



Karen Michalson

Enemy
Glory

Reviews

“Epic, mythic, and yet grounded in real emotion, *Enemy Glory* is the best kind of fantasy, a sprawling, multi-layered saga of war, gods, intrigue, and magic. Karen Michalson creates worlds within worlds and manages to light them all with loving detail. This is a writer ready to explode on the fantasy scene. Disconnect the phone, cancel your appointments, and stock the fridge for the long haul: *Enemy Glory* will make you want to wallow in the pure joy of reading, all over again.”

— Jack O’Connell, author of *The Skin Palace*
and *Word Made Flesh*

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— *Locus*

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— *Publishers Weekly*

“Sets the scene for a grand-scale fantasy taking place in an exotic realm where religion and magic vie for prominence.”

— *Library Journal*

“*Enemy Glory* is a thoughtfully crafted piece of language art that demands to be devoured, delectable piece by delectable piece. . . . It’s a great book for igniting discussions about tough issues.”

— *Fantastica Daily*

“Lovers of fantasy novels will enjoy *Enemy Glory*. . . . This story is epic, mythic, and yet grounded in real emotion, a sprawling saga of war, gods, intrigue, and magic.”

— *Bookreviews.com*

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Karen Michalson

Arula Books

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Any resemblance to real persons and events is accidental and unintentional.

ENEMY GLORY

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A division of the author's sullied dreams

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*For Bill
For being there*

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One

The first time I saw the scarefisher I thought he was a compost heap. Pieces of sun-browned flesh kept falling off him and rotting away into the soft brown sand that surrounded his hovel. Lush reeds grew out of his feet and delicate daisies nodded out of his forearms. Strange white grubs crawled in and out of his soft permeable belly. So many waterflies drowned his chest that from a distance it looked like his skin was growing the shiny scales of his prey. Two long gouges in his neck suggested gills.

Of course he couldn't speak. Of course he wasn't real. But he leaned against his hovel and slowly wove kelp nets out of wind. His weaving made me more nervous than the loneliness of the spot. You see, although I'm methodical by nature and used to feeling my way through slow bursts of logic, the slowness of his rhythms demanded that I slow my thoughts to match his, and I won't do that. Not for life itself.

Besides, it is especially dangerous to slow one's thoughts in the North Country. Here one is likely to mistake rabbit holes for oak trees, and fall toward infinity while grasping for strength. Or oak trees for wrens and bleed on rough bark while caressing soft contradictions. Or wrens for weather. Or weather for dreams. Or dreams for all you've ever envied. Or a scarefisher, weaving down your thoughts, for the real thing.

Or, cruelest of all, here the sun might make you believe you are beautiful. And if you're not careful, you'll embrace the light and joyfully throw your life away to gaze at your deadly reflection. And then you'll die while the Northern light chants that it was all a trick, that you were really dust and maggots all along. I mean, I've made something of a career out of destroying beauty, enough to establish a reputation as an evil cleric, but here in the North the sun's cruelty could transform even me into a poet, the kind of poet who writes precarious verses as the sun destroys them.

I guess I am becoming a poet. The North does that to people. You begin to even describe the North, and you're more than half gone. I watched the scarefisher weaving kelp out of wind for what might as easily have been weeks as minutes. The magic that animated him was still strong and sure; someday it would pull the world as I knew it through his resilient and formless fingers. In the meantime I would sit and catch the kelp as it turned darkly back to wind.

A heavily shod foot thudding into my back probably saved the remnants of my reason, although I've no idea if this was my attacker's intent or if I was grateful. An old fisherman leaned over me, roughly grabbed my collar, and tossed me to my feet, away from the scarefisher. The movement startled the waterflies into a spurt of confusion. I tried miserably to gain some balance on the slippery sand. My knees were traitors. My breath was stone. I fell and rose again unsteadily. The fisherman stood watching me through dull eyes, eyes of sticky amber that

held a paralyzed remnant of his youth like a dead fly. In my heightened sensitivity I knew he had once been kind and innocent and generous and simple. I also knew that *something there is that punishes simple men*, for this was the phrase that swirled through my brain as I helplessly read his inner life. I groaned and heard the sun creating beauty on the water with tiny explosions of light.

“Isulde . . . ?” I gasped in explanation, immediately feeling my weakness intensify. What was I doing in this cold, charm-laden country, so far from the warm realities of southern climes? Nobody is real in the North. Even if one wanted to be real up here, there is very little the North Country will do to encourage such an ambition. My heart was splitting mountains and my stone breath was avalanching into pebbles of pain. Pain was real here. And Isulde, perhaps, could be real here. But what if she were really here, to see me like this?

“She ain’t here.” The old fisherman was sad and wistful. It was queer to realize that this was probably her foster father, this lonely beach her home. “How ye know Isulde?”

Hearing her name on his lips stunned me out of any reasonable answer.

“What’s yer name then?” the fisherman asked to prod my silence. He looked me over, his eyes and mouth narrowing suspiciously at my black riding clothes and the silver crescent moon that pinned my cloak. “Where ye come from? You either mighty sensitive or mighty weak to adapt so poorly to our Northern energies. Speak, boy!”

I lowered my eyes and stared through the impression I had made in the sand. It was dark beneath the surface. It usually is. “My name is Llewelyn. I come from . . . nowhere Sunnashiven in the south . . . the capital . . . I am a priest of Hecate, leastways I used to be. . . .” The memory of my horse sent me spinning into the sand again. “I think my horse became sea foam and I nearly drowned.” Maybe I said this. Maybe I dreamed it.

“Yer nag is tethered in back, where I found and secured her. Ye had ridden her into a sweat. How do ye know my daughter?”

“I dreamt of her in the moonlight once.”

A bitter smile tore open his leather skin. “Then enter and be welcome.” He helped me to my feet and nodded towards the scarefisher. “Isulde made that one when she was a little girl. Still draws in the fish on a good day. Probably always will.”

I nodded dumbly, leaning on his arm for support as we entered the hovel. Isulde was simply the best.

Of course, this was not her fault. The North Country bred magical talent, magic in these parts being as common as fish, and just as undisciplined. It’s said that a Northern magician with the right training could rule the world with a smile, but again, try to train one. They’ll have none of it, usually. And not from principle or moral qualms about the powers of chaos taking instruction. It’s sheer laziness. Why build a fancy cottage when a makeshift hovel will do as well? Why hunt if food grows wild at your door? Why eat if the moon will sustain you?

The fisherman was handing me some porridge in a wooden bowl. He looked wistful again. I drank it eagerly. It was cold and sour and smelled of rotten fish. "Best of the house," he mumbled as I vomited porridge all over the sand floor. Tears of embarrassment scalded my eyes.

"I'm sorry. Maybe you can make it disappear?" I asked weakly.

"I'm not a wizard and my daughter ain't here to keep house." He took a little spade and began throwing shovelfuls of sand onto my retch. I watched helplessly, thinking how little I belonged anywhere north of the Drumun Mountains, how well that childhood curse against entering the North Country had held up. I would turn into something foul up here, a black squid squirting poison in the sand. I felt tentacles growing under my arms and summoned all my strength to wrestle away the illusion. The result was dry heaves. "Ain't often we get a priest of Hecate in these parts. Looks like yer monastic training ain't prepared ye too well for survival 'round here. Or don't your goddess *want* ye wanderin' 'bout outside Sunnashiven?"

"I came of my own accord," I managed to choke out through splashes of chest pains.

"And no doubt expect a poor man like me to offer ye shelter because ye serve the forces of evil and claim knowledge of my daughter." He paused, and added softly, "The latter is enough." I could hear the scarefisher weaving. The roof creaked in the wind, and somewhere a wild dog barked. I could see through the doorway that the sun was slain and falling into the far shore. Soon it would be night. I began to tremble violently. Evil though I am, I feared the North Country darkness, a darkness more impartial and demanding than all the shadows my masters had nurtured me on into evil. Hecate would not protect me here. That dog was not her dog.

The rapidly cooling air allayed my sickness enough to let me observe my surroundings. The hovel was darker than the failing sky outside, and the fisherman had already lit a yellow candle and placed it on a roughly cut pine table in the middle of the room. I sensed that he recognized my fear and was clumsily trying to offer me a modicum of protection for Isulde's sake. From where I leaned in a corner against a pile of worn sheep skins I could look up and see all manner of crazy fishing nets and hooks hanging from the ceiling. There were no windows, and when my host closed the door the candle burned brighter in the absence of outside light. I noticed a fireplace and cooking tools in the opposite wall. The fisherman was throwing driftwood on the red coals he had probably used to light the candle. The wall to my left was bare and drafty, admitting a delirium of east wind. There were gull feathers stuck in insane patterns in the plaster. No doubt Isulde had placed them there.

I felt my left hand resting against something smooth and wet. Slowly turning my head, I saw a small black altar stone, long disused, and covered with spray along the side which faced the door. It was probably Isulde's. The wind dropped tufts of gull feathers along its eastern edge. The furthest side was already glowing from the fire's warmth. On the side closest to me there was a thin hole in the stone, its bony darkness the slender blank of an ancient birth canal or an untimely grave. If she should come . . . if she should come . . . here would she claim her power and renew her spells; here

would she sing to the Northern night and grow strong again.

And here would she think of me. It was with supreme effort that I tore off my riding brooch and placed it in the hole. In the flickering light the barest suggestion of silver betrayed its presence. The amulet would bless her altar with my energy and so she would know that I had been here. A dirty trick, I'll admit, but one born of desperation. My hand was light as a dying crocus, light as a lover's hint. My wrist plopped back on the sand like a dead thing. My brooch was a waning moon in a meager sky. It was my life for her to find.

After placing the brooch on the altar I noticed that along the wall to my right were some large storage chests which I guessed contained the old man's meager possessions. I suddenly realized this was the northern wall, and the thought sent my body into uncontrollable spasms. At the sound of my moans the fisherman, with some difficulty, dragged the table away from the fireplace, letting the light and warmth from the south wall engulf me where I lay. "Cain't do much more for ye, evil one from the south. Like I said, Isulde ain't here, an' I ain't much of a healer. It's a nine-day wonder ye journeyed this far past the Drumuns and kept any life to ye."

The pains had returned and I was rolling on the floor, clutching handfuls of sand in agony. He sat in a rickety chair by the fire and spooned porridge into his mouth, watching my convulsions.

Every cleric, no matter what his moral or spiritual alignment, learns early on how to protect his body from magical attacks. A priest's body is a living temple of his deity. Beyond a certain level of training, a true priest's health depends as much on acting in accord with his deity's demands as on diet and exercise. But nothing I had learned in the service of Hecate was of use to me here. So I went back in my mind to a time before I became a priest and an adept at destructive power.

And what I found was that when I was a child, before I ever dreamed of Isulde or studied magic or knew anything of the gods save what nature told me, I suffered from deathly headaches because I loved beauty too much. Flowers were beautiful, and so I loved flowers, and my love grew into a strange childish longing for the flowers to love me back. But every time I kissed a columbine or dragon tongue, hoping that I could lick its colors into my dreams and that just that once the flower would sing and bloom and dance for me, the thunder-pain and nausea would sicken through my body, menace me away, and reduce all loveliness to a grimy hallucination. Then one summer, sick with love, I made a blood offering to the fields around Sunnashiven. I sat among new flowers and dug a hole in my palm with a pointed stick and chanted a poem I made up as my blood ran into the ground, forcing my clumsy images through the flowery bursts of pain my childish love of beauty always seemed to bring on. The flowers did not love me, but when I kissed a day lily at the end of my poem my headache vomited itself into the ground, and as my head cleared I felt the bright and empty sky embrace me where I lay. Perhaps I once was a poet, before I knew better. I had used my own language, my first unwitting word spell, to stop my own pain. I tried this now.

Within three breaths I had only succeeded in making my feet numb.

But their numbness caressed them into a fine susceptibility to the fire's

soft heat. The heat rose through my legs and torso and swallowed my head, bringing a light reprieve from the torture. I rolled onto my stomach and buried my face in my arms, desperately willing the pain to completely cease. My will has always been especially strong, but I could work nothing here. My anguish was merely dulled.

As the pain lessened I heard the fisherman scraping his bowl, followed by the sound of his chair creaking as if he was getting up to stoke the fire. I heard him settle back in his chair, sigh in annoyance, and grumble that *he* had not had it this bad his first time North, nor ever heard or knew of anyone who had. “An’ I used to play with *fairies*,” he said shrilly, banging his spoon against the table. Each bang made my liver fly into my mouth. He was clearly waiting for me to respond, and he would not let up his imbecile banging until I did. An evil cleric’s liver tastes remarkably like owl meat and cardamom pods, which is what many of us dine on the eve before initiation. You have to rip open the owl yourself. I don’t know where the tradition started, but it is not limited to Hecate’s followers. Nearly all evil clergy follow it, even vegetarians like myself, just as nearly all good clergy eat something equally unspeakable at their initiation. Anyway, when I spoke it was in the breathless woodwind shrieks of a tortured bird. My life was dancing out of me like a fuzzy baby owl in its death throes.

“Who . . . helped . . . you?”

“No one, boy. I played with *fairies*!” That was that, I guessed. After a short pause he added pointedly, “Fairies in the *south*!” I had no idea what he was talking about, but it was crucial to me that I understand. I was dying and he was my only link with Isulde. “Big fairies. Womankind. Ye know what they do. Hooo hooo!” I wondered if he was drunk, if it was porridge he were drinking, or if porridge brewed from his Northern catch was naturally intoxicating. His supper clearly nauseated *me*, but that was no indication of how it might affect him. In or out of the North, a servant of evil must watch his diet as much as any other cleric. One priest’s wholesome food is another’s bane, and up here I had no way of guessing if the porridge was clean for me. Since I had been retching on my own food for three days, it probably didn’t matter.

I waited for him to continue, but my patience was rewarded only with the sound of him rising from his chair again and swaying back and forth. I inwardly begged him to speak to me, to tell me everything he could about Isulde before I entered death. But my silent pleading turned my own throat to raw scabs and beetles, and he did nothing but hoot and bang his spoon.

If I hadn’t been dying of my curse, getting him to speak would have been a fairly simple affair. It is a basic part of every cleric’s training to calm and counsel in distress. We all know how to draw out the drunk, insane, and silent ones, how to entice people to speak their intimacies with us. We evil ones are less hesitant to calm an agitated person without his knowledge or consent than our good brethren are. Calm someone in a crisis and you make him ripe for conversion. Make converts and you rise faster in the profession. However, I am sure you will understand that in the present circumstances I was in no position to try any clerical magic. Merely hoping he would speak had turned my own throat against me. Actively attempting to influence him would involve drawing down my goddess’s energy and invoking Her force through whatever conductive path I could create

between my mind and his. The North Country is not the place for such magic because Hecate is a goddess who loves law and order and Her force tends to break up in the Northern chaos. I didn't want to think about what could happen to me if I tried to draw Her. A dying cleric is tender of his spirit, and I had risked too much of my spirit coming here in the first place.

Why did I come? The answer would be my doom and judgment once I brought it forth and owned it. Anyone with a farthing of magic in his shoes avoids the North Country like manticores avoid mice. Magicians such as Isulde who are *born* in the North bloom and thrive here, of course, but if your magic has another birth, the slow pounding of Northern energies will sooner or later wreak their havoc on you. Soldiers, merchants, farmers, fishermen—those who have no knowledge of magical arts—have little personal danger to fear past the Drumun range. An untutored wood cutter or a highly trained law interpreter, so long as he lives without magic in his heart and breath, will feel no ill effects here. Sure, he might see thistles turning into old men or onions into frogs, or hear colors arguing theology with the sunlight, or trip over a tree root and land back in his own root cellar. Such things frighten travelers and keep most folks south of the mountains, but such things do not kill. The ordinary traveler will not sicken and die here, except of his own fears.

Sometimes, though, the strength of the North is the strength of surprise. A merchant who never studied magic but has spent his life handling magical gems, a soldier who relies on magical weapons for survival, a child who pretends too earnestly at spells, might suffer here. Again, not to the point of death, but to various degrees of nodding acquaintance. Such people are also as likely to recover as to remain somewhat incapacitated during their stay. It is only wizards and clerics who are really vulnerable up here, but especially clerics. The closer you are to your deity the more you must safeguard yourself against outside forces anyway, because your power is in your god's protection. Yet nothing in the North is all that certain. I once read of a Master Wizard from Gondal who reportedly survived here for six months. The poor bastard did it with dandelions.

I once read a lot of things, none of them useful now. I was going to die . . . to die . . . to die . . . and none to know and heal me. I realized hazily there was a poem in that somewhere. Even Isulde, should she find my body split and wriggling, my corpse a hundred maniacal Northern fishes drying their gills before the southern fire, had no power to raise me from the dead, here or elsewhere. That would take a capacity for god energy and a formal discipline that no denizen of the North Country possesses. I wanted the strength of surprise. I wanted her to heal me. I wanted her to love me before I died as I once wanted the flowers to love me.

The fisherman was making buzzing noises. I turned my face toward him and could feel that the warmth in my mouth had reduced the beetles to sticky white eggs. I swallowed the eggs to clear my throat, threw up some white mucous with black buggy wings, and felt that I could speak again, although my head throbbed in seductive clouds of pain to express this new relief. I saw his mouth was ringed with purple, so perhaps he was drunk. I tested my throat with a moan, which came quite naturally and caught his attention. He sniffed and gagged in disgust.

“Yer ain’t a fairy. Who ye be. Yer evil. I can smell it. Ye wanta woman. Ye wantsa fairy. Ye wasa fairy. I can smell it now. Bad!” He drank from a jug. “Ye die soon. I get fish.”

“No doubt,” I said thickly, then choked on my spit as he approached me with another bowl of porridge.

“Eats it down. Ye like. Ye wants. Good.”

“No—” I lacked strength to scream loudly, and he had the loathsome mush down my throat and all over the front of my cloak. My gullet became a water snake, my heart a baby owl. When the serpent slid through my teeth my considerate host tripped over his feet and fell on me in fright. The owl’s heart was now my heart. I told myself it wasn’t real. It wasn’t real. Nothing is real in the North. His fright was real. My pulse was a bird’s—rapid and nervous and singing up a painful wind. My snake was a salamander. It found the southern fire and became a rainbow. My host slithered away in the sand.

And my language burned my tongue to half its size when I uttered the spell of revealing, “*ea Hecaatus somani caeribe.*” *To me, by Hecate, you write your heart.* By forcing his wretched sup on me he had placed himself at my mercy.

The North is a realm which loves not force. If I had tried to wrestle coherency out of him through magic, it certainly would have killed me. But since he had tried to force his will on me, I could bend his energy back on himself to prop up the spell without hastening my death by much. Simple mathematics. And I might score points with Hecate on the other side. Although under ideal conditions I would invoke Her blessing and power in the spell, the words themselves had an energy of their own that might be sufficient to waylay a drunk. I had no energy of my own to impart but I have always understood intimately the uses of words. His energy turned back on itself and he spoke. My tongue expanded to its former size, but my mouth began to bleed like his purpled lips. There is always a price for success.

“When I was a child,” he began stupidly, haltingly, “I played with fairies.”

“Yes, of course. Please go on,” I said in my best nonjudgmental, clerical tone. If I could keep my voice this soothing, some of my monastic training was still worth something. How desperately my heart was cracking—the spell must hold.

He sat back on his haunches in the sand, a middle-aged puppy with eyes like moistening soil. “My brother and me” he grinned sloppily—“we used to like to fish, ye know. Back when we were kids.” He wiped the back of his hand on his mouth and smacked his lips.

I waited. Nothing. The fire popped. *Speak, damn you, I’m dying!* “We’re still kids, ain’t we brother?” I said softly.

“Yeah,” he continued. “Weir kids in the river. We called ‘em undines.”

“An’ we used to fish for undines?”

“When no one was looking. We weren’t supposed to go fairy fishin’.

We didn't have a license or nothin', and usually it wasn't legal. So we'd cross the river into the nomind's lands where dey wouldn't bother ye."

Nomind's lands? He means unorganized territory. Where? It figured that his most significant memory was of lawbreaking. Laws are sacred to all disciples of Hecate, because laws are so easily used to strangle individual power into weak conformity and that is one aspect of Hecate's particular evil.

"Where were you born?"

"Near the River Kretch in East Angruk."

That's part of the Duchy of Walworth now. I smiled a little. Walworth was always one for laws himself, although he tried to hide it. I wondered what he would have thought of his own true love's foster father's proclivity for poaching, what he would have thought of the fisherman in general. *That* would have been a delicious meeting.

"We'd stolen some bass hooks, poles, the biggest ones we could get, ya know, we were just kids, and got them cross river."

All the better to mangle undines with. I winced.

"An' we hid in the reeds like. An' we waited for dusk to see if we'd catch 'em singin'."

"And did you?"

"Yeah, we did. We did once! It was great." He wiped his sweaty forehead with his hand and smiled shamefacedly, like a tongue-whipped child afraid to say he likes something. But his voice was full of relish. I hated him thoroughly for that. The bastard didn't have to sound so enthusiastic. How in the name of Hecate and all that poisons joy did this dirty dim-witted son of an East Angruk ditchdigger gotten to hear the song of the water fairies when I hadn't even been able to get a flower to love me? I was a sensitive child, too, with quite a fine mind. And I hadn't become evil yet. And I hadn't gone breaking laws. And I'd known how to love.

I should have been a high priest, or an archon at least, because despite the exquisite envy I was sampling I managed to keep my voice fluid and even. "And what did it sound like?" Being a lover of beauty I had to ask. I swallowed expectantly, prepared to interpret whatever confusion he threw at me, and thus die to something like fairy music. I was a swan. A black screaming swan.

The dolt couldn't remember the music but swore up and down it was great. I sighed and coughed. There is no justice. There is only fiction. Nothing is real in the North.

"We heard the singin' and we threw our hooks out." *Anything to spoil the cadence, the slob.* "Bein' kids we didn't know." *How blessedly innocent. Was I supposed to applaud his ignorance? Excellent maestro; when I was a kid I "didn't know" either, but I never got to hear a fairy song, you bleeding jackanapes!*

"And did you catch your prize?" I whispered kindly, while tears of outrage writhed over my bloodied lips like crushed butterflies. I knew from my studies what kind of damage fishing hooks could do to fairy flesh.

The child in me would have protected those beautiful, delicate creatures from such thoughtless violations, would have taken the hook in his own flesh first. I would have gladly drowned myself awake to hear such voices, not bait beauty with empty hooks like this half-wit cretin.

“I got pulled under. They caught me. ‘Pretty boy’ and ‘lovercake,’ they called me. ‘Here’s a golden ball to play with, from the frog-prince to you. Here’s a golden plate to share. Drink our sweet goo. Now eat with us and be our darling. Be our merman. Our luscious young man of the blue.’”

“And so you ate the food of fairyland?”

“They gave me candy and fins and told me I should be King of the Sandcastle. They called me sweet provender, and bale of good oats, and Bottom the waterbaby, and Tom o’ the wisp, and said the caddis flies would sing for me everyday and I would get great queens though I be none.” He farted and belched.

“And did you . . . get great queens?”

“Ah—the womanfish, my mother, yes, she wrapped her soft white flesh between my legs, she blew bubbles in my nose and ears, she smiled upon my cheeks and licked my neck with her rough dry tongue. I drank her clean milk and she drank mine.”

I was now feeling faint and wet. I was losing consciousness and would soon die. In a voice of unassuming desperation I begged, “And Isulde, did she come soon after?”

“Isulde, yes, it was on the beach. They left me here, the sweet clean fishes. I cast my nets and wept for them. For years I wept.” He sighed. Some coherence was beginning to creep back into his speech. “And one evening there was a little girl running to me on the shore, in the light of a full moon, rolling pebbles before her feet. I fostered her.”

So this little girl was Isulde and she was indeed half fairy herself. Anyone who knew her would find the old man’s story easy to believe, but I wanted more supporting evidence. The girl could have been an ordinary abandoned child, the old man’s memories jumbled. *Question the source and die.*

I tried one last time to speak. The spell was thinning and my only hope was that his own drunkenness would keep the magic buoyant enough to impel him to tell me something more of Isulde. “Did you teach your daughter fairy songs when she was a little girl?”

“No, she knows ‘em all already. She can sing ‘em.” He nodded his head in a curious gesture of awe and unearned pride. *I’ll bet she can, I thought ruefully, and no thanks to your careful tutelage. Damn your eyes! If I had in my charge a student with half her abilities, her mind’s growth would not be so abhorrently accidental!*

It was on the word *accidental* that my spell broke and I lost consciousness. Down went my spirit like a black feather falling in disgrace from the sun, helplessly yet logically drawn toward Hecate’s portal.

And on my way to death I had a dream.

And somewhere in my dream a door opens and shuts.

And somewhere a fine and noble voice echoes mine to ask, "Isulde?"

And somewhere I am a bird of prey dropping closer to the portal. There is a scroll on the portal. There is an essay on the scroll. There is a poem in the essay and I tear the paper hungrily with my beak.

A woman with three dogs, hunting dogs, bird dogs, gently opens the gate to let me in forever. She extends Her hand over the boundary. I perch there and croak something that seems to mean, "My love is darkness." The gate begins to close.

And the voice which echoes mine comments wryly, "Then live and be damned."

A violent surge split my chest and jerked me back to consciousness, where I hovered like a hummingbird between life and death, not moving too far in either direction. My eyes focused on a heavy sword poised sure and steady above my heart, a weapon I recognized, which caused me to raise my eyes with alarmed surprise to the cool gaze of its owner, the Duke of Walworth.

The duke's features were as steady and professional as his weapon of choice, but his eyes had an unnatural brightness and his brow was covered with the sweat of fever. I noticed his skin had a strange pallor and a soft smile briefly crossed my mouth in spite of myself. Walworth was a highly experienced soldier who had fought with and slept with and loved too many magical weapons to travel through the North Country unscathed. The North wouldn't kill him, of course, but it was having its effect. The magical sword he was holding me with now could not be healthy for him, and it was a rare event for me to see the duke look vulnerable.

Then I realized that his ability to use his weapon of execution to draw me from the point of death was a measure of his extraordinary skill and competence in everything he undertook. Only a highly superior, exceedingly disciplined fighter, perhaps only Walworth himself, would have the requisite skill and willpower to perform such a feat with a weapon created for other uses, and to do it in the confusing swarm of Northern energies. And the duke was clearly ill. My smile faded into an expression of utter neutrality, but I knew he could read resentment and envy in my eyes. Somewhere in the shadows the fisherman was clapping and howling, a drunken audience.

The duke's control of his weapon's power never wavered, but the noise drew his gaze to Isulde's altar, where he saw the gleam of silver from my brooch. Keeping the sword perfectly poised above my heart, he deftly released the moon from its hiding place and tossed it onto my chest, saying evenly, "Yours, I believe." He smiled with quiet amusement and added with pointed courtesy, "I should hate for you to lose something so valuable." I must admit, from a purely aesthetic perspective, it was touching to hear him admit his own weakness and love for Isulde in such an elegant turn of phrase. He actually feared having a conduit for my energy on her altar.

Anyway, I was alive now and my enemy and liege lord was responsible. I even felt the power from his weapon imparting to me enough strength to speak, although physical movement was out of the question. He acknowledged my condition with a gently mocking smile that shadowed his hardened, weather-beaten features. "You will not die unless I sentence you to death, Llewelyn, and I do not choose to do so yet. Even the meanest of

my subjects is entitled to a fair trial before they meet the executioner.”

“And you’ve ridden this far to give me one? I’m most obliged. Accuser, judge and executioner at your service and pleased to make house calls. I shall remember this courtesy for the rest of my life, my lord.”

“And so you shall.” He sounded grave and concerned. “Be careful what you say, Llewelyn. You court your spirit’s destruction to speak truth in spite of yourself. You could die blaspheming the powers you serve.” A hint of smile softened the deadly earnestness in his voice.

“And high priest too? You mean I get a bonus? O lucky day!”

Walworth’s face briefly softened to something approaching melancholy but quickly returned to its unyielding hardness. Once we had been friends. He was remembering. His sword arm swayed slightly but his weapon remained fixed. “Be careful. I move my hand a hair’s breath and nature takes its course. I may be all that stands between you and damnation.” His voice was most courteous and respectful.

He knew about the curse that had been laid on me in childhood. After all these years he remembered that as dedicated to evil as I was, I could claim no protection from Hecate in the North. My teachers claimed they cursed me for my own “good,” of course, to prevent me and any other young student with magical ability from hurting ourselves beyond the Drumuns if any of us was foolish enough to go. These were my earliest teachers, the ones who had charge of me before I adopted an evil alignment. The absolute certainty of dying here, which the curse insured, was supposed to dissuade us from traveling to the North Country at all and potentially injuring ourselves. Not very logical, especially considering that Sunnashiven’s citizens rarely traveled *anywhere* and the North was little more than legend to most of us, but that was the sort of argument that caught people’s imagination in Sunnashiven. And it provided work for the hack wizards in the school.

Speaking of catching one’s imagination, for me the curse against traveling north was especially heavy because, except for very special circumstances, any cleric risked displeasing his deity and consequent damnation by willingly embracing death. My body was still Hecate’s temple, and I *had* come here of my own accord. Not to mention how vulnerable I was in the North Country as a dedicated priest. Walworth looked at me with steadfast pity, as if he could read my thoughts.

“Bring me a vessel of hot water,” he commanded the old man. The fisherman staggered over to us with his wine jug. “No, get a clean pot and fill it in the lake.” Our host smiled dopily and disappeared. I heard the clang of metal followed by the door opening and closing.

“You should have asked for the house special, my lord. Our host brews a most excellent mush, one I’m sure you can’t get at home.”

Walworth grimly surveyed my cloak, quietly appraising the damage the fisherman’s sup had done to me. His expression was severe. “Save your speech. You haven’t the strength to waste on banter now and I’m losing patience. Remember, you’ll need your tongue to plead your case tonight.”

He had correctly assessed my condition. My last outburst resulted in an explosion of weakness across my limbs, and it was all my enemy could

now do to keep me conscious.

So we waited in silence for the fisherman's return, forming a most curious tableau. A young man dressed in clerical black lies helplessly before the altar of his love. His riding clothes are drenched in blood. The moon wanes upon his breast. A tall, imposing figure skillfully holds the younger man's life at sword point. His riding clothes are drenched in the sweat of fever, but his bearing is one of supreme discipline and his face is a study in concentrated attention. A tower of grace sheltering a black, crumpled wind. It is a broken flower that loves an ill moon.

It seemed like hours, but it could not have been more than a minute or so before the sound of the door told me that the fisherman had returned. The duke commanded him to warm the water over the fire and to do whatever he could to keep the flames blazing at their full power all night. The old man must have obeyed him because I soon began to realize that the room was growing warmer, although the heat was not helping me any now.

"There is a legend concerning kingship, Llewelyn, one I am sure you have encountered more than once in your studies. You have read of the peasant-king Aru, who banished the corn blight and became first true king of Arula, ancient capital of Gondal. You have read of the witch-queen Melga, who saved her people from the plague and became their first true sovereign. 'A true king is a healer' is a commonplace. What is not so common, and what learned scholars like yourself understand, is the meaning behind the legends. Aru banished the blight so the corn could grow as it would. It grew more abundantly, so legend honors him for feeding his people. The truth is he freed the corn. Likewise Melga is honored for bringing prosperity, but the truth is she freed her people from sickness, and so many of them prospered of themselves."

He paused to glance toward the fire and then returned his gaze to me. "I have no reason to free you of your curse or to save your life, even if such a feat lay within my skill. But I think I can prolong your life a little, enough to let you speak your case. Do you consent?"

"With all my strength," I said wryly.

The fisherman came over to us with the steaming pot in his bare hands. I wondered at his flesh not burning and decided it must be another Northern mystery. He placed the pot in the sand near my chest, and sat on the ground. Walworth tossed him a small brown leather bag while continuing to keep his sword motionless. "Empty the packet in the water." He did so and I could smell monkshood and kingsfoil. "Now stir the mixture with a burning stick." The old man sighed, went to the fire, grabbed a wine jug and then a stick, and returned to stir the brew. The odor grew increasingly pungent and I could feel a little strength returning already. "Now fill a small bowl and give it to him to drink. Do not sample it yourself. It isn't wine, and monkshood's a poison."

The old man put a little mixture in the mush bowl and held it to my mouth. I drank. Monkshood was Hecate's plant and I usually considered it a treat, although it was deadly for most folks. Kingsfoil was a healer and usually made evil clerics like myself slightly nauseated, but here the medicine appeared to be working. My sickness lightened considerably.

Walworth noticed the change and firmly placed the point of his sword in the ground. “The effect will be temporary, but there’s enough to get you through the night should the discomfort return. Also know that the more you drink the less effective it becomes. You are still dying, and your illness is still devouring your body. I’ve merely slowed it down a little.”

I sat up slowly and once again noticed his fever-flushed skin. “Have some monkshood, my lord. Make a new man out of you.”

“I’ll live.” This was probably true, all things considered. He smiled in cold appreciation and settled himself comfortably in a chair, his sword within arm’s reach. “I, Walworth, Duke of Walworth and King of Threle—”

“King of Threle?”

“I won the war.”

This was not encouraging news. I had hoped that he’d crossed the Drumuns to avoid capture or execution, to find Isulde and live in safe obscurity. When I’d fled from his duchy his side was losing. He continued, “I, King of Threle, do hereby charge you, Llewelyn, priest and scholar, with high treason against my person and people. To wit, with aiding Roguehan, our enemy, with using priestly arts to influence my critical judgment and that of my generals, and with the death of my cousin, Lord Cathe. The penalty for sabotaging our national defense is execution by the method of my choice. Do you wish to plead?”

“No, my lord. I wish to state that the border of Threle lies considerably south of the Drumuns and that the North Country has never had a ruler. I suggest that you have no authority to try me here, king or not.” I succeeded in making my voice sound bored.

He seemed to consider, but I got the distinct impression that he expected this argument. “Man,” he addressed the fisherman, “do you owe allegiance to any liege lord?” The fisherman looked uncomprehending. It was clear that the only allegiance he knew how to offer was to his wine jug. Walworth waited for an answer. The fisherman drank. “Who is your king?”

Our host waved his jug around. “The king of the fairies . . . no king at all . . . we are a free people.”

“Then you are free to sell me your dwelling?” The duke tossed him a gold coin.

“Your currency has no value here,” I objected.

“That coin has much value in my country, and it is our host’s right to determine what the value be to him.” Our host held out his hand again and Walworth tossed him another coin. “You can travel to Threle and live handsomely on those.”

The fisherman looked at the coins and nodded dumbly.

“A match. Then I, Duke of Walworth and King of Threle, do declare this, my lawfully gained property to be part of the Duchy of Walworth and under my sole jurisdiction.” He looked gently at the fisherman. “You have my leave to remain here for as long as you please.” He removed his sword

from the sand and clapped him on the shoulder. “I appoint you seneschal of this property. Saving myself, here you are lord.”

The old man murmured, “Lord.”

“Good. I trust that takes care of your legal objections, Llewelyn?”

I was silent.

“The seneschal can stand in for jury. With his consent, of course.” He glanced at him and saw that he was almost passed out. “In the event that the jury cannot render a decision, I shall. Let us proceed. Do you wish to plead?”

I still refused to speak.

“Know that the court will allow you to plead your case. Because your life could be required, it is nothing less than your life that you may bring before us. You may tell us all your story and we will listen. You may also require us to relate our evidence against you.” He waited.

“My life is little more than that yellow candle’s, my lord. Because it is already forfeit, I have no desire to spend my last hours listening to your accusations. Yet I would satisfy the court’s sense of fairness and plead my life if my lord would consent to a dying man’s request.”

“Which is?”

“If you find Isulde, you tell *her* my story.”

“If she dwells on my soil, she shall have access to the trial records. That is Threlan law.” He took writing materials from a large pocket inside his riding clothes, set them on the table, and held his pen like a second sword.

And so to this extent the law was on my side. I must tell everything for her. I might reach her through this absurd performance.

Settling myself comfortably back against the sheepskins, I looked boldly into the coolly questioning eyes of my enemy, and began to speak my heart.

Two

Set this down for judgment, my lord.

My earliest memory is of the witch who lived next door to my parents’ house in Sunnashiven. Her name was Grana and she created my childhood out of sadistic fictions. I believed in her darkly, for her tales were wide and strange. I suppose I believe in her still, between my reason. Because even now, as I lay here dying on my own words, I choose to begin my tale in the voice of my childhood, as if I were once again beginning my life, as merciless and true as Grana once began it.

Grana was older than summer. She told me once that she used to keep the sun in her cottage at night and charge him sixpence for the privilege of keeping her bed warm. If he didn't pay, she made it rain the next day, and the day after, until he made good. And thus her garden grew. Grana always had a few warm coppers around to give me, so I began to like the sun very much and longed to meet him. Grana said the sun at night was not for little boys to see.

Grana also knew the north wind and got all the witch-gossip from him. She used to keep him in her cookie jar when he came to visit, and once she let me hear him sing with delight as she shook the jar. "Poor man doesn't get many treats," she declared. "Be careful, Llewelyn, or he'll eat your bones." When the wind wasn't there she'd let me help myself to cookies. They were always sticky and cold and froze my teeth, but I didn't know better than to pretend that I liked them.

Grana had a cat named Grana and a goat named Llewelyn. They were just for us, and also had different names that I used to forget. When Grana showed me how to pet them they felt rough and shuddery. And when I was alone they turned into a dirty secret I felt afraid of having.

She also had a pack of dogs that lived in a big hole in the ground, but she said they were the dogs of the moon and I mustn't go near them. I was very much afraid of that hole and never did go near it. At night I lay in bed trying to keep my mind a blank lest the dogs of the moon hear my thoughts and come after me.

One night I went without supper to bring Grana some mutton to give to the dogs, hoping to get on their good side. She said she would tell them that the offering was from me. She also said she was sure that they would remember me for a long time. The next day she told me that the dogs liked my mutton very much and had told her to tell me to bring more whenever I could. I never ate mutton again, but eagerly brought it all to Grana, who would warm and spice it over the kitchen fire. She had to taste it for the dogs, she'd say.

She also taught me letters and symbols and let me read in her books. I learned to write *Grana* with double stars and to write the names of all her cousins the water sprites with X's. But I was never allowed to write my own name lest the gnomes find it and eat it. We used to make up stories together, and anything I said was already in the book, which she told me was a gift from the gods and which someday I should use well. I was unused to gifts of any sort, so I was quite proud of having a "gift from the gods," even though I had no idea what a gift from the gods meant. But I did know that when I was with Grana I learned to think of myself as special.

We also had pictures to play with and a crooked mirror that told me my future, but I always forgot. The pictures scared me a little. A woman with horns was the priestess and that was me when she stood on her head. A woman pouring water would grant my wish but I mustn't wish too much or she might go away. A little boy hanging with the rope in his hands was me too but I mustn't touch the rope.

When the moon was dark Grana would go away on marvelous journeys that left me half enchanted and half in awe. Sometimes her dear friend the elf queen desperately needed her to check on last week's rainbow, who was ailing, or some powerful mountain wizard needed her advice on making magical jewels. Grana could raise exceptional storms, and so she was in much demand among the sylphs to teach their children her tricks. She knew the sylph king personally and often had a place of honor at his parties. She was also a dutiful daughter and frequently brought tea and oranges to her ancient father, a crystal cave in the North Country. She knew how to fly, and when the gods' messengers were especially busy Grana was happy to serve.

She would promise me all kinds of gifts on her return, the anticipation of which always got me through her absence. But despite her promises she almost always returned empty-handed. The elf queen had clumsily broken the magic drum she was making for me and was most sorry, or the mountain wizard gotten some unexpected orders and wasn't quite finished with my toy sword yet. Sometimes she would describe in detail the wondrous toys and baubles that she herself had found for me in her travels: a packet of incense I could burn to summon up anyone I'd like to see, bright painted birds that would fetch me any food or drink I desired, a piece of night sky to wear in my heart. But she always lost these things "along the way," or the gnomes would steal them when she wasn't looking. I grew to hate the gnomes.

Once Grana brought me real mermaid's tears in her withered hands, which she said resembled pearls. When she opened her hands there was nothing there but mutton grease. She said the tears must have melted, as they do out of water, but just the same I should be happy she brought them, as they took her much trouble to get. It wasn't easy to scare a mermaid into crying but Grana had managed it just for me, so I pretended to be happy just for her. I also remember a soggy fly-specked box of fruit pulp we ate with moldy bread. It was so sweet I had trouble eating it but she said it was a delicacy from good King Aru's court and would make me strong, so I forced it down.

It wasn't long after I started starving myself to bring her mutton that she said, "I'm off to see the king of the fairies to tell him what kind of a boy

you are.”

“What kind of a boy am I?” I was a little curious but mostly scared that the king of the fairies would learn something bad about me out of Grana’s report and convince her I wasn’t really special.

“A lucky boy. It’s not every boy the king cares to hear about.”

“What does he say about me?” I tried to sound carelessly innocent over my pounding heart.

“That he’s saving many beautiful things for you that you shall have when you are older.”

“Like what?” Maybe it was all right. Maybe this time the toys would even survive the trip home.

“Oh—” her old-woman voice got low and seductive—“like trees that bear golden apples so high you can’t reach them, and bags of jewels so heavy you can’t carry them, and a crown of lightning that only a great king can wear, and a wand of starlight that only a great wizard can use.” She was stirring some brown lumpy syrup for one of the sylph children, who was ill. “And remember, Llewelyn, my friends the sylphs are making beautiful books for you. Such books as would make you long your life away,” she breathed. “Open one book and taste honey, close it and taste salt. You like honey and salt?”

I nodded. She gave me some. As I licked a foul taste off my hands she continued, “And no book will ever have your name on it. They are only books made by other people for you to look at and admire. Oh, and I will bring you a magic cap from my very special friend the winter queen which will make you invisible to all.” She scooped some syrup into two rancid bottles and left the rest in the bottom of her cauldron to cake.

“Can I come with you, Grana?” I was sort of excited now. It would be great to meet the king of the fairies. Maybe he would teach me fairy songs or show me how to make a flower love me.

“No, Llewelyn. If you don’t stay here and mind my garden, the dirty gnomes will come and steal my nice mushrooms and eat all my gold!”

“Then I’ll throw rocks at them and kill them down!” I stoutly proclaimed.

“No, you won’t. Killing gnomes with rocks is like swatting mice with a broom. They always come back stronger and someday they’ll find you in bed and nibble off your feet.” She showed me where the mice were gnawing hers. “You know what you’re supposed to do.”

“Let them nibble me to nothing so they won’t get your gold.” I was

feeling brave lately because the dogs accepted my sacrifice of meat. Maybe Grana would think I was really special if I sacrificed myself on her behalf.

“Yes, that’s exactly right.” She nodded. “You’re a smart boy.” Then she put the bottles in a sagging wicker basket and hobbled away down the street, eyes brighter than a june bug’s lust.

Llewelyn’s stealing food!” crowed my sister Trena. “I saw him put meat under his shirt.” I had seen her stealing apples the other day, but since it was outside I couldn’t say anything. Not that telling a tale on Trena would have earned me much in the way of justice. My family pretty much ignored or hated me, so in return I pretty much ignored or hated them. Only Grana made me feel important and loved.

My mother, who had just been complaining of having nothing to do, lifted my shirt and saw a mess of grease. “Llewelyn, you’ve burned yourself and ruined your clothes. Now I have to wash them! Whatever possessed you to do that?” She sat back down and looked fierce. “What are you going to do now?”

“Put butter on the burn?” I said hopefully, remembering that Grana had taught me a song once where someone cooled a burn with butter—or was it that someone burned with longing for butter and died in the vat? I couldn’t remember.

“Put butter on it and make your shirt worse?” She shook her head and sighed in exasperation. “Never mind about your damn burn. Give me your shirt. Now I’ll have to wash again. Your other shirt was covered with grease yesterday too.” I took off my shirt, feeling violated and worried. Even when Grana went away I always managed to leave an offering inside her garden gate when I went to mind things, just as a gesture to the dogs. What would happen to me if I forgot? “Look at your burn—that’ll hurt for a week. I hope you’re happy.”

I wasn’t, of course. I missed Grana, who promised me good things and never yelled. *I’m a smart boy—how dare they treat me like this? Wait until I get the wizard’s wand Grana promised me. Then I’ll show them.*

My father said nothing but continued to shovel food in his mouth. Even though he never let us forget that he was an undersecretary to King Sunnas and privileged to speak on all sorts of great matters at court, he never had much to say at home. Not that he ever seemed to notice much at home, but I always took my food with the horrible tightening fear that if he did notice me, I was sure to get punished for it.

Trena delicately cut her bread into little pieces like she’d heard the ladies at court did and slowly ate as if she were really one of them at heart

and someday would marry a duke. She had a certain annoying air of being quietly justified for something through my downfall. I wanted to slap her but contented myself with kicking her chair and causing her to drop her food back on her plate. “Llewelyn, stop it!” she said in her habitual raspy voice. “Look what you’ve done!”

“Stop it Llewelyn!” barked my father, who clearly had no idea what I’d done, but was finally disturbed by the commotion.

“I didn’t do anything.” Which was true, in the simple way I thought about it.

“Well, stop it anyway, whatever it is. It’s clear you’re the troublemaker tonight. Where’s your shirt?” he asked suspiciously. “Did the gnomes steal it?”

“Llewelyn stole food under his shirt and got it all greasy and now Mother has to wash it,” offered Trena eagerly. Now it was my mother’s turn to act all quiet and justified, since Trena had done her work for her. She waited expectantly for my father to punish me.

“You stole *what*?” My father’s eyes bulged and his voice squeaked a little with panicked authority.

My mother waited for Trena. “He stole food.” Trena offered no further explanation this time, knowing my father would think the worst without one. She kept softly chewing her bread as if she didn’t care. I kept wanting to slap her.

“You stole food from where?” My father was not particularly bright, which didn’t make his fits of authority any easier for me to bear. His neck muscles bulged and his eyes got bigger than horse troughs. He clearly thought I had committed some crime which would jeopardize his position, even though it was Trena and her friends who stole combs and apples from the market. She was wearing a comb now. The wrong way.

“Why don’t you ask Trena where she got her comb?” I asked sullenly.

“It’s my comb,” said Trena.

“It’s her comb,” said my mother. “Her friends gave it to her.”

“I don’t care about Trena’s comb. Don’t change the subject, young man. It isn’t fair. Are you stealing food?”

“I took some mutton from my plate and put it under my shirt.” His job out of jeopardy, my father looked slightly relieved, but I still felt as though my desperate gift to my private life, to the only part of my existence they hadn’t dirtied up yet, had been violated.

“Well, that might be a stupid thing to do but it’s not stealing. Your

mother will just have to wash it.” He started to drift back into his perpetual fog but dear watchful Trenna wasn’t about to let that happen.

“He brings it over to old Mother Grana’s. I’ve seen him leave it behind the gate.”

“Mother who?” his attention was back, however temporarily. “Who’s that?”

“The old woman who smells funny and lives next door. I’ve seen her picking the ditches near the market and stealing combs.” He mumbled something and closed his attention, but Trenna was rewarded with my mother’s interest while my sense of violation sunk deeper in my gut.

My mother prompted, “You mean in that rat-infested dung heap that ought to be burned? It always smells like shit when the wind blows.” Her comment felt like a direct attack on the only beautiful thing I had ever had to believe in, and it gave me another reason to hate her ignorance.

“That’s because she has this big pit outside she uses as a privy. I’ve watched her.”

“Trenna, that isn’t nice.”

“Well, I can’t help it. It’s out in full view.” My mother found this funny. “Besides, Llewelyn goes over there all the time, even when she isn’t home. I saw them eating mud pies and grass last week.”

“Is that how you got all muddy? What do you *do* over there?”

I was grateful that the subject of the meat had been forgotten, but resentful that my secrets were being pried into. “I don’t know. We play.” I hoped she’d be satisfied with that. The details were mine to cherish, and I knew instinctively that the more she pried out of me the less my experiences at Grana’s would be mine. Once my family chewed over my poor private affairs I would feel dirty returning to Grana, as if Trenna and my mother would be looking over the garden wall and commenting on everything.

“I’ve seen them whirl each other around like a May dance in the weeds. Llewelyn couldn’t do it right and he fell.” My mother laughed approvingly. Any reference to my shortcomings always made her feel comfortable with herself again. I hated Trenna. It wasn’t a May dance. Grana had promised me a ride to the sun so I could help drive his horses. Turned out I was too heavy to get further than the cottage roof.

“Llewelyn, I don’t think it’s right for you to go May dancing with an old lady. You’re too young. You shouldn’t be over there bothering her at all. Why don’t you leave her alone and play elsewhere?” Leave it to my mother to mask her fear of anything different with concern for others.

I had to think of something practical to justify my visits to Grana or the dogs might get me. Simply playing wasn't enough. I was forced to save myself by throwing out the best part of my life for them to pick over like vultures. "She's teaching me to read." My mother looked like she didn't understand, which I took as a sign of disbelief. I had to continue to justify myself. "She's a witch and she knows how." Perhaps that would impress them into silence.

It didn't. Her voice was sarcastic again. "Llewelyn, she's not a witch! A witch wouldn't live in a dung heap like that! What's the matter with you? Do you think a real witch would have time to go prancing in the weeds with a child like you? And teach you how to *read*?" Even though she had just laughed at Trenna's description of Grana the thought of me having anything to do with a real witch threatened her. If my mother was too lazy to aspire to an education, it was just as well if I didn't consort with more motivated people who had. She might have to talk to one of them some day and then what?

I had to prove myself. I ran from the table and picked up one of my father's books, which was strictly against the rules. Opening it at random, I tried to read aloud, while my mother looked horrified and my sister looked pleased with herself. To my great embarrassment I only recognized a few letters on the page, but I bravely tried to pronounce them. Nothing came out but nonsense. My mother smiled and said sharply, "I thought so." I had made a fool of myself so her world was right again.

When my father noticed what was happening, which took him a few minutes, he grabbed the book away. "What do you think you're doing? You think you're smart? Huh? *You think you're smart?* You know better! You want to burn the house down or send us all to fairy land? What are you trying to do?"

"Show I can read," I mumbled, feeling humiliated beyond their wildest hopes.

"So now you think you're a wizard. Think you can just pick up a book and read like a master. Why should I send you to school? You know it all already. You'll teach us! And if the house turns into a bale of hay or a bowl of sugar, you'll be happy then!"

Actually I probably would have been at that point.

"Oh, Sirlé," broke in my mother, who could now afford to sound charitable. "That isn't a magic book, is it?" Her eyes sparkled with anticipation and her voice sounded hopeful that he would say yes and confirm the great danger I was placing them all in.

"No, Lenna, but any word can be mispronounced to sound like a magic

word and any book can be dangerous in the wrong hands.” My father knew nothing of magic but he liked to preserve his own sense of importance and he found my mother easy to fool. Even at that age I had a vague sense that he overplayed himself, but I had no way of knowing how. “What ever possessed you to try to read?”

Trenna had been silent too long. “He says Mother Grana is a witch and taught him how.”

“Mother Grana ain’t no witch.” He shook his head. All of a sudden he knew all about her. “She must be about ninety-five years old. I see her standing in the dole line every month, trying to sell handfuls of dirt out of her basket. She’s the one been going up to my buddy Hara the guard and trying to see the king, claiming to be his mother or his aunt. Goes around saying she’s the city’s mother, too.” He laughed sharply. My father was always afraid to really laugh. “Llewelyn, you think she’s a witch? Real witches have jobs and training. Real witches are out there healing kings and helping court wizards make the sun rise. Real witches write books and teach in schools. Grana ain’t no witch. What are you, stupid?” I felt sweaty and shamefaced. Worse, the only thing I wanted at that point was to be next door sharing a story with Grana, but my want was now coupled with a strong feeling of guilt for wanting anything I might enjoy. My complex feelings dissipated into a general hatred of everybody.

“Well, Sirle, the boy’s never been to school. You keep talking about it.”

“He’s still young.”

“He’s ten.” My mother didn’t so much want me in school as she wanted to argue with my father about sending me to school. She knew there was no possibility of me going anywhere yet.

“Well, what do you want me to do? Only nobles go to school that young. I can’t just put him in until he’s at least twelve. You think I’m a count made of gold pieces to put him in so young? You want me to lose my job through arrogance because Llewelyn thinks he’s smart? You want us *all* to starve?” My hatred turned back into guilt, not over the possibility of my family starving but over ever having thought of myself as smart or special, even in the humble privacy of my heart. After all, I wasn’t a noble and I wasn’t in school.

My mother knew all my father’s arguments but had to keep it up. Sometimes it’s hard to let the feeling go. “Well, you could do something. *You* could start teaching him.” She also knew that would never happen, and the question was calculated to irritate.

“When am I gonna teach him, Len? I haven’t the time. There are food shortages all over Sunnashiven and the peasants aren’t happy starving

themselves to give up their meat and drink for the city dole.”

“Well, if you were around more, Sirle—”

Now that the argument picking up, I grabbed my greasy shirt, the mutton still in it, and made my way quietly to the gate, pausing breathless and shaken until I could feel the distance bringing in something resembling relief.

It was to be our secret, Grana said.

I must have minded the garden well while she was gone, for I never even saw a gnome, and Grana was very pleased with me when she came back. She told me that all of her gold was safe, and that her mushrooms looked fresher and plumper than ever, although all I ever saw were the blackened toadstools under the juniper bush. She even gave me a unicorn’s tooth disguised as a hard white pea, the kind that bruises princesses. And as a reward for my good behavior she was going to tell me a glorious secret, known only to herself and the king of the fairies. She had asked the king if she could tell it and he said it was all right to tell me but no one else. I was pleased and proud. She smiled importantly.

“I’m going to have a baby.”

The only thing I understood as I clutched my gift was that something had been taken away, and that somehow I was no longer good enough for Grana. “Why, Grana? Don’t you love me anymore?”

“Yes, of course. Poor little fishie.” She kissed me on the cheek. “Enough to want a smart boy like you to call my own and to let you help with it. I know how it will hurt you to fade away next door while the new bug takes your place, but that is the way of it, and you have made amazing progress in these things. Only a few months ago you started giving up your mutton to the hole each night to starve yourself in such a pretty way. Three days ago you decided to give your body to the gnomes to save gold you’ve never seen, such a boy as you are. Now help with a baby to take on your life and all’s done and paid for. Wind up the charm. You are my sweet. You can do it.” She was in a wonderful mood.

“Grana?” I asked hesitantly. “Can we give Trenna to the gnomes?”

“Trenna *is* a gnome, Llewelyn, and that is how it should be. But I see you are starting to learn, which is a very fine thing. I am most proud of my boy.” She pinched some caked syrup from the bottom of the cauldron and put it in my mouth. “Candy mice,” she said.

“How do you get a baby when you’re so old, Grana?”

“With grass and bugs mostly, and the help of a smart boy to follow

directions.” She looked more tender than usual for a second and knelt down to my level. “Do you love the flowers, Llewelyn? Do you sing to them in the fields like you’re supposed to?”

“Yes, Grana, but they give me headaches in the fields, so I come here to sing.”

“My soft black bird. Sing and be merry. The headaches will end in a few years. Grana promises.”

We spent the rest of the summer trying to help her conceive. Actually, it was Grana who did all the work. She grew the herbs, she made the potions, and I followed her orders and touched the drinking bowls with my hands. I also learned all the names of the plants and how to draw down the moon in a bowl of water without looking. By summer’s end Grana told me she was pregnant and I mustn’t ever come back to see or the baby would eat up my life. She gave me a few coppers from the sun to see me on my way and told me to eat well. My last memory of her is of an ancient hand stirring an empty cauldron.

As I finished speaking of my early experiences with injustice I found myself glancing helplessly at Walworth’s sword arm.

“Set this down, also, my lord.

“I learned to hate punishment before I learned to hate anything else. Not because punishment is unpleasant, which is the reason most children hate it. I hated it because it was impersonal and therefore unfair, because it was never any clearly defined moral transgression that brought it on so much as my parents’ incredible insecurities. If I demonstrated a hair’s breadth of behavior contrary to anything in their narrow world, or chanced to let slip that I possessed anything resembling a definable personality, they needed to humiliate me to feel better about themselves, because humiliating a sensitive, intelligent child was easier than expanding their own minds and less threatening than listening to him plead his case. Like most Sunnans, they feared being responsible for their own lives, so they were going to make damn sure that I feared being responsible for mine. I grew up without ever feeling it was safe to claim ownership over my own existence, let alone over the tale of my existence.”

I paused before adding slowly and carefully, “I never believed my words mattered.”

Then I stopped speaking and studied Walworth’s face to see what effect my words were having. Did *he* believe my words mattered?

My judge made no comment. He was good, I must admit. So far as he was concerned the game was still mine to lose, and my words—my life I suppose—were still mine to tell, to prolong as I

willed, until death from sickness or his inevitable judgment took me.

I felt the splendid pain of the northern night press distantly beyond the healing broth I was drinking, and decided to return to the telling—assuming now a voice to match the tale.

Three years later the old woman gave birth. The city records indicated she was over ninety, so nobody knew what to do. The city women discussed the event for weeks, the men looked frantically embarrassed when the women brought it up, and the King formed a committee to investigate.

The older kids made up dirty songs and jokes about it inspired by chaiaweed, dried flowers that were supposed to bring on visions or drunkenness or pleasant sensations—I was never sure which—when smoked in a hollow reed pipe. The flowers grew wild all over the city, and so when the authorities weren't poking into Grana's business they had quite a time trying to prosecute a pleasure they couldn't control. I remember that around the time Grana gave birth the bodies of a boy and a girl who had fasted for three days and smoked a good deal of chaia were found by a city guard outside Sunnashiven's northern gate. I also remember thinking with all the logic of childhood how safe chaia must be if only two people died out of the thousands who used it, how death came only if you were stupid enough to fast for days before smoking ten times the normal amount. But the government seized the ammunition it needed, declared that chaiaweed was deadly in "some cases," and poisoned all the city flowers. No one could smoke *any* flower without risking death. Three hundred people died. My father repeated the official line on how much progress we were making toward public safety.

Strangely enough, this summer of death was also the summer I chanted my poetry into the field and cleared my head.

But I also recall this summer as being overripe and deadly without the government's help. As if there had been a spill somewhere. As if the season were twisting itself apart, its hidden abscesses bursting open with the bloody pumping pestilence that fuels the underside of creation. Plague is nothing if not bright and insistent, and the colors that summer were ghastly bright. I didn't hear of anyone dying of plague, but it was a plague season nevertheless. Nature looked like a garbage heap, rotting and sickening her votaries with hues one chord above what should have been there. It was a ramshackle, crumbling kind of season through which I studied the cruelest spectacle of my early years—life's own machinery, insistent, bare, and wrought to the breaking point, achieving perfect god cycles at breakneck speed. That was the summer the strawberries bloated as soon as they formed, and collapsed into sagging skins and juice as soon as you looked at

them. Wild grapes fermented on the vine. Flowers exploded in the seed. You could smell an apple rotting in your hand the moment you plucked it.

Outside the city the corn grew tall and plump two weeks after planting and while the peasants brought amazed offerings to the temple priests the corn rotted and fell to the ground for lack of harvest. The chaia came back after the poisoning, but a deep brittle red crept into the petals, something that never used to happen before first frost.

And everything else manifested a twisted fertility. The sky over Sunnashiven was pale and green for weeks, constantly threatening storms it couldn't produce. It leaned heavily over the ground and drew all the vermin out, more mice and bugs and rats than I'd thought the ground could bear. Dogs gave birth to puppies the size of young pigs, which promptly died. The sounds that summer were all wrong and premature, too. The heat was so oppressive that human voices were distorted like badly tuned lyres. If you paid attention, you could hear an echo against the city wall before you heard its source. Old men sounded like squalling babies. Women's voices cracked like the corn stalks falling to the ground. My own voice began to change, earlier than I imagined it would.

My father would occasionally come home from work looking worried and complaining that the city wasn't getting its due and just wait until winter, the poor will suffer, but he usually lacked the energy even to mouth this much of the official line. My mother complained of having too much food to cook because she could find nothing else to complain of.

It amazed me that they could fail to appreciate the dogmatic weirdness of the season itself, but in this respect they were no different than anyone else in the city. The peasants in the countryside noticed, though, which is why there was actually plenty to eat after the first corn died. The peasants enjoyed several strange and abundant harvests during those months, and the court bureaucracy could not keep up with imposing taxes on everything for the dole, so they had plenty of corn to sell and the prices dropped. Even the poorer city residents could now afford to buy food.

I had long stopped leaving mutton at Grana's gate, or even thinking about her, but I had gotten into the habit of leaving my mutton on my plate untouched, my fear of the dogs having become a fear of some undefined punishment should I take too much food. No one seemed to care. I think perhaps that Trenna snatched it, for she often complained of growing fat, although in the context of the season it wasn't easy to tell.

At least, this is how I remember that summer. As I said, no one else in my family seemed to take much notice, and I said nothing because I feared the humiliation they'd heap on me for daring to imply that I had enough of a mind to observe anything on my own. Well, it wasn't so much the

humiliation as having to endure the way my mother would take the only thing I valued, my intelligence, and turn it into a point of mockery, and nothing hurts more at a young age—or any age—than being mocked and reviled for failing to reach your ideals. Really, it makes you feel unworthy for life. I still remember the hot sweaty thigh-shaking feeling of being told in a sarcastic whiny voice, “You think you’re smart? You think you know it all just because you’ve been in school for a year?” when the only private space I had to nurture a life that mattered was reserved for my intellect.

Trenna never had this problem because she never developed an intellect. She instinctively recognized that the easiest way to gain approval and favors was to become as ignorant as she was expected to be. By deliberately strangling off and killing whatever mind she once might have had, Trenna absolved her mother of her own uneasiness with life. My mother rewarded her sacrifice with a dirty sort of gratitude that passed for maternal love.

It was Trenna who saw the baby first, or so she claimed when the story finally reached even my housebound mother. It came in the form of some nonsense rhyme the local children were chanting in front of our house. Why they stood by our house I’ll never know, but perhaps they feared going too near Grana’s or they didn’t recognize her dwelling for the mountain of weeds that now covered it and they mistook ours for hers. Most likely they knew it was my house and were seizing the opportunity to taunt me. I had never been popular, and going to school at court made me the butt of a lot of the local children’s jokes. Anyway, the rhyme went

*Down in the market, down in the ditch
Mother called Grana, called herself a witch
Called herself a fairy queen, called herself a judge
Called herself a merry queen, down in the sludge
Had herself a baby, put it in a shoe
Fed it lots of funny things and then named it Lew.*

Then they’d all run away, leaving my mother to ask, “Do they want something with you, Llewelyn? I thought I heard your name mentioned. Why don’t they just come to the door instead of bothering people like that?”

Busy with my reading, I ignored her. I didn’t know what it meant either but I knew if I spoke, I would implicate myself in the birth. Not that I feared the court officials investigating me, because maybe I would have learned something from that. I just wanted to avoid giving my mother anything she could use to make me feel wrong about myself.

“Trenna, do you know what that was all about? Llewelyn isn’t speaking to us. He’s too studious, I guess.” Despite my strategy of keeping silence, my mother felt honor bound to lay on guilt for studying.

Trenna was quite the lady. “Well, Mother, that’s what happens when you go to school. Just like Father.” Trenna’s bizarre comparison didn’t make me feel any more confident about having a viable intellectual life. She had spent the afternoon leaning against the window waiting for the soldiers to go by. Somehow she always knew where they would be exercising and she always contrived to be there, which was why she was home for once. No longer able to read, I contented myself with pretending, which was not a bad state of mind to be in while the following conversation occurred.

“That old beggar woman that lives next door had a baby. Everyone’s talking about it.”

“What? Is she even still alive? I never see anyone over there. She must be close to a hundred.”

“That’s why everyone is talking about it, Mother. You should go out more.”

“I can’t go out with all the cooking to do this summer.” She sighed a great martyr sigh, waited for some word of comfort from Trenna, got no response, and gave in to a curiosity made irresistible by her boredom. “How did you find out? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’ve known about it a long time, Mother. Weeks. It’s not the kind of thing one goes around talking about. It’s disgusting, really.” Trenna turned briefly from the window and looked pleadingly at our mother, clearly hoping she would ask her to talk about it.

“So you can tell *me*,” Mother whined.

“Well, if you must know, old Mother Grana has been bothering everyone at market for months, asking for blankets and candles to consecrate her baby. Everyone laughed at her, of course, and Deeb gave her a corn-husk doll as a joke.” My mother must of looked slightly disapproving because Trenna said, “Well, I didn’t do it. I felt sorry for her, really. But it was kind of funny, because Deeb kept asking about the doll after that and Grana would kind of nod and blink and say the baby ate it.”

“Trenna, you shouldn’t hang around with Deeb. He’s wild.” She laughed as she said it.

“He’s just a friend, Mother.” Trenna always sounded so damn superior when she could claim friendship with a soldier. Never having trained for anything herself, she felt being around soldiers somehow made her as good as one, and she knew my mother at least would be impressed with her

worldliness. “Anyway, three weeks ago Grana showed up to market with a baby in her arms. She called it her goat and her kid and a thousand other things—piglet and filly foal and jack-in-the-shell and little prince and who knows what. We all thought she stole it somewhere because even though she had been looking rather big for a beggar we thought it was just fat, not pregnancy.”

“Is she still big, then?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, absolutely bloated. You should see her breasts—like two pumpkins, and they give off this foul yellow milk when she squeezes them.”

“Trenna! How do you know these things?”

“I just do, Mother. Everyone knows. The baby’s about the size of a three-year-old already. Big and grey and lumpy. It really is disgusting.”

“Aren’t the authorities doing anything?”

“Deeb says there’s a rumor that the temple priests are calling it a child of the gods and are going to raise it and give it an education. What else can they do?” she added cynically, glancing at me. “Oh, here come the soldiers.”

Trenna positioned herself in full view in the window. I heard the loud steady *clop-clop* of marching feet outside and then a sudden unexpected silence. Trenna gasped and ran out the door. My mother turned to me, not ready to exhaust the topic yet. “Llewelyn, what do you think of someone going to school practically from birth? Marked already to be a temple priest? He’ll get a quite an education, don’t you think?” she needed. “They’ll make a smart boy out of him.”

“I don’t know,” I said stupidly, quietly, noncommittally, trying to pretend now that I had no real interest in my book but had work to do nevertheless. I decided that if I could appear to be less committed to study than I actually was, my mother’s stinging comparison between me and Grana’s brilliant new child wouldn’t draw the reaction she was looking for. She wanted me to show jealousy and thereby acknowledge not only my own inferiority but my own unreasonable desire, given the limited intellectual capacity she wanted me to believe I had, to be smarter than I really was. Her strategy worked because I felt an inner guilt and self-loathing anyway. I just covered it over in thin childish stoicism.

The sound of more passing soldiers gave me an excuse to leave for the shelter of my room, but my father walked in just as I was standing up.

He noticed me for once. “Where you going, Llewelyn?”

“To do work.” I couldn’t get out of there fast enough. My stoicism

might not hold. My room was a sanctuary for tears.

“You got work? What kind of work?” The question was an accusation.

“Reading.”

“Oh.” It was still news to him that I could read books now. He collapsed in a chair and my mother assaulted him with the question, “Sirle, did you hear about Mother Grana’s baby?”

“Oh, yeah, the old woman who used to live next door. She’s dead now, you know—”

Trenna ran in shrieking, “They’re burning down her house! They’re burning down her house! Come and watch!”

“What what what?” shrilled my mother, panicked at having to choose between two tidbits of news at once.

Trenna chose for her. “The soldiers are burning Mother Grana’s old house. They’ve got torches and buckets of water to keep our side wet. They’re using our well. Come and see!” She stuck her head back out the door. “Oooh, there goes her roof. Hurry, Mother, you’ll miss it!”

This roused my mother enough to go to the door and look, but her attention was equally drawn to my father. “Did you say she was dead, Sirle?”

He slowly got up to join his family at the door. “Hara said they found her body in a ditch by the market this morning. Practically rotted away when they brought it up. Could be some new plague, who knows, but orders are to burn her house. We’ll be all right, I’m sure.” That was probably what they had told him. The news made me feel protective of my past relationship with Grana only because it also made me feel embarrassed. It was an awful feeling, much worse than something as clean as simple mourning.

“Trenna says the child is going to temple?”

“The child is huge. Looks nothing like a newborn. Might even be older, who knows? The priests have him now.” I needed to be alone. The burning suddenly felt horribly personal and I was finding it difficult to breathe. The smoke was filling our house through the windows and the doorway was blocked with Trenna and my parents. As I turned toward the back of the house I heard my mother ask, “And is he named yet?”

And my father absently reply, “Hara says they’ve given him an honorary title to designate his status as a child of the gods. They’re calling him Lord Cathé.”

“Your cousin, my lord, the man I am accused of killing.”

Three

Six months before my seventeenth birthday the masters said they would be pleased to curse me. I was most happy to hear it, for I had worked diligently for five years to earn that privilege. Only the very best students got to be cursed, which was presented as a credential that entitled them to pursue the higher arts of wizardry. The preferred euphemism was “protection spell,” but those of us who were smart enough to merit “protection” were also smart enough to recognize the spell for what it was. We were also flattered enough not to complain, and any uneasiness about the process was relieved through the laughter of false modesty. We were the chosen apprentices, far beyond our classmates in ability, so we could afford to laugh at the process while the others had to somberly prove their own seriousness. Being the only commoner who made the cut, I felt especially proud.

The process took all day, which was odd, because I’m sure I could perform an equivalent piece of work inside an hour or two, but government wizards are not the most efficient sort. Anyway, they put the six of us inside a small, barren room with no windows and left us alone. We joked with each other that the room, being so dark, probably doubled as an undersecretary’s office. One young lady sallied that it probably wasn’t so, as darkness could only improve the handwriting of her mother’s clerk, and we all laughed a bit too loudly, to show each other that we were quite satisfied with ourselves and our new position. The solemnity of the occasion brought out an unexpected camaraderie for a few moments that I still look back on fondly, as the first time in my early years I could trace something resembling the workings of friendship.

That was exhilarating, the joking, because I had never been accepted as an equal among my classmates before. We were all going to be great wizards one day and I had visions of a stellar career in a famous court where I would hold mysterious consultations with my five classmates—my *colleagues*—on vital matters of state. The uninitiated would have to refer to us with grand mysterious titles in deference to our high distinction in the craft but among ourselves we would be on a first-name basis, enjoying that enviable familiarity among elites. I wondered how much longer I would have to address my fellow classmates as “my lord” and “my lady,” and whether even now I could speak familiarly with them. Then I thought with

satisfaction of how impressed my parents would have to be, and how even Trenna would have to show me some respect. After all, she was only a soldier's wife and had never even been to school. When another young lady, an earl's daughter, joked that she and I could put an illusion on the room to make it look like the king's chambers, complete with undressed king, I howled with delight at the novelty of actually being recognized and valued as one of them, even though none of us was capable of doing illusion spells. I even felt comfortable enough to notice how attractive she looked in the darkness by the light of her softly glowing robe. I was suddenly sure we would marry someday, and be world-renowned wizards winning great battles together. I would even have a robe that glowed like hers. I confidently returned her compliment. "We could even put a disrobed Master Grendel in for good measure, that would scare the servants."

Everyone laughed loudly and it took me a few seconds to realize that Master Grendel himself was standing in the doorway with three chuckling master wizards at his side. He and I were the only ones not laughing. I was suddenly crushed with hot self-loathing at daring to go so far above myself and crippled with fear that my mother would gloat over my failure should Grendel throw me out of the circle. He was silently letting me know that as deep as my self-loathing went, it still wasn't intense enough to get back on his good side.

"Take off your clothes," he barked at me. Since I was the only one who couldn't afford a proper robe I had to go through the cursing sky-clad. Wearing nothing was considered better than wearing something improper. As soon as I had them off he threw them out of our circle with a look of disgust. The other students were too scared and impressed with what was about to happen to make any sign of noticing my nakedness, but I felt utterly worthless and humiliated before the softly shining lady of my dreams. Grendel drove that one home too by announcing that real wizards felt no shame of their own bodies and he had no intention of initiating anyone into the study of magic who couldn't control his feelings enough to avoid disrupting the circle.

I felt walls of blankness go up around the circle as we joined hands. No one was going to take a chance at being found out with the wrong feelings. I put up my own shaky mental walls and that seemed to satisfy him. The other three masters positioned themselves around the perimeter and Grendel walked around us with a white candle, muttering the traditional rune of opening. It was all quite hokey, actually, with all the usual stuff about the circle being the cosmos and the candle our protection and everything else you learn on day one. I would probably have dispensed with all that and gotten right down to it, but Grendel had to create work for himself to keep himself and his friends employed. When he got to the

northernmost point he disrobed. I thought I heard a suppressed giggle from one of his colleagues.

“And so you are sanctified to the service of the great country of Sunna. Know that we bind you to the service of the state for the rest of your natural lives, a binding we exact as payment for your training,” he droned. “Wherever you go, whatever magical arts you practice, you work for the glory of Sunna. And so, for your own good and the good of the state, we invoke four bans against your lives and enjoin you to know that death shall take you should you violate any one of them.”

The wizard in back of me loudly yawned.

“One. You will not attempt any spell or divination requiring your full individual powers without our guidance and permission. The day will come when you may act on your own, and at such time we, and we alone, in council will decide to lift this ban. Until such time be wary of progressing too fast lest you become too enchanted with your own powers at the expense of what belongs to the state. To walk this path is death.

“Two. You must use magic only in the service of Sunna. To help another state is death. To work against Sunna is death.

“Three. This ban is related to the second. To help yourself is death, unless your ultimate goal is Sunna’s welfare. It is death for the wizard to feed himself and death for the wizard to find herself drink. It is life for the wizard to save his life so that he might help his countrymen. Know yourselves and your own motivations in every spell you attempt.

“Four. It is death to travel beyond the Drumuns. Ye are novice wizards of the state and to the state ye shall remain wed. The North is a leaderless land and injurious to you now. The North is the land of chaos and it is death to you even now. We place this ban on you in perfect love and honor, to keep you safe from injury and to preserve you for our honor. Your powers are ours and it is death to lose them.”

I felt the other three wizards driving the bans into us for about forty-five minutes, which I later learned was really more a factor of their officious self-importance and need to waste time than actual magical necessity. Under the right conditions a really good cleric could do the same thing in about fifteen minutes. Anyway, there was a good deal of chanting and candle waving and enough incense to choke a battalion of horses before they let us go. I don’t remember feeling “cursed” or “protected” or different in any way except I somehow knew with pride that the spell had taken. I was special now. Initiated. Not everyone was capable of living, or could be trusted to live, such a guarded life as I would now have to under the bans. Although my shame crept back as Grendel watched me put on

my clothes while the others left in silence, I felt the quiet glow of superiority spread over me when I was alone that night. I was now a novice wizard, of value to the state, and no one could take that away.

I suppose that is why it took me several months to admit that our “special training” was little more than elaborate repetition of what we had before. I finally had a reason to feel superior, and with the masters telling us every day how bright and talented we were it wasn’t easy to give that reason up. The masters used our intelligence to justify their own slow progress with lessons, telling us we must review everything, everything, lest we forget one jot or one tittle of one half sound we’d been taught for the last five years. Since we were marked and banned and special and everything else we couldn’t afford to forget things like ordinary students could. We had a responsibility to the state.

And so I learned little from my classes and had no contact with my classmates, whom I still addressed by title outside of school. Eventually I began to feel a little silly about the whole thing but I never let on. To my mother I was learning deep mysterious secrets I couldn’t begin to explain. My father, of course, never asked and I wasn’t even sure he knew that I was allegedly studying wizardry. Or else he was afraid to know lest I was acquiring enough of an education to see through his desperate pretenses at importance. Trena only came home once. She sniffed at my books and acted bored.

Later, however, she contrived to talk to me alone outside. I was standing in the state-owned pumpkin field where Grana’s house used to be, stretching my arms over the green earth and balancing on one leg, trying to look wizardly and to hear the vines stretching themselves towards fruition. There were food shortages again and I imagined myself as some unknown hero helping to make the fields grow for the good of the state. I was so caught up in listening for some affirmation from the plants that I got startled and lost my balance when she approached. I fell over and crushed the vines.

“Here, little brother, let me help you.” Before I could protest in all my adolescent pride she had taken my hand. When she saw my look of annoyance she added quickly, “No, let me sit down there with you. I’ve always loved this place.” She settled herself in the dirt, crushing three more vines with her skirt, and sighed as if she were full of appreciation for the natural beauty around us. I couldn’t understand what there was to appreciate and thought that maybe I was missing something. It was an ugly patch. The weeds were already filling in one corner and the state had blocked off the property with a low wooden fence, which meant that from a sitting position we were not visible to anyone outside.

Trenna spent only a few seconds in her state of rapture before she suddenly looked at me, stopped sighing, and said, “My, what a man you’ve become since I’ve married and gone away. My little brother, the young adept of Sunnashiven’s wizard school. I’m most impressed with you, Llewelyn. I tell all my friends about you. I really do. I hear you’re at the top of your class. It’s such a shame we don’t see each other more often.”

Since I had absolutely no feelings on the subject of “seeing each other more often,” I felt a little guilty and confused, as though I had done my sister some wrong by not appreciating her. I had no idea of being at the top of my class but had always suspected this might be true, so I was willing to believe the absurdity of reports of my progress finding their way to the soldiers’ station twenty miles east. It is wonderful to be flattered by one’s own fantasy. Of course Trenna, who knew nothing of magic, would be impressed by anything I had done, and I was eager to let her know how special and adept I really was, just to soak in more praise. After all, she could not be aware of the tension between myself and Grendel, which was no doubt responsible for some of the aloofness on the part of the other masters. And perhaps the masters were all secretly impressed with me. However, the thought of Grendel chastened me a little, so I said in a voice that resonated somewhere between that of one who could do much if he chose and sheer terror, “It’s nothing.” That way, at least, I wasn’t really boasting.

“Oh, no, I’m sure you are quite an adept,” she said enthusiastically, reaching into her skirt and drawing out a small dry apple. “Would you like some fruit? Soldiers’ families get first preference in times of shortage.” Before I could answer she put it in my hand, and while my mouth was full she shook her head in wonder and said, “All those books and everything. The gods know I couldn’t do it.”

I was glowing but all I could think of to say between bites was another clumsy “It’s nothing.” I shrugged my shoulders and smiled jerkily at the ground, so uneasy in my pride that I was afraid to openly show acceptance of the praise she was giving me.

“Look at this, Llewelyn. My husband gave this to me.” She dropped a plain gold ring in my sticky hand as I finished my apple. “It was engineered by a high priestess of Aphrodite,” she told me dreamily. “Very expensive. If you wash it in rosewater when her evening star is visible it brings out the best features of your own natural beauty, whatever they are. Dark hair looks darker, bright eyes brighter, that sort of thing. And if you wear it three days running and throw it into someone’s glass and they drink from it, that someone will love you completely.”

There was a silence during which I felt she was looking for some

response from me. I had to say something to show I was as appreciative of her prize as she had been of my abilities, but I felt that to praise her ring was somehow to admit that she had something beyond me and thus to diminish her high opinion of my accomplishments. I asked with something less than real interest, "Where did he get it?"

"I believe he won it at dice" she said. "It really works."

"You didn't look any different when you had it on." I felt mortified as soon as I said it. I didn't mean to be peevish; I was just anxious about proving my powers of observation and all I could think of saying was the obvious.

"Of course not," she laughed pleasantly. "It's the middle of the day, and I haven't washed it in rose water."

"Oh, I forgot. I haven't studied much theology, and clerical magic is outside of my discipline," I said defensively. I really felt stupid then. You didn't have to be a high priest to know how sacred roses were to Aphrodite. Trena pretended my ignorance resulted from single-minded devotion to my own arcane studies.

"Well, wizard, I'm sure you can at least feel the magic in it." She waited expectantly, so I closed my fist over the ring and chanted the opening of an identifying spell, which was all we had been taught in school. It *did* feel warm, which was a sign of magic, but beyond that I couldn't go, nor could anyone else in my class. It occurred to me afterward that I might have violated a ban, but as I felt no ill effects, I gave it no further thought. Besides, I was practicing to get better for my day of service. I returned the ring to Trena and said something intelligent like, "It's magical, alright."

"How clever! Llewelyn, I've got something else to show you. Tell me what you think." She removed a small metal key with a red stone in the flat part from her skirt and dropped it in my hand. I was still feeling the tag end of the identifying spell and the key felt warm and then cool as the energy I had summoned up dispersed.

"It's a magical key," I fumbled.

"It's a wizard's key," she said. "I know you know that. The kind that can open anything."

"Where did you get it?" I asked enviously, resenting that Trena, who knew nothing of magic, had access to all these magical items and I didn't.

"My friends gave it to me. I don't know what to do with it, so I decided to give it to you."

I brightened in spite of myself. A real magical item to call my own! I had no idea if it really would open anything but it had to do something. It

did feel warm. “Trenna, are you sure?” I said to be polite.

“Of course I’m sure. I want you to have it.” Then she added, “Promise me you’ll keep it safe. Don’t bring it to school or show anyone. It’s just between us. Brother and sister.”

“Well, sure,” I promised awkwardly, overwhelmed with such an unexpected present. Why *would* I show it to anybody else? It was mine. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” She stood up and hastily brushed the dirt out of her skirt. “I must go now, Llewelyn, Seth is waiting for me. But I’ll see you again soon, I promise.” I stood and she gave me a quick hug and ran toward the military wagon in front of our house, where Seth was leaning against one of the horses. Feeling more confident now, I waved at them and grinned and Seth waved back as if we really were brothers and not just related through marriage. Trenna got in the cart and they drove away. She made no effort to visit me again.

I never brought the key to school, but I did keep it in my pillowcase, along with the hard white pea Grana had given me and a piece of colored glass that I liked to look at. I saw no harm in going through the motions of impressing the key with my personal energy. It might make it easier to use later, once I figured out what I could use it for. And for that the library might help.

One of the privileges I had as a student of wizardry was unlimited use of one of the court’s tower libraries. The other one was for clerics and their students and off-limits to us. The librarians were all idiots who constantly lost or misplaced books, but it wasn’t a bad place to work once you learned your way around. I spent a lot of time there because I had no place else to go between classes and I rarely saw anyone else making use of the place, not even the masters. Besides, I would occasionally stumble across an interesting volume of history or mathematics or philosophy, which took the edge off the dullness of my classroom instruction. I got quite fascinated by philosophical proofs, so much so that I began to view class time as an intrusion on my real studies. Even though the library contained nothing really advanced, I learned enough from my casual reading to be able to outperform my classmates and show myself worthy of the honor of being educated in their school. My mathematics master even remarked once in surprise at how quick I was at finding the shortest geometrical proofs, a facility that would come in useful when we got to more advanced spells.

Which we never did, of course. Most of what I learned in Sunnashiven I taught myself and I learned to keep quiet about it lest the masters judge me overprideful in my own learning. There was a fine thread that divided

superior classroom performance from superior performance generally, and I occasionally broke that thread to my own chagrin when I got caught up in some new idea from my reading. As long as I was proving myself equal to the lessons when my classmates weren't even bothering to study, the masters, including Grendel, seemed to quietly approve. My responses took up class time and seemed to justify the masters' own lack of preparation or to validate the abysmal level of their instruction, while my classmates' boredom indicated all too clearly their noble dissatisfaction with the masters' lack of ability. I felt many times that my abilities were used to defend my teachers' mediocrity, and I was a willing participant in the game. Anything to get that credential and justify my existence.

So after awhile I began to feel a little nervous about spending so much time in the library, in case anyone did notice and decide that I went there out of purely personal ambition. I got into the habit of hiding in a corner behind a stack of books and listening with one ear for footsteps so that I could look like I wasn't working on anything too threatening should someone approach. This particular morning I had about three stacks of books around me, because as I was studying the library's worn copy of the *Wizards' Compleat Compilation of Magical Items* to see what I could find out about my new key and I didn't want to take any chance at being discovered. I had just determined that the *Compilation* was far from Compleat when I heard the door bang open and close, followed by heavy running footsteps and a soft indistinguishable sound of impatience as my table shook and one of my protective stacks of books crashed over. I slammed the *Compilation* shut and threw it away from me, which meant that I was now sitting there looking as though I was hiding with nothing to do. I looked up to see another student looking at me in surprise.

"By Ares's withered arm! I didn't know anyone was sitting here. Sea gods' granite gonads! I'm sorry! Here, let me get your books." She bent down to the floor and began loading her arms.

For the first time since the cursing ritual I laughed without self-consciousness. I'd never heard such language, even from the city poor who accosted me for bread crusts outside school and who were invariably threatening once I'd exhausted my slender supply. The incongruity of hearing such impious sentiments on the lips of another student struck me as wildly funny. All of a sudden the restrictions of school didn't seem real. I noticed her hair was hastily tied back without regard for fashion and that although her smock was finely wove, nothing except her absolute ease of manner marked her as anything but a commoner. She put the books on another stack, which swayed precariously under its own weight, and said seriously and earnestly, "I hope I haven't disturbed your studies."

“No, I’ll certainly manage to continue,” I said with a hint of self-importance. Then I collapsed a little. “Lady, is it?”

“Actually, it’s General,” she said proudly. I felt stupid, not knowing if she was testing my gullibility or if I should have noticed something. I had read about young military commanders, of course, but that was something for history books or princesses, and I didn’t think she was a princess. Not knowing what to say, I said nothing.

“My father retired from military service and gave me his army so that he could give his full attention to the apple and wine trade.” She looked at me like I should have known that. “The growing seasons have been so strange for the past few years, in case you haven’t noticed, that our county is suffering a bit of a depression.” I must have still looked blank, because she insisted, “Apples and wine! Clion apples? The sweet kind that need a lot of rain? The legend of Clion, who planted serpents’ teeth with his own blood and grew the most delectable multicolored apples this side of fairy land?” I grimaced involuntarily and she said, “Oh, I’m sorry. You’re not an Athena worshipper or squeamish or anything are you? My nurse used to read a lot and pray to Athena. Used to go berserk at the thought of killing snakes or owls, as she said both were sacred. I put a snake in her bed once—live. Didn’t like that either. Want an apple? I have two pink ones. Best kind.”

I started to laugh again, although a little uncertainly. The apple *was* delicious, fresh and pink like candied dawn, and I hadn’t had really fresh fruit in months. She sat down nonchalantly on the edge of the table, swinging her legs and munching. A few books fell over. “It’s the gods’ own game getting them in here.”

“Past the beggars, you mean?”

“No, past the librarians. The beggars I can handle. You roll one down the street—an apple I mean—“ I laughed, “and they all chase it and you run inside the palace quick. It’s the damned palace librarians that won’t let you bring food in the library. I swear by Venus’s fat sow that Lady Justa looks for me just to confiscate them and eat them all herself. I put wormwood on one once, just to see what she would do. The next day she came in with a sore throat.” I was beginning to like the general; I felt safe with her, until I realized I could get expelled for eating in the library. The thought tensed me up and I tried to give back the part I hadn’t eaten. “Don’t you like it?” She sounded hurt.

“I’m a commoner,” I was forced to explain, “and susceptible to punishment.” I resented having to say this and jeopardize the friendly feelings that were starting to develop between us.

“Oh, posh, who cares? I give my foot soldiers more freedom than King

Sunnas gives his counts. We'll just tell them you're under orders from me to eat."

She gave the rest of the apple back to me, so what could I do but take it? It would have been easy to dislike her not-so-subtle boasting about being a military commander, but she had such a pleasant, unaffected manner that I liked her in spite of myself. "Here, have another one before they go bad."

This one was yellow and tasted like a fruity mead. I couldn't get it down fast enough, and while I was thinking of whether I might ask her for another I noticed she had the *Compleat Compilation* in her hands and was browsing through it.

"You really understand all these symbols and stuff?"

"Well, not all of them," I said honestly.

"I wouldn't mind understanding even some of them, but not if I have to learn magic first. Wizards curdle my sword! I've never met a wizard yet that didn't look like a rat about to bite the cat's tail and win. That's why I come here where you never see them. Do you know Master Grendel? Every time he walks near me my apples sour. I'm serious. And Mistress Nage gives me the coughing fits. She's got eyes like a bug on chaiaweed. Witches are just as bad." My new friend made a face that sent me into paroxysms of laughter and she quickly hid the apples in case a librarian came over. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said pleadingly while I was still laughing. "I didn't mean it. I see you're studying wizardry. How stupid of me."

"No, it's all right," I said between laughs.

But she continued, "I really have been rude. I forgot to ask your name."

"It's Llewelyn."

"You can call me Aleta. Since you're clearly a civilian I won't make you call me General. My father is Count Clio. My mother died in childbirth and I have no siblings, so I'm practically a countess already. We have a rather confusing history that nobody really understands, so we don't really belong to anybody," she boasted. "We even have our own language that nobody speaks." She sounded so earnest I laughed again and this time she joined me.

"As well as your own army," I said because I knew it would please her.

"Yes, my army, where I should be now, instead of listening to Mistress Nage repeat twenty times a day that soldiers used to carry kingsfoil for healing and chaia is bad for you. Bad for *you*," she said in a parody of Mistress Nage's voice, and stuck her finger toward my chest the way Nage

did. I couldn't hold back my laughter if my life depended on it. "My father smokes chaiweed and grape leaves all the time and nobody cares."

"And your soldiers?"

"That's where he learned it from. They call it *chana*, and it's more potent than anything you'll find here." She looked at me earnestly. "I really need to get back, Llewelyn. A general should be *with* her troops, not sitting at ease in some palace school. We had three raids against our orchards last year, so my father decided I'd be safer in Sunnashiven while the army looks after itself. Some strategy, huh?" Her good humor evaporated. "Sometimes I think he's more concerned about saving his precious daughter than about doing what's right for the land."

"Did your county repel the raiders alright?"

"Of course we did," she said defensively. "I led the first attack, when we were taken by surprise and my father didn't have the time to stop me. Killed three raiders." I was awestruck. She continued without noticing my reaction. "But then he sent me away. I get intelligence. I know the last two raids were successfully put down by our captain of the guards, the most capable Sir Perie, but *I* should have been there! I should have been there!" She banged on the table in frustration which finally attracted one of the librarians.

Since I was busily trying to recall what little history I had read concerning County Clio, so I could have something intelligent to say to her when she finished, and I wasn't getting much beyond the doubtful legend that the area had once been settled by refugees from Glon, I didn't notice the librarian's approach. He caught me as I was starting to speak, so naturally I got the blame.

"And so the upstart boy from the wrong side of Sunnashiven is responsible for all the commotion." He whined the words in an irritating sing-song voice, as if he viewed our conversation as a personal insult. "Is this how you repay our generosity? By hiding in a stack of books and making enough noise to fright the elves from fairy land?" I blushed at the allusion—not that Olin knew anything of my lifelong fascination with fairies and flowers, but some words have a way of hurting. "And you, Lady Aleta, consorting with him, a commoner. King Sunnas keeps distinctions and manners you would do well to learn." He grabbed her bag and emptied it on the floor. "I told you before! No apples in the library! They make a mess!"

Aleta, who was clearly still incensed by the thought of being kept away from fighting in her county's skirmishes, turned all her anger toward our persecutor. "Lord Olin, this man is not a commoner." He smirked but she

continued. “He is a knight of County Clio and an official member of my honor guard.”

“You have no honor guard here, my lady, and I know this boy for who he is. He is not one of your countrymen. But you certainly have interesting tastes.” He leered at her breasts.

I thought she was going to kick him but she managed to control herself enough to say, “He is if I say he is and I just made him so. His name is Sir—” she looked at me trying to remember my name, “*Sir Llewelyn the wizard* and he is my servant and under my orders to pick up those apples.” I was appalled, but I got down on my hands and knees and began shoveling apples in the bag so I wouldn’t have to look at Olin. He was a duke’s son and took himself most seriously as a court intellectual. I knew he would do his best to keep me out of the library from now on, and reading in the library was my only means to a real education. *Damn Aleta; she’d better be able to pull this off.*

Olin stomped on my hand and I cried out in pain. “I’m in charge of the library and I say the apples stay there!” He was probably planning to sell them on the black market himself, where they were worth quite a bit.

“And I’m in charge of my own servants and *I* say he picks them up. Not even King Sunnas would dream of interfering with a visiting noble’s right to conduct her own affairs with her own retainers. I have diplomatic immunity.”

“And I’m the king’s second cousin,” he began, but faltered, uncertain of his standing. I got the rest of the apples into the bag and gave it to her. “I want you both out of here now, and I don’t want to see either of you here again causing trouble and disturbing people, for a long time.” In my case that probably meant never. It didn’t matter that there weren’t any other people here. Good-bye studies. He roughly escorted us to the door, which he yanked open with a great deal more force than was necessary, and suddenly stopped in stiff surprise. There was Master Grendel on the other side, looking equally surprised at Lord Olin’s pompous eagerness. Olin had to do something to deflect Grendel’s attention, so he made his face smooth and inclined his head to me in quiet, innocent courtesy: “Good afternoon, *Sir Llewelyn the master wizard of County Clio.*” He bowed low to Aleta. “Good afternoon, my generous Lady Aleta. I hope you can dispose quickly of your apples.” Then he closed the door behind us and left us to our fate.

I could feel Aleta withering under the wizard’s stare. She stared at her feet. If I could have died then, I would have gladly done so, but death wasn’t an option, so I remained before him in a state of pure agony while he lightly searched my mind. “*Sir Llewelyn the master wizard?* Not much there, I’m relieved to report,” he commented, probing and insulting

simultaneously. “I should hate to think of County Clio being so desperate for help that they’d really hire you.” He seemed to be disparaging Aleta as much as insulting me.

“It was all in fun,” murmured Aleta. “I didn’t mean it, and I didn’t do it right anyway.”

“I know that,” said Grendel impressively, withdrawing his probe with a slap that made my head hurt. “My student here could suffer serious consequences if you had. Student wizards live under a ban not to help any foreign nation, no matter how friendly and well intentioned that nation might be.”

Aleta went pale. “Llewelyn, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know and it wasn’t real anyway.”

My anger with her was replaced by sympathy. “The ban is only against using magic. There was no danger, really. Was there, Master?” I mumbled, and looked at Grendel.

“Of course not, my lady,” he said to Aleta with uncharacteristic gallantry. “But you really should take time to learn our ways. I shall recommend extra lessons with Mistress Shile.” Poor Aleta! Mistress Shile would curdle *my* sword if I had one, and I was used to being around wizards. He looked in her bag. “Those apples *are* for personal consumption.”

“They came from my father for me as a gift.”

“The city poor might also appreciate them as a gift. Give them to me and I’ll make sure they’re properly documented and distributed.” She reluctantly gave him the bag.

He put his hand on the door and said to me gruffly, “I missed you in class this morning. Don’t let it happen again.” He walked into the library with the apples. He probably wanted to extort money from Olin. I realized with alarm that he might see the *Compleat Compilation* I was browsing through and I walked away as quickly as possible to put distance between us. I had been so frightened of Grendel hearing me called “master wizard” that the thought of the key was knocked out of my consciousness when I met him, but I couldn’t be sure what he knew now. What to do?

“Llewelyn are you in trouble now?” Aleta interrupted my thoughts. “I’m so sorry. What can I do? Don’t worry about the apples. I can always get more.”

I quickened my pace even faster to get away from her, but she easily kept up. I spit my anger at her, “You have no idea what you’ve done to me, lady. You might have just cost me my education and condemned me to a

life of herding goats, but it's all one to you. You can go back to your army and estate." She kept following. I stopped and added coldly, "I must ask your leave to remove myself from your presence."

"Well, I said I was sorry! Herding goats! Don't be ridiculous. You're starting to sound like that obnoxious Lord Cathe who always mopes around in such a wonderfully profound state of melancholy." She turned abruptly to go off to her rooms or something, but I was suddenly thrown into such an intense swirl of irrational fear that my anger was temporarily dispersed by morbid interest. I had not heard the name Cathe in four years, and even then it didn't seem real. Along with the fist of fear engulfing my body was the restless feeling of reliving a dream experience after having forgotten the dream. No matter what happened, I had to find out about this person.

"Lord Cathe?" I called. Aleta kept walking, and I felt my raised voice attracting attention to myself. I caught up with her. "Aleta, I'm sorry. I didn't want to offend you." She stopped and looked at me. "Who's Lord Cathe?"

"As if you don't know. You act just like him. You two would be great together." People were traveling back and forth through the hall and staring at us. I was terrified of being seen acting so familiar with her, especially after what had just happened, but I was more terrified of the name. I had to know more.

"No, I don't know. Please tell me who he is. Perhaps I should like to meet him," I pleaded.

"He's a prig the size of County Clio and Sunnashiven combined, that's who he is. He's not really a lord, either. The title is honorary, which is why he has to work extra hard at being a prig." A well-dressed lady looked us over with mild curiosity and kept walking.

"Please don't get me in trouble," I breathed.

"All right," she said sarcastically, "Nobody knows who the most honorable Lord Cathe is. There's a rumor that the gnomes stole him from the North Country and left him here, which I tend to believe, although you couldn't pay *me* enough gold to take him. There's another good story that he just appeared on earth four years ago and has aged into young adulthood already. That's what he likes to claim. He looks about seventeen and is a high priest of Habundia already. You'll see him skulking around the courtyard in the early morning pretending to bless the plants or whatever it is he does. He's quite impressed with himself."

Since I wasn't sure if this all applied to me on some level I said nothing. Taking my silence for anger, Aleta said stiffly, "It was nice meeting you, Llewelyn. May you prosper from your studies. I'm sure everything will be

all right.” She was off before she even finished speaking, leaving me to feel awkward and alone in the middle of the crowded hall.

Getting home was not easy that day, because my feelings kept causing my legs to give out and I was easy prey for the taunts and jostling of the street beggars, whose numbers appeared to have increased since morning. I neither ate nor slept, but spent the whole night going over and over the day’s events and looking at my key in the moonlight. What did Grendel know? What would he do? Who was Lord Cathe? I had to see him, but the thought sent unexplainable paroxysms of fear through my chest. What would I even say to him? The whole situation was absurd. What if they didn’t let me back in school? Even if I met Lord Cathe, would he say anything to me? He might not even *have* any connection to me. But those stories about him. Had he been around all this time without my knowing it? I supposed it was possible, as I had no social contacts either inside or outside of school to tell me of city affairs, and since the clerics kept very much to themselves in the temple, their affairs were rarely spoken of. I felt as though some dirty little secret I had nothing to do with had nevertheless been revealed and thrown at me for comment. I felt like I had been caught in some crime.

With dawn came with the resolution to try to find this Lord Cathe and see what he looked like. Not to speak to him or anything; just to see. So I grabbed my books and a little bread crust and headed out for the palace courtyard, where Aleta said he often went. There was nobody there, but I did notice that the flowers and shrubs looked exceptionally lush and beautiful, and even the pear trees were bearing fruit, although I didn’t dare take any. After awhile I got bored and began to read, but then the nervous anticipation of going to Grendel’s class set in and I couldn’t concentrate. I sat and watched the morning shadows contract until I knew it was time to go, marveling at the fact that no one had entered the courtyard all morning. The inside of the palace seemed strangely quiet and empty too, but all of the other students were sitting in their places when I walked into class, so things suddenly felt the way they were supposed to feel at this hour.

At least things felt normal for about five minutes. After twenty minutes with no sign of Grendel we all knew something was wrong but none of us dared bolt. After what felt like half an hour Mistress Nage ran in and breathlessly informed us that there would be no classes that day because the outer farms were under attack. As we all sat there in quiet horror she proudly rebuked us by saying there was no need to panic, but since all wizards were needed in council and we weren’t real wizards yet we could best serve Sunnashiven by going home and keeping out of the way. Properly humbled, I maneuvered my way back home through the mauling beggars I had managed to avoid by coming so early, and sat in my room

with another day to brood over Grendel, Lord Cathe, and my bright future as a goat herder.

It was because I was brooding over all the miseries of my life that I didn't hear my father come home early from work. That is probably one reason why the violent slamming of my door ripped the breath out of my chest. The other reason was that, small as our house was, my father never bothered or showed any interest in entering my room, so he really seemed out of place there, like an unwelcome guest I had to put up with. Since I had the key and the white pea and the colored glass spread before me on the bed I felt like he was intruding on my precious privacy but he didn't seem to even notice them. He was too conscious and proud of his court uniform, and too eager to get the unpleasantness of having to speak to another family member over with, to notice anything except my school books, which clearly made him uncomfortable.

"No school tomorrow! Not 'til they tell me different." His duty done, he turned to go. I was supposed to make sense of that. My first thought was that I was being punished for something—the key, Lord Cathe, pride, who knew—and that my father expected I was aware of what I had done wrong and would save him the discomfort of having to tell me. I quavered and asked what he meant, which was more than I ever had occasion to say to him. "Just that. No school for anyone!" I felt relieved it wasn't just me. "That includes *you*." Relief vanished under what felt like an accusation. "There's a war on. You're coming with me tomorrow!"

"With you where?"

"To see the judgment and sacrifice. They're going to sacrifice some priest to make things right. Food shortages and all. It's our duty to be there."

I swallowed hard but could think of nothing to say except, "Do you know who is to be judged?" I tried hard to sound neutral so he wouldn't get angry.

"It's got to be that smart one, Lord Cathe. The high priests all say it must be a child of the gods to appease the gods. Too bad, but it has to be. That's what comes of reading books."

My hearing was suddenly pitched to a fine sensitivity, for I heard my father walk away and my mother shrilly complain, "Llewelyn's going to a sacrifice? But he doesn't have anything to wear. What shall I do?" before I withdrew back into myself enough to realize that my hands, mechanically clutching Grana's pea in some mad bid for comfort, were growing cold and bruised.