door behind which Sapha was either asleep or wakeful. It would be just as well if she said, like the night before, 'Here's the torch. Go alone. Get a keg and back at the double.' He knocked. He could hear Sapha get up. There appeared a nutty aspect through a crack in the guttering candlelight.

'Well?' the aspect hissed.

'Sapha dear, I don't feel like sleeping again. Would you mind my going down to the cellar for a keg? Don't be cross with me.'

'What's the big idea, walking about at night? You should've gotten one before.'

'That I will.'

'All right, wait till I light the torch.'

Sapha brought him a torch and lit it with the candle stub.

'Go, Martram.'

'I'll give you back the torch tomorrow. What's the point of bothering you?'

'No, bring it back tonight.'

'Just as you say.'

Daniel got down to the cellar in a hurry. He thought: Worse luck: she'll be waiting and be alarmed soon enough. Or is it good luck? I'm underground... alone. What was it Faddaf said? 'The mist over the ground will lure you.' It *is* luring.

Daniel knelt to see the passage the mist was slowly issuing from. I'll get through. He lay on the ground and crawled inside holding the torch. It was hard going and long. At least he thought it was long because he was urging himself with wishful thinking while his clumsy movements could not keep pace.

'Martram!' Sapha's voice hushed by the cramped space came, and again, before he could come to his senses: 'Martram!'

I wish she wouldn't nose me out... She would, you bet, it flashed across his head. And, sure enough:

'Martram? Martram?'

Daniel could feel with his skin the burrowing voice, strained, tense in pursuit of its prey. His heart was racing... At last the crowding walls fell away and he tumbled into a small cave whose space was no longer cramped or air oppressive. Homely, isn't it? Daniel smirked in comfort and drew himself up to his full height. Center stage was a huge rock with a flat, smooth top. He approached the rock, and the torchlight abruptly revealed its secret. Daniel shivered: in front of him were the words patterned as a closed circle, 'Burdened with Shwarrawsh's mourning to ashes wordcircle's burning.'

'Martram? Martram? Answer me!' came the sinister words out of the passage.

There were deep holes chiseled between the words in the stone, with one of them that separated the words 'burning' and 'burdened' holding a beige Tear of Shwarrawsh.

What sort of prophet would have carved this rhyme in stone and filled a hole with a Tear and put it on the bottom of a lake not yet emptied by the monster? thought Daniel. He put the torch in the middle of the stone, took off his gneiss bag of Tears, undid it and started filling the holes with his Tears that amounted to that much Shwarrawsh's mourning. When there were two left—the white one with a violet tinge and the gawping stone with a turquoise eye—he remembered he was to find the Path and had a mirror for the purpose in his jeans pocket. I no longer have to depend on my black eye: the gawping stone will lead me. But I have to find the Path before...

Daniel lifted the gawping stone in front of him only to see Sapha emerging from the hole. (She had no idea there was a cave there, any more than what the alien wanted with it at the moment. But she knew that he had not come back and that meant he was up to no good... conspiring against the Lord, against the Emptied Lake, against Sapha whom he called Sapha dear to further his ends.) She arose. She had a candle in her left hand, and with her right she pulled out his gift, the dagger. Daniel backed off to the rock. Sapha advanced on him, her eyes full of vengeance. He quickly pushed the last Tear with the violet tinge into the last hole, snatched the torch and stepped forth to meet the barkycrook, waving it in front of her face and trying to knock the dagger out of her hand. The torch brushed the candle and it went flying aside. He had another go, missed and was hit in the chest. But the protective shirt would not let the dagger get to his body; Daniel dropped the torch and the gawping stone and snatched her sinewy hand holding the dagger with both of his.

The space suddenly and increasingly came to be pervaded with an oppressive energy he could feel with his body and ear drums, the pervasion being swift and making everything shake unconsciously. The cave walls developed cracks. At that moment (it was just a moment) Daniel felt, along with a sharp pain in the unseeing eye, a clump of air between his unseeing eye and the wordcircle that was about... about to pop and tear apart the black ball in his eye socket and blow his head. The next moment, that Daniel was not aware of, the clump pushed him outside, out of the confines of the Emptied Lake, with a huge fire ball raging in the hollow...

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **No Last Time Necessary**

Daniel was freed from the sleepless night pervaded with reverie by a knock on the door. He got up and dressed in a hurry.



'Come in, forestman,' he said with deliberate cheer, sure that it was either his breakfast or news of further inquiry and intent on putting up a bold front.

'You guess wrong. This is no forestman. Hello, Dorliefan.'

It was Estean (the sadness in her eyes defying her jovial words). She had arrived before everyone else. She had meant to. And she wanted him to see she was the first to arrive.

'I don't know whose arrival would give me greater pleasure than yours. (Daniel did not prevaricate: she always made him feel good).

'One who would bring you joyous tidings: the words that support your being Danad.'

'Right you are, the messenger being you.'

'I sure am,' said Estean tenderly smiling with her eyes. 'Dan, I'm here to report that father's no longer as grim as the other day. He hasn't been giving me a wide berth.'

'It's the executioners that are grim of a morning... he merely orders people about.'

'You aren't being fair to Palarardians.'

'I'm not being fair to the fairness of the White Room.'

There was a knock on the door.

'There's your breakfast,' said Estean as she opened the door and accepted the tray. 'What is it? Rux tea, cheesecake and goat's milk.'

'I don't feel like eating. I'll just have some tea... though it isn't parate tea.'

'I meant to tell you such a terrific lot.'

'I'm quite ready to listen... listen, listen...'

'You liar.'

'You can see I'm not. You're the best judge of that.'

'I'm at a loss for words... they're all gone.'

'How did you mean to tell me without words?'

'I don't know how. My soul was all for it, and the words are gone.'

'Then let's sit in silence, me listening to your soul.'

'And me to yours, Dan...' Estean faltered.

'Are the words back with you? Let's have them.'

'I'm sorry for what happened in the boat.'

'I am sorry... for running away.'

'Swimming away.'

'I'd just recalled I was Dan. It was your idea in the first place. If I weren't Dan, I'd not have fled... you.'

'But you're Dan while I'm no Leoely.'

'Estean, d'you know what I'd like best of all? You're the one that can guess.'

'Can I have some cheesecake?'

Estean took a piece to her mouth only to put it back on the tray. The tears were running down her cheeks. She had missed the chance of stopping them with cheesecake or some such thing.

'I know, Dan, what you'd like best of all.'

'Not as a rule but at the moment,' Daniel said.

'That's what I mean.'

'Estean, let's say together what I'd like best of all on the count of three, so you wouldn't call me a liar.'

'Let's.'

'One... two...'

There was a knock at the door instead of the three.

'Come in, White Room messenger.'

There was Ozuard in the doorway.

'Estean?' he said in a low voice: his surprise had caught him unawares.

'The same, Father. I'm here to see Danad, lest I never see him alive again.'

'Danad, we're expecting you in the White Room, to go on with our inquiry,' said Ozuard dryly and left.

'I've got to be going, Estean.'

'Wait: you wish you'd be in the stones room. Is that right?'

Daniel came up to her and kissed her cheek.

'You are a wonder,' he said and went to the door. Then he paused: 'I'm forgetting: I've something I want to ask of you.' (Estean could barely contain her tears). 'When it's over, look under my pillow. If you find something there, do what you think fit.'

\* \* \*

There were two men armed with daggers on either side of the door to the sinister room. There had not been any before while Daniel was wearing his white armband, and it threw him.

Besides the four Palarardians involved in the inquiry there was another person in the room, one he had not bargained for: Leuely was seated on the bench she had occupied the previous time.

'Greetings to you,' he said and looked at Leuely: 'Good morning, Dorliefan.'

'Good morning,' she replied.

'Take your seat, Danad, and we'll begin... We'd like to hear you out first, Leuely. Is there anything you wish to add to what you've had to say?'

'Should she?' said Daniel looking at her. His words and look seemed to suggest: 'Wouldn't she be sorry if she did?'

'I should,' Leuely replied.

'Look at me!' he cried (Leuely started, the Palarardians being dispassionate). 'Should you, green eyes? Don't.'

'I want to have my say and I will,' Leuely said on a proud note.

'Speak, dear Leuely,' Ozuard encouraged her.

She got ready and was about to speak when suddenly...

'I can't,' she whispered cupping her face with her hands.

'Should you, indeed, Leuely? You told us all when last we met,' said Retowal and thus rubbed her on the raw.

'I keep dreaming of him every night,' she exclaimed. 'This man,' she pointed her finger to him, 'who calls himself Danad. I keep dreaming of him every night... We're sitting side by side and crying. He is looking at me with his eyes... Not with this ball of black, but with his own eyes: one blue, one turquoise... Each time I recognize the place. It's... the bench next to Falafy's house. We're sitting

side by side and crying. I keep calling him Dan... each time calling him Dan. Do you hear me? When I utter his name, I've no doubts... there are no doubts in my heart he's Dan. It couldn't be if this man were not Danad... if he weren't Danad.'

After saying her piece Leuely ran out of the White Room.

Her words stunned Daniel and restored his past to him: he felt like the Dan he had been ever so long before. He had forgotten there were other words about to be uttered in this room.

'You hear me, Danad?' said Ozuard.

'I don't seem to,' Daniel said as he roused himself.

'I can see you do, now. If this is the case, let's go on with our inquiry. Yesterday Zusuz's maid...'

'What of Zusuz?' Daniel interrupted Ozuard.

'He's turned to ashes along with the rest of them on the Emptied Lake. The people Falafy told us about have destroyed the Darkness lair with secret fire,' Ewnar replied.

'What of those people?' Daniel was agitated as he suddenly thought...

'They must've made the ultimate sacrifice. Fire knows no mercy,' Ozuard said.

'Which reminds me: Falafy didn't mention your name among the others,' said Retowal, his voice full of taunting jeer.

'I'll ask my question nonetheless,' Ozuard brought everyone back to the beginning. 'Sapha told us that you arrived on the Emptied Lake driven by the dark force that had found refuge in your eye socket. Would you argue against it?'

'Just don't tell us you have anything to do with the victory over the forces of evil,' that was Retowal again, who was trying his best to be Ewnar's proxy, Ewnar being silent with his bandaged head.

'I wasn't going to,' said Daniel quietly. 'But I'm going to ask each of you: you, Ozuard, you, Feltraur, you, Ewnar, and you, Retowal, to answer two questions. Here's number one. Why did Gura and Sapha speak of me as one who was, like them, Zusuz's accomplice? Why, if the Darkness lair had been destroyed with just a drop of it left in me to start the Emptied Lake anew, didn't they cry I was an enemy and laugh in your faces before their death? And another question: Why did the stone hurled by me hit Gontear half a jiffy after his arrow felled Sapha who was standing between us twenty paces from me? That's all I had to say to justify myself.'

'Are there any other questions or arguments?' said Ozuard.

'I have none,' said Retowal.

'Nor me,' said Ewnar.

'I think I'll ask a question that only four people know the answer to: myself, Estean, Leuely and Danad—the Danad who had arrived in Palerard with Falafy's fatally wounded son, Natan, over his shoulder. Tell me, young man, what became of the horsehair the charm was suspended from, the charm of asnardat shaped like a feather?'

'You kept it. It was no horsehair. It was a hair of a barkycrook you called a nuthead at the time.'

'Thank you, Danad, I have no more questions,' said Feltraur.

'Danad,' before we pass the verdict, I must explain to you how we arrive at a decision,' there was nothing but serenity in Ozuard's voice. 'Two similar votes override two others that are disparate. Out of the two against two, the one prevails that's in favor of the white armband man. Should all the votes be disparate, the rule of the favorable verdict prevails. Is that clear?'

'It is, and I like the favorable verdict part of it.'

'I think each of us has arrived at a decision. Who'll come first?'

'I will,' Retowal offered. 'The one-eyed man in front of us has the Darkness lurking in him. The barkycrooks and the esteemed Dorliefan have indicated as much. Nor does he himself deny it. We've no right to take risks. Mindful of the fallen in the fight against the Darkness, I say: execute.'

Daniel's heart missed a beat and fluttered, his body limp, no matter how hard he tried to be strong, no matter how he had prepared himself for the worst. To counter that, he clenched with his right hand the digits of his left until they hurt, and grated his teeth, not to betray the weakness that had crept in with Retowal's words, with his look which he kept fixed on the pencil in front of Ozuard.

They can see me shaking, he thought. They can't help seeing that... It's a good thing neither Leuely nor Estean's here.

'Now for my say,' Feltraur said with his usual serenity. 'Danad, I've considered your two questions and the answers to them haven't affected my decision. In fact, they've confirmed my belief that you *are* the Danad Palerard once received as a friend. I say: Remove the white armband and release him. Our Lord Ozuard has your word that no one would learn of Palerard.'

'Thank you, Feltraur,' said Daniel in a voice that had not yet become level.

'I won't argue my point of view; I'll merely voice my decision,' Ewnar began. 'I say: Let this man of the Non-world choose between having his memory wiped clean of Palerard (something our esteemed healer will take care of) and retreat to the Non-world without the option of returning to Dorlief and other villages.'

Daniel felt relief: They aren't going to execute me. There's Ozuard left who's no executioner.

'I wish to argue my decision,' Ozuard began. 'I only arrived at it today. Two of the Emptied Lake witnesses, Gura and Sapha, who knew for a certainty whose side Danad was on, said he was our enemy. But they were our enemies themselves. Two other witnesses, Leuely and Estean, tried to impress on us that he was the Danad we used to know as a friend. However, they hadn't been to the Emptied Lake and couldn't know whose side he was on, besides wanting wholeheartedly to see Danad in him. The esteemed Dorliefan Falafy sensed the dark force in this chap along with another force which balances the first. As you see, each argument is contentious and I've no way of knowing which he is, friend or foe. I wish I could think he's not a foe. So I say: Let Danad chose between agreeing to have his memory erased of the word Palerard and everything to do with the word, and going back to the Non-world he comes from, thus forfeiting the right to come back to Dorlief and other villages. Danad, when combined with Ewnar's, my vote prevails over Retowal's and Feltraur's. You may remove the

white armband. (Daniel undid the armband, put it on the table in front of Ozuard and resumed his seat). The choice is yours, since the verdict allows you to choose.'

(There was another circumstance that prevented him from siding with Feltraur. But he would never reveal it to anyone.)

'Here's what I say: I've had my memory erased, and I'm fed up with that. Nor do I choose the second option—I merely go. Obviously, one of yours will have to witness my departure. Let him make haste: I'm not one for waiting,' said Daniel, injury in his voice, and left (first the White Room, then the palace) making for the ferling beak.

He never looked back and could not see Leoely and Estean rush out of the palace after him, only to stop abruptly, one of them catching the other's arm and saying something to her.

Ewnar caught up with Daniel at the beak.

'Danad,' he said, 'I've got to blindfold your eyes... eye.'

'Just save your breath: I'll close it.'

'Agreed. I'll put my hand on your shoulder.'

'I'm game,' said Daniel fighting his feelings... which craved aloneness!

Daniel made sure his mirror was in his pocket.

He would step on the Path that would take him to the Non-world in the Sadorn Forest. He would not let himself take that last look at Dorlief: he did not need the last time. To find the portal to the Path with his mirror and the turquoise Tear hidden behind the blackness in his unseeing eye, he needed over two hours. Ewnar would be nearby all the while watching without interfering with him.

\* \* \*

One day in the fall, Uncle Samuel and Martin were back home by midday as usual after their morning round of the forest. Samuel went to the kitchen to warm over the dishes and set the table. Martin went upstairs... and the moment he pushed at the door to his room, his soul (Daniel's soul) was filled with happiness... not the happiness whose fragments you gather to string into words when looking for the answer to the question what happiness is all about—he was filled with boundless happiness (with not a limit to it) at the sight of Matthew, who had sprung up and stepped up to him... the fragments were in the shape of drops, drops of feelings whose memories stirred up to pour out into his heart all at once.

They embraced.

'It's you, Dan... it's you!'

'Mat, you're alive... alive... alive!'

'We've survived it, Dan! We've survived! We shouldn't have, but we have!'

'Mat, speak, do! What of ours? Out with it!'

'We've weathered it. We've put it behind us. Semimes and Faddaf—we didn't stand an earthly in that slaughterhouse, but they saved us. Semimes the Conqueror astride his Blackie...' Matthew faltered.

'What?'

'The Blackie was shot dead...'

After a brief silence, Matthew continued:

'Everyone's in Dorlief now. Sawasard and his father are building a house.'

'That's great.'

'Groyorg says (I don't know whether in jest or in earnest: you never know with him) he's moving to Dorlief: he's fallen in love with Dorlief nights. Andy's back home, he's come with me. He visited with the Carroty. It was Malam who talked him into going back. I've given Chris's parents a letter from her.'

'How's she?'

'She's a regular Dorliefan now. Know what they call her? Try to guess.'

Daniel smiled as he mentally tried a few options of Christine's new name and smiled.

'I'm afraid to outrage you. Tell me.'

'Tinity. She likes it.'

'So do I.'

'As do I.'

'You would.'

'She's with Falafy now. She and Lutul think the world of her. Malam had sent her through the secret passage. She'd emerged from the barrel more dead than alive. She's enchanted with Dorlief, even though it isn't what it used to be as yet.'

'How's Falafy?'

'Ready to kick herself for not knowing her kith and kin in you. She did feel something, didn't she?'

'She did... Danad's shadow.'

'She means to attend to your eye. By the way, the forestmen's Lord Ozuard has been to see her.'

'Forestmen's,' Daniel smirked.

'To say how sorry he was about what happened to you. You're now a Dorlief hero. What makes you silent?'

'Tell me another, Mat. It's embarrassing.'

'Semimes misses you a lot. He's a dream: to stop by the Loner, all three of us, and give him a globe. And another one: to get the caboodle to visit the Celestial Meadow. D'you remember the celestial blooms for Chris?'

'You can say it again. Has Falafy been given a globe?'

'Semimes vetoed it. He said her grandson would. Now for the main thing, Dan. You'd better brace yourself.'

'The main thing? For me, Mat, all you've said is the main thing. What matters is you're here... It's got so I've been forgetting my name.'

'You got me there. Let it be the mainmost thing,' with these words Matthew produced from his anorak and handed to Daniel the feather of silvery asnardat (left by him under the pillow in the room next to the White Room) with a hair attached. 'This is a horsehair. Leuely said you'd understand. What do you say?'

'Dreams being prophetic. Let's go and keep Samuel company at table, and then off we'll go.'

'On the Path.'

. . . Feathers, lots of feathers floated every which way. Danny could make out his among them. The swing would next go up, and he would catch his feather. The swing went up, Danny stretched out his hand and he struck it lucky. The next moment the swing went back, and Danny, in thrall to his luck, was careless enough to let the swing slip from under him. He was in for a precipitous fall. What crossed his mind was that yesterday's feather was no feather but Matthew, Mat who had rescued him the day before and... the moment he thought about it, he felt another hand in his. It was Mat's trusty hand.

'Fly, shall we?' Mat suggested.

'Let's,' Dan agreed...

They flew like birds; it was a swift and easy flight. Down under was a lake. They saw on the far bank minute human figures. Nearer and nearer...

'They're waving to us,' said Mat.

'I can see that. I think they're hollering to us. Calling us.'

'Shall we land? Make up your mind.'

'Let's.'

Dan and Mat landed. People crowded around them.

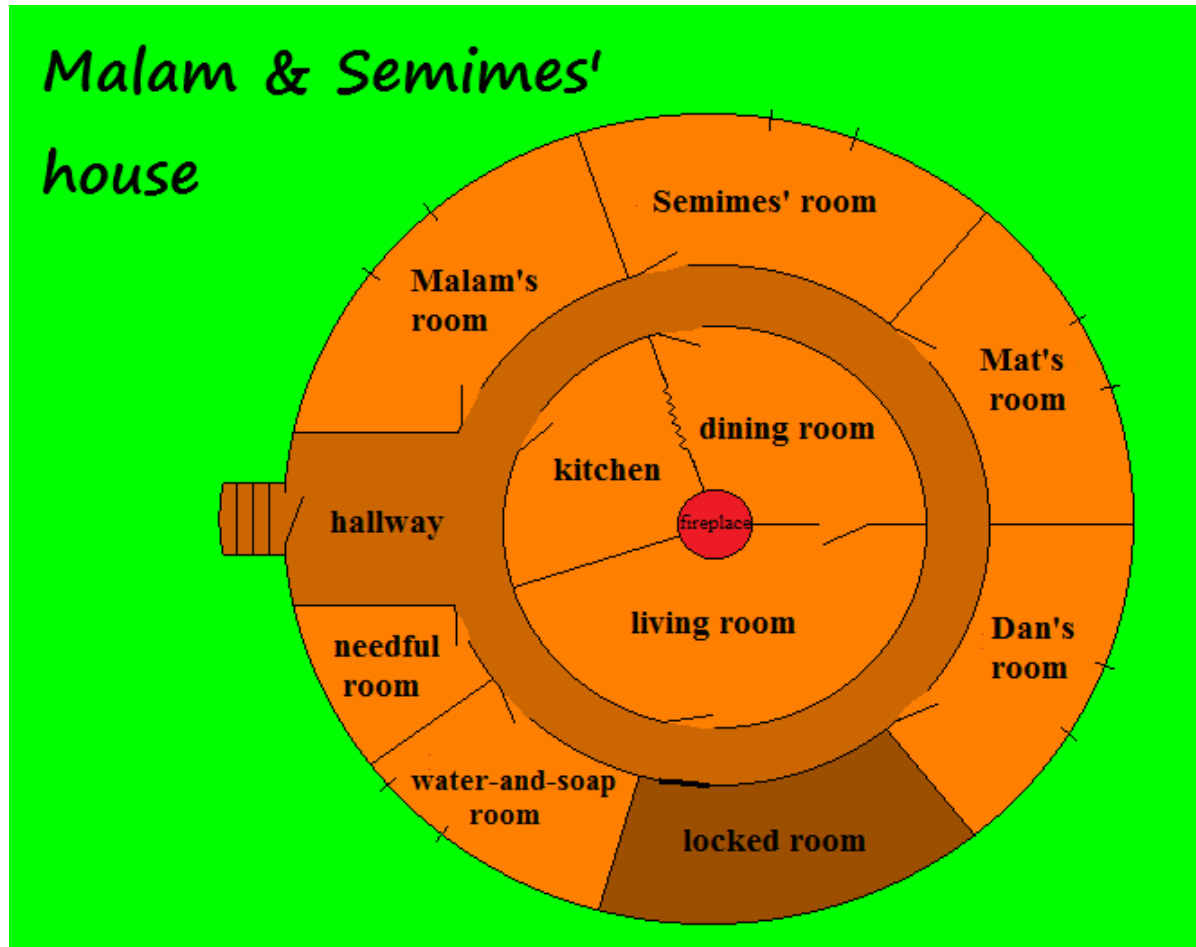
'Look! He's come instead of his grandfather.'

'He's his extension, isn't he?'

'A chip off the old block!'

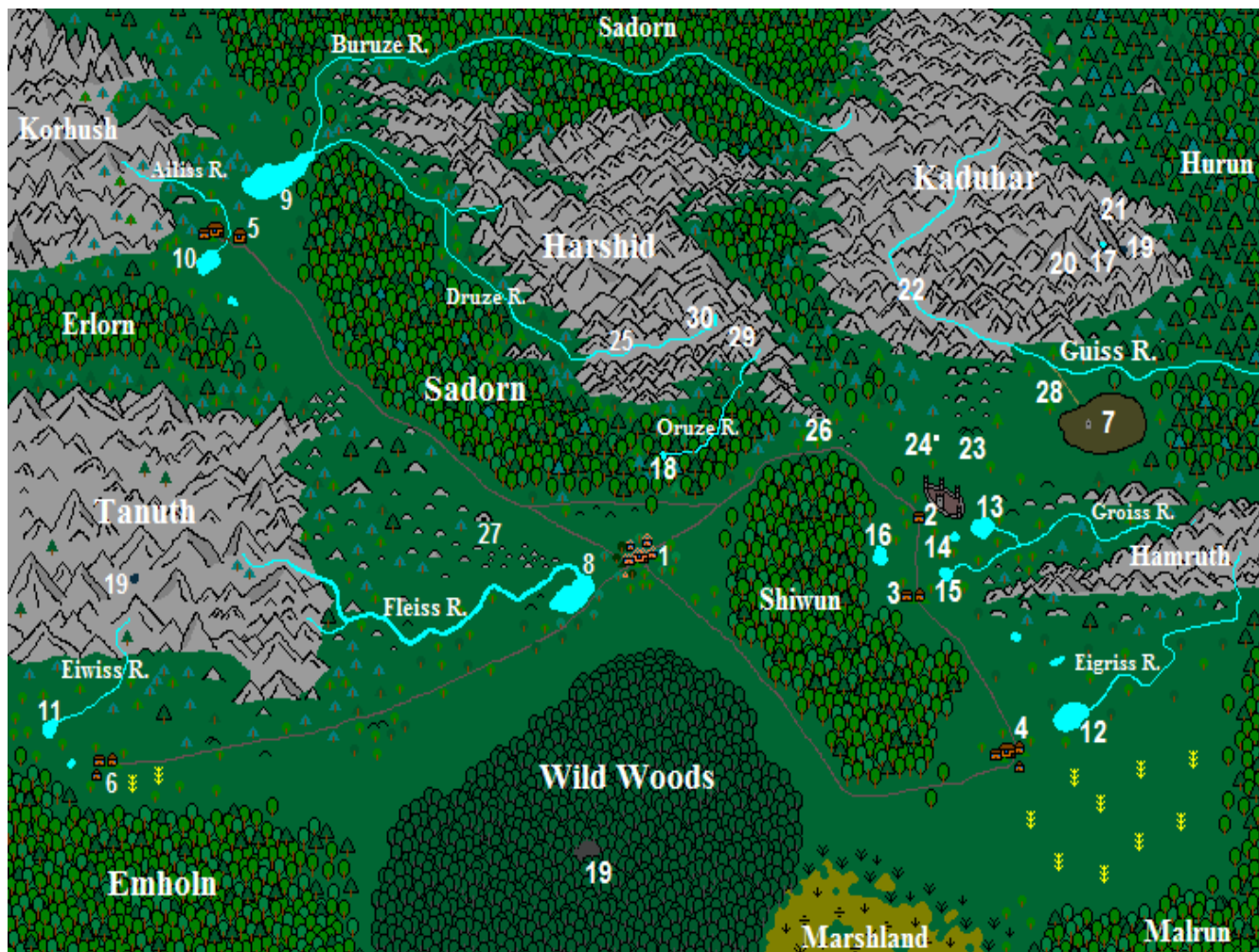
'He's got his friend with him...'

**Plan of Malam and Semimes' house**





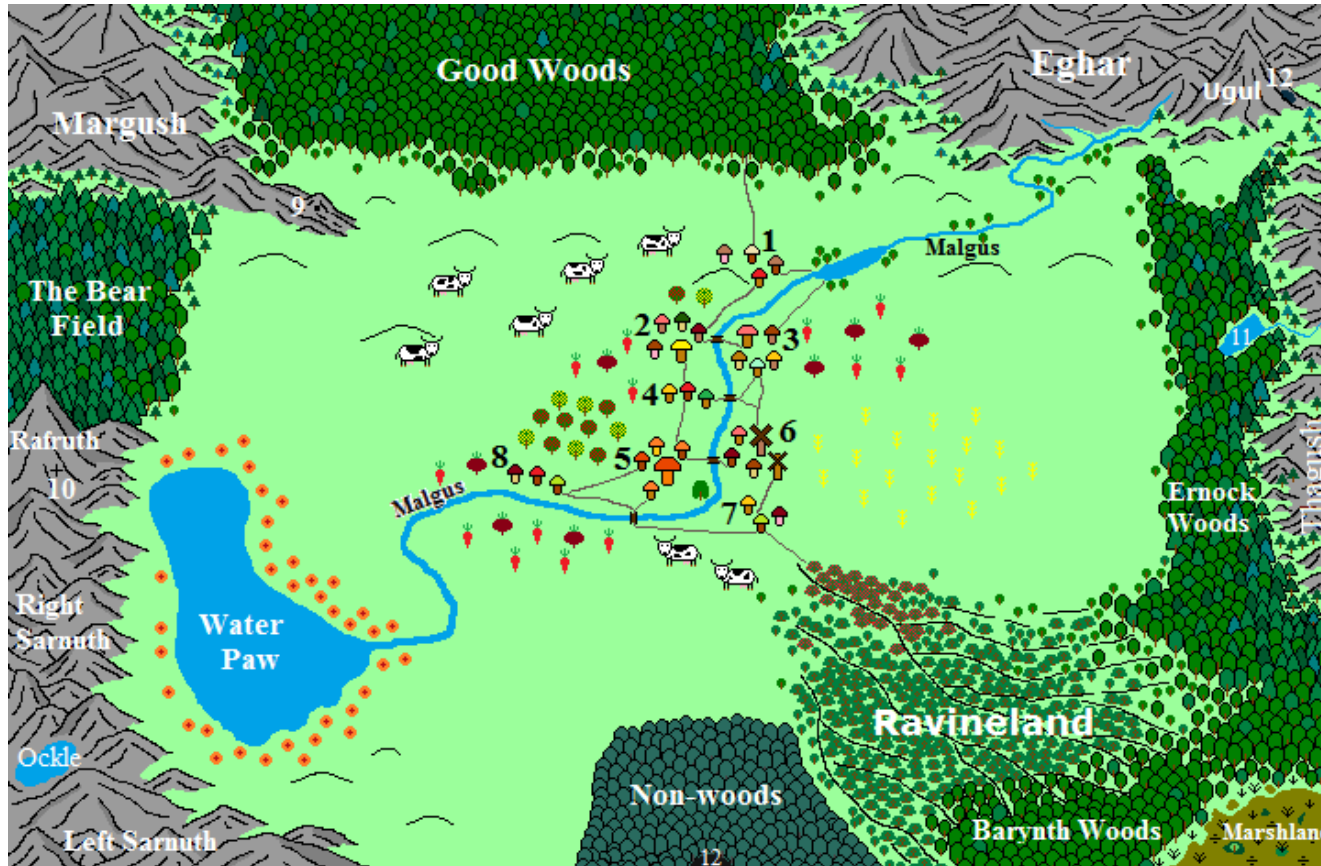
## Map "Dorlief and environs"



## Dorlief and environs

- 1 - Dorlief
- 2 - Natlief
- 3 - Cradlief
- 4 - Hoglief
- 5 - Nefenlief
- 6 - Parlief
- 7 - Lake Lefend (the Emptied Lake)
- 8 - Lake Werent
- 9 - Lake Newent
- 10 - Lake Lent
- 11 - Lake Urent
- 12 - Lake Solef
- 13 - Lake Lef
- 14 - Lake Fend
- 15 - Lake Nent
- 16 - Lake Oslent
- 17 - Lake Tahl
- 18 - The Mirror Pool
- 19 - The Dark Waters
- 20 - Mount Hawur
- 21 - Mount Tusul
- 22 - The Wedolick Gorge
- 23 - The Three-headed Hill
- 24 - The White Stone
- 25 - The Kerdock Gorge
- 26 - The Tawsus Cave
- 27 - The Dogush Cave
- 28 - The old course of the River Guiss
- 29 - The Barynth Gorge
- 30 - The Vanishing Waterfall

## Map "Malgusia (The Hidden Side)"



## Malgusia (The Hidden Side)

- 1 - The Upper Field
- 2 - The Right-bank Field
- 3 - The Left-bank Field
- 4 - The Neighboring Field
- 5 - The Orange Field
- 6 - The Mill Field
- 7 - The Raspberry Field
- 8 - The Remote Field
- 9 - The Unknown Cave
- 10 - The Roosh Cave
- 11 - The Wood Lake
- 12 - The Dark Waters