THE

Giant's Harp

A novel of myth, marble, and memory

ROBERT HUNTER

1984 — 1996

In memory of Jerome John Garcia

November 1, 1996

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Introduction

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The Giant's Harp is a fantasy of myth, marble, and memory — a coming-of-age tale that begins on the windswept cliffs of Ist and unfolds across deserts of bone, Eagle Malls, Stone Libraries, and the long northwest aisle of the world. Written between 1984 and 1996 on Robert Hunter's old Osborne computer, it is at once a hero's journey, a meditation on lineage and inheritance, and a lyrical puzzle-box of riddles, ballads, and equinoctial omens.

Readers of the Grateful Dead's songbook will recognize the country. The terrapin who carries this volume's sigil first appeared on the cover of Terrapin Station (1977), the album-length suite Hunter wrote with Jerry Garcia — itself a piece about a storyteller, a sailor, and a soldier, drawn toward a place that exists more in song than on any map. The novel inhabits the same imaginative weather: ballads sung in minor mode, sealed instructions, fiddle-playing terrapins, and a long road taken on faith.

Hunter finished the book in the autumn of 1996, weeks after Garcia's death, and dedicated it “in memory of JJG.” In a real sense it is the prose companion to a forty-year conversation between two old friends — a Stone Library with its arms in the clouds, raised in a lyricist's hand to a guitarist who could no longer hear it.

Twenty-one chapters and an epilogue carry the reader from the first whispers of Ist to the final blood of thunder — and to a quiet inheritance beyond it.

CHAPTER I

I

Whispers of Ist

° ° °

"Listen son. Hear her?" Ro clenched Elmo's wrist as they leaned over the ledge of the Giant's Harp, looking through layers of cloud and mirage at the faraway beach below.

"Let go, Father! I'll be careful. Is that her down on the rock?" Ro doubted his son really saw the Schula through the reflective layers of hot and cool air where the desert approached the sea, but there was something down there that looked like a woman. He produced a spyglass from the fold of his cloak.

"If something is solid, a telescope brings it closer but mirages disappear . . . well, well - she's there, right enough! Have a look." Ro grasped the child's arm as he handed him the spyglass, wary of the fenceless step jutting over the abyss.

For the first time ever, Elmo saw the girl clearly. She looked older than he but not by much. She was singing more beautifully, to his ears, than ever before in his ten years. And wasn't she looking right at him? So it seemed. He ventured a wave but it wasn't returned.

After gazing a long while, he said:

"When I'm older I'm going down there."

"When you're older you won't want to."

"Did you ever go?"

"Well..."

"Were there Schulas in those days?"

"More than you could count, son."

"Is she the only one left?"

"No, but there aren't many."

"Where did they come from?"

"All I know is what I've heard from the storyteller. The way Aeoui would have it, they serve Ist who sowed them from whale's teeth and sent them to sing for her father, Bran the Giant, after he was turned into a floating island by Yu."

"Do you believe in Ist?"

"That's not a proper question."

"Lo said you don't believe."

"Depends which side of the bed I drop my shoes."

"Well, I don't believe."

"I'm sure that distresses Ist greatly."

"I believe sometimes. It depends who I'm with. When I play with Echo we pretend she's Ist. She makes herself believe she's Ist so hard I believe it too, at least for awhile. It makes her awfully mad when I stop believing. Sometimes she rolls on the ground and screams until her father wakes up and tells me to go away. I hate him."

"Mind! Sod's gruff but he's a decent and honest man. What part do you play in the game of Ist?"

"Sometimes I'm the rat that bites her heel and gets cursed. Look! The Schula just waved."

"I don't think she can see us all the way up here. It's more than three furlongs down to the beach."

"Oh she can, she can! Look at her, she's waving!"

"Let's see. Well, well!"

"Is Ist still the boss of the Schulas?"

"If you believe the first part of the story, you might believe the rest. According to Aeoui, she wears the Schula like an overcoat when she wants to. Ist is said to take many forms in many places - sometimes several forms in a single place."

"Like wind?"

"Like water."

"Like clouds?"

"Like sky."

"How big is she?"

"Many sizes, many faces."

"Not Ist, I mean the Schula."

"Small. Bigger than you."

"Echo says Ist comes to Terrapin sometimes. Is she a Schula then?"

"Not according to the story. When she comes here, she's a beautiful lady with blazing eyes, very vain and easy to offend."

"Have you seen her?"

"Someone who fits the description. Some vow she was Ist. I am not among them."

"Will she come again?"

"The woman? Or Ist? Neither, if we're lucky."

"I want to see her. I hope she comes. How can you tell when she's coming?"

"Oh, things change in strange ways. Winds blow down chimneys and rattle cookpot lids. Those winds are her ears."

"What are her eyes?"

"Windows are her eyes. She can see you inside your room if you don't pull your curtain. Even then, she might send a little whirlwind under your door to part the curtain so she can see what you're up to."

"So you do believe in her?"

"I'm only telling you what Aeoui says. Stars are my stock in trade. I happily leave such beliefs to those in need of diversion and suggest you do the same."

"But if you believe something, why hide it?"

Ro's eyes twinkled at the question. He recognized the influence of his old friend Lit,

Elmo's teacher.

"Your beliefs are your own affair, so long as you don't pester others with them. It's time we headed home."

"I want to watch the Schula some more, Father. Please! Can't I just stay here by myself for a little while? I promise to be careful."

Ro considered. More caution would be coddling, the widower decided, as he'd often warned Henrietta, his late lamented wife.

"You may stay, but mind the angle of the sun. If you're not home before it sets, beware my wrath!"

Elmo was jubilant. Ro was so cautious he'd felt no hope of a "yes."

Ro walked away, nerves humming: a touch of vertigo, he realized, a new feature of advancing age. The child had no fear of heights whatsoever. Nor had he himself, except when gazing through his telescope on a particularly clear night - when he sometimes felt in danger of tumbling into the sky.

This touch of vertigo was probably a product of his overconcern for Elmo, he reasoned. It was the child whom he feared might fall, not himself. For himself, the astronomer had no concern except as parent to his son who had become doubly precious following the loss of Henrietta.

"The fearlessness of others is a fearsome thing," he muttered.

As soon as Ro left, the Schula sang more clearly. Her ballads became love ditties as a warm zephyr favored the notes, scooped them from the beach and carried them up the promontory cliff to the Giant's Harp, a megalithic monument of marble, ancient beyond known local history. Elmo clambered higher up the massive steps in order to hear better,

ignoring the deeply etched freezes of deities and battles connecting the scores of white fluted columns supporting ten cubit square slabs of obsidian, hoisted in place, it must be, by giants, gods, or machines unknown on earth in remembered time.

The Giant's Harp was a remnant of Time Before. It bore other names in other times.

"Time Before" was the long, long space preceding the short, short memories of the illiterate people of Terrapin, an inbred town bordered on three sides by desert, set on a cliff facing the sea.

Ro was among the very few citizens of that town who had traveled beyond its boundaries. He'd made the dangerous trek, in the company of Lit, across the desert to Nikaba; Lit in search of books, Ro of diagrams, astronomical charts, discourse and lenses for the telescope he meant to construct. In Nikaba, Ro learned other names for the Giant's Harp. He kept them to himself. It was not considered good form in Terrapin to know things.

Elmo splayed himself on the marble lap of the goddess of architecture, bracing his arms on her T-square and compass to steady his spyglass. The Shulas's voice resounded through the corridors of the Giant's Harp, splitting into several voices as the end of one note trailed into the next. Granite eagles and gargoyles of onyx gazed in rapt attention. Arcades of marble men and women, supple in the craft of their carving, if missing an arm, a head or a nose, gave unwavering audience. Elmo could feel the multitude of statuary crowd slowly around him, the marble lap of the goddess grown soft and warm, as he stared at the lovely singer below in growing entrancement.

Elmo, what are you doing here all by yourself?

Spell suddenly shattered, he turned in annoyance to find his playmate, Lo, standing hand in hand with her father, Lit the teacher.

"My father said I could."

"There, see! Elmo gets to do everything. Why can't I go anywhere alone, Father?"

Lit had seen Ro walking away from the Giant's Harp, by way of the western terrace, looking a bit ashen. He guessed what had happened and more or less applauded Ro's decision to let the lad watch out for his own balance. Lit, himself a widower, realized that he must now, reluctantly, allow equal privilege to his pretty, pale daughter - or never hear the last of it.

"What time must you go home, Elmo?"

"Before sunset, Sir."

"Lo can stay and listen to the Schula with you. Be sure she gets home by twilight!"

"Father! I can take care of myself!"

Lit returned by way of the Hall of Urns: thousands of niches bearing ashes of generations celebrated in the art of the Giant's harp but otherwise absent from living memory. Unreadable writing in a forgotten language recorded the name and deeds of the tenant of each urn.

He lowered himself down the seven western steps, hanging by his hands from the ledge of each step and dropping to the next, then crossed the long meadow to the mimosa grove where the path into town began.

Stopping for a pint of cider at the Sign of The Nine Hammers, Lit found Ro alone at a table.

"Your liberality is contagious," said Lit. "I let Lo stay with Elmo to listen to the Schula."

"I was up there alone at his age."

"So was I."

"First bachelors, then husbands..."

"Then widowers and now mothers!"

"What have you been teaching my son lately, Lit?"

"A bit of this and that. He's learning to put an edge to a blade, so he'll have a trade."

"He's been practicing on my razor," Ro patted his nicked chin. "Does this keenness extend to any other studies? He's been plying me with religious questions lately ... picks up a lot of nonsense from Sod's daughter Echo. I don't want to set him against the oddities people believe around here. He's not discerning enough to hold his tongue around belie vers... but I don't want him to swallow it whole either."

"If our gentlefolk knew your true thoughts on the subject, they'd cross their fingers when you walk by a deal more than they do."

"I'm polite and mind my own business. I find, unfortunately, that my astronomical calculations do not square with the notion that the stars were sewn by the gods on a black cloth carried to the sky by a turtle."

"I daresay. Yet you believe in Ist."

"Believe? Hardly. I acknowledge the cursed fact of Ist."

"Then, you should have no quarrel with my teaching of your son. After all, you've taken pains to impress your educational opinions on me, in great detail, this past half century."

"Indeed. And to you alone, being the possessor of one of the few functioning minds in this barren end station of the world."

"You slight Gia and Aeoui?"

"Aeoui is a pedant and Gia confesses her own senility. But no, of course I don't include them. They're my teachers, after all, and I seem to be able to think, though that's as much inconvenience as blessing in Terrapin."

"Tell me the truth, my friend, have you any serious objection to the way I instruct Elmo?"

"No. He can accept or reject your opinions once he's learned them, although it is startling, sometimes, hearing the parrot of your voice and ideas around the house. It reminds me of the nights we argued away our youth."

"First here, and later at Gia's ...when the keeper kicked us out of the Nine Hammers!"

"Did you see Gia by the Giant's Harp?"

"Yes, we spoke. She keeps watch lately. She won't say, but I'm sure enough she's looking for signs of Ist."

"Pray it will be a brief visitation."

"Or that she's wrong," Lit said fervently.

"I don't think Gia, of all people, would be wrong about that."

In a dark, back corner of the tavern, alone, facing the wall, Fit's dark, sullen brother Eliot drank down his sixth pint of black beer, commenting on the probable course of their conversation to himself, though he'd heard none of it. It was all the same to Eliot: "They don't know what they're talking about."

"Let me see the spyglass, Elmo."

"Leave it alone."

"Come on, let me see!"

"Let go or I'll push you right over the ledge!"

"Try it and Ro will never let you come out by yourself again!"

The children scrapped over the spyglass, heedless of the ledge of the Giant's Harp and the yawning abyss of melody and mirage. Elmo snatched the glass from Lo and ran to the far side of the terrace, she chasing. As the sun touched the water, both game and music stopped suddenly as though by command. Time to head home.

The children scaled the seven terraced steps, boosting one another by shoulder and handhold, then crossed the main hall of the Giant's Harp without looking to right or to left at the ancient artifacts which were, after all, just part of nature to them. They jumped down each of the seven southern steps, landing with a series of hard jars, rather than simply walking around the corner of the terrace they'd played upon and strolling downhill. That route would have brought them too close to Gia, known by all children to be a witch.

In their scuffling, they'd stopped paying attention to the Schula, whose pre-sunset ballad wasted itself, likewise, on the disenchanted ears of Gia.

The old woman stood like a lightning struck tree, grimly propped on her cane, staring out to sea. Over a hundred years old, she'd lost track of her age, Gia was feared, though not hated, by all children and respected by adults who could remember fearing her, too, when young. Even the great-grandfathers of the town remembered her as an old woman.

It was said that one of Gia's eyes had been plucked out by Ist, whose beauty she had supposedly rivaled when young. In truth, the eye still rested in the socket beneath its tight closed lid. Only when startled would the lid fly open. The dazed orb would weep for an hour after she shut it.

"One thing I know," said Elmo, as he chased Lo across the meadow, "I'm not inviting you to my birthday."

"When is it?"

"Soon."

"I'm not inviting you to mine either."

"When aren't you?"

"Midsummer Day."

Nor did he, though she came anyway. The next year he did invite her, but she didn't come. The next year he had no party, and the year following, Lit died and Lo went to live with her feeble-minded Uncle Eliot, on the far side of the village, near the southern gate leading to the Desert of Bones.

II

Descent

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Lo knelt dreaming over a washtub full of the filthy rags Eliot called his clothes. Memories of pleasant days, long gone, eclipsed the thick gray bubbles reflecting her unhappy face in grotesque; streamed through the tatters of curtain nailed above the cottage window. Daydreams, almost daring to become visions, suddenly retreated in panic as the outer bolt was slipped and the door flew open. Eliot lurched in.

"So, you have no taste for work!" he growled, catching her half submerged in reverie and squeezing her painfully with his grimy paws.

"I'm sorry, ouch, please stop! I was just thinking. . ."

"See what you think of this!" A kick of his boot sent Lo sprawling across the washtub. She strangled a scream to avoid more trouble, but a whimper escaped.

"And don't mewl!" He slapped the back of her head, threw a chunk of dog meat on the table to be boiled for supper, then stormed out the door to drink away his troubles at the Nine Hammers.

Lo dried her face on her apron and ran her fingers through her matted hair, feeling the ugly chunk cut by Eliot's shears as punishment for being

caught looking out the window, which she did constantly in his absence.

She feared to actually step outside. Eliot set traps around the cottage to make sure no one was prowling about and he had a paranoid's keen eye for detail. He was unlikely to miss such marks of disobedience as the imprint of her shoeless foot in the forbidden world outside the door.

Eliot spent all his idle time, hours when the tavern was closed and no work was offered him, designing and hiding his traps. He changed them often and showed something like intelligence, if not outright genius, in their construction. There were sharpened shafts in surrounding bushes, a spring action noose and a false surface giving way to a nine foot pit of barbed wire, dogshit and broken glass.

The desert that bordered the South wall of his cottage presented a blank slate suitable for peopling with Eliot's deepest and least rational fears. The North side, facing Terrapin, did not. In town were pints to drink, wells to dig, cesspools to drain, and people to dislike. But from the desert something seemed to warn.

Eliot out the door, Lo started a fire, filled the cookpot from the cistern, and threw the high-smelling meat in the cold water with a handful of salt. Eliot liked lots of salt. No sooner had she hung the pot over the fire than the heavy iron lid began to rattle. A quick breath of wind from under the door sent the yellowed curtain dancing. Lo was startled at the concurrence. Surely the huff of wind wasn't strong enough to rattle a cast iron cookpot lid?

She settled herself by the window and gazed at the desert. Was someone coming? No. It was only a mirage that soon dissipated.

Since Eliot's house was isolated, none knew what abuses he practiced there. Generally disliked, he was tolerated at the Nine Hammers, so long as he kept to himself, which he did from preference. He paid his tab regularly and caused no trouble.

"Let the bastard be," was the edict of Dor the taverner, and let be the bastard was.

Eliot was given leave to sit in a dark corner, tacitly reserved for him, and left alone to mutter inaudible comments into his ragged black beard, curses lost in the general noise and cheer of the sole tavern between the continental ledge and the great desert.

Eliot was tolerated in memory of his brother Lit, whom he resembled only in greatness of girth. The school master had been a town favorite, with his gift for reducing complex problems to simple, comical alternatives. Occam's Razor, he'd called it. Many had sought Lit's savvy perspective on their troubles. Even the taverner, Dor, used to being the catchpot of his customers' woes, would turn to Lit to unload his own perplexities.

Other than ancient Gia, no one else had ever been so much at ease with Ro the astronomer: a gentle soul, of sorrowful countenance even before the death of his wife. When Lit died, Ro stopped coming to the tavern, keeping entirely to his telescope and calculations.

All agreed Eliot was a half-wit, but he was a work horse and people hired him to dig their wells and cellars. They'd have thought it a grave misfortune, had they thought about it at all, for Lit's frail daughter Lo to fall into Eliot's hands. They knew she wasn't dead, insofar as they knew anything at all, because she was sometimes seen at her window beside the southern gate. That she looked sad was easy to understand, had they understood anything at all, what with her father dead and she so young, no more than sixteen. Had any discerned the more immediate cause of that sadness, assuming they discerned anything at all, it is likely Eliot would have been lynched.

Unfortunately, there was no reason for anyone to pass by Eliot's cottage except to visit the southern gate to the Desert of Bones. Terrapin was fertile and self-sufficient, desired no commerce with the land across the waste, so passers-by were rare.

Bullied into submission, Lo failed to realize that release from bondage would have been as simple as running to Ro. The daughter of his oldest

friend would have been protected as a matter of course. Unfortunately Ro had much to occupy his mind and remembrance of the pale, black haired girl found no place among his comets and constellations.

Nor did Elmo much remember her, though they'd lived next door, played and scrapped together while their fathers smoked and exchanged riddlesome chat. Besides, Lo had been altogether too smart for Elmo's taste. She was, after all, a year older than he. Elmo wasn't less intelligent than many, but Lo was, after all, the school master's daughter and probably had lessons for breakfast. She made him feel a bit thick. He wouldn't have been surprised to find she could read.

Few in the town could read, other than Ro, Lit, old Gia and maybe Aeoui, who would never say. The ability to do so was viewed with suspicion. Since there was nothing in Terrapin to read anyway, neither menu nor road sign, Elmo didn't suppose it made much difference and never applied himself to Lit's offer of instruction. Some said the marks on the floor of the Giant's Harp were writings, but most believed they were just decoration.

Elmo learned to play whistle, having a good ear and deft fingers. He sometimes attempted duets with the Schula, but since the wind generally blew music either down the cliff or up from the sea, seldom did their melody unite unless the winds were still. Even then the faint music was often overcome by the murmur of surf.

Elmo had a yen to join her and make music face to face, but descent from the Giant's Harp to the beach was perilous. Those who attempted were few in any generation. Certainly no grown townsman would be fool enough to try, even if tempted by the enchanting melodies floating up the promontory face.

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Early one morning, before Ro awoke, Elmo set off to attempt descent of the northern promontory cliff face, undismayed by tales of boys who

never returned. It was the morning of his fifteenth birthday and this was the present he'd promised himself. His interest in the Schula had burned brighter and brighter since the afternoon Ro had handed him the spyglass to view the lovely creature five years ago. He'd decided to wait until he was at least as tall as he guessed her to be. He'd grown quite a bit in the last year.

To the right of the overgrown path, leading to the cliff face, rose the lyre-shaped pillars of the Giant's Harp. Stone steps descended a hundred feet to the jade mines. Rusted tools and coils of rope lay scattered around the entrances to the mined-out shafts. Elmo found a small hand pick and selected a coil of tarred rope which he slung over his shoulder. He stuck the pick in his belt, where dangled his sheath knife, whistle, Ro's spyglass and a canteen.

A hairbrush, a wood framed looking glass and a bag of taffy, items that might be expected to entice a Schula, should personal charm fail, completed his array of necessities.

The steps ended five hundred feet past the mines. A footpath ran at a steep angle past the vent holes and surface quarries but soon trickled away to a deer trail through a maze of vines covering a series of monolithic terraces, hidden, except in broad outline, beneath centuries of untended growth. Like the Giant's Harp, whose terraced steps they resembled in height and breadth, they terminated in mid-air, jutting into emptiness. Whatever they once led to no longer existed.

Elmo slid down a maze of vines, known as "the monkey climb," scratching himself on blackberry bramble, thistle and the stinging nettle which twined among the creepers. The edge of the monkey climb was as far as anyone usually ventured before reconsidering the call to adventure, what with two thankless hours needed to battle to the bottom of it and twice that to climb back. Only a bare rock ledge, providing an inferior view, rewarded the toil.

Silver lizards dozed in the late morning sun, scattering as he came to the end of the monkey climb and approached the rocky ledge. It was more difficult to climb down the steeply sloped lip of the ledge than it had been to slide and stumble through the vines. The vines offered only discomfort but the rock face promised danger. At least there were no further thorns to jab or nettles to sting.

Face against the rock, his back to the sea, Elmo didn't see the lucid mirages over the shimmering water below: projections of the town, familiar houses and avenues, mingled with fantastical landscapes, making it impossible to tell where permutation ended and simple reflection began. The Nine Hammers was promoted to the dimensions of the Giant's Harp, which monument was reduced to the size of a mean hovel among shifting, glass-like fingers of hallucination.

Elmo descended the first several hundred feet splayed belly to rock, oozing like a drop of tallow from ledge to ledge. As the distance between ledges increased, he began looping his tarred rope around outcroppings of stone to lower himself.

The rope was fifty feet long to begin, but he cut it in half to lessen the burden. None of the drops had been more than twenty feet and he figured, out of misplaced optimism, that the going would not get much harder.

The next hour vanquished this miscalculation. He was forced to reclimb. He was fortunate enough to find a more accessible route back up, where he sat and spliced the discarded length after coming to a drop requiring fully fifty feet of rope to negotiate. He'd learned rope splicing from Lit, did it well and quickly, but the miscalculation cost an hour of precious daylight.

His method of descent involved slipping a noose around the base of a rock, sliding down, then unfastening the loop with repeated whipstrokes. Sometimes it wasn't possible to dislodge the rope, and he had to shinny back up and secure the loop in a different fashion. It didn't occur to him to loop the rope around a rock on shorter drops, slide down the doubled

course, and simply pull it after him. What Lit or his father had not specifically taught seldom occurred to him.

Evening approaching, Elmo was able to gain several hundred yards quickly as the stone strata became more forgiving. The pick sank easily into the limestone layer, allowing short drops without the nuisance of securing and retrieving the rope.

The sun touched the sea as the limestone face graduated again to harder rock, requiring rope. The first few drops were easy enough, but they led to a hundred foot clear fall. Elmo stared at his fifty foot coil, questioning, for the first time, the good sense of his adventure as fatigue swooped out of a red chunk of sunset cloud and claimed him.

He broke into tears of frustration. If only he had a kite of Harp Tree leaves to carry him to his destination. The wind was probably strong enough to bear him to the beach had he the materials and tools to make one. Having nothing better to do at the moment, he recalled the first time he'd ascended into the winds of Terrapin, his kite string played out by Aor, the town Rough, one of the sons of the mythic Wolf O'the Wild, old Loup Aru. He remembered the exhilaration he'd felt during this rite of passage ... and the sensation of terror, second only to that of his father, who'd declined to hold the slender cord of the kite himself while watching the issue of his loins silhouetted against a crimson cloud, causing the astronomer to mutter an unaccustomed but spontaneous prayer to a deity in which he did not believe.

Elmo's resolve was refreshed by the Schula's song, absent the greater span of his climb, ringing to responsive stirring in his heart. Doubt vanished as quickly as it had descended. But there could be no more climbing today. First he would have to unwind the individual strands of the rope and rebraid them, thinner and longer, from the half inch thickness. The rope would be less secure, but there was no other choice.

Before beginning the long job, he had to reclaim the rope, again wedged tight in its anchorage. With no strength to climb back, he

whipsnapped, ever more languidly, while he listened to the Schula sing an interminable ballad of ancient Terrapin, a story familiar from the tellings of Aeoui.

Yu was father to all gods but one. Ist was half mortal, daughter of Bran, a giant shepherd of land whales. Her mother, File, was the youngest daughter of Yu. She had discovered the giant drifting in the sea, an island to all appearances.

It seems that after searching the Earth for hundreds of years, seeking others of his giant race and finding none, Bran gave way to despair, left his herd of land whales, and plunged into the sea where he floated unconscious and dreamless. File discovered the giant, fell in love with his handsome countenance, and did her best to awaken him by dancing on his breast while singing the same song with endless variations for a hundred years.

Wake my love and come to me

Wake my love and follow

I will sing to thee today

And thou to me tomorrow

alalee alala alaloo

Wake my love to this my song

From slumber hie thee hither

Before the fruit of love decays

The supple branches wither

alaloo alala alalee

Wake my love and fill my cup

With measure overflowing

Place thy treasure in my keep

Who best may tend its growing

alala alalee alaloo

Wake my love, I dance alone

Who would's't with thee entwine

As human flesh to human bone

As red, red lips to wine

alalee alala alaloo

Before the birth of Ist, Yu was content ruling over the gods, a respected parent. But Ist was stubborn, willful, insolent, beautiful, vain, and gifted with music earthly and divine.

She made Yu unhappy. This was his first encounter with such a feeling, so he didn't understand what it was, only that he wished to avoid it. Before this, there was nothing he did not embrace with the whole of himself. This feeling he would cast away from him. Or cast himself away from it, if need must be. After long brooding, he left the City of Eagles to seek remedy not to be found in heaven. He sought no advice from his gods. Since he'd never before had a question, he did not know how to pose one.

Yu wished only to be where Ist was not. Her beauty disturbed him as much as her insolence. Never having experienced anything but the greatest felicity from his children, he did not know willfulness for what it was - nor understand pride, admixture of traits human and divine - for he was only divine. And though he'd breathed life into those godlet creatures shaped by his sons and daughters to be carried to Earth on the broad back

of the Terrapin, their doings were beyond his interest or his ken.

Yu went walking on Earth, making himself small so he did not upset the people or step on their towns. He'd never come to Earth before, only looked down, now and again, attracted by a well said prayer and suitable sacrifice. If animal, the spirit of the sacrificial beast was served to the gods at table. If human, it was set to work - spirits of women to spinning and weaving; those of men to serving wine and tending table. Spirits of children were set free to enjoy the endless day of the City of Eagles.

Spirits of the sacrificed were fed well and given good liquor in just compensation for their moment of supreme agony. The work was pleasant among playful and loving gods, and music was part of the air of the City of Eagles, wherefore, the moral of the Schula's song avowed, it behooved any young man or woman to be sacrificed to Yu.

Elmo teased at the rope a bit more, yawning. He didn't think that being sacrificed to Yu was probably as inviting as the Schula suggested, but then he wasn't very religious. As the endless song continued, his efforts to free the rope became ever more feeble, the whipsnap ripples more gentle, until they no longer stirred the clump of sowthistle the rope was snagged in.

It happened, sang the Schula, life was so interesting on Earth that Yu recovered his former good cheer. In the hundredth year of his wanderings, he discovered the oldest of his creatures, one long lost to him, created even before the gods to whom was given the task of building Earth upon a foundation of mud heaved up from the dark ocean between the stars. The dark ocean was the mother of Yu, who had no father.

This oldest of creatures was the very friend Yu had created for company while still a child, tired of wandering the skies alone - the very Terrapin who helped the children of Yu to build Earth, carrying upon his broad back whatever the gods designed and wished to place there: trees, sand, the many living things they had made in their shops and petitioned Yu to breathe life into.

The song was becoming repetitious. Elmo did not hear the end of the tale. Drowsiness proved stronger than interest. He would leave the rope wedged till morning. The boy crawled into a shallow niche in the cliff to succumb with reluctance into the sleep of fatigue.

Dreams eased up the crevices from the beach, some wound down the promontory face on puffs of cloud, fragrant and rosy with sunset colors. Other, darker, dangerous dreams lurked inside the niche, but they were formless and difficult to dream. Long banished to the walls of the shallow niche, they dropped gratefully onto the sleeper in hopes of finding a stage upon which to perform their transmutations.

The mind of the exhausted climber dissolved into a tantalizing romp of fantasy which faded until only a silver sky remained, shading gradually into its own horizon, darkening into the depths of slumber without image.

Dawn spirits in scrub trees conversed in cricket ratch and cicada whir, loud even against the roar of waves. There was no trace of quiet in the night, outside of the sleeper's deafness to it all.

A discontented measure of melody drifted in a tendril up the cliff face, like an uncoiling rope, paying out to the level of the sleeper's niche, worming its way through the substance of his slumber, summoning him like a beckoning finger. Something of the Schula charged this tentacle of tone and was not to be dismissed. Elmo arose, still sleeping, caught hold of the tip of the beckoning strand and fixed his own rope to it, making a ladder to descend to her.

But the tendril now projected horizontally, rather than downward. At its end lay the beach and thudding surf, no longer below but inclined straight ahead across a gulf through which the strand twined and shimmered.

The tendril twisted teasingly to and fro then suddenly slithered around his wrist, penetrating his skin, threaded his veins as easily as vision pierces clear glass, pouring melody in pulses through his arteries.

Mingling with his lifestream, it breathed through his lungs, looked through his eyes, gave instant solution to all the mystery the music presented, promised answer without ceasing to many more mysteries, all delicious to know.

It seemed a simple matter to pursue the trilling to its source, to take a step forward and flow along it like an impulse along a plucked string, but as he lifted a foot, a chill blast of wind turned the warm current of his dream into ice. He awoke teetering on the verge of the precipice, preparing to step to his doom, shrill of cicadas loud in his ear, banishing the phantasm of music with a jolt of pure terror.

He spent the rest of the night clinging to the bosom of the stony niche. Nor till dawn did the youth fall into a strength-recovering sleep, fingers loosing their compulsive grip, dozing sentience assuring that murderous visions are of the order of night, powerless to broach daylight slumber.

When Elmo awoke, the sun was nearly forty five degrees above the horizon and the vista was awash with mirage: spires and domes of unearthly architecture, shot through with dragons and birds of light, transparent to the horizon of sea and sun.

In a heap at the mouth of the niche lay his climbing rope, by some agency dislodged and kept from falling to the beach below; its most likely natural trajectory.

Elmo figured that the last limp, lashing tug of evening must have unseated it; its own weight allowing it to gradually slither free. The light rain of morning must have helped it some, lubricating and adding weight to the strands. Mystery explained, he began unbraiding and resplicing the rope to double length while the Schula's full-throated morning song commenced.

Upon a silver strand sat I

O me and my love beside me

If ever, my love, I chance to die

O die, my love, beside me

...sang the Simla with a rollicking lilt belying the substance of the lyric. Resting his fingers for a moment from the braiding, he trained Ro's spyglass on the singer. For the first time, he saw her face in clear detail. Below abundant copper hair, violet eyes looked back, aware of being watched. She smiled brightly.

Strength was renewed, as much by the smile as by slumber, though Elmo was very thirsty. His canteen was empty and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he fixed the rope to a rock and began to lower himself through the swarming mirage which poured off the ocean, hiding the true features of the face of his descent.

Approaching the end of his extended rope, he had to swing out in an arc to reach the outcropping below. And there, it seemed, his journey must end. The rest of the drop, three hundred yards, was smooth as glass with no outcrop, handhold or pick purchase visible. Frustration vied with thirst for the spoils of aggravation. He had no choice but to stay right where he was. He could hear, but not see the Schula, who lilted on no more than half a minute's walk away, were that walk not a sheer drop.

He wasted away the morning, dejectedly tossing pebbles to the beach, wondering if there was any way to get back up since he couldn't get down. The Schula sang on and eventually there was nothing to do but take his whistle from his pouch, apply his dry lips and join the music. They could, at least, hear one another clearly at last.

He waited until she finished her song, then played one he'd often heard her sing. The Schula joined in at the second phrase, soaring over the notes he played, curling round them until, transported, Elmo lost the beat. She stopped abruptly, with a shriek of displeasure.

After awhile she sang again and he ventured his whistle into the web of tones cautiously, exercising more discretion. He played with closed eyes and didn't notice that, as the angle of the sun steepened, the mirages around the cliff face dissipated, and where there had been a sheer wall of

impassable glass, the true lay of the face revealed itself, stepping from beneath its deceptive curtain.

The three hundred foot drop was a mirage! The beach was a mere stroll away. He covered the ten foot drop to the next ledge in a joyous leap, plunging into a bush of daisies soft as feathers.

A spray of mist collected by the breeze from the cataracts of Terrapin promised quenching of his thirst and the nearness of song the sating of his heart's desire. The stream of Schula melody coursed liquidly and along it he flowed, exultant, to the beach.

III

Ballad of the Doubly Drowned

° ° °

One further minor mirage cleared as Elmo sped to the beach. The short run downhill was steeper than it looked. Unable to brake his momentum, the boy charged past the Schula and half way to the surf before losing his footing.

Startled, the Schula's pitch wavered. She stopped mid-note and glanced briefly at the offending projectile. Seeing only an insignificant boy, about her own size, she recovered her composure and sang on, just as though no intruder had dropped out of the sky to disturb her.

Elmo recovered and approached the Schula's stone, politely awaiting the song's end to introduce himself. He'd heard this ballad before but did not remember it being so lengthy. When the Schula came to the last verse, she began another song with no break between; one unknown to him.

Though the new tune was a good one, the boy became more and more distressed at receiving such casual treatment after his arduous descent. Fatigue and thirst provoked further irritation but there was nothing to do for it but wait politely while the Schula sang verse after verse. Elmo's debut had been disastrous and he didn't want to compound it by

interrupting the maiden or insulting her by wandering off in search of a drink before introducing himself.

Barren beats my broken heart

And listless rolls my eye

Life has fled, the better part,

And left me here to die

A bird upon yon elder bough

Brought news of you to me

Your coming death he did avow

And bade me visit thee

William, sweet William

I heard me not your plea

Vain and proud I would not come

You died of love for me

I will tie a lover's knot

That none shall ever loose

Of roses, vine and bergamot

I'll plait myself a noose

Around my throat I'll wear it

As from yon elder bough . . .

"Aren't you clumsy? Where did you come from?" demanded the Schula in mid-phrase, suddenly riveting Elmo with eyes of brilliant blue.

"Up there, where the clouds are," said Elmo, pointing to the Giant's Harp wreathed in morning mist.

"Are you hot?"

"Hot?" he replied, a drop of sweat dangling from the tip of his nose, "Not very."

The Schula turned from the boy and continued her tune, picking up the beat of the tale where she'd left off.

Despite thirst and confusion Elmo was astonished by the glamour of the Schula. Some of the girls of Terrapin were fetching enough, but glamour of this sort was unknown in Terrapin, whose rural necessities produced a species of female more prized for strength and durability than comeliness.

Nor had Elmo seen a female half clad before. The Schula wore only an unconcealing skirt of braided fibers. Apple round breasts peeked through cascading tawny locks, making the young lad nervous. He tried to avert his eyes, but could not. The Schula gave no indication of minding. Elmo might just as well not have been there at all. He had a curious feeling of invisibility which was not unpleasurable.

Elmo hit on the ploy of offering the sack of lures he'd so carefully selected. That might get a response. He untied the pouch from his belt and dangled it by the thong. But the Schula was not to be diverted from her song a second time. Her brilliant blue eyes gazed right through him.

As the Schula sang, mirages formed of forest, fen and foreign soil. A honey-colored shaft of light shot through with bands of black seemed to roll and coil above her head as the sunlit beach became a stage for another, darker, time and place. Then, the Schula herself dissolved into the play of mirage, until only her eyes and voice remained.

Elmo stood stupidly, dangling the lure, a shadow transfixed, until at long last, the heroine of the song hanged herself by her garland while the messenger thrush celebrated the definitive union of the star-crossed lovers in death.

The mirage dissolved slowly and, through it, the lightly webbed hand of the Schula extended. Elmo gave her the sack. He'd intended to parcel it out an item at a time, but. . . it wasn't really his to decide.

Her gaze once more included him for a moment, which was all the thanks he was to receive. She studied his face for a perplexed moment, then turned her eyes to the gift. Thick coils of bronze hair hid her face as she peered into the sack. Elmo could not tell whether she was surprised, delighted or even somewhat pleased by its contents.

Whatever her expression, by the time she finished eating the sugar, admiring herself in the mirror and running the whale bone brush through her hair a few strokes, it could not be read.

Sufficiently groomed, she tossed the toiletry gifts to the sand and made two fists which she held before one eye in the attitude of a spyglass. Elmo proffered the instrument, which she eagerly snatched and put to her eye, wrong side to, lens trained on her foot. Startled by the unexpected change of perspective, the Schula dropped the spyglass onto her rock. The lens cracked. Elmo snatched it up and put it quickly to his eye to check the damage. A hairline fracture. Ro would be furious. The boy realized that now he could never return. A lump rose in his throat as he turned the glass on the Schula who had begun to walk down the beach.

The fissure in the lens created an optic flame which surrounded the Schula's head like a nimbus, but it was her swaying stride and claspable waist that stirred Elmo's attention. He wiped a drop of sudden sweat from his nose and followed her down the beach.

The Schula found another rock to adorn, tossed her hair, yawned and then demanded:

"Who are you and why do you pursue me?"

"Elmo. And I like your singing. Who are you?"

"E," she touched her finger to her chin and drew a straight line to her navel, ending with a finger snap.

" E?"

"Sa!" She made a sad face and buried it in her hands as though grieved. "Aeeeii ... Sah!" Then she inquired: "What is that?"

"It's a spyglass, it makes things come up close, if you look in the right side. Did you see me watching you from above?" She nodded.

"Mirror."

"Spyglass," he corrected.

"Mirror!" she replied decisively, turned away and began singing.

Suddenly Elmo's thirst would allow no further distraction. He turned his back upon the lady of the rock and dogtrotted a few hundred yards to where a waterfall splashed from the cliff, buried his face in its pool, and drank his fill several times over. A sharp cramp ended his greedy guzzle. He would have howled in pain were he not choking on the last swallow. He gagged ... panting and coughing at the same time, bent double with pain.

Great as was his distress, he refused to cry aloud within hearing of the Schula, whose back was turned to him. He assumed that any show of weakness would doom all further attempts to make friends with the imperious creature. He was probably right.

Wondering why the boy, who obviously fancied her, had suddenly stopped paying courting, the Schula slyly turned her head to discover, by peripheral vision, the cause of her abandonment. Had Elmo accepted disdain at face value and gone away? Ah, no. He was lying by the pool. But how could he nap in her presence? ...and during her song!

Elmo had stopped writhing by this time. Still rigid, he tried to melt the cramp by will power, making it no better and no worse, for he had none.

Waiting several minutes to detect any sign of artifice in Elmo's posture, the Schula's vanity and curiosity wrestled within her charming bosom. Aggravation stirred toward this male creature who was apparently less susceptible to her charm than she would have expected.

Cheeks aflame, her will, for the moment, was not her own.

The Schula approached Elmo and prodded him with her toe. The cramp was beginning to subside, but he lay very still, concentrating, confident that his will was working a wonder. She prodded him again. This time he managed to look up. Even though she broke his concentration, the cramp continued to relax, proving that will, once set in motion, works wonders on its own.

He looked up to a smiling face. "Isa" she said, pointing to herself. Elmo heard the note of surrender in the simple enunciation of her name, but it didn't signify much to him, filtered as it was through the nausea of his diminishing cramp and he made no reply.

This lack of response to her friendly tone was so unexpected that the Schula's previous aggravation kindled to rage. She fell to keening tones of such distress that Elmo was moved despite his misery, though not to physical motion. Impassioned Isa, able no longer to stand the pain of slight, threw herself on the sand and began thrashing.

The cramp suddenly released its hold on Elmo, who sat up and looked in amazement at the actions of the Schula. So bitter was the pain of apparent rejection, the Schula didn't notice the change in the boy. He tried to stand but the Schula grabbed his leg, fearing that he intended to flee. Her small fingers were stronger than they appeared and the grip hurt. As Elmo tried to pull away, she clenched more desperately. A wave splashed far into shore; a finger of ocean rushed directly to their spot and lingered for a moment pointing straight at them.

"Hey, that hurts! Let go! I'm not going anywhere..."

Isa let go her grasp and buried her face in her hands, shamed by her foolish actions. The boy had no idea what to do next and sat thoroughly confused. The Schula composed herself and gave the boy the last piece of sugar candy in the pouch. He accepted it and put it in his mouth. A wave crashed and applauded. Face was restored.

Three more Schulas appeared far down the beach, laughing and chattering as they came closer. They darted in and out of the surf, lacing

their babble with chirps of musical phrases. The trio settled on a rock and struck up a harmony.

When the wind rolls on the ocean

When the sun shines on the sand

When clouds reach from the sky above

And take me by the hand . . .

Elmo turned from Isa to watch the pretty Schulas and listen to their tune, but Isa gently took his hand and led him further up the beach, away from them.

"They sing like gulls. It hurts my ears."

"They aren't as good as you, but it's a pretty song."

"A silly song with a silly story, though you can't tell from the way they mumble it."

"I know the song, I've heard you sing it. Or I think it was you."

"I sang it once, that's so, but only because I was sick with poisoned clams and it expressed my pain."

A bubble surged from the subaquatic pits which kept the local sea warm as bath water, colors streaming over its surface in broad horizontal bands. A flock of seagulls settled on it, crowding together at the top so as not to slip down the sides. Isa led Elmo around a fold of the cliff, far enough down the beach for the surf to hush the rival Schulas. She chose a rock to adorn, held both of his hands, and began singing a song calculated to demonstrate, convincingly, her easy superiority over her silly sister Schulas and charm their memory out of his ears.

The Schula sang, in minor mode with little ornament, a mournful ballad, sparse of melody, with many, many, verses. As she sang, it seemed, the sea crept closer to listen:

A sailor who perished at sea,

Able a man as ever was found,

Drifted down to the Garden of Po

God of the sea - king of the drowned

All the blooms of the garden

From tangles of seaweed grew

Eyes rolled up in eternal dream

A cheerless and ghastly crew

Their hair and hands floated upward

As though they sought to flee

But none had ever escaped from Po

And his garden beneath the sea

Those who die on shipboard

Are subject to other fates

But those who drown inside the sea

Sink through these garden gates

A Schula who loved this sailor

Sweet daughter of Po and Ist

Begged her father to spare the man

"Surely one flower will never be missed"

Full of the dead his garden grew

The rotten ripe fruit of the sea

She begged, pleaded, and softened the heart

Of the God whose favorite was she

Often she sang on the sailor's watch

To hurry the night away

He on the quarter-deck, she on the waves

Who vanished at break of day

The face of the maid who sang to him

The sailor never had seen

At hint of dawn she disappeared

Beneath the ocean's green

The sailor was married, this she knew

The Schulas know many things

Married to one to whom he was true

As the Schula to songs she sings

And thus her love was pure

And thus her love was true

She didn't divide his loyalties

With a flash of her eyes of blue

The god relented but cautioned her

Since never had such been done:

For seven years the sailor might live

But return when the time was run

For upon his brow the mark of the drowned

Was set and would there remain

No other kingdom of death may hold

A soul that the sea had claimed

He could not die in battle or bed

Nor perish in fire nor frost

And though a sword should pierce his heart

His life could not be lost

The sailor returned to his family

And turned his back on the sea

Though at night he went to the water

Where the Schula would oftimes be

And though he never saw her face

He loved in his heart her song

He thought of her as a childlike thing

But in this he was halfway wrong

For the Schula was a woman

Of beauty surpassingly rare

Waist slender as two hands round

And hips full round to bear

Lovely was she as starlight

Pale was she as the moon

Blue her eyes as sunlit sea

In the bright shining afternoon

Any braw man would love her

Of this she was quite aware

And so she kept to cover

Her face and her golden hair

Seven years passed agreeably

The sons of the sailor grew

Strong young lads with their father's face

Handsome young men and true

The eve of the day agreed upon

The date that his soul was due

The sailor went down to the beach at night

In hopes of a song or two

The Schula showed herself to him

By light of a crescent moon

And told his fate in words of woe

Soft spoken, no more the tune

"Now hast thou laid thine eyes on me

Who concealed myself with cause

That thou might love thine wife, not me,

And honor thy marriage vows

"But now thou must away with me

To the garden of drownded men

Thou wert delivered but by my pleas

Who must fetch you back again"

"I know full well that doom resides

Within this heart of mine,

Although I knew not what the cause

Nor how that doom would shine."

This the sailor said to her

But would not take her hand

"Let thy father come to me,

For I'll not leave the land!"

And yet his heart was smitten,

Divided quite in twain

As though it had been written

That the price of love is pain.

His wife, the joy of his eye,

Now looked to him so plain

Beside the glowing Schula

Who came for him in vain

Each by each the days grew cold

Though it were late in Spring

Listless lapped the gray, cold waves

Where Schulas did not sing

Each by each his sons went down

In ships to ply their trade

His eldest fell in battle

To a round of cannonade.

This stroke felled the sailor's wife

Whom lack of love had sallowed

Both were laid in Fiddler's Green

And soon a third grave followed.

The second son fell from a mast

And all his bones were broken

Still the sailor would not heed

The words that had been spoken

Full well he knew a curse was laid

Yet naught to him prevailed

So stricken by the Schula's charms

Was he that reason failed

His youngest son was lost at sea

And still the sailor kept

Both his feet upon dry land

And not a tear he wept.

He waited by the beach each night

In hopes to hear the sound

Of his beloved's singing voice

One night she washed up drowned

He roared and ranted at the sea

He tore his clothes and cursed

At length he knelt him down to pray

Where angry breakers burst

"O god of the ocean, king of the waves

And all who inhabit the deep

I would strike a bargain with thee

To return to thy ghastly keep

Wind upon wind and wave upon wave

And lightning gave him reply:

"Tell me sailor, the terms you seek

And prepare yourself to die!"

"Thou has destroyed the life I had,

I require no further days -

But this, thy daughter, I thee implore,

From the depths of the dead to raise!"

"Fling thyself from the uppermost rock

Of the ridge abutting the sea

And I will deliver my daughter's life,

Though it do no good to thee!"

The sailor leapt over the cliff to doom,

The breakers devoured him whole

Tides delivered him to the home

Awaiting his bloodstained soul

The Schula woke from the dream of death

And found what had come to pass,

Demanded of Po her stolen death,

Which he granted, with grief, alas

For though the granting of life was his,

A power he'd come to rue

It lay not in his power to refuse

A death which was rightly due

Returned to the rapture of the drowned,

A heaven of silt and slime

Her body sought the sailor's,

In the garden they intertwined

At the garden gate the lovers float

To welcome the newly dead

With silver fishes in their throats

And eyes turned back in their heads

The grim ballad issued like a golden tendril from Isa's lips, twining about itself to form a braid of narrative and, when finished, shivered into pinpricks of light and vanished. Seeing the effect of her song upon her listener, Isa regained all of her former self-possession and was only too ready to refuse when he begged to hear another.

The other Schulas had come up the beach to hear the Ballad of the Doubly Drowned and when it was done, rushed out to the waves to sport around the sand pit bubble and chase their reflections. Isa sprang from her rock and ran after them, slipping like a hand into the glove of the sleek surf. She emerged four hundred yards out, shooting straight up from the water, within the bubble, beckoning to Elmo, who was quick to follow, stripping down to his undergarment and diving into the sea for the first time in his life, finding the warm saltwater more inviting and buoyant than the cold creeks of Terrapin.

Emerging inside the bubble, he was astounded. There was no sensation of rising within a confined space. The perspective was, instead, one of colossal sky overhead. The effect of the sunlight shining through the shifting bands of color was exhilarating. A flood of lemon yellow washed away by a rain of aquamarine greeted his arrival.

Isa smiled, treading water with so little effort she seemed to stand still, while Elmo splashed like the river trained swimmer he was. Isa again began to sing.

This time she sang no story or melody, but sustained a high, ringing pitch. Gradually she let the note warble and vibrate, producing overtones which ascended the harmonic ladder to the ceiling of audibility. The colors and patterns of the sky-bubble shifted and changed hue in response to her tonal commands. A clear patch formed in the center of the hemisphere. Isa directed her tone at the center of this patch, tightening the vibration until the note she held was overshadowed in volume by the clear, ringing overtone it produced, growing in intensity until the bubble suddenly shattered.

Isa dove beneath the water before the fragments touched them, pulling Elmo with her. He was so startled he lost his air, struggling below the surface with empty lungs. Isa drew him to her, placed her lips upon his and gave him half her air in a carefully measured kiss while a boy on a kite sailed high over their heads from the steps of the Giant's Harp.

During this time in Terrapin, the inhabitants were treated to a variety of new tunes by the Schula. Elmo taught her some of the songs of the nomadic Roughs, as learned from old Aor, master of kites. Elmo played the tunes on his whistle, for he had no voice to sing, and recited the verses to Isa, who learned them perfectly first time through, giving new weight to the ancient litanies by her sonorous tone and delicacy of ornament.

Her favorite, the "Palanitos" was a lament of eye stinging sadness, supposedly in the ancient tongue of Terrapin, relating the suffering of a kidnapped virgin in the home of a cruel giant:

Mishwallala lia lo, liolai,

Shambala, Intoila, liolai-arou

Elio septe Intoila,

Shalla Mishwalla, lia lo, lio lai, lialoo

When she sang it for the first time, the shaggy heads of some Roughs, that evening passing through Terrapin, appeared on the lower terrace of the Giant's Harp, enraptured by the transformation of the favorite tale. She watched them through the cracked spyglass as she sang. The sea was quiet as sun set and after awhile the Roughs could not help but bawl along on the refrain, intensifying the music until it seemed the lowering disc of sun paused a bit, wanting to hear the end, before slipping behind the rim of the bay.

IV

The Wind of Ist

° ° °

Isa, supine on the beach, watched her toes through the wrong end of the spyglass as the water rushed over them and retreated, carving furrows beneath her heels. She suddenly turned the glass on Elmo, whose eyes she could feel washing over her with an undertow of their own. He looked away quickly. Why, she wondered, did he blush so when she caught him staring at her body?

The Schula smiled, sat up, returned her gaze to the sea, shifting so her profile was displayed, arranging her cloak of tawny hair to the best advantage of her charms. She felt his eyes return like an arrow to its target as soon as she'd looked away.

Elmo carved at a thick reed with his jack knife, intending to make a bass flute, but his attention was so distracted by the Schula that the blade slipped and drew blood. He threw both tool and reed to the sand, angrily, and sucked at the finger.

A shadow fell over him and when he looked up, Isa was standing there, hair billowing in the breeze.

"What have you done to yourself?" she scolded. He held up the gashed finger and she took his hand. The proximity of her bewildering femininity was too much for Elmo. Finding nowhere to avert his eyes, he closed them. He felt the lick of her tongue on the gash, lapping away the blood. Then she took the finger in her mouth, held it there, rolling her tongue around the injured member. Elmo flushed to the roots of his hair and quickly placed his free hand over his lap in a gesture of concealment which Isa, eyes wide open, did not fail to mark.

For fully five minutes she ministered to the finger and, when she was done, there was no trace of cut nor blood, just a pleasurable tingle in the restored digit.

Elmo was too flustered by the Schula's nearness to fully appreciate the small miracle.

When he could safely stand, he did, ambling down to the surf. Isa remained where she stood, unable to fathom the boy's shyness. She had never seen such physical reticence before. She vaguely understood it didn't imply rejection, but beyond that it made no sense.

The Schulian culture, nine-tenths female, was not much concerned with clothing. Denizens of temperate beaches, music was their whole concern, seafood being plentiful and makeshift shelter, from wind, rain or high tide, easy to find on the cliff base where thickets grew. Obeying the Schulian adage "when in doubt, sing" Isa began an ancient air:

When mighty Terrapin was young

And stars were yet to shine,

Before a song was ever sung

Nor ocean flowed with brine,

'Pon his back he brought the work

Of Heaven's gods to berth

Across an endless sea of murk

And built the garden Earth.

Star by star and sea by sea,

In Heaven's workshop wrought

To the world transported he,

And all the mountains brought

To rise above the firmament

He'd built of straw and sand,

Twice a thousand years were spent

To build this place to stand

Between the sky and emptiness

He carted grit and soil

Without a moment's pause to rest

from his appointed toil

While the Schula sang, Elmo went for a walk along the beach. Lovely as the day, nice as the song, he felt a rising irritation. Something was demanded of him by Isa, but what was not clear to him. He felt ashamed that he could hardly keep his eyes off her and more so since she caught him at it so often. What must she think of him?

He didn't understand the nature of this attraction. He'd certainly been drawn to girls before, but this was different. Red haired Echo had excited a certain response in him, as had Lo, but it was mild and passing. And, of course, they were always fully clothed, even modest in their dress. Besides, it was their faces that attracted him, not their unripened bodies.

Of matters physiological, his education was lacking. Certainly his father, Ro, would never speak of such things. And Lit, his teacher, had nothing to say on the matter, though he'd promised to tell Elmo certain things when the time was right, knowing Ro would simply postpone the task until it was too late to make any difference.

As for gutter education, Elmo had small opportunity. His few friends knew as little as he. The primness of the local moral code was strong and binding. Elmo had heard a thing or two about how babies were conceived, but he didn't believe it. It sounded too far-fetched; the fantasies of dirty minds.

He believed his feeling for the Schula to be more elevated than all that. Her great beauty and wonderful singing touched him deeply. Yet, it seemed, in her actual presence, the song faded away under the urge to perform something indefinite, something undefined but forbidden, upon her sweet ripe person.

He felt sure she could read his mind. The feeling was so pronounced it must be apparent from a hundred paces. Otherwise, why would she suddenly turn and gaze at him with that knowing smirk on her face? And, knowing, why did she torment him as she had just done, healing his wound in such a lascivious fashion, her small skirt of reeds brushing his face, her aggravating breasts visible even through his closed eyelids? It was too much to bear! Her behavior was . . . scandalous!

The song of ancient times rolled on the breeze. It seemed the Schula was singing in his ear, following him. She was impossible to escape.

On Terrapin the gods did ride

To stir the sea of mud

To froth it to a foaming tide

And quicken it with blood

Each god opened up a vein

And let the blood flow in

From it living creatures came

Where none were to begin

Yu sent down the heat of sun

To bake the sediment

Until at last the deed was done

The finished firmament

T'was then all things were ferried

To be set upon the land

Across the abyss carried

All the gods had made by hand,

Upon the back of Terrapin

Till all was brought at last

Each thing found a place therein

Then Terrapin slept fast

A thousand years he rested

Beside a silver stream

Where gentle billows crested

In a sleep bereft of dream.

Elmo sat down on a rock and continued to carve at his bass flute, scraping away a spot of dried blood, suddenly realizing the strangeness of

the healing process whose pleasurable sensation had turned his thoughts from the sweet simplicity of an innocent act to enflaming images. That he was bad, he had no doubt. That the Schula provoked this badness was also beyond denial.

Isa's melodious discourse eased his apprehension, but only somewhat, as she wove the tale of Earth's creation.

While he slept, upon a loom

The gods were set to weaving

A giant cloth as black as doom,

As dark as widow's grieving.

They sprinkled it with bits of light

They chipped from off the sun,

Wove in comet tails of white,

And threads of dawn were spun.

When done, they woke old Terrapin

To endless daylight bright

And bade him take one end within

His jaws and hold it tight

They bade him take it to the world

And cloak the sun from sight

And as he swam, the cloth unfurled

And thus was born the night.

Elmo knew the story well, from the lips of Aeoui, the storyteller. For the next thousand years Terrapin delivered these and all manner of things that are now to be found. There was this difference in his labor now: he slept at night, so that not everything the gods conceived and made was, in the end, delivered. Much remains in their workshops. The two humans the gods had fashioned became restless and vowed it was good enough for them just as it stood and gave the gods no peace until they had their way.

Terrapin carried all the creatures the Gods had fashioned, forty at a time, one trip a day for forty days until all had been delivered. He was summoned then to the City of Eagles to be rewarded for his toil. A great banquet was given in his honor.

Weary from his labor, he fell asleep after drinking the first glass of wine from the first pressing of the first grapes. When he awoke, another thousand years had passed and men had built their towns and villages. They had learned all the arts the gods had given them to know, but they did not know how to dream. Of dreams the gods knew nothing.

Sleeping in the City of Eagles, Terrapin invented dreams, that sleep might be the sounder. He made enough to spare and when he woke he went back to Earth and wandered from place to place, leaving a portion of dreams in each place he visited, some in cliffs and some in forests, some on mountain peaks, wherever someone might chance to fall asleep. When he reached the West, many dreams remained. He left some on the beach and the rest on the desert, which became mirages.

Elmo paid scant attention to the singing of the familiar tale. He was too disturbed by the singer. He had not, he said to himself, come down here to be ignored. The Schula had ignored him from the start. . . when she wasn't throwing herself at him. Do her good to see less of him for awhile, maybe she'd . . .

No way to get out of here, or he'd take it, the way he felt at the moment. It would take a week or two to climb back up the cliff, if it could be done at all. There was no ducking in and out of the Beach of Mirages.

Isa, on the other hand, wondered why Elmo expected her to make all the moves. Certainly he was interested. And company was company. There were no men of her scarce race available. The few Schulos there were had more willing women at their beck and call than they could handle, so that they grew soft and stupid to a man. Even Elmo looked good next to them. Maybe she wasn't good enough for him? He said he was an astronomer and made maps of the stars when he was home. It sounded like a lie, but he talked knowledgeably about ecliptics, orbits and other boring things. She would have preferred to converse, but he tended to speak at, rather than with, her.

"What happened after Yu found Terrapin when he came down to Earth to get away from Ist? I fell asleep on the cliff before I heard the end," said Elmo, just as though he didn't already know the story. It seemed like a good thing to say at the time. Give her some of her own back.

"Then you heard all I sang. I grew tired and slept myself."

"Tell me the rest. There's nothing else to do down here."

Isa flushed, turned quickly away and, after a moment, began to sing. It is the Schula's way to sing when perplexed.

As the song unfolded, the grayness of the day passed with a brief, warm rain and a rainbow arched to touch its own reflection on the calm swells, forming a perfect circle. A mirage of the Giant's Harp wavered within.

When first Yu came to Terrapin

He came not in fine array

He wore a body black and thin,

A pilgrim of the way

Ten thousand years unto the day

From when the world was made

The roiling mud turned into clay

And trees brought down for shade

Ten thousand years, no more nor less,

The sun rolled 'round the Earth

Before the god came to the West

To this, our place of birth.

And here he met the terrapin

Beloved first creation

Before the beasts on wing or fin

Before the world's foundation

Before the gods themselves he wrought

This friend to call his own

And none can know the joyful thought

"No more to be alone"

Deep within the desert near

A secret, hidden spring

The creature slept from year to year

Woke seldom but to sing

His mournful voice made warriors sleep

All argument to cease

Eyes were dried that endless weep

Each heart was given peace

For seven years the song would roll

Throughout the day and night

Until the country, healed in soul

Admitted Heaven's light

And in this way, the Terrapin

Preserved the human race

And then he went to sleep again

And left them to their fates

And in his song he spoke to Yu

Of everything on Earth,

All that happened, old and new

From the moment of its birth

Of heroes and misbegotten,

Of matters great and small

Nothing was forgotten

Old Terrapin told all

And at the finish of the tales

The long and ancient list

Yu told of his own travails,

With the demi-goddess Ist

The Terrapin was half-amused

And half-perturbed at this

His counsel never was refused

He cautioned thus of Ist:

Only half a god is she

For Earth her nature yearns

Send the wayward one to me

The things of Earth to learn

I'll teach her of the land and sea

And all that swim within

Of human hearts' complexity,

Of duty, rank and kin

Of sacrament and sacrifice

Of poverty and need

Of honesty and artifice

Of treachery and greed

Of this and every other thing

Of scripture and of song

Of changes that the seasons bring,

Why Winter nights are long

When all has been revealed to her

When every art is learned

When nothing is concealed from her

And charity discerned

I'll loose her from my tutelage

And send her home to thee

Freed by reason from her rage

And ask one boon for me -

That I may quit this endless round

That holds no joy for me

And rest in dreamless sleep profound

For all eternity

Yu's reply was lost on Elmo, who snored loudly in the brilliant sunshine. He dozed till sunset. Isa sat on the rock for a long while, watching him through the wrong end of the spyglass.

When she had seen all she wished to see, Isa tossed the spyglass alongside the sleeping boy. "Mirror," she said decisively, left the rock and waded out past the small frothing breakers. Facing shore, she threw her right hand over her head and sprang lightly, shaping her back to the curve of the wave as it touched, melting into the curl, whirled round once and slipped from sight.

Elmo awoke at sunset, alone. He wasn't disturbed. Isa likely had gone for fish to vary their clam and berry diet. No sun remained to start a fire with his spyglass lens. He noticed disapprovingly that the objective lens was face down in the sand. Carelessness! He examined for scratches and, though it was dark, thought he saw some.

Isa enjoyed fires, approached them with awe, tried to dissuade him when he extinguished one. He argued that driftwood was scarce and that he'd spent an hour a day for the last two weeks keeping the fire supplied. Isa ate her clams raw and said she didn't care if they had a fire or not, but that it seemed a shame to put one out when you had one.

Since Elmo created the fire by focusing a tiny image of the sun, she reasoned a bit of the sun itself visited them and should be treated respectfully. Elmo couldn't truthfully deny that this was so, but didn't see what difference it made considering that it couldn't be used up, although the wood could.

Elmo said he always damped fires at home, and she replied that it showed what kind of home he came from; "If all the people in Terrapin are like that, it's no wonder you ran off."

Not wishing to strengthen an already incorrect impression, Elmo admitted exaggerating, hoping to end the absurd dispute. When she demanded to know why he had lied, he said in exasperation, "To tease a silly girl!"

He took the whistle from his pouch and tried the melody Isa had been chanting earlier.

That song about night being a bolt of dark cloth. She probably believed it. Were the stars just holes in the cloth letting spots of daylight through, in her view? Or were they jewels sewn on by the gods? Ro and he knew they were something else entirely.

No, stars were not holes in the fabric; he saw it confirmed as one of them dropped from the sky and fell at such an angle a dreamy observer might think it landed down beach. Elmo suddenly jumped up and ran as hard as he could, outspeeding his frustration, searching for the fallen star. But no bright thing from celestial heights was to be found, only more sand.

Down he flopped panting. He decided to spend the night right where he was and dug a pit for shelter, laying a few sticks of driftwood on top

and covering them with fronds of seaweed over which he strewed handfuls of warm sand. It was snug and cozy. Only his head protruded.

If Isa missed him, it served her right. She might learn to announce her goings. It was good to be utterly alone for once in two weeks. She watched him like an insect under glass. Still, it was lonely on this vast beach without company. Isa was at least that and they had enough fun to keep him from dwelling on the impossible ascent home, but if she was going to start running off without warning, that was a different matter.

She should at least consider his feelings. What if he were worried that she'd drowned? Was he? He thought about it and wondered if he should be. He wasn't, but what if he was? She wouldn't care any more than she cared for the spyglass she tossed so offhandedly in the sand. She didn't think about anyone but herself. That's what made her so boring. She'd liked the Rough songs but did she thank him for teaching them to her? No, and if he missed a beat or played a jarring note on the whistle while accompanying her, she always stopped cold. Sometimes she refused to finish the song and if he showed any sign of displeasure she just might not sing the rest of the day.

Another star fell, but so far away it must have landed across the ocean, over in that place he used to see when he went up on Aor's kite. Echo had told him about it and when he looked for it he thought he did see it, the golden lily fields out past where the giant snakes stuck their heads up over the horizon.

Echo was a funny girl. You could get her to believe anything, but she would do the same to you if you weren't careful. She mixed made-up facts with things that might be true until there was no way of telling.

His thoughts turned more and more to home - the place, people and ways he knew. He wondered whatever had happened to Lo after Lit died. Not all that sorry to see her go, she was nothing but a tease, though he liked her well enough. She thought she knew everything.

Isa was a tease too, but in a different way. She didn't know anything at all. Her songs had an answer for everything, but she didn't think for herself. They were just words to her, something to string a melody on. Stupid. Time to think about climbing home. The ocean murmured gently and he fell asleep wondering if he should take some clams back to Terrapin.

Elmo dreamed he walked a black sand beach where waves of milk splashed ashore. All he saw was black and white, seabirds, sky, horizon. He walked the sand for hours, naked, shivering, shrill of cicada and hush of white waves breaking, wind hard but inaudible.

About to die, and soon, he knew he must, he saw a patch of color some distance down the beach. His spirit revived. Drawing closer, the patch took the appearance of a woman. Coming closer yet, he realized the woman was several times his height. The colossus was a statue of Isa. As he gaped, her four arms began moving, jointlessly, serpent like.

Six-breasted, she glittered with silver scales. A rumble issued from her parted lips. Each hand held an item of menace: whip, torch, hatchet and trident. Her breasts were tipped with lidless staring eyeballs and her hair stood straight away from her head. Her expression was severe, the eyes of her head were coals of blue fire.

As he stared in fearful wonder, Elmo became painfully aware of his nakedness, but did not try to hide it. It was beyond hiding. A powerful current of desire enflamed and enlarged him until he felt near to exploding.

All the eyes of the statue were fixed upon this flagrant protrusion. They grew ever brighter and more menacing as the member engorged to heroic proportions. . . and then he did burst, splattering the legs of the statue with wave after wave of crimson seed. It ran down her legs and puddled at her feet, staining them .

Eight eyes riveted on him, as though demanding explanation, he hung his head, exhausted and detumescent. There was a long moment of

silence. The cicada stopped shrilling. The white waves were silent. Then slowly, the sound of the wind became audible, faint at first, gradually ascending to a deafening roar. From the motionless lips of the statue issued a terrifying hiss, followed by strange words:

"Sagatha Ka!" she raised the hatchet, and, with a sudden accurate swing, emasculated him. The severed part fell to the ground and exploded in blue smoke.

"Sagatha Ta!" thundered Isa, and thrust the torch in his face, burning away his youth, leaving his face ancient.

"Sagatha Ha!" she roared, and from the eyes of her breasts flashed rays of dark light which entered his own eyes, destroying all but hateful memories.

"Sagatha Va!" The whip lashed out and the tongue crosshatched his flesh. At the center of each wound erupted a stinging boil.

"Sagatha Pa!" her mouth spewed dark blue blood upon him. All of his senses produced, of themselves, whatever degree of light, taste, sound or touch was least bearable to them: blinding lights, screaming, tintinnabulation, foul taste, intense heat, stinging, clawing, slapping.

"Sagatha Sa!" She pronounce the words with a voice like the swarming of hornets and pierced his heart with her trident. The flesh of pain cracked, shattered and fell away in dust. All evidence of mortality vanished and he stood in his eternal form, filled with blue radiance.

"Eula Bondi," concluded Isa, in a voice melodious and soothing, as she drew him toward her with a magnetic force, allowing him to flow through the portals of her monolithic thighs and out the other side, into a garden of similar blue spirit beings. Looking back, he saw her standing tall as the pillars of the Giant's Harp, staring distantly toward the land of wakefulness.

Her feet rested upon an immense domed shell with octagonal markings, as of a tortoise.

She had only two arms now. Her right was raised high, her left held a fan of gleaming coral. Each strand of her hair floated independently and electrically, filling the air with a crackling hum. Something mysterious and terrifying could be felt gathering in the air.

He suddenly fled down the dilating iris of a tunnel which opened in empty space, leading to a dreamscape of confused, disordered fantasies where he languished until morning.

The boy awoke to the sound of squabbling gulls, worried. He arose, wrecking the sand and seaweed cocoon, and ran back to his familiar stretch of beach. It was so early the tide lapped at the foot of the rock where Isa usually lolled. She was nowhere to be seen. A group of other Schulas sat close to the cliff, one crooned a disquieting lament:

My love lies bleeding on a rock

The rock lies in the sea

Rise you waves and crack the rock

Return my love to me

Return my love, though cold and dead

His body drained of blood

That I may take him to my bed

Return him on your flood

One Schula nursed a child. She met his glance but looked away quickly as Elmo approached. She was pretty, not markedly favored like Isa, but lovely enough to be the prettiest girl in Terrapin. Next to Lo. Or maybe Echo, who was beautiful without being pretty. Crimson as sunset, pale as snow. Well, not really but that sounded nice. She was ruddy enough to support her freckles, so Ro had said.

A grandfather was eating clams as he gathered them from beneath the wet sand of the shore, opening them with an iron tool he wore on a seaweed thong around his neck. The old Schulo's one tool did many things. He could hurl it with great accuracy at a target, it was both hammer and drill, made a good broth spoon, and was useful for starting fires when struck against a piece of flint into a handful of sagebrush tinder.

The mother sang as she suckled the child:

Everything out of the sea is salt

And all of the sea is brine

That thou art gone is nobody's fault

Nay, nobody's fault but mine

Though the mother, pouring melody and milk into the tale of abandonment, ignored Elmo, the grandfather nodded as he sat down to listen and pry open clams. Only the infant seemed curious, her violet eyes following Elmo's every motion.

Everything out of the sea is salt

Salt are these tears of mine

That I am alone is nobody's fault

Nobody's fault but thine

Salt, sand, coral and brine

Will O'the Wisp in the wind

More have I been sinned against

Than ever I thought to sin

Careless of offending the Schula at song, Elmo asked the old man if he'd seen Isa but got no reply. When he was rude enough to ask a second time, the song stopped, the family arose in a body and stalked into the frothy tide, the infant hobbling easily behind. A wasp then stung him and a gull delivered a carefully aimed load on his head. The wind seemed to chuckle. It's laughter was low and feminine.

Elmo spent the time until mid-day sulking on the sand. His irritation at Isa began to give way to that strange new sense of longing she raised in him. Justifying and pardoning her, he remembered the attention she had shown him: the half lung full of air when he was struggling beneath the shattered sea dome, the wonderful singing which even the elements gathered to hear, the jealousy around other Schulas, the healing of his finger which had awakened such disturbing and unusual thoughts.

Thoughts of this led to another round of irritation. Isa could desert him easily enough, but it wasn't possible to desert her in turn. This seemed an unfair situation that she was taking advantage of. She must be very angry. He tried to remember if he'd done anything to cause it. Couldn't think of anything. Maybe she was just bored with him. She was pretty boring herself, always brushing her blond, or was it brown, hair. And staring at him with those questioning blue (or were they green?) eyes.

He found it inexplicably difficult to remember her face. When he almost pieced it together, an eye, an ear, a feature at a time, the image dissolved to be replaced by wrathful Isa of the dream . . . imponderable Isa of the colossus.

There was really nothing to do but fall asleep, which Elmo did. He slept until dusk, awakened by the hiss of the sun entering the waves. Loneliness settled with all its weight. It deepened with fading day until, night come, it was complete. He sat on Isa's rock and, to his own amazement, wept.

When there was no more to weep, he plodded to the cliff and considered, by moonlight, the path by which he'd come.

He climbed to where the mirages had parted two weeks before, revealing the jut of rock from which he'd made his final leap. He sat beneath a sail leaf tree. The leaves of this tree would make a good ground cloth should he decide to camp here. And they would do for blankets. He'd need them. A rising North wind rippled the leaves.

The surf churned and pounded while the full moon tugged at the tide. In an hour the foam lapped the base of the cliff. The beach was gone, except for a few prominent markers such as Isa's favorite rock. Why hadn't she warned him? She must have known! Elmo he examined the moon with his spyglass until it set. The scratch on the lens gave it a vivid purple halo. He was halfway glad the tide kept him from waiting down there for Isa. In case she was spying, he didn't want to give her the satisfaction. Suddenly he no longer felt ashamed to picture her in the heated fantasies his mind presented, despite his conscience. She'd left him to be caught by the tide. What better did she deserve? He gave himself wholeheartedly to the arousing images and fell asleep afterward.

No dreamland gate arose when he fell asleep; the edge of a forest appeared. Hundreds of eyes lurked in the branches. They did not menace.

A great circle of animals sat in a clearing, among them Aor and several other Roughs known around Terrapin. All were mute, motionless. In the center of the ring stood Isa, no longer monolithic, merely tall and stately, shining with diamondic blue, as did her eyes which focused nowhere but saw everywhere. The coils of her hair lived a life of their own, though the color had changed to red, churning and twisting around her face as it had in his last dream, which he remembered he had dreamed, though he did not know he was dreaming as he remembered.

Elmo sat on the outside of this circle through the night, a dream without event, only the mute presence of Isa and the watchful animals. When he awoke, it was as though the dream continued: Isa's hair became the very vigorous North wind which blew stronger by the minute.

Elmo stripped a handful of currants from a bush and added a few scarlet Harp Plant berries, which the children of Terrapin were warned not to sample, but he'd learned better from Aor, who would pop a few of the "poisonberries" in his mouth whenever he passed a Harp Plant. The Harp Plant bore berries of two colors. The children were free to eat the sweet blue berries, but the poison myth and bitterness were enough to dissuade children from eating the red. Adults brewed liquor from their juice. The narcotic properties of the red berries served to spirit away the last trace of Elmo's depression.

Storm clouds, some hours still from shore, were visible on the moonlit horizon. He decided to make the climb. No worry about drinking water this trip, the rain would provide, and there were plenty of niches and caves to hide in. An hour's scrabble at the cliff convinced him ascent was impossible by the old route. What he jumped down, he could in no wise jump up. He realized he knew that anyway. But the red berries had given him courage to make double sure.

He looked for a lateral passage, hoping for a new avenue of access, and discovered a place where he could climb a few hundred feet, but after poking through briar bramble and thistle for an hour, he ended up on an exitless ridge overlooking his campsite. He had to go back around to get down and recovered his former ground lacerated and planless.

His sail leaf blankets were gone. The strong wind had carried them off like kites. The attached leaves of the sail tree itself snapped and cracked like banners.

He recalled the less windy afternoon he had sailed aloft on a kite made of them, old Aor skillfully plying the kite string. It occurred to him that a kite would be about the only way out of here.

There were plenty of leaves, and the wind was strong enough. The red berries discounted danger of themselves. All he lacked was twine to stitch the leaves together and someone to hold the cord. The roots of the Harp Plant were thin and strong, they would do for thread. Elmo uprooted all

the young harps growing either side of a hundred foot stretch of trail. A splinter drew the thread, and the twigs of the older harp plants were supple enough for bracing. Decision made, his kite was sewn within an hour and braced in two. Of course, there was no one to hold the rope - and no rope to hold. The red berries advised him to never mind that.

The storm front had nearly reached land as Elmo prudently wrapped his body with sheets of sail leaf in case he got dragged along the rocks.

It occurred to him that he could abandon this dangerous enterprise and return to the beach. It occurred to him he could not. Settled on that, he moved out of the shelter of trees, holding his kite obliquely to the wind so it wasn't ripped right out of his hands. He climbed to the top of the tallest sail leaf tree. He cut a leaf off and watched what it did. Right up the cliff face it flew. Well, why not?

He leapt into the wind.

Holding onto the front brace, Elmo kicked his feet back, hooking his toes on the rear brace as Aor had taught him. He entrusted himself entirely to the wind, did not doubt the updraft would be fortuitous and grounding easy. Suicide was far from his intention, though he could in no wise guide the kite, only follow the course of a leaf in a gale.

He wondered if it was the poison of the red berries that made him see the shining tendril, messenger of Isa's song in the dream from which he awoke teetering on the verge of the cliff.

The tendril reached from the cliff face to his kite and began reeling him in and playing him out with as much skill as Aor, changing its length elastically to preserve his distance from the rock.

It suddenly snapped and he was cut free in the wind and borne out to sea. Out and out and up and up, and, in what should have been his panic, he found himself thinking of Isa, of her body, of his wounded finger, of his damaged pride. Then of his descent to the beach. Then of his playmates, red haired Echo and pale Lo . . . the games they used to play. He thought of his long dead mother and could feel her presence, the

gentle rock of the cradle, birth . . .

The wind shifted and suddenly he was blown back toward the cliff, though high above it. Over the Giant's Harp he sailed and, in a clap of thunder, the vagabond returned to Terrapin as the storm exploded in full fury, forcing the kite down with the weight of a good soaking and a down draft, not gently.

CHAPTER V

V

Wolf O' The Wild

° ° °

Elmo lay in bed three months, left leg broken in as many places. Aor changed his cast three times as the boy outgrew each.

"If you outgrow this one in the next two weeks, it'll be too bad. It's time for my yearly howl."

"That means the barber, the dentist, the doctor, the smithy, the roofer and the trash collector will all be gone. Terrapin will have to close down for the fortnight," said Ro looking up from his astronomical chart. "I will tend to each of these duties in turn and entertain the children in my spare time, but I will have my two weeks with my kin," growled Aor, tightening the tape till Elmo winced, then loosing it a bit. "Still tender, eh? All right, when the tenderness goes, you can start testing it. I've never fixed bones that grew so fast. It might improve the mend or it might hinder it. Either way, it can't hurt you to keep to your bed another month."

"You said two weeks!"

"I said no such thing. I said I've got to go sing with my wolfenkin for two weeks and I'll look at it when I get back. Make a note of that Ro, lest you both forget. Have you been rubbing onion into the tape like I told

you?"

"Yes, Aor," said Elmo, who had not. Nor had Ro enforced the prescription. He cared no more for the reek of onions in the small house than did his son. Though he had the greatest respect for Aor's abilities as bone setter and tooth extractor, he had little faith in his remedies which ran the gamut from onions whole to onions sliced, juiced and aspirated.

"You've been seeing to it have you, Ro?"

At that moment a knock at the door kept Ro's tongue free of lie or evasion. Gia entered without waiting to be asked. Aor stood and Ro put down his pen respectfully.

"I will come right to the point, Aor," said the ancient woman.

"The boy . . began Aor.

"Is old enough to hear. He's been to the Schulas and come back. Many have not. When they don't, the ensuing trouble is less. The longer he stays off that leg, the better all around. I do not refer to his health, Aor. It is your intention to go to the winter howling at the Ebo?"

"It is my duty sworn and my desire."

"I see. I cannot forbid it or I would. You may do less harm than good if things pass as I foresee, but don't ask my blessing. Are you girt for battle, Ro?"

"I will do my year's transcriptions in two weeks time. I can do no more."

"Nay, nor any of us. We can still speak our minds until the stranger from the desert comes. But when he does, day by day more silence must prevail."

"Then we Roughs must sing the louder through the darker nights of winter. By Yu, may the stranger not appear!" prayed Aor.

"Save your throats. He comes not 'til Summer."

"Will he be like the other?"

"More like the first than were the second or the third, Ro."

"That was before my time."

"Well I know. T'would be wise to practice for the coming silence by not saying what need not be said. Then it will be a natural thing in its time. Good-bye. I am going to look in on Echo."

Gia left, Ro relaxed. Elmo was amused to see his father, Aor for that matter, reduced to schoolboy status before the mistress. He believed none of her nonsense. She stuffed everything into her pipe dream, even Isa. As for Ist, Elmo didn't believe in gods, less a demi-goddess, and was hence ill-equipped to discern such a one, not for lack of opportunity.

"Echo is in for a hard time," Aor said.

"Maybe not. Gia's more easy on Sod's daughter than on most of her broodlings."

"Only because she must be. Echo is frail."

"Echo? Frail?! said Elmo. The frail one had once blacked his eye when he teased her about her flaming tresses once too often.

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Gia passed several itinerant Roughs on her way to the home of Sod the wheelwright. She didn't like Roughs, as much for their onion reek as for their want of civilized principles. Aor stood proof they could be useful citizens, without losing their touted untamed streak. The majority wandered nomadically, inciting susceptible village youth with wanderlust and disdain for education. Fortunately, Terrapin was difficult of access and their visits were infrequent. When they came, they stayed a fortnight, camping at the Ebo Oasis, eighteen furlongs into the desert. They set up such a howl, all night, every night, it was heard in Terrapin.

Gia did not have to look far for Echo. She stood in a crowd gathered around a Rough named Gorg who entertained with a mild version of one of the raucous songs of the pack.

Gia caught Echo drinking the song like a cat lapping cream, shaking her thick red braid to and fro, when Gia pinched her sharply on the arm and spoke loud enough to ruin the charm of the song for Gorg and his

spectators: "Come along, Echo. I want a word with you at home."

Echo's violet eyes winced from trance to focus as she obeyed the old mother with neither pleasure nor question. The Rough cleared his throat, offended, unhappy at the loss of this pretty and fervent spectator who looked back and waved. Gia did not notice since Echo walked on her blind side. Had she noticed she would have said nothing about the low bred act of waving in public. Or indeed anywhere. Waving was for mounted Captains urging their troops to war. Or Schulas. Low bred but highly born, thought Gia of Echo, whom she loved with a love beyond her will to question, a love having to do with another love, and before that, near the dawn of memory, another.

Gorg summoned up the Wolf O'the Wild again, where he'd been cut off, as though nothing had happened and soon had his audience of loitering youths and unemployed elders re-hypnotized.

Jack O'the Wild, Wolf O'the fen

Soul of the pack, faces of men

Brothers of all, Servant of none

Run by the moon, sleep by the sun

Wolf O'the Wild, hear me plead

I have served you till I bleed

I have fought at your right hand

Free me to mine own command

Jack O'Roses spurned your curse

Jack O'Diamonds stole your purse

Jack O'Rifles shot your mate

Jack O'Whispers sealed your fate

Wolf O'the Wild, hear me plead

I have served you till I bleed

I have fought by your right hand

Free me to mine own command

Silver money, Silver bars

Silver needles, Silver stars

Silver castles, Silver skies

When a boy is born an old man dies.

° ° °

The house of Sod rocked with snores. The wheelwright made his wares so well they never broke so he had no business. He slept all day and when he woke he ate everything in the house then amused himself shocking (he thought) his daughter with crude tales of war before going back to sleep or rolling off to the Nine Hammers, where he would fall asleep over his sixth pint and need to be shaken and told to go home long before closing time.

Whenever he slept he snored, from the moment his eyes closed till they opened. No common snore this, but a rich and varied repertoire of gagging, retching and other digestive functions at flabbergasting volume.

Sod was tolerated and given free beer in return for the immense bar with carved-in seats he hewed and chiseled from a walnut trunk, four years labor for the wheelwright. He was the maker of the Sign of the Nine Hammers as well, carved twenty years ago.

The motif of that wheel of oak, whose spokes were nine arms at right angles, bent at the elbows, wielding hammers, was taken from an a

similar icon sculpted of obsidian at the western portal of the Giant's Harp. Sod's wheel revolved, but only in a strong North wind. Except, according to local lore, when Gia passed, though none ever saw this since the old mother avoided that street of the town. Unwary drunkards were apt to catch a painful whack when a sudden wind blew from seaward.

"Mind the hammers," was innkeeper Dor's usual good-night to customers and "Knocked by the Nine" was local slang for a hangover, a phrase spread by the nomadic Roughs until it was used by the citizens of towns who knew nothing else of Terrapin.

In the opinion of many, Aor's wife Pisey in particular, Sod's snoring had killed Echo's mother and would be the end of Echo too, who was often seen with dark rings around her violet eyes, nearly asleep on her feet.

She had dropped and broken every piece of porcelain in Sod's house in her sleep-deprived state. Sod happily replaced them with items carved of wood. It gave him something to do and he was never happier than when crafting something needful from wood - though it never crossed his mind to sculpt something on his own. It had to be needed. One day he returned from the Nine Hammers to find the remains of a thick oak mixing bowl in the trash, cracked down the middle. He never found out how Echo accomplished that and it was useless to ask. She blanked out for minutes at a time and remembered nothing.

Sod, who happened to be awake, saw Gia coming up the walk with Echo in tow and quickly ran out the back door. He was in no mood to be taken to task by the old woman who saw no good in him beyond his providing for Echo.

"Father's not here," said Echo. Both noticed tobacco smoke, but no comment was made. Gia had less wish to see Sod than he had to see her.

"How has your father been treating you? Who do you play with now?"

"Gia, I don't play with people. I am nearly full-grown, you know."

"Well -1 suppose you are, aren't you? These things go by so fast I've stopped noticing.

Yes, you have at that. Turn around, let me look at you."

Echo obliged. Her young body had acquired the fruitful curves of womanhood, her freckles had faded into her rosy complexion and her hair, if it were possible, was redder than ever. Violet eyes, large and bright, had a perpetually startled expression except when her "spells" came, when they seemed to focus nowhere and everywhere at once.

"You remind me of someone I knew long ago," the old mother said dreamily, which startled Echo as no amount of snappishness could have done.

"I do? Who?"

"Not your mother certainly and your grandmother very little. No, its further back than that. I don't remember. Have you recovered from your chill?"

"Yes, thank you. Aor told Father to make me eat an onion a day."

"How did you manage?"

"I nibbled enough to get it on my breath and put the rest down my dress."

"Have you learned to close your window in Winter?"

"I guess so. But it's funny about the cold. It doesn't feel cold to me. In fact, the only time I ever feel really warm is with the window open."

"No doubt. I know that chill myself. It's an old friend now. You must make your peace with it. You could very easily die warming yourself with frost, especially the way you 'go away.' You were quite blue when Aor called me over. Have you seen anything of Elmo?"

"Not since he came back."

"That's good. He's a worthless boy and you would do well to steer very wide of him."

"He doesn't interest me much anymore. He was fun to play with when we were little, but he started hurting on purpose when he got older."

"I don't think it was on purpose. Some people can't help themselves. Like your father. He loves you but he has no way to show it. Did you know he was moved into the barn to sleep with the stock when he was five years old? He was already a snorer!"

"Do I know it? It's a point of pride with him!"

"Nevertheless, you could do worse; as has your friend, Lo with her Uncle Eliot."

"I haven't seen her for years."

"Don't you ever wonder about her?"

"Well...I guess not. I just sort of forgot about her."

"As has everyone else. I myself know nothing. My legs are not up to walking to the Southern gate. I suspect she's being mistreated or we would see her about, but I cannot oversee everything and I've trouble enough to deal with within walking distance."

"Maybe I should go see her. Which house is Lo's?"

"The last before the gate."

"I wouldn't want to run into Eliot though."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, I don't know - I get this dirty feeling whenever he walks by, even if he doesn't see me. If he looks at me it almost makes me ill. I can't tell what he's thinking, other than the obvious. I usually can with people, you know. At least they don't often surprise me."

"Knowing what people are likely to do and what they actually think are different things. I don't have the strength to consider Eliot. I need it for a greater foe."

"You mean Ist?"

"I mean Ist, child."

"I don't believe in her."

"I saw you playing her to perfection at games."

"That's different. I don't play games anymore."

"No, I suppose not. But this time it's in earnest, darling girl. Sit down, there is much I have to tell you. Little of it will make sense. Ask me no questions. Remember what you can of

When Gia had spoken, in her harsh whisper, all she intended to speak, which was not much, she stood by the aid of her cane and said "Give my regards to Sod. He's probably quivering in the trash barrel with the lid on. I can't imagine what he thinks I'll do to him if I catch him!"

"Oh, no. Nor I!"

"One more thing before I go, Echo."

"Yes, Mother Gia?"

"Let me warn you, for what good it does me, to stay away from the Roughs. At least until the Still Night has passed."

"Oh, I will."

"See that you do."

Echo shivered as the door closed. She understood very well why Sod hid. Gia was scary. She looked out the back door. Sod had indeed crawled in the trash barrel. The lid rattled with his snoring.

She left him undisturbed and gratefully took to her bed for a nap. But she couldn't sleep. The odd things Gia had said turned around in her head. It made no sense if you didn't believe in Ist. It made no sense if you did. Jabajaba of Nikaba, what kind of a name was that, and who was he to her?

° ° °

A puddle of candlelight from Echo's window shone a yard into the dark and was cut off by the thickness of the night. The solstice moon was hidden by clouds. It was the Still Night of the Roughs.

Many a youth of Terrapin would gladly have joined the pack to rage away in ecstatic howl on a Winter's night. Those not filled with shudders were moved with admiration at their wild songs, so different than the plaintive airs of the Schulas. Some townsfolk stopped their ears with candlewax to drown the sound, determined to sleep. Some heard the

songs through a haze of Harp Plant berries steeped in grain spirits.

It was rumored that during this time the Roughs dropped to all fours and did not cook their meat, or care what that meat was. The tone of their songs during the first week was on appropriate to tales of daring do and high adventure. But the songs they sang, throughout the second week, leading to the Still Night, spoke of fear and, as the day itself neared, of terror. Finally, before they stopped singing altogether, of blood alone were the ululations, in a language known but to them, a singing of sounds akin to the lament of wolves. After the Nights of Blood came the Still Night, when they were presumably bled out.

The Still Night was most fearsome of all. Ears used to being stoppered searched the unaccustomed stillness and men couldn't sleep for absence of the disturbance they had come to expect. Echo slipped from her bed, slipped on a jerkin of sail-leaf, wrapped a hide of fur over her shoulders, drew on her calfskin boots and stole into the quietness.

Had she been asked her plan she would not have known. She was one of those to whom the most chilling music of the pack spoke directly. It sounded to her as it did to them, lusty and compelling rather than fearsome and abrasive. It was in no case as jarring as the sounds to which she was used, the one thousand and one permutations of the strangled groan which issued in an unending torrent from the sleeping lips of Sod.

The new snow had a patina of ice so that it made a crackle at each step, before crunching with a sigh as Echo headed toward the Southern edge of the village.

She soon turned a pale blue and her breath escaped in huffs of cloud. She felt no cold. Her stride was loping as she headed toward the desert. Her violet eyes looked everywhere and nowhere. She saw everything and nothing.

The darkness lent itself to elaboration. The pines of the desert margin became giants and the thicket of mimosa along the path became dancing girls attempting to entice them. The wind hummed like a bowed bass

string.

Goblins peered from under the skirts of the mimosa women and shook threatening fists at the men and at Echo. Snakes hissed out of the mouths of the giants, turned to fire and dropped on the ground to pursue the goblins back to the safety of the mimosa skirts.

To Echo's imagination the Still Night was filled with sound and action as she rushed to the source of the howls which had called her throughout the weeks, surpassing in intensity, at last, even the plate rattling snores of Sod.

She ran, no more asleep than awake, through the white margin of desert which extended from the Southern gate to the Ebo Oasis. She saw huge swimming things in the night, winged things which breathed fire and wore many heads.

Echo had, in her time, spotted more of these fabulous creatures than any dozen children of Terrapin combined. She could see the sparkling fumes of their nostrils breathing out crackling displays of aurora at the horizon.

Once, aloft on a kite sailed by Aor (the only girl allowed the privilege, at Gia's insistence), Echo thought she saw beyond the gulf between the worlds, catching whiffs of perfumed wind from the Golden Lily Fields which buoyed the kite ever higher and southward, until its string escaped and it flew wild, over the snapping jaws of the creatures in the gulf, coming to ground gently among the lilies. There the fantasy ended, for her imagination, though broad, was not extensive enough to discover anything to do among the lilies. Her dreams encompassed only the reaching of them.

Under a similar spell Echo now sought out the Roughs. Things stirred in her which were not content with fantasies of Golden Lilies, though these things were likewise imprecise, knew only that they desired and prompted Echo to respond.

As a child she had sought this desire while darting like a minnow in the river which runs toward the northeast gate of Terrapin to spill in cataracts to the ocean. The same desire flashed in the sunlight of the riverbreast, again in the sudden glimmer of a stone, or at the bottom of one of the whirlpools which dotted the riverbed. A system of nets and stakes protected unwary children from swimming too near them.

The children were warned of great worms living at the bottom of these whirlpools, whose delight was to wrap around a child and squeeze the life out of it. The worms were said to be covered with eyes. Each eye was the soul of a child the worm had squeezed to death. The congregated souls which covered the worm's body were anxious to capture more children for company as they grew bored with one another, living in the same body. They were said to sing enticing songs from the whirlpools, hidden from sight, pretending to be more beautiful and interesting than they were.

Echo had heard, or thought she heard, those songs. It was difficult to be sure beneath the surface of a rushing river. She was certainly brave enough, during one of her spells, to slip down a whirlpool without thought, had they not all been fenced off.

Echo's senses elaborated the dismal desert terrain, trading commonplace for rarity. The frost became flesh and her journey carried her across the belly of a sleeping giantess, down her thigh and out between her toes, or, again, the wind became water which bore her along her path.

She dropped to all fours and her nocturnal vision became keener. The wind carried tastes rather than odors. Her sense of taste was hunger itself, but not so keen as to be demanding.

Behind her on the trail lay her boots and the sail leaf jerkin, only a wolfskin cloak remained to cover her blue skin. In this attitude, Echo entered the circle of the Roughs in the midnight hour of their stillness.

VI

The Still of Night

° ° °

The Still Night

Soft blue flakes fell tinted by moonlight. Darkness was nowhere in the night where Echo lay sleeping in snow. Aor lifted the young woman and carried her to the council fire to thaw. The Roughs circled the fire in rings, a hundred of them, bleary and shaggy.

After thirteen nights of howling, they awaited the coming of Loup Aru, Wolf O'the Wild, in silence, voices blistered by song.

Wolf O'the Wild

Hear me plead

I have served you

Till I bleed

I have served you

Well and true

Wolf O'the Wild

Now serve me too

Jack O'Thistles

Black and bold

Drove me out

In the rain and cold

Jack O'Roses

Bold and black

Tracked me down

Then broke my back

Jack O'Lanterns

Robbed my sight

Burned my eyes out

With his light

Jack O'Doubles

Demon's Child

Hear my troubles

Wolf O'the Wild

...sang the Roughs upon the previous Night of Blood. Tonight they paid the dues of excess. Solemn and utter stillness was ordained of old for this night

In their center now lay Echo, close to the fire. The voice of the fire alone spoke, in consonants of wood pitch snapping, hissing vowels of steam.

Aor attended to the half frozen girl alone, so deeply committed were his fellows to stupor. Harp Plant liquor swirled in their veins. Aor had drunk only a meager portion in comparison to most. His devotions to Wolf O'the Wild were serious, but of milder intensity. He was, after all, civilized; had left the nomadic life to settle in Terrapin, marry and live by his skills.

Aor was Rough enough, still, to join the two weeks howl each year, though he sometimes missed the contents of the pots and pans of his wife Pisey.

He massaged the small body with his thick hands and could feel the life quicken beneath his attentions. Kindly brown eyes showed great concern under flaps of black eyebrow and matted locks of wolf gray hair. Raw meat and onions informed his frosty breath.

His fingers probed her flesh with a sensitivity belied by their coarseness. He kneaded her legs and arms, until a flush showed. After half an hour, as he rubbed the flesh around thighs so slender his great fingers could nearly encircle them, Echo began to moan softly. He crossed his thumbs over her belly and wrapped his fingers around her back, kneading her midsection with his thumbs to "circulate the bile". She moaned more loudly as vitality returned with attendant pain.

Aor carried the reviving girl away from the fire, so as not to disturb the silence of the Roughs. He laid her on a bearskin and returned to the fire for a flaming log which he set on a pile of sticks. They caught quickly and he continued his ministrations.

Within her delirium, Echo lay in a warm meadow, the afternoon sky alive with butterflies, so many she could not see the sun. Hands grew from the ground on stalks all around her, stroking, probing, massaging. It hurt and she was frightened but did not dare move as the hands moved up

her legs, belly and chest. The hands must not know she was aware of them or something bad might happen.

As the pain occasionally crossed the neighboring boundary of pleasure, the many hands became two and they belonged to a young man clothed in flames of red and blue.

Aor heard Echo moan long and low and he began massaging more vigorously, feeling the blood circulate more quickly beneath his hands. She was beginning to flush and the blue disappeared from her skin.

As Echo lay far away in her meadow, the young man's hands entered her flesh and rubbed against the bone, bringing heat and radiant blue light which changed the color of her skin, as she could see from some height suspended above herself, from which position she could still feel the sensations of the hands as though she were entirely within her flesh.

The young man's hands moved all over her, dipping in and out of her blue flesh as though her skin were water, stroking the bones of her legs and arms. Then he lay upon her and she was suddenly filled with fear mixed with desire. This, she knew, must not happen, whatever it was that was to happen next. She began to struggle, opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came.

The young man disappeared during the struggle, though Echo could still see her writhing blue body and feel the weight of him upon her seeking another kind of entry into a place she would not allow.

Aor could see dim outlines of Echo's vision as he rocked back and forth beside her on his knees. He hoped she would come around soon, because he realized that Wolf O'the Wild had made his hoped for appearance at the camp of the Roughs, in the Still Night of their howling, at last. And, among his hundred drunken acolytes, he had seen a young blue skinned woman with hair redder than the fire she lay beside.

Aor quit massaging and concentrated his energy on what he could see of Echo's vision, merging it with his own, by some virtue the liquor of the Harp Plant allowed. Loup Aru had entered the girl completely. Aor could

see her blue glow suffused with raging sheets of red, but Loup Aru was otherwise out of the sight of the vision.

Aor realized, with dread, that a struggle must ensue. He knew that his strength was not sufficient to overcome the Wolf O'the Wild himself. And Echo's meager unfocused power could hardly help him. But there was no recourse. He didn't have to debate with himself. He went directly in.

The next thing he knew he was hurled out of the vision with peremptory force, knocked on his back in the snow where he lay stunned for a moment, blood running from his nose. Force would not work. Another attempt and Loup Aru might do more than give him a backhand slap. Yet there was not a moment to waste.

It was then that Gia made her first appearance, at the Still Night of the Roughs, in living memory. Not in the form of her old, stiff body, but as a form risen up in the desperation of Aor's vision. He saw her clearly within the fire and knew the tall, stately apparition for whom she was. Red and gold tresses cascaded over her naked body, age shorn away to reveal a queen-like form of diamond blue sheen, high-breasted and long of limb.

No words were spoken between the vision and the man, but suddenly Aor knew exactly what to do. He darted past the scarlet flame of Loup Aru's ecstatic ardor, planted an image in Echo's mind, and was out again before Wolf O'the Wild realized the servant had again dared trespass his master's forbidden boundary.

The hands caressing Echo's dream body began to burn her with searing pain. She realized it was no longer the young man who forced his uninvited attention on her, but her father Sod, whose hands were broiling her with their fire as he pulled off large chunks of her flesh and stuffed them into his mouth.

The horror of the transformation prompted a reaction so utter that Loup Aru was ejected from the land of Echo's vision like a cannonball; found himself wedged between two worlds face to face with an angry Gia. For a moment their eyes met, his red orbs and hers of blue ice, but

there was no contest. He dropped his eyes, touched his hand to his forehead and both disappeared in a crack of thunder and lightning.

Echo awoke with a scream, stopped in her throat by a hairy hand clasped over her mouth.

"Hush my girl, it's all right. It's over. Easy now."

She recoiled from Aor's healing hands in terror and confusion, could not, in the flickering light of the fire, tell to whom they were attached.

"Easy now, easy now - it's just me, old Aor. I wouldn't harm you for the world. Everything's all right. Easy now."

Echo's flush deepened as she realized she was naked except for her wolfskin, which she pulled tightly to and huddled shuddering. The pain of resumed circulation coursed fire.

"Easy there my lass, easy. Aor won't harm you, you remember me, sure you do. Just rubbing some roses into those little blue bones, almost froze to ice you did. . . nothing a diet of onions won't fix right up. Just look at you, out here where you have to business to be."

She nodded but couldn't speak. Her tongue filled her throat like a bite of liver too big to swallow, barely allowing breath. She had bitten into it when the light had seemed so bright and the sound of crickets had hammered in her ears like pots beat with spoons. She pulled the edges of the wolfskin tighter, trying to fuse her suddenly rechilled skin with it.

"Come over to the big fire now Echo, melt the rest of the snow out your veins before you wake up the pack with your chattering teeth. They'd as soon eat you up as wink tonight, but they're safe as statues for the bye and bye, off somewhere in the Seven Sisters having a chat with old Howl himself. He's gone where he can't harm you now. Get this Harp juice down you."

She drank with difficulty, the benevolent liquid turning the pain of her bitten tongue into a numb void and easing the freezing chill.

Aor watched Echo pick her way through the enchanted pack back to the fire. Poor little whelp, he thought, pathetic offering summoned to this

miserable encampment. The days of glory were gone, when the Roughs roamed a thousand strong, took a town if they liked and lived there as long as they liked. Good old days.

Eventually they grew fat with conquest and were not hard to unseat, having little talent for administration of their holdings. Public hangings thinned the pack, but they'd had their day and the revenge of the citizens was righteous by the Rough's own standards. There was no bitterness among the survivors, just sadness at grandeur fled.

But Roughs didn't truly need external trappings. Glory was their nomadic life: "Away to the Desert of Bones, take back your town, reclaim your daughters, we are gone!" They didn't need towns and villages, they carried what they needed with them. No longer capable of taking a town, though, or even a village, their sense of themselves suffered. A few, like Aor, took to civilization, most remained nomadic, but all observed the command of Wolf O'the Wild to gather one fortnight a year

Aor knew it would be dangerous to the pack if Echo disappeared from town on the Still Night. Uneasy alliance could be injured by suspicion. It wasn't so long ago the hangings stopped. Fortunately, she would be home safe before thundering Sod knew she was gone. She managed to get to the fire and settle down, still as any Rough.

"What a slim, mean bite you send your slaves these days, Old Howl. This child, when we've been host to Ist. This scrumpet in a wolfskin. From Ist to this. You have no pity, Loup Aru, I do not drink to you, only to take the chill from my blood," Aor muttered as he sipped Harp juice thinned with snow and attempted to join the pack in their unity. Still Night was not the night to worry.

No, it wouldn't do to let Sod know she'd come here. The dolt would feel honor bound to raise a stir. But taking Echo back before she'd warmed and rested might kill the poor thing. Have to bundle her back first thing in the morning while Sod still snored. Not likely she'd remember much, if anything, of what had gone on in her vision.

When dawn came, Echo arose and walked among the Roughs. Not a single eye followed her movement. She stepped through the outer ring and, as she did, the pack shuddered off its spell and stirred. First the elder sounded a nearly inaudible note. Others began to add quiet harmony, starting at the foot of the coals and spreading to the periphery of the ring, forming a dense, rich chord. Then they huddled against one another and truly slept. The formerly silent amphitheater soon resounded with snores.

They dreamed, but not individual dreams. It was a dream the whole pack dreamed but they did not dream themselves in it. They dreamed the progress of Echo from the circle and out across the morning snow. Aor followed her bodily, at a distance, not wishing to enter the dream of the pack. His allegiance to Wolf O'the Wild had suffered this night.

Echo walked in a vision of her own. Before her, she saw not snow but sand. . . the sand of the beach, the Giant's Harp rising high above. She felt very tired and sat down on a pleasant rock to watch the waves. She plaited some coral and little colored shells into her hair. A warm and gentle breeze made the shells tinkle with a delicate chime.

Aor picked up the little figure where she'd fallen again in the snow and carried her in his strong furry arms, holding her tightly to his chest to give her warmth.

While sitting on the pleasant rock of her vision, fixing the shells into her hair, Echo began to sing. As she sang, Winter and Spring passed. Summer made the waves warm and dazzling as they broke against the colored bubbles among swarming mirages.

Aor was startled by the frightening moan which came from the stupefied child's throat. He would have closed her lips to stop it were they not already closed.

She sang a liquid note and balanced it on the point of a slightly webbed forefinger. Light as a bubble it bounced on the back of her hand and rolled down her arm to splash on the sand.

She sang another and let it hang from her lips, suspended on the upturned corners of her mouth until, with a heave of her breath, she sent it winging up the cliff and into town above. She awaited its report as it swept through the town, a bell-laden whirlwind, and returned to her lips. It carried the impress of a heart, which pleased her. Her singing was meant to captivate love.

She sang a note of longing and misery and made it echo on the rocks until it played harmony with itself. She opened her throat very wide, deep down into her belly and brought forth a hunh! which shattered the harmony into a thousand pieces. She hissed, like a great sea snake when it lifts its head above water in the abyss at the edge of the world. The sound flew up and plucked the strings of the Giant's Harp.

Aor carried Echo's limp body through the Southern Gate. The snoring of Sod trumpeted loud and clear. Chimneys smoked, but no one was out this frosty morning.

She sat on the rock in the sweet sunshine of her comatose dream all day and when night fell, she sang a shining gold thread of melody up the cliff face to peer into a niche where slept a wayfaring youth. "Come, come," she beckoned with the tip of her tone, giving it a flick.

Aor carried Echo into the house and placed her gently in bed, drawing the covers around her neck and looking long at her, finally shaking his head. Such a meager bite. Old Howl had surely lost his teeth. He left the house, taking no care to avoid banging the door, so sound and loudly Sod did snore.

Through the night Echo sat on the rock of illusion, teasing the boy with her tendril tone until at last he rose and came out of the niche to investigate. He reached for the note she sang and she pulled it back a little, making him come after it, closer and closer to the edge.

Suddenly she wrapped the tendril around his wrist and pulled, but he awoke suddenly and ruined the fun.

When dawn came, she gathered up flocks of mirages, obedient as sheep to the crook of her tones, deploying them around the path to the beach leading from the niche, creating precipices where there were none at the base of Terrapin's cliff, testing the perfection of the lure, the power of the liquid tones to overcome resistance and fatigue in the heart of the youth, to make him do what a sensible boy would not do until vanity was satisfied and she grew bored, looking elsewhere for distraction.

VII

Jabajaba of Nikaba

° ° °

"How far to the next oasis, stranger?"

"Half an hour due East and then half an hour due West."

"That leaves me where I am."

"Nearly; just beyond this dune lies the Crack in the World. The oasis is on the other side."

"How big is the crack? Can I jump over or climb down and up the other side?"

"If you can leap two hundred yards. I don't know how deep it is. Smoke rises from it but whatever fire causes it is so deep you can't see it."

"East by West I walk then, stranger. Can you tell me the time?"

"Nearly Midsummer, lacking a day and the time between breakfast and supper, traveler."

"What can you tell me about the town ahead?"

"There's cobblestoning and roofing to be done, wells to be dug. They aren't fond of paying, but if you work cheap enough and fast enough they're lazy enough to let you do it rather than working up their own sweat but mean enough to do it themselves before they'll pay a fair price."

"Yes? That sounds very much like the town I left a fortnight ago. Do they have work for scribes and teachers?"

"Not in Terrapin, my friend. Few read their names and next to none can write them. Tell me, did you crawl up the edge of the world to get here? I've seldom seen anyone approach from the South but Roughs and what they tell us of the land beyond can be pressed in the hole of my bad tooth."

"I hail from beyond the Desert of Bones. Jabajaba is my name, of Nikaba on the Gia River."

"I've heard the Gia runs red in the morning, blue in the evening and white at night."

"There's an old song that says so. When the goddess File gave birth to Ist, the Gia ran red with her blood and blue with placenta. The white was milk the river brought to feed Ist by Yu's command. In fact, the Gia's just as green as any other river."

"Do they know much of Terrapin in Nikaba?"

"Not much that's new, I'm afraid."

"There's nothing new in Terrapin. What they once knew about us is still true, or as true as the Gia running blue with afterbirth."

"We've heard you have Schulas and that you honor the demon Ist."

"Speak with care, Jabajaba of Nikaba. This is the domain of Ist and she is no demon, but the gracious and beautiful queen of all hearts."

"I see you're a religious man. Forgive me, I meant no harm. Those who brought such misguided information were obviously scurrilous and untrustworthy. It's a wonder my map brought me here."

"May I see your map?"

"With pleasure, old father. May I know your name?"

"Aeoui is my name, story teller my trade. I come to Terrapin from Capodistra, three days journey to the West."

"By the depth of your voice you must tell your stories well. I'd like to write a few of them down if you have the time to spare."

"And sign your own name to them in Nikaba?"

"You're right to be suspicious, but I'm no plagiarist. I call myself a scholar, which is what brings me to Terrapin. I haven't hiked fourteen days across the Desert of Bones to steal stories. Can you tell me anything about the Eagle Mall?"

"We call it the Giant's Harp. It was carried here at the Beginning by Terrapin himself, who was the first creation of Yu."

"Yes? Hmm. I understand there's writing on it."

"Some writing, some pictures; snakelike marks, circles, some like vines and broken twigs. There are some like pillars standing, some like pillars crossed or fallen. Most have no meaning. Had they significance beyond design, my father would have told me."

"How would your father have known for certain?"

"The idle gather round my fire to listen to the history of our people as I heard it from my father and he from his. I tell the tales as they were told to me, coughing where my father coughed, in all ways keeping the tale as near to what I heard as might be.

"In this way all things which were known of old are known now, but alas I am the last for I have no one to pass this vocation to. The children hear with half an ear these days. While I tell on, my father and my father's fathers live awhile, but when I tell no more, no more do they.

"Sometimes I think it's for the best. As many evil things as good are kept alive by the telling of them and I have no charge to decide which things should not be told. Each feast and holiday has the tales proper to it. All are told in their time. All or none at all. That is the creed of my fathers and it is my creed."

"We have a saying amongst our scribes," said Jabajaba, "perhaps you've heard it: 'How may a man be dead if his words live? The spoken part of a man is his better part, it goes out of him and causes him no more trouble, while like a worm inside him gnaws the part he did not speak. A man who is dead is dead because he speaks no more."

"I think, Jabajaba, that a man speaks no more because he is dead."

"Still, a foot of your fathers and a lock of your own white beard could be saved by trusting me with some of your holy ware."

"I can tell the beginnings of things. Which do you want to know?"

"Tell me why there's so much sand in the Desert of Bones. I've been walking through visions of water for fourteen days now and would have died of thirst if I hadn't found an oasis yesterday."

"That is the Last Oasis and marks the extent of my own travel. This land was once fair and blooming as far as the edge of the world. Here my ancient grandfather, also named Aeoui like myself, sat in gardens rich with scented flowers to tell his stories.

"One night Ist herself appeared to listen to a tale. Whenever Grandfather finished a tale, Ist demanded to know what happened next, so that my ancient father was kept at telling until Venus arose in the morning sky.

"Still she asked what followed from each and every answer he made, until he had told her the history of Terrapin unto the very day in which they spoke. She demanded to know further, what would happen before the sun should set that day.

"This, Grandfather did not know, though he feared to make no answer, so, in exasperation, he told Ist that before the sun set that day, the spirits would depart from the trees, flowers and other growing things, having grown tired of their accustomed forms.

"Ist was at last satisfied and said 'so be it,' appearing in her true form, which so dazzled Grandfather's eyes that ever after they saw but dimly. At a snap of her fingers, the spirits of the garden arose and fled, so that nothing was left of all the sweetness flourishing upon this sand through which we walk. Those banished spirits dwell in the air now and appear as mirages. Before that day, there were no mirages in Terrapin."

"How is it, Aeoui, that your pleasant oases escaped the edict of Ist?"

"They spring from spots sacred to Yu. His shrines and temples, though they are all dust now, once stood wherever an oasis rises. Upon these spots no mirage ever settles. It is by this that we judge the god still lives. Should a mirage ever settle upon an oasis, we would know that the world was at its end."

"I think I see the spires of Terrapin ahead."

"The city you see is mirage, there are no spires in Terrapin."

"It must be in such a stately mirage that Ist makes her home, if she is not dead as I've heard."

"Dead she is not, for on that day the spirits will return to the sand. Then, all we see around us will again flourish and grow green."

"And yet you say she is not a demon."

"One would fear to say such a thing even were it true, Jabajaba of Nikaba, but it is not!"

"Our scribes write her name with a mark like a fish tail drawn with quick strokes, but sometimes she is also written with a mark meant to be a wolfs tail. It is said she rules both."

"How strange your notions of the goddess. Ist commands flowers, trees and the intoxicating Harp Plant. She rules sand and mirage, but the wolves owe no obedience to her. They are subject to Loup Aru, the Wolf O'the Wild, as are the Roughs. Things of the sea belong to Po."

"Our understandings are very different, Aeoui. I was taught that Po was the keeper of the spirits of the drowned."

"Then you heard your history from the songs of Schulas, who believe themselves to be his daughters. They're so wild none knows their true father and so vain they assume he must be a god."

"The Schulas aren't favorites of yours?"

"I am not such stone as to remain unmoved before the charm of their music, but their shoddy grasp of facts must naturally set me against them. It should be as easy to sing the truth beautifully as lies. The children listen to them daily while I seldom come to town to correct their subsequent

misunderstanding of history. There are so many villages and towns who need me, I can't very well do for all."

"Hold awhile Aeoui. . . tell me, are there any markings on the Giant's Harp like these I draw in the sand?"

"Very like them, some the very ones. This one and this one, I know. . .this I do not. . . these resembling different gestures of the hand and fingers I recognize. Do you write in these scripts?"

"No, but I suspect there is wisdom frozen in that place older than your fathers', spoken in tongues they did not speak. I've made this tiring journey to examine this alleged syllabarium of dead tongues, not to steal tales. The man who made my map was not a scribe and provided only careless notes from memory, which more tease than inform. That is how I know these few signs."

"So! Well it is good to meet you, Jabajaba of Nikaba, but I must take leave of you now. Tomorrow, I must be in Terrapin to ply my trade. Your oasis lies a short walk beyond this dune."

"Aha! Now that you point me the right way, I see the water ripples in the air. I'm bone weary or I'd gladly accompany you. Can you tell me where to find lodging when I get to town?"

"Ask at the Nine Hammers."

° ° °

Aeoui entered the Southern gate, passing the house where Lo lived with Eliot. He saw her at the window staring out.

"Lo! Be sure you come to Midsummer's, I haven't seen you there for years. It is Lo, there, isn't it?"

She opened the window and answered in a soft voice. Aeoui read deep unhappiness on her face and heard it in her voice.

"I would love to, Aeoui, but I'm not allowed out."

"What? Not out! We shall see about that! Not out on Midsummer's? Where is your uncle? I'll have a word with the devil."

"No, please, don't speak to Eliot. Don't tell him I talked to you, Aeoui, please."

"What? And why not? Are you afraid of him child?"

"I must go now."

"Are you afraid he might return and catch you talking to someone? I will see him, by thunder."

"I beg you don't, Aeoui. I. . . I'll come."

"Very well, and fix yourself up a bit. You look like the daughter of old Gia herself. If I don't see you at fireside, I'll come and find out why not!"

Lo shut the window, her hand trembling so she could barely fasten the clasp. She lowered the top half of the back window and wedged a polished metal dish between the panes to make a mirror. Eliot had broken the glass mirror over her head when he caught her admiring herself, then beat her because he cut his hand doing so.

He didn't beat her so much anymore. Not since she learned to say nothing, stay meekly inside and refrain from looking out the window when he was at home. She practiced the art of invisibility so routinely it would have surprised her little to find she no longer had a shadow.

Eliot's shovel, pick and wheelbarrow were gone. That meant he had a job, hopefully a well to dig. When all three tools were gone, it often, but not always, meant he would be gone till supper. If the barrow alone was gone, it meant he had a cartage job and might be back any time. She knew the average time each combination of tools might represent and arranged what freedom she dared steal around this knowledge.

She knew every mood and nuance of her tyrant's face and disposition, what it was likely to lead to and how to stay out of harm's way as much as might be. Anything out of the ordinary was punished, be it the moving of a table without asking, or the very asking itself, so that she was paralyzed and Eliot as good as lived alone, except that he had his meals served, his clothes washed and his house swept.

Not to make him out as more of a monster than he was, Eliot usually refrained from punishing her for mere suspicions. He was broad enough to be above that. . . in fact, prided himself on it.

Lo returned to the mirror after checking the front window, peeking cautiously to see if Eliot was in sight. The house was so situated she had two minutes to assume her death mask after glimpsing him at the head of the road, three minutes if he trundled his barrow. It pained her to consider the number of hours she spent darting to the window. Sometimes, especially after a beating, she left the death mask on for days and didn't go to the window at all.

What the nature of Eliot's suspicions were, or their cause, she had no notion. He was above explaining himself. He prided himself on it.

Lo swept her hair back to hide the strands Eliot had hacked off and tied it with a blue ribbon, her only adornment. She kept it hidden, along with a book handwritten by her father, in a crevice between the roof beams. The ribbon's proscription lent it charm and the dinner plate mirror told her that she was truly transformed with it tied in her dark hair.

When wearing the ribbon, the gray eyes in her pale face lost their glaze of humiliation. Of course, no one else ever saw them. Except Eliot. Aeoui was the first person she'd dared speak to in two years. He had spoken to her first. She could have ducked out of sight before she was seen, as she always did, to avoid any possibility that news of her crime might reach Eliot, but this time she didn't.

She wondered at her own bravery, darting again to the window as though the very remembrance of the conversation would bring Eliot steaming down upon her, slapping her with the small white hands which grew from the thick wrists of his workingman's arms.

She wondered if Elmo would be at Midsummer's. Since she had talked to nearly no one since the death of her father, Elmo was more in her mind than she in his.

She would go, she decided suddenly. Lo of the blue ribbon decided, the unbeaten fragment of Lo who sometimes glanced from her chalk white face despite all better judgment.

"Close your slut's eyes," he would snarl when he saw that rare glint, but he wouldn't hit her then. For some reason he was afraid to, and anything he feared in the least, he would not do. He prided himself on it.

Though not a philosopher like his foolish overstudied and dead brother Lit, he understood well that life was too hard and too short to waste time doing things you fear. If you feared them it was for a good reason and it didn't matter what the reason was. Since you couldn't know everything there was no point in knowing anything.

He spent nights at the Nine Hammers muttering alone, facing the wall, "... you don't know what you're talking about. None of you know what you're talking about."

Eliot was as invisible to the local patrons as was Lo to him. Devil take the brat. She had the same warped mind as her father. Nothing was ever too good for Lit or too mean for his brother. Oh yes, Lit, talking like he knew everything, impressing everyone. "How can there be such opposites in one family," he'd hear them say, laughing. What did they know? Didn't know anything, that's what they knew. Nothing. That's what. Go home for a minute and make sure Lo isn't sneaking out. Bet she does it quick. Whole town would know. Good-bye reputation.

Be cursed Midsummer's tomorrow. Lo was getting old enough to be sneaking out in earnest. Well, he'd have to kill her if it came to that. No court on earth would convict him. At least lame her a little, not enough to keep her from helping around the house. Good thing the neighbors were distant, she'd done a lot of screaming when he was breaking her spirit.

Now she was tame, but there was something vicious in those cold gray eyes that could suddenly startle. Better dead with that kind of streak. He'd seen it in Lit too, after the time his brother had clumsily fallen from a tree and broken his precious arm. Sheer nastiness, that's what it was, the look

in Lit's eyes as he clasped the arm to his chest.

Nearly skinned alive Eliot was for that, and it was only an accident! He'd given Lit only the slightest good natured nudge from the top branch of the persimmon tree. Even so, he was beaten so hard, just as though it were all his fault, that he could feel it yet when Lo looked at him with those eyes so like her father's.

"Enough trouble mindin' my own, what you might say, Aeoui. Look at old Eliot over there muttering to himself, the stinking devil."

"But have you noticed anything, Aor. You get around more than most."

"I won't lie to you Aeoui, and ashamed I am to say I've seen this and that, but never enough to do anything about. I'm sure he beats her, but then, I beat my own boys."

"Ah yes, and I'd beat mine if I had any, but I don't mean an honest and merited roughing, Aor. She's terrified that Eliot might even find out we spoke."

"I don't like that."

"She's promised me she'll be at Midsummer's tomorrow."

"We can but watch," Aor rose to go.

"I'll speak to Ro. Careful you don't hit the hammers going out the door, Aor."

"Many's the time. Mind your own head, Old Crow's Tongue. Goodnight all."

All heads turned to acknowledge Aor's farewell, except Eliot's. He mumbled away at the wall.

"Don't know what they're talking about, none of them."

VIII

Eagle Mall

° ° °

It was Midsummer's Day morning. Eliot was gone. Lo sat on the front step braiding shepherd's purse hearts into a bindweed belt. She was tense, glancing around every few seconds to see if Eliot was returning.

She wore her blue ribbon. Her gray eyes were set in the expression Eliot feared and hated. The look added beauty to her pale prettiness. Submissive Lo was absent from those eyes. This Lo would not be that Lo again, if she died for daring.

Her fingers trembled as she braided, betraying fear beneath determined cheerfulness. The ribbon did it. The ribbon and the book she read while she was braiding. It was a the blue book written in her father's hand - a book of lessons and advice Lit thought worth knowing and passing on, written in the six months of his illness during which Aor had ministered to him with onions and compresses. Lit did not know he was dying, nor did Aor bother him with the information, the result being that the otherwise provident teacher and father had failed to take precautions for Lo's future. That this might be held against him never once crossed her mind.

The book contained no hints on surviving the guardianship of such a one as Eliot, so she had hidden the volume beneath a floorboard and all but forgotten it until this day.

Lo had dared go to the margin of the southern gate to pick the weeds for braiding, avoiding Eliot's booby traps by stepping only where she's seen him step. Aeoui had followed the same straight line (distinguished from the rest of the yard as it was by Eliot's comings and goings) when he'd stopped by to see her, unknowingly avoiding Eliot's deviltry.

Shortly after Eliot left that morning, swinging his pick, Lo had made her decision, put on her ribbon and left the house. She'd promised Aeoui she would be at the Midsummer's gathering. This was the first step toward that fire.

Eliot wouldn't be gone long. When he carried the pick alone, it was for protection, not work. Dor, the innkeeper, made him leave it outside when Eliot went to the Nine Hammers to drink and mutter.

Lo had slept but little the night before. After four years in Eliot's bondage, she knew the time had come to make her move. Hour after hour she had lain awake with one thought: do what must be done and pay the consequences. The yellow bindweed blossoms trembled as she bound them into a rope and tied the completed braid around the waist of her damp sail leaf smock. She had scrubbed it as soon as Eliot left and put it on wet, having no other clothes.

She then committed the audacity, just as Eliot appeared at the turn of the road, of fixing a garland of sweetbrier blossoms into her hair, arranging her dark tangled locks with her fingers since she had no brush or comb.

Lo arranged the garland using the porch window as a mirror. Eliot's reflection erupted behind her, stunned, gaping. She continued to twine the briar roses unconcernedly, just as though he were not about to kill her.

o o o

Jabajaba of Nikaba entered the southern gate of Terrapin whistling. He had left the oasis an hour before dawn and it was now mid-morning. His heart was glad. The town was fair as reported. He could see the fabled Eagle Mall away at the end of the avenue, towering above the town.

The southern gate was overgrown with generations of foliage, layers of dead-nettle, raspberry briar, knotgrass and elder. Blue headed harebells nodded at hedge foot in the gentle breeze.

Doubtless, the ancient gate was a treasury of inscriptions, but it would take a major burning away of the detritus of ages to discover them.

Jabajaba's attention was drawn to a couple near by. An ugly looking brute was berating a pale young woman who wore a blue ribbon in her long black hair. The girl faced away from the man, appearing to pay not the slightest attention to his ranting.

The man suddenly slapped the woman across the back of the head, knocking her off her feet. Her head struck the porch and she fell dazed. The man raised the pick and shook it threateningly with his small white hands that looked bizarre attached to his powerful arms. It appeared he was really going to strike her with it.

Jabajaba shot forward, without thinking, deflecting the arc of the pick with his forearm. A briar rose was severed from the girl's garland as the pick chunked into the ground.

Words of outrage leapt to Jabajaba's lips but remained unuttered as he looked into the hateful, unfocused eyes of the would be killer, saw the flecks of foam at the corners of his contorted mouth.

The brute made a dive for the pick and Jabajaba stepped back, tripping over the girl who had crawled behind him for protection. The madman ripped his pick from the ground and swung it over his head to deliver a blow to the intruder.

Before the pick could dispatch its intended victim, a speedy blur exploded on the scene, hitting the would be killer in the belly with cannonball force, sending him rolling head over heels.

"Aor!" cried the girl.

Aor had knocked the wind out of the assailant, and from himself as well. Jabajaba snatched the pick from the stunned man who held his small hands before his eyes in terror and whimpered.

Soon as Aor recovered his breath he said, "Well now Lo, suppose you start at the beginning."

"I told Eliot I'm going to Midsummer's and he said he'd kill me first."

Jabajaba wondered, not unreasonably, what sort of crazy place he'd come to. He had been in Terrapin less than one minute. He wondered if he could keep up the pace.

"Stand up," Aor commanded the whimpering bull, lodging the blade of the pick with a forceful kachunk into the ground, half an inch from Eliot's leg. It was apparent Eliot was no longer dangerous. He was a quivering, sobbing wreck, all fight fled.

"Curse you for an idiot, man! What means this outrage?" bellowed Aor. Eliot's tiny hands jumped protectively before his face. "And stop that mewling, you are a man grown. Don't disgrace our town further in the eyes of this stranger."

"Stranger no more. In the time it takes to sneeze thrice, I've saved a lady's life and you,

Sir, have saved mine. I am Jabajaba of Nikaba."

"I am Aor, and this fair lady is Lo, daughter of Lit. This sad excuse for a man is Eliot, once but no longer guardian of the lady who owes her life to you. Welcome to Terrapin, Jabajaba of Nikaba."

"A pleasure, I'm sure. Did you suffer from your fall, daughter of Lit?" Lo did, indeed, look disoriented.

"I am not much injured, thank you. Just a bump on the head. Thank you for . . ." she seemed at a loss for words and gazed about her in confusion. Suddenly the world tilted sharply and rose to meet her. Jabajaba caught her before she hit the ground. She was so light, he was able to stop her fall with little effort.

"Let me tend to her," said Aor. He scooped Lo out of Jabajaba's arms and started to carry her toward the house. Lo came to for a moment, long enough to say: "Keep to the beaten path - there are traps!" then passed out again.

"Mind Eliot, if you please," Aor called over his shoulder as he carried Lo into the house and laid her on the bed.

"No, not here!" she protested in a barely audible murmur, before dropping off again. Aor understood, lifted her back off the bed and placed her on the thin mat on the floor. He then produced an onion from the folds of his voluminous coat, as well as a knife, and began to slice it under her nostrils. The fumes brought her back to consciousness with a shiver.

"There's a girl. Nothing wrong with you an onion can't cure! Now chew on this while I attend to your uncle." He pressed the sliced onion into her hand and left the room.

"Tell me, Aor," asked Jabajaba when the old Rough returned, "does Terrapin have a jail for this animal?"

"Jail? No, not for his ilk, only for honest criminals. For the likes of him we have mineshafts that we seal with boulders, leaving just a peep hole open to drop moldy bread into. Right for such as Eliot. Just right I'm bound."

Eliot made a sudden rolling break and was on his feet and out the southern gate in twenty paces, charging into the network of bramble and nettle on the margin of the Desert of Bones.

"Let the rascal go, Jabajaba. No use us scratching our hides in the thornies . . .let him tear his own flesh to shreds for part payment."

Eliot's howl of pain was soon heard, accompanied by curses once he realized no attempt would be made to recapture him.

"You've made a real enemy, all the more so seeing he's a vengeful coward. Welcome to Terrapin, stranger."

Lo stood at the door of the cottage in shock, her normally pale face white as death. Her gray eyes rested mutely thankful upon Jabajaba.

"But you've made two friends to compensate," Aor added.

"Once cursed but twice lucky I am, then. Can you tell me where I can find a place to room, board and wash the sand from my beard?"

"That depends on your skills unless you have a fat sack of gold at your belt. What brings you to our land, my friend?"

"I've come to study the writing on the Giant's Harp. I'm a scribe and this pouch holds only silver and biscuit."

"Ah! Then you may be in luck. Try the house of Gia, across from the Sign of the Nine Hammers. She's been known to take a lodger on honest business, though they be rare in Terrapin."

"Strangers, or honest ones?"

"Both, both. You'll find her balmy, but don't let it fret you, she's better of temper than she looks. Give her greeting from Aor, for what good it'll do."

"That takes care of me, but what's to be done about Lo? She can't be left around for Eliot to catch when he comes out of hiding."

"Don't worry, we two are friends of old. I'll keep watch on her and raise the cry for trouble. And I'll know which direction to yell, won't I?"

"I'm all right, Jabajaba of Nikaba. Thank you for my life." Lo managed a smile as she picked up the blue book where it had been knocked off the porch. Jabajaba's eyes went straight from the smile to the book as he replied: "Well thank you for a bit of excitement. It's been dull plodding through sand so long. May I ask the name of the book?"

"'Tis the wisdom of my father, Lit the teacher. It is all I have left of him."

"I would like to glance at it sometime, if you've a mind to let me." Lo considered for a moment, then stepped forward and pressed the blue book into the stranger's hands.

"Glance all you like and return it when you've read your fill."

Aor put his gnarled arm round the girl's shoulder and led her toward town. Eliot's smoldering eyes followed them, from deep in the briars

where he lay hidden. When the scene was clear, he retrieved his pick, then ran quickly through the southern gate into the desert, clothing shredded from the brambles.

"None of them know what they're talking about," he snarled viciously, pausing often to attack the sand with his pickax.

° ° °

A black tomcat blocked Jabajaba's way at Gia's gate. He scratched it behind the ears and it arched its back, raised its tail, permitted him to pass to the porch of the sizable thatched cottage.

Gia, from behind curtains, saw a sun burned black eyed stranger with a bushy red beard and yellow hair walk up her path. Los, the tom, kept the stranger at bay long enough for Gia to inspect. She must be sure. She was sure. But she must be certain.

Gia made Jabajaba wait a good while after he knocked, sizing him up more thoroughly from her hidden vantage... He looked somewhat fierce but kindly and had a broader brow than common, a brow that stirred her memory. He didn't fidget while she made him wait. That was good. Insofar as anything was good concerning the coming of this man. It was also good that he didn't appear to feel her eyes upon him. He was a man of plain sight, not one of the other sort from whom secrets were unkeepable. It had not always been thus, in her certain memory.

. . if, in fact, it were he, and how could it not be? And neither a moment late nor early

Gia waited until Jabajaba turned away before throwing the door open wide and fixing him with her one good glittering eye.

"Who dares disturb an old woman's nap!"

"I am Jabajaba of Nikaba looking for room and board. Aor sent me to the house of Gia with greetings."

"That is not much of a recommendation. And what sort of man would you be, who falls to slumming with Aor no sooner than he wanders in

from the desert?"

Jabajaba wore a patina of desert grime and a necklace of empty water gourds hung round his neck.

"I'm a student and a scribe."

"Then you cannot afford the cost of lodging, good day sir."

"I have money."

"What sort? Beads and feathers, by your look."

"I have silver and three good pearls."

"Pearls will buy nothing in Terrapin. Let me see the color of your money."

He brought out a small sack which the crone snatched and stuffed in her withered bosom.

"But that's all I have!"

"It is safer with me, if you take it across the street to the Nine Hammers you'll come back with none of it. I will hold it till you go. Now, fill this bucket at yonder well and be quick about it, or you will get no tea."

Jabajaba jumped for the bucket and did as he was bid, leaving his gourds and pack by the front gate and crossing the road to the well. A woman with the reddest hair he had ever seen was dreamily leaning over the edge of the well. She did not look up nor seem aware that anyone had approached.

Jabaj aba waited for the red-haired beauty to raise her bucket so he could use the rope. He was in no hurry, taking advantage of her unawareness of his presence to feast his desert weary eyes on her face and form. He remembered the great desire he had felt for water before reaching the Last Oasis. This girl reminded him of that thirst, though he couldn't think just why. It was nothing so simple as a metaphor for awakened lust, though his attraction to her was unaccountably immediate and strong. What puzzled him was a sense of long acquaintance with the figure he gazed upon.

Gia, watching the tableau from her window, shook her head sadly and let the curtain fall back into place.

Suddenly self conscious, Jabajaba realized how he must look after walking fifteen days of desert. He cleared his throat but this signal of presence went unnoticed by the young woman who continue to gaze down the well as though there were something well worth considering at the bottom. She appeared carved of rose quartz. He decided to speak.

"Hello, I'm new in town. Is this a public well or must I pay to draw water here."

"What? Oh. . . what did you say?"

"I'm a stranger in town, is the weather always so lovely?"

"Oh. Yes. It's cold though."

"I'm a friend of Aor, lodging at Gia's. Where do people go in town for amusement?"

"Go? Uh . . . nowhere."

The woman's purple eyes were fixed on the ground. She seemed deeply embarrassed. He reached for the rope, without asking, and began to pull up her bucket. She seemed surprised he should do so, showed reluctance, for a moment, to permit it. He filled his own bucket and introduced himself: "My name is Jabajaba, I come from Nikaba across the desert."

"I'm. . ." there was a long pause while she seemed to search for something she did not ordinarily use and had consequently misplaced, "... Echo."

"Well I must get this water back promptly or Gia says I get no tea. It was nice talking to you."

Echo stood looking after the interesting stranger for a long time after he went away. He must be brave to live with Gia. Jabajaba, from Nikaba across the desert. . . there was something familiar about the stranger.

Musing, she lowered the already filled bucket into the well and drew it up again, balanced it on her head and returned to the house of snores.

° ° °

"You were long enough," Gia complained. "Fill the kettle and hang it over the fire, then sit down and let me have a look at you,"

"I met someone at the well named Echo," said Jabajaba.

"She's a strange one, a delicate one. If you have an eye for her your sight is keen and clear. Not all can see her loveliness beneath that mop of ragged hair. But you say you've come to study. Let me guess. You've come to decipher the Giant's Harp?"

"Yes. It's known as the Eagle Mall where I come from."

"It's the same thing and it isn't. Each of its many names conjures different histories. You'll need more than your small bag of silver to pay your board before you finish the task you've set yourself."

"Why? Does it appear that difficult?"

"I don't know your qualifications. Others have tried and come away convinced there is no more meaning to be found in the markings of the Giant's Harp than in the lines of their hands."

"Can you tell me of these others? Where were they from?"

"It was so long ago I remember nothing. The water is aboil now, carry this pot over and fill it up before the steam dies. Tell me how you met Aor."

"I'd just got through the gate off the desert when I saw a madman trying to kill a woman with a pickax. I stopped him, but I tripped and it looked like he was going to put the pick through me, when Aor stepped out of thin air and stopped him."

"So it came to that! What did you do with the madman?"

"He got away from us, into the bramble thicket."

"At large, is he? How fares the girl?"

"The funny thing is, she didn't seem especially perturbed, neither before nor afterward. Oh, she ducked behind me, right enough, when the fellow swung his pick, looked pale as death, but I mean, she didn't seem very scared."

"You make fine distinctions, Jabajaba."

"No, it's not that. Anybody would have noticed. It was, well, strange."

"Lo was anything but a strange girl when she went to live with Eliot five years ago, after her father died. Lit was a good man. A pupil of mine."

"You were a teacher then?"

"I am a teacher, young man. With pupils or no."

"Then you are a reader?"

"I can spell my name. Yours too, if it comes to it. Come Tio, come Zee." Two cats, a calico and a fat blue longhair jumped on her lap.

"Who was the black devil who challenged me at the gate?"

"That was Los and your description is apt. Its a wonder these proper ladies have anything to do with him."

"I'm anxious to look over the Eagle Mall. If you'd be so kind as to show me my room?"

"Yes, of course... Behind that door. You'll find bedclothes in the closet and the tosspot is on the back porch. If I'm out when you return, the door is never locked. We may have maniacs in Terrapin, but no thieves."

Jabajaba moved his pack into the room which was barely big enough for the bed, an ancient sack of ticking on four squat legs carved into lion heads. There were many things he wanted to ask Gia about, the source of her name to begin, but his interest in the Eagle Mall was greater than his interest in the squint eyed crone. He took parchment, pen and ink from his pack and set off.

A broad cobbled street ran straight from the southern gate, then looped in a circle around the central square and continued another half mile to the edge of the town, where a broad strip of meadow dipped out of sight before rising into a steep knoll overlooking the edge of the continent.

From a distance the Eagle Mall appeared to rise from behind the town square. The lyric pillars reached high overhead, like arms protecting the town.

A cool breeze blew through the portals from the ocean and a pleasant perfume Jabajaba would only later be able to identify wafted to his nostrils, the scent of the Harp Plant blossom which grew only in near proximity to the" Giant's Harp."

He noticed, as he approached the town square, that the Eagle Mall suddenly seemed farther away. No longer giving the illusion of being perched atop the plaza, it now hovered at the vanishing point of the avenue. As he walked, he seemed to come no closer, which he soon discovered was due to the sudden dip of meadow where the avenue ended.

From the bottom of the dip, the pillars suddenly attained true perspective, towering from the knoll to shore up the sky.

Jabajaba's fingers itched to riffle the pages of this stone library with its arms in the clouds. He climbed the knoll and, removing his sandals, set foot on the first terraced step. The marble was unexpectedly warm. The first step was forty paces across, thirty two paces covered the second, each step up requiring the use of hands to climb.

The third step was twenty one paces across, and the fourth twelve. Eight paces took the fifth terraced step, a sixth was six paces broad, then a top step of three paces took him to the floor of the outer hall.

These terraced steps ran all around the Giant's Harp, the outer step on the Northern side overhanging the cliff edge with a dizzying view to the beach. A hundred yards to the left of these steps was a path in the cliff face leading to the ancient closed mineshafts from which the wealth of Terrapin was one time dug.

The sight which met his eyes upon crossing the outer hall and entering the vast inner vault banished the accumulated weariness of his journey. In eight radii, extending from the obsidian altar in the center, ran aisles a hundred feet in length. Six feet in width, they each ended at one of eight outer pillars of the vault. A ninth pillar stood between the North and Northwest aisle. Each of the eight aisles was thick with writing. Every

one contained a different style of script etched into its marble.

A Schula's tune rose over the cliff and meandered among the pillars, wafted on a salty breeze sweetened by the Harp Plants which completed their attempted ring around the Eagle Mall by growing down the cliff side where the bottom step overhung the promontory edge.

Jabajaba walked around the ring of aisles clockwise, paused, then walked around left to right, stood for a long time considering, then raised his hands to the heavens shining through the open arches of the dome and, though not a religious man, gave joyous thanks that he'd been guided to this temple.

The ages had not eroded the writing. Each aisle was overlaid with a slab of green glass, half an inch thick and marvelously transparent, which would keep it intact for ages still to come.

Jabajaba sat down, took out his pens and paper and began to copy.

Gia went first to the house of Ro the astronomer. "He's come back."

"What is his name?"

"Jabajaba of Nikaba."

"We must prepare for Ist."

"There is no preparation, Ro."

"At least we will read the signs aright."

"Must it always happen thus?"

"In your own memory is it not so? Your experience and my calculus agree, Gia."

"It is so painful to lose our young ones, time after time."

"Has this one the same marks of ambition?"

"Aye, the same. Worse than the one, better than the other."

A gust of wind blew suddenly from the grate.

"The chimney listens already, Ro. I go."

Jabajaba of Nikaba felt very good about his prospects as he stood surveying the aisles radiating from the altar of the Eagle Mall. Though he could not read a single sign, he could see his own name rise like a mirage

amongst the letters, brilliant with the luster of renown. He had but to copy what he saw displayed to distinguish himself among the scribes of Nikaba, never mind producing a translation. Again he raised his hands in heartfelt gratitude to the resident deity.

Eight rays displayed eight distinct varieties of script: cuneiform, pictograph, alphabet, rune, hieroglyph, cursive, one that looked like worms and broken twigs with dangling berries and another resembling a network of mazes.

Each aisle's writings began with a quote from the aisle to its immediate left before preceding with its own style of script. Jabajaba presumed that this was done for comparative purposes, so that, could one fathom the signs of one aisle, one might with diligence decipher the rest. He was led to believe this by the recurrence of a dotted circle within each form of writing, appearing in a similar place in the text example. The obvious assumption was that the various examples were of identical content.

He decided to begin his work by copying the comparative sections until a clue suggested itself or happy intuition whispered.

He was deeply absorbed in copying when a shadow fell across his page. He looked up to see the old white bearded story teller who had directed him to the oasis.

"I thought to find you here, Jabajaba. Have the scratchings on the giant's floor spoken yet?"

"Their tongues would wag if they weren't tied together, but I think I see the knot which binds them, Aeoui. Do you know the meaning of this dotted circle? It must be duplicated a thousand times in this aisle alone."

"Perhaps an eye? A dotted circle is popular as a design for garments, both here and other places my wanderings take me. The people call it the 'Eye of Ist' and believe it brings luck and fertility."

"It doesn't seem likely that the writers were so concerned with a bodily part as to speak of it at such great length."

"The markings are designs, nothing more. If you wish to hear tales, come tonight to Midsummer's where I will be entertaining the children and instructing the susceptible. Good evening."

Jabajaba turned his attention once more to work, but twilight gathered quickly and the green glass became more and more opaque until it was barely legible. He reluctantly quit and moved to view the sunset from the cliff, where it lingered an hour after it vanished from Terrapin, behind the west colonnade of the Eagle Mall.

He lowered himself to the bottom terrace, unprepared for the sudden step into thin air which presented itself. So sudden was the onset of vertigo, Jabajaba splayed himself against the terrace step, heart hammering.

When he'd caught his breath, he inched forward on his belly and peeped over the step, discovering a heady pleasure in the thrill of fear surging through his body.

He'd never realized he had a fear of heights, having never been higher than the top of the Great Rock in the Desert of Bones. He'd felt the thrill of its height as he gazed back over the distance of three days journey to the fertile delta with the blue palms, but it had not been unexpected, as was this abrupt abyss. Nor was it so very, very precarious.

The next stop on the rounds of Gia was the Nine Hammers.

"You sent me a right one this time, Aor."

"He looked like he bears watching."

"He needs no watching. He's a harbinger but no threat in himself. First Elmo went to the Schulas, then you brought Echo home half dead from your orgy! Aor started to protest, Gia silenced him. "Yes, I know all about it. I thought it might be time, and I was not mistaken. No more though, lest a wind blow up and carry our words to Ist. She's caught me jabbering once today."

Gia finished her cup of thick black beer and set back out on her rounds, looking warily behind her from time to time. A sudden gust from

the otherwise windless afternoon gave the Nine Hammers a spin on their axle, quickening her limping scuttle.

"Those to be told must be told quickly for soon every golden throated lily will grow an ear and every window frame an eye lid," she muttered. "Not that telling makes a difference."

As Jabajaba looked over the cliff he heard a tune rising faintly from the beach. He could make out no words but realized he was listening to a Schula. So they were not all myth and story after all!

Each rush of the surf drowned the melody. Only alluring fragments were audible. He detected a speck which he thought to be the source of the singing. His gaze was drawn from the speck by the appearance of what seemed to be a bubble of glass bulging from the sea.

Astonishment brought back the vertigo, despite, or because of, the rare beauty of the sight, instinct commanded that he crawl back a safe distance from the cliff and retreat.

He heard a beating of wings as he got to his feet and walked around the inner edge of the terrace but could not determine the source. A remarkable sleepiness seized him. Too tired to move another step, he lay on the warm marble and fell asleep.

He dreamed that he awoke and went back to work inspecting the markings, which had become luminous through the green glass so that he could see them in the dark. He peered at the basket-weave letters, trying to decide if they were phonic or representational, when Aeoui appeared and told him that they were pictures of every bird's nest which had ever been built.

"And when the little birds are hatched, they go over here to catch worms," he indicated the southern aisle, which looked like a mass of worms in all possible contortions.

"When they have eaten, they go to the stream to bathe," Aeoui indicated the eastern aisle, whose markings were in ripples, currents and waves.

"Then they come out to dry in the sun," he tapped the western aisle with his walking stick. This aisle contained circular, spiral and hemispherical inscriptions.

"What of these other four directions?" Jabajaba asked.

"The birds do not know of them. Two lead hither and one leads yon. Northwest is the passage of the terrapin, see how his footsteps slide and slosh along the aisle? These are the footprints he made when he went to seek his rest.

"From the southeast comes a traveler, these are his footprints in the Desert of Bones. They would speak his own language to him if he knew how to read."

"And these other two?"

"From the northeast enters Ist, from the southwest come I to tell you this, and by this path," he tapped the northwest coursing route of the terrapin, "I go!" He vanished to the beating of invisible wings.

There were other dreams, one of frightening heights which brought him to the edge of wakefulness, desperately trying to clutch the smooth marble. Another was of a meeting before the council of scribes in which he presented them with a bird's nest filled with worms, declaring it to be the father of words. He was thrown out of the council with laughter and scorn, made to eat the worms and wear the bird's nest on his head.

He awoke dizzy and unrested. The dreams were fresh in his mind, causing him his first doubt: what if Aeoui spoke truly and these weren't signs but merely designs?

He looked up the northwest aisle and remembered the words "by this path I go."

"What are you doing?" He whirled around, startled at the voice. It was the red-haired young woman from the well.

Echo looked much more self possessed than when he'd startled her from her thoughts at the well. She's changed her dress and now wore an orange smock which tilted alarmingly with her scarlet hair and the rose

tint of her flesh. She had an air of having just wandered by casually.

"Echo. You startled me. I fell asleep for a minute, must be more tired than I thought. It's nice to see you again. I've been copying the designs on the floor."

"What for?"

"To look for meaning."

"Have you found some?" She looked with grave seriousness at the marks on his paper, as though she might herself detect some of the meaning he sought, if not the very thing she'd been looking for herself while staring down the well.

"I'll have to do some study before I can even decide if I'm copying them right side up."

"What will you do if you find any?"

"Any what?"

"Meaning."

"I will tell it to you, if you want. Do you come to the Giant's Harp often?" He realized, by the way she paused and considered, that he'd asked another tough one. She seemed to be searching in the same vague place she'd previously mislaid her name.

"I come here sometimes," she said at last, with an air of decision, even conviction. "Are you coming to Midsummer's?"

"I hadn't thought about it. I guess I will. You are? "

"Yes. Sometimes it's fun. You asked if there was anything to do here and I forgot to tell you. Good-bye."

"Wait!" exclaimed Jabajaba, but the girl with the flaming hair was away down the steps.

IX

Midsummer's Eve

° ° °

"Isn't that terrible, poor darling? What did they do to you next?" Moonlight glinted from the woman's copper gold hair, shone directly out of her diamond blue eyes as she stroked Eliot's matted hair consolingly. The lone cricket of the oasis paused whenever she spoke, then resumed its ratcheting.

"What do they know about raising kids? Nothing! Let 'em squat in the street if they had their way. Smash her head like a pumpkin, I say, and the rest of them too," Eliot patted his pick.

"Teach them a thing or two, and rightly so. They don't understand a man like you." The woman fingered the ribbon at the throat of her golden bodice and smiled ravishingly. The moonlight stole none of her color, though the rest of the desert was shadowed in tints of gray.

"Haven't had half the trouble they deserve," Eliot continued, pouring his troubles into the dainty ear of the strange woman who had said "I've been waiting for you" when he stumbled, thorn scratched and confused, into the Ebo Oasis at sundown. "I'll give them the other half though, if I catch one alone. Those know-nothings shouldn't even be allowed to walk

around where there's decent people. Let them try and raise an ungrateful niece who makes you feel like a dirty rat in your own house! I can tell what she's thinking, you see. She doesn't know it but I can."

"I'm sure you'll give her all the trouble she deserves. You seem so awfully brave. And so-o-o big . . . and your hands, so deft and sensitive . . . I'm sure they know the thousand secrets of touch!" She started to fan herself briskly.

"I'll be keeping an eye on 'em all. Little slut. Thanks I get."

"I'm sure Lo is being just as bad as she can be. Children these days! She's up to no good right now, you may be sure. You're only doing your duty to keep watch, especially with that wicked stranger come to town. You must be fearless and merciless, it's only right after what's been done to you. I'll be going now, but first I beg a favor of you?"

"Huh? Whazzat?"

"Just this," she leaned over and kissed him. Eliot was conquered.

"Don't go yet!" She was gone. As soon as he came to his senses, he'd never been kissed before, he rubbed the burning sensation of her lips away from his lips and spat.

"Pah! What does she know, anyway? Nothing! I do what I want." Eliot grabbed his pick and left the oasis, headed for town.

° ° °

As the sun dropped behind the Giant's Harp, long shadows of the colonnades crept to the edge of the town square. The shade of the main West pillar edged forward as the sun sank lower, seeking out a particular slab of marble set dead center in the town square. When this slab was darkened completely, with no ray of the pillar's shadow falling outside it, Midsummer's began.

Midsummer's, once a time of unleashed frolic, was now a muted occasion with a few traditional rites preserved from the days of early villagehood. The relaxing liquor of red Harp Plant berry flowed, though it

was considerably thinned from what the Roughs tossed down on the Still Night.

Crowds, eager to be entertained, came to the story teller's ceremonial bonfire to hear the epics of their ancestors, to learn who the fathers of their fathers were, and what deeds they had done.

° ° °

The evening star rose full, caught within the horns of a new moon. As Jabajaba trudged down the knoll from the Giant's Harp and across the meadow, past the mimosa patch at the edge of town, he heard the voice of Aeoui intoning an invocation. This made him to hurry his steps. Darkness had fallen by the time he settled at the outer ring of the fire, notepaper in hand, poised to record.

He saw Echo's bright red hair a few yards in front of him. She hadn't noticed his approach. He decided to transcribe some of Aeoui's words before making himself known to her. A quiet breeze blew in from the desert and carried Aeoui's voice toward the Giant's Harp.

Workmen set aside your tools

The night is fast upon you,

They will still be waiting

When morning dawns anew.

In days long gone the deeds of men

Were great as they shall be again.

Now while deeds are small and few,

Come harken to the old and true.

Let these tales of ancient times

Unto all hearts be spoken,

Mark the cadence and the rhymes

A single thread unbroken.

While this firelight shall flame

Heed to visions rare and strange

Flown from places without name

In ancient words that do not change.

Let my inspiration pour

Like raindrops on the ocean

Songs of peace and songs of war

Of treason and devotion

From my lips the words of old

By flame of will are bidden

Shining forth as bright as gold

Except what must be hidden

When my tale is told and done

Let dark and silence reign

Through the night until the sun

Tops yonder hill again

When Earth was new, in days of old,

Molten streams of silver rolled

'twixt riverbanks of whitest gold

T'was there this story first was told.

There was a giant, tall as ten

Among the first of living men

Who floats now on the Northern Sea

And from his breast there grows a tree

Whose branches will not bloom until

The sun and wind and moon grow still

But once he walked and by his hand

A herd of whales who walked on land,

Spoke in tongues of gods and man,

Conversed in song with Master Bran

Our present speech was taught by wolves

Who learned it from the moon,

But once we spoke another tongue

And all we said was true.

All we said was said in song

And nothing false was sung

Before we learned of right and wrong,

Or the Giant's harp was strung.

Before the gods we honor now

Lived other gods, remote

Who birth'd their godlings not by womb

But bore them from the throat

A ripple of amusement passed through the crowd at this unlikely image. Jabajaba, fingers flying over his paper trying to transcribe every word, was grateful when Aeoui paused here for effect. It gave him time to quickly replace the broken pen nib which was punctuating his pages with random blobs of ink. Echo looked round and their eyes met. They gave a mutual nod of recognition before the song continued.

These godlings then created men

And men begat each other

In ways amusing to the gods

Who watched from under cover

Watched them writhe and sport, behold

The fruit thereof was good

They warmed each other in the cold

And tended to their brood.

The gods of old were one as all

And each as one another

Complete unto themselves were they

Both father and as mother

Man they made from clay and straw

By gender did divide him

Set him naked in the world

His other half beside him

That man might stand beneath them

To serve and to obey

But half a god they made him

Of moldy straw and clay

Not two alone, created they

To walk upon two feet

Not two alone but one besides

And far less incomplete

For Bran no mate was fashioned

Nor man nor god not beast

Taller he, than hill or tree,

His sorrow never ceased

He searched the world in misery

For like size company

But evermore he found the shore

As empty as the sea

The gods looked on in envy

As mate with mate commingled

Wondered at the wisdom of

The god who made them single

Yu explained he could not change

The form they'd been provided

But promised future gods would all

Be equally divided.

"By twos alone," the gods did pray,

"observe the lot of Bran,

Who wanders earth in sorrow,

Pleasured not by gods nor man"

When great Bran swung his staff around

The winds licked 'cross the plain

When he drove his spear to ground

The Earth howled out in pain

In spite of all his strength and size

Great sadness was his lot

He burned by day, he writhed by night

His tears flowed thick and hot

No breast to lay his head upon

No true love's consolation,

No like size lips to kiss his own,

Nor joy of generation

Across the ocean, great Bran swam

Among his herd of whales

Rested, then swam back again

Among their flashing tails

The whales took liking to the waves

And begged great Bran to free them

Now his sadness was complete

That even they should flee him

"This is none of mine to give"

Said great Bran to the whales

"Go seek Po who rules these depths

for here his word prevails."

On condition," Po agreed,

"That forth you venture never,

Surrender both your hands and feet,

Forswear the land forever."

The story teller's rising and falling tiers of cadenced syllables had hypnotized most of the crowd by now. Possessed of their full attention, Aeoui left the narrative hanging and turned to his first love: moralizing. As the lecture gathered momentum, he soon lost the attention of those not readily susceptible to his magic. Elmo was one of these.

He wondered if Aeoui did it on purpose, to chase people away so he could amble over to the Nine Hammers and wet his whistle. It would be nice to have a younger story teller come around. Someone young would understand that a little moralizing goes a long way and, though not against it in principle, exhortation soon became boring to such as Elmo, who was not alone in this failing.

". . .to observe the limits and bounds provided each individual by the favor and decree of the gods, and not to overstep such lines, clearly drawn and ..." Aeoui droned.

"So clearly drawn and so tediously detailed," thought Elmo. "Maybe I'll go up to the Giant's Harp and play my whistle."

"... or risk losing our own qualities in the striving toward," continued the pedant. Elmo's mind wandered down the path to the mimosa patch, across the field and to the Giant's Harp. Soon, his body followed it.

As he passed the mimosa, he heard a commotion from the direction of the fire, but it didn't sound very interesting, certainly not a fight. He heard the voice of Aeoui caution on. Could even the apparition of Ist halt that drone, once he was wound up? Elmo thought not, limping across the meadow. Last season's leg injury pained him still. Aor said he'd walked on it too soon. And neglected his medicine. He'd tried his best but really couldn't look another onion in the eye. If a limp was the price, so be it.

Jabajaba heard a strangled gurgle and looked up from his notes, where he was taking advantage of the Aeoui's sermonizing to fill in shorthand symbols with their corresponding words while they were fresh in his mind. His personal system, not quite perfected, relied heavily on his retentive memory.

Echo, who had sat rigidly during the story, began to jerk spasmodically. She gasped as though she could get no air, making a creaky flapping sound unlike anything Jabajaba had ever heard coming from a human throat. For an absurd instant he wondered how it would be spelled, then dropped his notes and dashed over to her.

Echo's eyes rolled back in her head and she made stuttering sounds, thrashing violently. It looked as though she might hurt herself; Jabajaba grabbed her around the waist and tried to restrain her. The scent of her flesh was sweet, her entranced strength considerable. Though nearly twice her weight, it took all his power to hold her as she frothed, bucked and began to speak in a strangled voice: "No, no, the light, it's too bright oooh stop make them stop - the lights the LIGHTS - I'm bleeding, the lights, make them stop!"

Aeoui was saying that the reason the sea does not roll off the edge of the world is that it is forbidden to do so, when Echo suddenly relaxed and collapsed in a limp little heap.

Jabajaba felt a sharp poke: "Pick up the girl and follow me," Gia whispered. The crowd, seeing Jabajaba in command, did its best to ignore the diversion. Aeoui preached with greater vigor to reclaim their strayed attention.

"I told you she was one of our delicate ones," Gia said when they were well away from the fire. "Stay with her till she comes around, then help her home. She lives cat-cross to the well, you'll know the house by her father's snoring."

Jabajaba looped an arm under one shoulder and swung Echo over his back, holding her by haunch and arms like a slain deer. Echo's head bobbed up and down against his neck as he walked, the sweetness of her scent growing ever more faint. Her soft flesh against the nape of his neck felt cool, almost cold. He wondered if she were breathing. It suddenly occurred to him, with a jolt of fear, that she might have swallowed her tongue. He'd read about such things. He set her down in a clump of high grass and put his ear to her nostrils. Very faintly, yes, she breathed, and her mouth lolled open, tongue in its correct place. He sat watching her for awhile in the moonlight.

Again he was reminded of his desert thirst as he looked at her hair which shone bright red even though moonlight leeched the color from all

else outside the story teller's fire...

When he had looked his fill and had learned each line and curve of her face in repose by moonlight, he lifted "one of our delicate ones" very gently and carried her in his arms the rest of the way home, continuing to gaze at her face. There seemed something familiar about this moment, just as had been the case with his dream on the Eagle Mall, but he could not find or place it. Perhaps it was lost down the same well where Echo had seemed to misplace her name the day they met.

The house was easy to find from Gia's description. Jabajaba did not have to check to see if it was cat-cross to the well. Clarion Sod proclaimed his address near and far.

° ° °

Elmo sat on the bottom terrace, sore leg dangling over the abyss, sound leg tucked beneath him, gazing absently into the dwindling darkness where grotesque creatures romped visible to the mind's eye. It was easy to think he was sitting on the edge of the world as the whorling black delivered characters familiar from his dreams.

Three mounted riders, girls identical but for hair of black, copper-gold and red whirled past, waving, spurring their whales, who also waved. They appeared to be laughing and singing, calling out merrily, but the vision was mute.

As he gazed deeper into darkness, he saw a tortoise shell where Isa reclined. She did not wave. Even in fantasy, she would not. A voice fluted up, an actual voice, but it was hard to tell if it was Isa's since the wind blew the wrong way and he wasn't sure if he could tell anyway. Her voice might have changed by now. His had. Did she think of him? Her ears were keen, perhaps she'd heard him climbing down the stairs, could tell his leg was lamed a little. She could easily hear a shout down there with this southern breeze to carry it... if he were to call down . . .

"Hello."

"Lo!"

"How are you?"

"I haven't seen you in years."

"No. I went to the fire, but everyone stared. I felt like a freak and came up here."

"I heard about what happened to you, about Eliot and Jabajaba and all. I wish I'd known what was going on. My father and I would have helped. I hope they catch Eliot pretty quick."

"I don't think anyone's trying very hard. I don't think I want them to. He is my father's brother, no matter what."

"I don't guess he loved him much."

"He never said anything about him at all."

"You'll have to wait and see, huh?"

"I provoked him in a way."

"How?"

"I fixed my hair in front of him."

"Oh - bad as that?"

"I'm alive. I'm going to forget about it as fast as I can. I'll begin by never mentioning it again." And she did not.

"Have you been up here long, Elmo?"

"Yeah, I guess I have. I left when the preaching started."

"Echo had some kind of fit and Jabajaba held her down."

"A great rescuer of maidens, that one."

Lo blushed invisibly in the gloom.

"Do you want to know the end of Aeoui's story?" she asked, to fill the embarrassed silence.

"About Bran and the whales? Yeah, what happened?"

"Its very sad. When Bran can't find a mate he sickens and falls into a trance and gets washed out to sea. He floats around so long grass grows on him and sailors think he's an island.

"After Yu fulfills his promise to create sons and daughters, his youngest daughter, File, whom he loves very much, finds out about Bran. He's so big she can see him from the City of Eagles.

"So she goes down and mows the grass from him, and when it's all clipped away, falls in love with the handsome face she finds. She was pretty big too. I guess the gods are huge."

"Sometimes they are, sometimes they aren't, it depends on who tells the story," said Elmo.

"Anyway, he wouldn't wake up, so she kept going down every day for a hundred years, sitting on his breast and singing songs."

"She must have been smaller than him then."

"Maybe, I don't know, I missed some of it I got so upset by Echo, poor thing. I do start dreaming when he talks. I remember when I used to get to go to hear him, I couldn't remember if he said something or I dreamed it when I woke up the next morning.

"Let me think what happens next ... Oh yes, Bran finally wakes up and asks who she is and she says she's a mate of his own race to fool him because if he knew she was Yu's daughter he'd know it was dangerous to be caught with her.

"Anyway, after twenty verses or so, they end up with a daughter who turns out to be Ist, and when Yu finds out about it he gets so mad he turns Bran into a real island for good.

"Ist begs Yu to restore her father, but he won't, and plants some kind of enormous tree on him that's going to bloom at the end of the world when everyone's finally dead. Since Ist can't have her way, she makes him her favored isle and plants flowers and grape vines all over him and brings birds to sing in the tree.

"She even," here she lowered her voice and blushed into the unseeing darkness, "brings her lovers to be with her on the breast of her father."

"Ho ho. What happened next?"

"Nothing, Aeoui began to explain what it all meant and I left. I think he's still going on."

They listened through a light ratchet of cricket chirps and could, indeed, hear the voice of

Aeoui carried on the breeze. It was evident, from the lack of cadence, that the indistinct words moralized rather than providing entertaining tales of gods, demons and lust.

"Aeoui is a great believer in Ist. He's afraid she's going to show up at one of his gatherings like he says she did at his grandfather's when the desert was turned to sand."

"How is your father?" asked Lo.

"With him it's always the same. He sleeps most of the day and sits up watching the sky and writing all night. If the stars ever got mixed up, they'd only have to ask Ro where in the heavens they're supposed to be next and he could tell them."

"Do you know much about his work?"

"No. What's to know? The sky is there and so are stars and I can't see what difference it makes where they'll be next."

"A lot of people think it's important work. Lit thought so."

"A lot more probably think he's crazy."

"No they don't. At least they didn't used to. They just think he's a little odd. Doesn't he ever try to teach you anything?"

"He used to, but it didn't take. He demanded that I show interest, and interest is something you've got or you don't."

"If you learn enough about something the interest will follow, Lit used to say."

"Where are you staying now?"

"At Aor's. His house is so crowded with kids his wife put me in a box under the table. It's comfortable enough, but I feel like a litter of kittens."

"Well, if you need someone to watch out for you until they catch Eliot, I volunteer. I usually come up here after I've done my rounds."

"What rounds?" she asked, giving herself time to think.

"Remember Lit taught me to sharpen knives? I help fill the larder now so Ro can spend all his time studying the sky." He called his father by his first name, but it felt uneasy on his tongue. It was probably easier, he thought, for Lo to call Lit by name since he was dead.

"Yes, I'd love to have your protection, if I won't be in your way."

"What way? No, really, I don't care at all.

Lo was visibly taken aback.

"No, that sounded wrong, I'm sorry, I mean I don't care about the danger and I've got nothing better to do."

"Oh? I feel safer already."

From his hiding place near the mouth of the mining path, Eliot watched Elmo and Lo stroll down the knoll. It had taken the full force of his cowardice to overcome the anger that threatened to propel him after them with swinging pick. He turned instead and slouched down the path to the mine where he had found a hideout. It would not do to cross town to the southern gate and head back to the oasis until the Midsummer's crowd had thinned.

"Ignorant louse," he said, hearing an occasional snatch of Aeoui's voice droning in the distance. "What does he know?"

X

Runes and Riddles

° ° °

Catch me round the middle,

Who can guess my name?

Riddle me my riddle

To return me whence I came

Though long of years and weary

Tonight I'm strong and young

If you sing about me

Of whom is it you've sung?

Tell it on the first guess,

You shall have a gold chest,

Tell true the second time,

You shall have a silver chime

Fail on the third try,

Your first born shall surely die.

Ropes, knots, hangman's noose,

I'll crush its heart and sip the juice.

That was easy. Jabajaba knew the nursery song, even some rude answers to the riddle. The script was archaic but readily readable. There simplicity ended. He puzzled away a month at the Eagle Mall, sometimes suspicious there was no sense to any of it. The riddle was posed, right enough. Was the answer "the world's oldest practical joke?" The stern black of the obsidian altar assured him this was not so, but gazing up at the lyric pillars, jovial in aspect, doubt returned.

A dotted circle was everywhere repeated. If not a pronoun, it seemed reasonable to suppose it was a god's name or that of a ruler. Regardless of the varieties of script in the various aisles, the dotted circle appeared repeatedly among its characters.

To Jabajaba's relief, nothing had come of Eliot's parting threats. Dor the innkeeper claimed to have seen him sneaking through the shadows toward the Southern gate late Midsummer's Night, but was not certain enough of the sighting to raise a hew and cry. It seemed probable that Eliot hid on one or another of the minor oases which dotted the borders of the Desert of Bones.

It was certain that Eliot's unfortunate ward, Lo, had blossomed since her captivity ended. Gone were the sunken eyes and tenseness. Her ivory whiteness no longer suggested the pallor of death. She stayed close by her protectors. When Elmo wasn't at the Giant's Harp, Jabajaba could be found there, though so hard did he labor he'd little time for talk. His mere presence was comfortable to Lo. She spent many hours sitting near him, saying nothing, studying her blue book.

Jabajaba had glanced at the first few pages of the tutorial, written in simple phonetic characters. It seemed a good student reference work, conscientiously assembled and literate.

He approved it highly to Lo and returned to serious work.

The book, one smock, and a blue ribbon were Lo's only possessions at Eliot's house. She hadn't worked at the book. Had she shown interest in it, Eliot would have destroyed it long ago. It lay unnoticed for five years, gathering dust on a high shelf, less through fear of Eliot than because the handwriting and many sketches and cartoons reminded her painfully of Lit. If ever it was necessary to hide anything from Eliot, it need only be placed higher than his head, for he never looked up.

° ° °

Two young women met at the well.

"How are you, Lo?"

"Oh, Echo! I'm fine - how are you?"

"Well, thank you""

"I heard you're staying at Aor's?"

"He's very sweet."

"I like him too. I wish I could stay there. Aunt Pisey is so funny sometimes."

"Isn't she! What happened to you at Midsummer's? Were you sick?" asked Lo.

"What do you mean?" asked Echo suspiciously.

"Don't you remember?"

"I remember waking up the next morning and not knowing how I got to bed."

"Is that all?"

"Sometimes I don't remember things."

"Didn't anybody tell you?"

"Um . . .1 guess not," admitted Echo.

"Didn't Jabajaba say anything?"

"Lo, I really don't think I know what you're talking about."

"You seemed a bit. . . agitated while Aeoui was speaking and then you fainted. Jabajaba carried you home."

"Oh no! He did?! "Echo flushed to the roots of her red hair. "Was I loud?"

"No, oh no!" Hardly anyone noticed. I just happened to be sitting near."

"That's a relief. So Jabajaba helped me? Carried me, you say?"

"I wonder he didn't say anything. Don't you see him much?"

"You should know. You were up at the Harp with Elmo and him all day."

"They're just watching that Eliot doesn't show up without warning. He's threatened to kill me, I'm sure you know."

"Well, what are you doing here without your guards?"

"I just snuck out to draw water. I'm not as frightened for my safety as they seem to be." "Well, I'm sure that's all very romantic."

"Echo! What are you saying? You're not jealous are you?"

"Why should I be?" snapped the red haired one, a little too quickly.

"Well you needn't be. Jabajaba's not the least interested in me. Nor I in him, beyond gratitude for what he did to save my life. He's pretty . . .removed." Echo visibly relaxed at this information.

"He doesn't seem to notice me either, Lo. All he cares about is the writing on that bloody floor. Elmo seems to fancy you."

"Ha! I only wish it were so. I had a crush on him when I was younger but I don't think he's interested in anything or anybody."

"Except the Schulas."

"I suppose he likes them as much as he cares for anybody," ventured Lo.

"Maybe more."

"Well, he is a musician. Sort of . . ."

"True. Sort of. Does Aunt Pisey cook well?" Echo changed the subject.

"She's been teaching me to prepare hedgehog and onion. Aor swears an onion a day will put the rose in my cheeks. I don't think so, though. They're chalk white and that's all there is to it. Even the sun doesn't help. I only burn and peel. I get my color from my mother and she got it from hers."

"Curse his onions. He told my father I had to eat one every day the last time I got sick - and Sod made me do it for a month."

"That's horrible. Is he nice to you otherwise?"

"He ridicules me all the time. Other than that he's all right."

"He could be worse."

"I don't see how."

"Believe me."

"Was Eliot bad as that? Bad as they say?"

"Whatever they say, they don't know how bad he really is, Echo. Nobody ever will because I'm not going to tell them. Truthfully, I'd rather not talk about it at all."

"I'll bet he didn't snore like my father. Nobody does. Anyway, I don't think you need roses in your cheeks. I think they're beautiful like they are. I hate my skin."

"Oh, no. You've got lovely color... I'd trade you if I could."

"So would I! I always look like I'm blushing."

"Maybe it's the onions."

"Very funny. Aor was wrong, anyway. He thought I had worms. I know how I got sick but I couldn't tell anyone. Not so they'd understand."

"How?" demanded Lo.

"From sitting in a draught not caring if I froze to death."

"Sod's as bad as that?"

"Nearly. But it isn't that, it's not him . . . it's ... I don't know - I can't really say."

"Does he let you out?"

"Out of where?"

"The house," answered Lo with a worried glance at her friend.

"Oh, sorry. I drift sometimes. Mhmm. He doesn't care where I go. Or when I come back."

"Well, that's all right."

"Or if I come back . . ."

"At least he trusts you!"

"I guess so. I never go anywhere much except to find a quiet place to sit when I get sick of his snoring or his stupid humor. I wouldn't dream of inviting anybody over. He always embarrasses me to death. He calls me his little moo cow, ever since I started to develop."

"Crude, huh?"

"I hate it. I used to pray to Ist to toss him off the cliff."

"You pray to Ist? I didn't realize you were religious."

"What do you mean?"

"You believe in Ist?"

"You don't have to be religious to believe in Ist."

"Oh, well I . . ." Lo didn't have a ready answer.

"So I guess you're pretty frightened about Eliot showing up again?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? "

"You mean you're not?"

"If you mean for my life, no. That was over a long time ago."

"Lo! You're not serious! Don't say things like that. It's scary!"

"Oh Echo, there's so much I can't tell about. At a certain point, all I wanted out of life was to get free of Eliot. Well, I've done that. Only I'm not free. He stays with me - not just the threat of him showing up - but..." she broke into sobs. Echo put her arms around Lo and stroked her hair.

"It's all right. You're safe now. Eliot wouldn't dare show his face around here again. You can talk to me if you want to."

"I can't. I can't talk to anybody about . . . about . . . I just can't!"

"You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to... But if I ever set eyes on the bastard that did this to you, I'll rip his throat out with my own teeth!"

° ° °

"How's the business going?" asked Ro as he set a plate of boiled cabbage and pig trotters before Elmo.

"I have seven scythes to sharpen and eight ax handles to fit. The Nine Hammers always needs knives sharpened, so its going pretty well."

"You've been to the Giant's Harp a lot lately."

"I can grind there as well as anywhere else," said Elmo defensively, recognizing the opening tones of one of his father's serious lectures. He hoped it would not concern Lo.

"Have you spoken much with Jabajaba of Nikaba?"

"Hardly at all. He sits and copies all the time, like you, only with him its a floor instead of a sky. He seems to mean to copy the whole thing."

"You don't go to the Harp alone." Here it comes, Elmo knew.

"Um, no. Lo usually goes with me."

"How fares my old friend's daughter these days?"

"Oh, fine. Just fine . . ." Elmo nibbled a trotter, "are you sure this has been cooked enough?"

"It's pickled in brine. What would you think about having Lo come to live with us?"

"Unh-unh, it would be like getting married. She's nice but there wouldn't be any way to get away from her. Do they cook these before they stick 'em in brine?"

"I presume. Why would you want to get away from her? She's perfectly charming and very bright. Pretty too."

"Of course. I know all that. If you mean why don't I court her, I don't want to. She's just. . . you know, Lo. Maybe she's too smart for me. I dunno."

"Nevertheless, you could do much worse . . . and probably will," Ro added thoughtfully, remembering Lo's mother, Alalee, over whom he and Lit came close to wrecking a lifelong friendship. Charming woman, she was, but pale as her daughter. Pale as the moon. She'd disappeared one day, last seen walking in the direction of the Giant's Harp. Lo, three at the time, was found wandering on the grass. In light of this event, both men had been nervous about letting their motherless children play near the megalith. At least once a generation someone went over the edge, through carelessness or design.

"Lo's grandmother was also pale, poor sad woman. I wonder if you could find time to put a new edge on my razor, it's been tearing my cheeks."

"I honed it this morning. It's been tearing my cheeks too."

"You do have a bit of a bristle there," Ro ran his hand over his son's cheek, as close to a stroke of affection as the younger man was ever likely to get from his distant but loving father.

"Why do you call Lo's grandmother a poor sad woman?"

"Right after Lit was born, his father disappeared. They say he went to the Schulas and it may be true. Not all are as lucky as you."

"It got pretty boring down there."

"Even so. You'll always be bored if you don't develop an interest in something. There's more in my star charts than you have any notion, but it must be searched out. Searching develops the interest, assuming there's some to begin with, and boredom becomes but a word. Where the thoughts dwell, dwells the man who thinks them."

"Well, I like to play music. But even that gets boring pretty quick. Jabajaba says I'm not that bad at it."

"That's because you find no value in it greater than to idle away the hours. The man and the interest must be matched or the study is wasted. Play your music for pleasure, certainly, and sharpen knives for your daily bread, by all means, but you must stop neglecting your head before it's too

late and you end up another fixture at the Nine Hammers."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Should I waste my breath a thousandth time?"

"I know, you say I should think about my future, but what future is there around here anyway?"

"That's the very question you must answer for yourself."

"Lo studies a lot."

"You seem to value her as little as everything else."

"That isn't true. I do value her, though she never says much and stares at me sometimes in a way that makes me uncomfortable."

"You never did like being looked at."

"Not as though I were a map of the stars, Father. What became of Lo's grandmother after her husband left?"

"It's generally believed she threw herself from the Giant's Harp, but there were no witnesses. Lit was raised by Gia, who was old even then, though she had both her eyes."

"That must be why Lo's so fond of Gia. She never told me about that! Neither did he." The fact was, Elmo's tutelage with Lit had been rather formal. Personal revelations would have seemed out of place.

"Orphans always went to Gia, he wasn't the first."

"Jabajaba is staying with her now."

"Yes. She feels his coming is an ill omen. Gia is often right in such matters."

"Ah, he's harmless. He likes nothing better than to be left alone with his work and rescue girls in distress."

"Do I detect a note of envy?"

"He just happened to be there at the right time, that's all. Anybody'd do the same."

"Yes, assuredly. I've heard that Lo is much taken with you."

"From who?"

"Gia."

"She's a gossip then!"

"Hold your tongue and show respect! She spoke of it only in connection with the signs and portents she observes, not in the manner of one whose tongue is tied in the middle and wags on both ends."

"Like Aunt Pisey, you mean!" Elmo struck back accurately. Ro rolled his eyes to the ceiling. Aor's wife was a sore point to him. Many an afternoon of old had seen Ro driven to abandon his work just to get out of the house and away from Pisey's conscienceless chatter. Wincing, he sought to banish the unwelcome thought that his dear, departed Henrietta was just as bad. He did not respond to his son's statement, but said "I think it would be better if you were to stay away from the Giant's Harp."

"No, father, I have to go. Lo's waiting for me. I've promised to help her keep a watch out for Eliot."

"And what have you seen?"

"Nothing. Dor is the only one who's seen him and even he's not sure. I think Eliot's too scared to ever come back."

"Then why do you find it so important to protect Lo at this particular moment?"

"Well . . . you never know, do you?" Elmo speared a chunk of cabbage with his knife and filled his mouth.

"I don't think we've seen the last of him."

"Do your charts tell you that?" asked Elmo, swallowing the cabbage largely unchewed.

"I am not a fortune teller. Nor do I view the motion of the heavens as allegory, though it is tempting to do so at times. I can certainly cite many instances when events agreed well with unusual conjunctions. But such knowledge is always after the fact. Accurate knowledge of the stars reveals only that there are so many variables to be considered that a mere guess would do as well as the most accomplished astrologer's prediction."

Elmo settled back in his chair and stared out the window in the direction of the Giant's Harp. He'd adeptly addressed his father's pet

peeve, effectively changing the subject. He'd heard his father's practiced retort many times before, agreed with it entirely, but did not say so for fear of losing his one advantage in argument with Ro.

"I don't try to foretell the motions of the stars through watching the way people wander about the marketplace, though were I to study it long enough, correspondences would no doubt prove astonishing. My business is to record, compare, calculate and hypothesize. I have a few pet theories, but they are my diversion, not my work."

"Eve got to go now." He did.

° ° °

Ro lathered his face and drew the newly sharpened razor across his cheek. The burr on it drew blood. He reground it himself while the lather dried on his face. A gust blew the door open, spun through the room and left, slamming the door behind it and startling the dog. Gia cautioned that windows were the eyes and winds the ears of Ist, in the season of her coming. If so, those ears were big and wagging now. Sudden whirlwinds were frequent.

Gia had stopped giving voice to her predictions. Instead of informally directing the society and economy of Terrapin, through cultivation of former pupils who still smarted from her sharp pinches of instruction, Gia now kept to her hearth, keeping an eye on her bird of ill-omen, Jabajaba of Nikaba. Could she instruct this young scholar quickly enough to avert something she alone grasped? Thus wondered Ro, as he lifted his nose with two fingers and shaved his upper lip.

"If you get a new cat every time an old one dies, one of them's going to outlive you. Each time I get a new one I wonder, is this the one?" Gia had said of Jabajaba. Tarnation! Another burr. Ro decided against finishing his shave. He didn't intend to go out until dark anyway.

He honed the razor again and tried its sharpness on a tuft of hair from the dog, who'd settled back to sleep after the incidence of Ist, or wind, or

whatever. Blackie was getting used to strange winds, but it was not a good time for any of the animals in town. They'd all gone off feed. The tuft cut clean and Ro decided to re-lather his face. Dark or not, what he intended to do tonight had a ceremonial aspect which demanded respect.

He thought of dangers other than Istian. The foreign scribe bent on deciphering the Giant's Harp might count for nothing. Most probably that was the case. He was not the first to try to riddle the riddle. Ro had seen two others in his time, but the spells, stories and records that lined the aisles could not be grasped in their interlocking entirety without the master key. Ro studied the motions of heavenly bodies, in the reasoned belief that the changeless sky was the place where scribes of old would necessarily derive their code, should they wish to leave a message both obscure and imperishable. The writings themselves would presumably reveal the reasons for all the secrecy. Were that faith groundless, the study of the stars was important of itself.

A link in an honorable chain, Ro kept comprehensive archives of his astronomical observations and, once a year, inscribed those findings on the Giant's Harp, a permanent record to aid his successor, should he not discover the master key himself.

Ro charted the positions of the seven wandering stars and could predict the time and position of moonrise. He possessed a notion of the vast and cyclical movement of aeons which even Gia could not quite grasp, for all her years. Only Ro could comprehend the true antiquity of the Giant's Harp through inscribed astronomical evidence.

He had extrapolated the meaning of certain symbols inscribed on the aisles of the Harp by their correspondence, or lack of it, to the charts he had added over the course of fifty years, his own markings indistinguishable from those of his predecessors. His own teacher had been a crate of books loaned him by Gia.

Every year, on the night of the first Sabbath after Mid-Summers, Ro dutifully trudged through the sleeping village to the Giant's Harp and

levered up a slab of green glass. With a mallet and chisel, he updated the astronomical calculations, noted the orbit of Mars, and recorded such things as the appearance of a comet or unusual climatic conditions. He made a great many dotted circles in his work, struck with a circular die, for the sun figured prominently in his calculations.

Many more dotted circles appeared in non-astronomical scripts, but they might not mean what his dotted circles meant. These he could not read. Ro could read only the aisle he wrote upon, the Southern one, and some part of the aisle to its right, whose letters resembled swarms of tiny footprints in sand, headed Northwest.

Only two others now living in Terrapin had the art of reading and writing the old words. Aeoui at times refreshed his memory of literature from the cuneiform Southwest aisle of the Harp, though he convinced himself it was by memory alone he performed his feats of historical dialogue.

Gia once confided that she could read three aisles of the Giant's Harp, but wouldn't demonstrate and Ro wasn't sure he believed her.

Neither Aeoui nor Gia could read the marks of Ro, for they were not words but calculations, and though the key to them was not hidden, it required a course of study which was in danger of dying with Ro, could he find no successor.

It was not a matter of general knowledge, nor would it have excited much local interest, that these three could perform such feats of deciphering. They kept one another's secret as tradition demanded. Was it not by widespread knowledge of these arts that the world, not once, but twice before, had come to grief? The simpler writings on the stones said so and discouraged casual attempts at decoding with various curses which were not to be taken lightly.

The more superstitious of the townspeople felt it was bad luck even to glance at the writings and didn't go up to the Giant's Harp at all. Ro was proud that his son went up without a second thought. On the other hand,

Elmo's lack of fear might prove foolishness in light of Gia's qualms.

Ro recorded his celestial findings by candlelight, taking care to angle his chipper accurately so as not to confuse the mark of Venus with the similar signature of Mars, nor a hurricane with a drought.

He performed his service faithfully in consideration of his oath of fidelity, administered solemnly by Gia. But would the lineage die with him? There was still the possibility of a grandson to receive the secrets of his office, and though it was unlikely he would live long enough to tutor the child, the Book of the Harp was not of a certainty to be shut and sealed simply because of Elmo's apathy for all things studious. There was this Jabajaba of Nikaba . . . but, no - Gia had other plans for him.

XI

The Sacrifice of Ist

° ° °

When Elmo got to the Giant's Harp, after leaving Ro's study, he found Jabajaba thoroughly occupied with his usual nonsense. Lo was nowhere to be seen, so he sat on the top terrace and muttered to himself "All the trouble I'm going through to protect her, you'd think she'd show up on time," and fell to piping.

Elmo played a five tone tune using leaps, catches and trills to embellish the monotony of the piece. Lit had told him that, in pentatonic music, it didn't matter so much where you went melodically as how you got there. He taught the boy the half dozen ways to get from each note to any other: the tap down, the tap up, the double pat, triple cut, slur, and, last but not least, sounding the note directly, without "catches", where embellishment would only lessen the effect. Lit said the mark of a master musician was to know when decoration was called for and when it was not.

He played the ancient Riddle Song. Catch me round the middle /Who can guess my name?/Riddle me my riddle/To return me whence I came. Jabajaba, familiar only with the eight tone version known in the South,

didn't recognize the tune.

The Giant's Harp echoed an accompaniment, sustaining the fundamental pitch and generating overtones that rang through the marble corridors. The echo suggested the missing notes of the pentatonic version, even supplied them with the high harmonics of its ringing resonance. Jabajaba suddenly recognized the tune. It was all too much! The Giant's Harp was teasing him! He threw his hands into the air and delivered himself of a mighty sigh, proclaiming as he did so, "This dotted circle! I would give my teeth to know its meaning!"

Elmo stopped piping and told him: "It's the sun," then continued his tune.

With this, the door to the great stone library swung open.

"Well, suppose it is the sun," thought Jabajaba, "not that it hasn't occurred to me, but suppose it is the sun. . ."

If so, the Eagle Mall had a great deal to say about the sun.

If so, planets would be prominently featured in such a solar presentation. If there was any mercy in the mystifying layout of the aisles, it would be so. It didn't seem that those who had encoded the writings wished total obscurity. After all, they had provided comparative texts. Apparently comparative. That remained a guess until proven.

He interrupted the musician again, "If the dotted circle is the sun, then what is the plain circle?"

"That's all I know. My father told me."

"Aeoui said it was called the "Eye of Ist."

"He is mistaken. It's the sun."

Lo, arriving during the exchange, shot Elmo a glance of admonition. She motioned him to come over to her. Jabajaba was too busy with his newfound clue to notice either her arrival or her attitude.

"Should you be telling secrets?" she whispered to Elmo.

"Who says they're secrets?"

"I don't know. . . Gia maybe. Anyway, it seems like they would be."

"Mm. I thought about it, but the poor guy works so hard he deserves a break. I told him I didn't know anything else."

"Do you?"

"A little, not much. Only stuff I heard when Ro and Lit thought I was asleep. I know that my father writes some of it himself."

"He does?" Lo was startled.

"Yeah, he adds his calculations every year."

"I don't think you should tell."

"Of course I wouldn't tell that!"

"I mean, I don't think you should even tell . . .me."

"Why you especially?"

"Why not me?"

"Well you asked, didn't you?"

A Schula melody crept over the edge of the promontory and the pipe notes twined easily with it.

"Where did you learn that tune?" asked Lo. Elmo had to stop playing to answer.

"From her singing it," he jerked his thumb nonchalantly toward the ledge, indicating the beach beyond.

"You said you've been down there, why won't you tell me anything about it? You always change the subject."

"What subject?" Elmo asked, putting the whistle in his pocket and turning to face her. "There's nothing to tell."

"When I was little, Lit brought me to hear the Schulas a lot. He said all the old traditions that survived the flood are either written on the Giant's Harp or in the Schula's songs. He said they never make up new songs, but only sing the ones passed on to them."

"How did he know that?" Elmo wondered.

"Gia said she never heard them sing a song she hadn't heard them sing before. I guess she'd know. She looks old as the flood."

"And as deaf," Elmo replied. "If they did sing a new one she wouldn't hear it."

"You are fond of saying mean things about your elders."

This verged on unfairness. Lo had been the first to speak rudely of Gia. Elmo was reminded of the Lo of old, fond of setting little traps and acting innocent. He, however, was mature enough to overlook it, or so he fancied.

"I don't think they know any more about why things happened than we do. And I don't see why there's any reason to believe they ever did. What could Jabajaba possibly read in those stones that would make any difference? We'd still be stuck in Terrapin with nothing to do but sharpen axes and gossip. Or end up like my father, studying stars. He takes notes about every motion they make, but they don't come any closer for all his spying. He's bright enough to know they aren't holes punched in the sky or jewels in Yu's crown, but he can't say what they are."

"Maybe they're just stars."

"Well, you see what I mean then," Elmo concluded, clinching his argument.

"Lit said things are worth knowing for themselves. He said if you knew one subject well, you knew two because you knew how to know about things."

"Your father also taught me to sharpen blades and play the whistle, and that's enough to know as far as I'm concerned. A trade and something to pass the time. My father is pretty disappointed in me but I can't pretend to be interested."

"Why not, if pretending would make him happy?"

"You can't pretend to study star charts all day. You do it or you don't."

"You never know. You might learn something by mistake." Another flash of the old Lo. She wouldn't have said anything like that a couple of days ago. Irritating as it was, Elmo was half glad to see it happen. He'd been feeling like he didn't know her anymore. So distant and morose. She

never had been the soul of cheer, but she'd been funny in a barbed kind of way. She could sting, but she could take it too. Not so Elmo. Their play sessions would often end with him stalking away mortally offended.

Elmo began noticing Lo from the corner of his eye. He hadn't really looked at her square on yet, except from a distance. She had a nice shape, boyish hips, a small shapely bosom and a tiny waist. Black hair long and thick. Surreptitious as his glance, Lo was aware of it. She was used to being looked at surreptitiously. She was used to the heat of Eliot's eyes on her whenever she went about her chores. Looking for something wrong with her, but sometimes just looking. She shuddered at the thought. Elmo looked elsewhere quickly, with a strange feeling that dust had been thrown in his eyes. Lo realized what she had done and regretted it.

It was a reflex she'd need to learn to control.

"Do you mind if I ask you something," she found herself blurting, but followed through without waiting for a reply: "Most of the time it's like I'm invisible to you. You never look at me! Don't you like me?" A sudden blush tinted her pale skin the barest touch of pink. Well, she'd said it.

Elmo looked thoughtfully, or so it seemed, toward the horizon. When his silence became unendurable to Lo, he suddenly spoke: "Jabajaba told me about the place he comes from. He said there's a river there that takes an hour to swim across."

"Maybe he'll hire you to carry his writings back across the Desert of Bones for him." Lo was more relieved than hurt by the evasion. She'd regretted the words as soon as they were spoken. She'd left herself open for something, and that was always a mistake. Invited ridicule. She didn't know exactly how she knew that. . . with Lit, her frank, open nature was encouraged. With Eliot there was no question of openness of any sort. But she knew. On the other hand, could it be that Elmo hadn't even heard her? Not the words, of course he heard them, but the intent. Did it just sound like some indecipherable squawk to him? Strange. She'd never given two pins for Elmo's opinion of her in the old days. If he didn't understand what

she said, that was his problem. Being a bit thick, he was fun to tease. But teasing was no longer on her mind.

"Who would watch out for you if I was to go off to Nikaba?" said Elmo.

"Perhaps I'd go along and swim in that river myself."

"Jabajaba says that the current carries you ten miles downstream before you can swim to the other side."

"He must exaggerate. Jabajaba is a silly name, don't you think? I wonder if he likes to make people say it or if he has a nickname?"

"Shall we ask him?"

"No, I don't feel like talking to him. He makes me feel like a fly on the wall."

"Yeah, me too. He's like my father. So involved in what he's doing, you feel like you don't exist."

"If you would only look at me when we talk."

"Is this better?" he widened his eyes.

"Don't make fun of me, I'm serious."

"How do you want me to look at you, then?"

"Now you make it sound stupid. You just puzzle me when you stare off into your private patch of gloom. It's like you expect someone to appear."

"There's no one." To Lo, the tone and quickness of the denial bordered on confession.

"Did you meet any Schulas when you were on the beach?"

"Schulas? Yeah . . ."

"It must be really something to hear them close up."

"Oh, it's all right. The same only louder."

"I used to love them, but I don't know anymore. There's something about them, or maybe it's just the one singing now . . . something that makes me kind of scared. Would you mind seeing me back to town now?"

"In a little while. You just got here."

"No, now. Please? It's getting cold." It was not getting cold.

° ° °

The Schula melody hung questioningly, twining this way and that in search of the fled whistle note, then, like ivy that had reached the top of its lattice, curled back over itself and fell down the cliff.

Harp Plant berries chattered together in a light breeze from the West, a zephyr steady enough to set the invisible strings of the Giant's Harp to humming. It was a sound more felt than heard. Only the very light or very strong winds could sound the Harp. When Northern gales hit the pillars, they produced a minor chord which resounded to the Ebo Oasis like the concerted snoring of three fat giants.

The soft chord hummed with the sound of distant bees and crickets, a myriad of faint separate sounds, ensemble with the lap and splash of waves below.

Aor barely heard the mild chord as he knelt cursing, sucking a finger injured mending a hinge on a creaking gate. His hearing was less keen than in winter. He saw Echo going to the well with her bucket, looking distracted as usual. She had grown up nicely since he'd carried her home from the Still Night. Old Howl's pitiful whelp had plumped attractively, he could not deny it. Be trouble over that one some day for sure, if it wasn't brewing already. A well turned ankle for a fact. He took an onion from his pocket, bit off a chunk, then wet his finger in the fortified saliva. It felt better right away and he resumed hammering.

As she walked, Echo heard the chord of the Harp distinctly. She could also hear grass grow after rain, or believed she could.

As Echo leaned over the well, she saw the full daytime moon reflected from the dark water. She seemed to stand at the end of a tunnel of daylight looking out upon a midnight sky. The sight so startled her that she dropped the bucket into the well, where it dashed the illusion into a thousand silver minnows. She continued to peer into the well as the

particles reassembled to form a circle in the center of the ring of dark water.

° ° °

Jabajaba was making rapid progress in the aisles of the Giant's Harp. Rapid, certainly, compared to his previous month's headway. He discovered a complete system of circular symbols in the Eastern aisle. Positional details determined that, if the dotted circle was the sun, the empty circle was Venus. Books from Gia's library containing astronomical drawings confirmed this. Mars was drawn as a set of interlocking circles. Earth was three concentric circles and the moon a crossed circle of smaller size. These might, in turn, very well yield clues to words in the script of the adjacent North Eastern aisle, which appeared to be phonetic. Clues came thick and fast.

° ° °

Returning from the Giant's Harp, Lo and Elmo heard a terrified scream and a splash.

"Somebody just fell down the well!"

"I wonder who it was?"

"We better help," Lo ran to the edge of the well and peered into the darkness but couldn't see or hear anyone. The face of the moon in the water was shattered by whatever had fallen in, though, betraying a vanished presence.

"They must be knocked unconscious. You better go down, Elmo!"

"That water is cold as ice! What makes you think the scream came from here anyway?"

"It did, oh Elmo, there's someone drowning down there. I'm going down myself it you won't."

"All right." He wrapped his legs around the pull rope and reluctantly slid down.

"There's nobody down here. . .1 can't see anyway," his peeved voice echoed out of the dark hole.

"Go down under the water and look!"

He eased himself into the numbing water. His foot struck something that felt like an arm and he realized that he'd have to dive under. The arm sank fast in the deep well and Elmo was almost out of breath by the time he grasped the slender wrist and pulled it to the surface.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see the hair of the head was red. Red enough to tell at the bottom of a well. Echo! Typical.

He wasn't able to shinny up the slick rope with her limp weight. Nowhere could he gain a hand or foothold except by clinging to the well bucket rope.

"Elmo, are you all right?"

"It's Echo down here, she's knocked out. Go get somebody to pull us up, and hurry, it's freezing down here."

"Can't you climb it?"

"Go get someone!" She got Sod, shaking him out of his raucous sleep by beating repeatedly on his heaving chest.

Looking up, Elmo saw a single star at the mouth of the well and wondered how it had suddenly become so late. He supported Echo with his free arm, the other clinging to the rope. The back of her head was propped against his hip, leaving her legs to dangle in the water, reducing her weight. Echo came to with a sudden groan, discovered herself close to one unknown, and shrieked. The sound rebounded about the well, startling her even more.

"Echo, it's me Elmo. You fell down the well and conked your head."

"And you saved me," she whispered, almost reproachfully.

"Are you strong enough to shinny up the rope?"

"I think so. My head hurts."

"Up you go, before we freeze."

"It feels warm."

"That's the first sign you're freezing. Go!" He followed her up the rope. She emerged with one foot on his head. They stood on firm ground breathless, not speaking. The star was now gone from the sky, though Elmo didn't notice. The daytime moon had moved on, no longer residing at the bottom of the well, which Echo didn't notice.

They did notice one another: the youth with his dark curls plastered wetly to his head and the girl with the drenched red hair sticking to her shoulders, tumbling across her dripping smock, skin blue from the icy water.

They stood looking at one another for about a dozen breaths before Lo arrived with Sod, whose house was closest to the well. When he saw his daughter he began to guffaw.

"So these are the sweethearts what fell down the well!"

Lo blanched white as the reflected moon which had started the trouble. Her gray eyes snapped sparks. She didn't know which angered her more, the laughing pig of a Sod, faithless Elmo or the dripping slut exposing herself like ripe fruit beneath the clinging wet smock. Obviously she'd planned and timed the whole thing.

Echo's purple eyes flashed back as Elmo took Lo by the hand, led her from the garden, and tried to pretend that what had happened had not happened. In a moment he convinced himself that nothing had.

"It was lucky you decided you didn't like the Schula or Echo would have drowned. If I'd jumped in a second later she'd have been gone."

Convincing Lo of the innocence of the aftermath of the rescue was not to be done. She had seen what she had seen and knew what she knew and pretense was not only despicable but unmanly.

Aor looked up from his gate as the couple passed, still sucking his finger. He didn't like what he saw. Neither noticed him.

Elmo didn't try to convince Lo that her suspicions were false, made no apology to her unspoken accusations. Neither spoke at all. They parted company for the afternoon, as a matter of course, at the path leading to

Aor's. Lo offered no word of farewell.

Elmo headed back across the meadow, casting a long shadow to the right of his path. Jabajaba still labored at his scribbles. Elmo felt like being entirely alone so he followed the mining path, past the jade mines to the monkey run, sat on a big rock and blew a salutation on his whistle. The Schula quickly answered.

° ° °

"Come here, let me look at your face," Aunt Pisey directed as Lo walked through the door. "You look as bad as the day you first came here! What's responsible for this?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Well, if you say. How's Elmo?"

"Fine." *

"Only fine?"

"Can I help with supper?"

"Unless you'd rather gut the hedgehog, you can do these onions."

Cutting onions, tears came the more readily.

"There now, them onions aren't strong as all that. You can tell me, little Lo. I'll be on your side, you can be sure enough of that, unless it's to do with my Aor, which I wouldn't put it past him. He can be a mean man, gave Echo's miserable father an excuse to make her eat an onion every day."

"Served her right."

"So, she looks after your Elmo a bit, does she? There, you've cut yourself! Off with you, you're no good to me in this state. No, wait, you better wrap it up good, it looks pretty deep. Rub some onion in it so it don't anger. Now you tell old Aunt Pisey all about it."

"Oh, I just got mad, the way they stood there looking at each other. I didn't have any right to."

You been seeing him every day?

"Yes."

"You got a right. Men pretend they don't understand the rules. If a fellow lets you see him every day, you get rights on him. It just follows. He'll deny it when it suits him, but you know it and so does he. More you see him, the more rights you got, and if Echo's looking at him that way, you go have a word with her. Men'll get away with everything you let 'em get away with, every one of them, and that includes my old devil. That's right, you just tell Aunt Pisey all about it and we'll see what we can't straighten it out. So you caught 'em at it, huh?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Weren't you listening to a word I said?"

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Bad as you were when you got here. Go on, out with you. Go collect your fellow before that redhead does."

Lo gladly left the kitchen. "He can be a mean devil, that Elmo, like his father used to," Aunt Pisey muttered to herself, gutting the hedgehog.

° ° °

The song of the Schula quickly answered the salutation of Elmo's flute with a theme lonesome enough to invite commiseration. The voice and flute combined in a lament which slowly gave way to more jovial musical matters. The Schula's voice wandered from Elmo's vicinity as the breeze shifted, refocusing its resonance on the Giant's Harp, several hundred yards away.

The distant melody was poignant and Elmo put down his whistle and listened, deciding it must be Isa, though unable ever to be quite sure. The song ended in a terrified scream. Strange way to end a song, he thought. He tried the tune on his whistle.

The Schula did not sing again. Elmo rose from the rock to find his bad leg asleep and sat back down to rub the pins and needles from it.

° ° °

Lo walked back up the path after leaving the kitchen. Ten minutes had passed since she and Elmo parted. She looked toward the Harp but saw no one on the meadow slope or knoll. He must be up there already. She passed the clump of mimosa, its former bright yellow burned to brown uniformity by the Summer sun.

A breeze stirred her hair and was gone directly. The dotted red circles of her white smock seemed preternaturally bright by contrast to her fair skin to the eyes of Gia, who watched the girl grimly from the shadows in the mimosa.

She might, the old woman thought, have been the ghost of a maiden sacrificed in olden times upon the altar stone of the Giant's Harp. The very image. In all respects, Lo was the double of her mother and of her grandmother. Gia had watched each of them from the same clump of mimosa. She did not know how or when it would happen, the irresistible common fate, but she knew where it would happen - and was powerless to intervene. Who would listen to an old woman's stories? She cast the solemn gaze of her one good eye toward the lyre pillars.

Within those pillars, near the altar carved from a single lustrous black stone, sat Jabajaba of Nikaba in furious translation. Ambition flamed now that he had the clue he'd sought. He would not rest until he had the whole of it. If just a few more items were to yield their secrets, he was within a hair's breadth of determining a meaning to the maze.

At the moment of fiercest exultation, the gates of inspiration swinging wide and divulging a vast shining clue, the shadow of Lo fell across his text. She looked lost and entirely perplexed.

"Is something the matter?" he asked, with reluctance. The clue would have to wait, as it had waited for centuries. Something more pressing called.

"Eliot was right. . ." Lo said. "He knew what he was talking about."

"You weren't going to speak of him again."

"He kept me away from this," tears flowed down her cheeks. Jabajaba laid aside his text and took her hand. She drew it back. He took it again and she let it remain. It was shaking.

"I heard you Elmo snapping at each other. Is that what's the matter?"

"Oh, yes and no. . . for ten years I dreamed how it would be getting away from Eliot.

Now I can't even remember what I thought I'd find. I just thought everything would be fine and it's not. I don't know what to do, Jabajaba, I feel so bad."

Suddenly Lo laughed. It seemed utterly bizarre to be telling such personal things to someone named Jabajaba. The owner of the name was startled by the incongruous mirth. Was the woman mad?

"What are you laughing at?"

"It's . . . your name! I'm sorry, but it always makes me think of gibber-gibber, and you do spend all your time with gibberish ... oh, please excuse me. You were trying to be so kind. I don't know what I'm saying half the time. I haven't had much practice, you know."

"I've always thought it was a silly sounding name myself, but since it was my father's I try to wear it proudly. Those I know well just call me Jaba. Unfortunately, I don't feel I know anyone in Terrapin well enough to go by my nickname. Would you care to be the first?"

Lo was flattered by the courtly gesture, the first she had ever received, and re-estimated the young man forthwith. She also withdrew her hand and clasped it in its mate.

"It must be a nuisance having to keep any eye on me."

"Nonsense. It's a pleasure. And whatever you feel about Elmo right now, one or the other has to keep an eye out for you until Eliot's caught. That's a plain fact."

"What if he never is?"

"There's always that."

"I don't fear him.

"I can see. What is it you're afraid of?"

"The way I felt when I saw Echo and Elmo looking at each other. It was like I suddenly became Eliot and wanted to smash them like pumpkins. I felt Eliot right here," she slapped her breast.

"That wasn't Eliot, dear lady. That was just plain jealousy."

"Call it whatever you want -1 hate it as much as I ever hated Eliot. Come down and sit on the step with me. Jaba." He inadvertently glanced at his tools, but Lo took his hand firmly and led him up the Western aisle and down to the second terrace with its crescent ring of fluted pillars overlooking the verge of the cliff.

"I'll just sit here," he indicated the sixth step.

"Are you afraid of heights, Jaba?"

"It would appear so. I suppose I could get used to it."

"I've played up here alone since I was nine. I never was scared of it. Before that I came up with my father, from as early as I can remember."

A sudden whirl of wind brought a duet between a Schula and whistle to them, sounding as near as though performed at the foot of the terrace steps - the final step with no ground beneath it.

Lo stopped speaking and listened to the tones thoughtfully. She seemed disinclined to speak and Jabajaba could guess why. There was really nothing he could do about it and the daylight would be failing soon . . .

"I've got to get back to work before it's too dark. If you want, I'll keep an eye on you by myself until you patch things up, and even if you don't. Don't worry, Lo, you need a little time to get used to being a big girl away from your watchdog. These things happen, it's not the end."

She seemed not to hear him and he began to feel silly about offering homemade advice unasked. She looked up when he rose to go. The tears were gone and her gray eyes seemed to look through him, not quite focusing. He heard a rush like a bat's wing near his ear. He lurched away from it instinctively, twisted his ankle enough to cause a stab of pain.

Whatever it was wasn't there. Lo returned her gaze seaward. Jabajaba felt well and truly dismissed and limped back to his work, favoring the turned ankle.

The voice of the Schula became stronger and the whistle accompaniment ceased. Lo moved to the edge of the terrace overlooking the waves. Such a sad song. Venus stood alone in the darkening sky. The moon was already beneath the horizon. For a quarter hour Lo stood still as any statue in the Giant's Harp, and as white. The breeze which carried the music tousled her hair and tangled its blue ribbon.

A tendril of melody took tentative hold on the lower porch of the precipice where Lo stood, angling this way and that like a worm overturned in soil.

Venus sparkled in the late dusk. The sinuous cord of forlorn tones stole closer until it played, unnoticed, around the feet of Lo.

Ever so cautiously it rose and entwined her ankle ivy-like and exerted a tiny tug. Venus flashed incandescent. Lo extended her arms suddenly, beseechingly, to the place where the sun had set, but it did not reverse its course. The evening star reigned unchallenged.

A sob tore out of her, breaking her reverie just as the serpentine tone, secure in its grip, tested its true strength. It tugged as its melody rang with sudden tones of triumph. Lo teetered, bewildered, and lost her balance. Jabajaba jumped up startled from his work as a scream of terror resounded through the Giant's Harp, echoing and re-echoing, finally settling with a shiver into silence. Out of that silence rose the whir of invisible wings, no longer small.

XII

Footsteps

° ° °

Jabajaba told Gia what he had seen, little enough, but it was long in the telling since she silenced him often with a warning hand, darting her good eye around the room, shutting it, listening intently, then motioning for him to continue. Though the wind, from under the door or down the chimney, could hear, the curtained windows could not see. Threads hung about the room, tacked to the ceiling, so no breeze could eavesdrop undetected. Gia conducted Jabajaba's outpouring with gestures, hurried him past digression, stopped him at points with a wave to consider, then beckoned him to continue.

When he'd said all he had to say, she made no answer. When, drawn to fill the silence, he spoke again, she cut him off with a word. Then she relaxed.

"It's my turn to speak. She's gone now. She doesn't know we're home -1 could feel her coolness on my cheek. There'll be no more little whirlwinds. From now on, it will be ever fainter breezes, or the hurricane itself. If I stop in mid-word, it is to feel for Ist. She can creep in unnoticed while we talk, so subtle is she. I've lived long as I have by knowing her

ways."

"I almost think I believe you, Grandmother."

"That's a good sign, to be sure. Believe me or not, honor my age by keeping the silence I ask of you, for much depends on it. What you have told me describes the heraldings of Ist right down to the rush of wings and your twisted ankle, my boy. Except for one thing, which could not be Ist, for she never varies. You spoke of the sound of someone running away after the sacrifice."

"Sacrifice? You call it a sacrifice? What do you mean?"

"The word will do as well as another. Where others see accident, I see design. I do not see Ist in the stars, the cawing of crows or the shape of clouds. They bespeak other things. But in the whir of invisible wings and the twisting of ankles, her spell is sure. I'd be surprised had you heard the sound and not been injured. She knows fine balances, Ist. She can push you down a well with the tug of a curl if you dare to dream there.

"I've lived long and do not often speak where I do not expect to be believed, but assume I act according to an understanding it is not your privilege to know more of, and you will assume correctly. Otherwise, honor my eccentricity in return for the cheapness of your room and board. Speak to no one about this. Neither to Echo nor that thick son of Ro. If asked, you know nothing. This will stymie her advance while I prepare. Every day gained by silence is one less day Ist will have to dance on our hearts! I am her enemy and she knows me ... ah yes, she does! But I know her, yes I do, and we are well matched. Ist feeds on the fear she creates and grows strong."

"But surely everyone . . ."

"Lo will not be missed, except by Aor and I'll take care of him. The Roughs know some of what I know, and though proud, they defer to me in matters of Ist, through sad experience."

"Shadows can do strange things at that time of evening, Grandmother. I just told you what I thought I saw, I can't vouch for it."

"Nothing you told me was of any consequence beyond the whir of wings and the scream, and those you are sure of. It's always that way with Ist - things half seen, coincidence, recurring dreams. . ." she held up a hand commanding silence. Jabaj aba felt a faint stir of coolness near his cheek. There was a faint scent to it, some local perfume he knew nothing of. As soon as it disappeared, Gia continued. "You must not ask to know more than I've told you. What I've told you, you need to know. Were you less skeptical, I would have told you less and you'd be better off for it. Soon enough your very dreams will be searched. The more you know, the more attention Ist will show you. It is not the sort of attention you desire."

"I have no reason to disobey, Grandmother. I am your servant in all."

And more reason to obey than you imagine.

° ° °

The next morning a storm came to Terrapin, howling off the sea with such intensity that the solemn minor chord of the Giant's Harp sounded far across the desert, proclaiming, choiring, and trumpeting as the hurricane winded its marble pillars like strings. For half an hour the storm raged, then cleared as suddenly as it came, leaving the sky innocently clear and blue.

° ° °

Echo was lowering her bucket into the well when Aor rushed up, excited and worried. "Have you seen anything of Lo, my girl?"

"Lo? No."

"She's been missing the night. When did you see her last?"

"Last night she went to the Giant's Harp. I didn't see her come back."

"You were watching?"

"I was just . . .sitting. In the mimosa."

"Was she alone?"

"No, Jaba was up there."

"Did you go up yourself? Be forthcoming girl!"

"No, not then. Later I did, but she wasn't there."

"Are you certain? It's a big place."

"No. I'd know." Aor accepted this without question, harried as he was. "Have you spoken to Elmo?" she asked.

"He hasn't seen her either. I smell Eliot in this!"

"I think you're right. I feel him around. I have before, but it's stronger now. Somebody else was up there last night, I saw someone leaving after Jaba, headed toward the mining path."

"Tell me girl, do you recall the Still Night, when I brought you home from the camp?" "The camp?"

"The Still Night at the Ebo Oasis."

"I was there?"

"You remember nothing at all?"

"Something must have happened. I was sick for a month."

"Do you remember the dream?"

"What can you possibly mean, Aor?"

"The dream of the young man with hands of fire who forced himself on you."

Echo dropped the bucket into the well and blushed to the roots of her hair. Aor busied himself retrieving it while Echo recovered herself. He handed her the bucket and continued.

"There are dreams and there are dreams, Echo. Wonder not that I know of this. Only believe that the business of dreams and the business of life have deeper commerce one with the other than is widely reckoned."

"You . . . you want to know . . . my dream?"

"Aye, if you will."

"Yes, I did have a dream. It kept happening over and over. I'm not even sure it was a dream. You want to know about it?"

"Everything and anything. Try hard to remember."

"I needn't try hard at all. It was the most horrible dream, so real. . . it kept happening over and over, sometimes it was beautiful - but it was horrible too, and so cold. Oh, Aor, it was so frightening."

"You saw the Fair One, do I miss my guess?"

"What? How could you know? Aor! What do you mean?"

"I am often where I have no business my love, but there I was not. Fear that Fair One, Echo, not me!"

"I do fear her, Aor."

"There is no need to tell me about her. Nor anyone else."

"I have no one to tell."

"So! It's begun - the old dance. I need look no more for Fo, is my guess. The hurricane might have told me that if I was inclined to listen. There was another Fo, long ago, when I was coming into my first howl. Sad, very sad. Fooked like our Fo. And they said that she was her grandmother again. Sad, sad."

"Do you think she's. . .?"

"Yes. And there was another red haired young lady at this very well. Go home and stay inside, my dear. And one other thing."

"Yes?"

"Eat your onions, girl. You'll need the strength."

° ° °

"Good morning, Mother Gia."

"Aor?"

"I must speak to you at once," he nodded toward Jaba, questioning his presence.

"If you come to dwell on darkness, be brief. Come to the point and don't say twice what you should beware to say once. Tell me naught ye know I know in my own right and anything you cannot say in front of Jabajaba is best not said at all."

"It is all coming to pass and quickly as ever it did."

"Speak not of it. It is enough that we know.'

"Fo is gone."

"Even so. How do you know?"

"She didn't come home. And I met Echo at the well. She told much she did not know she told."

"That well should be stuffed with stones and abandoned. The trouble always starts there."

"If not that well, another."

"Go on, Aor, don't chatter. I know your pack called Echo on the Still Night. You Roughs should be exterminated along with your lice."

"It is not we who call, 'tis Wolf O'the Wild. As well you know, begging your pardon, Mother. I would have turned her 'round and marched her home save she was near to frozen."

"It would be best for that girl if you could call her to the bosom of your pack once more and keep her there."

"She is too old and the pack is not what it was when Foup Aru can be pulled from his meat by one of his whelps. Even with ," he added pointedly, "assistance." The point was not acknowledged. "However that may be, what she has kept of us will tell in time of need. Good day Mother Gia."

"Good day, Aor."

° ° °

Echo lowered the bucket into the well once more, glad that Aor had heard all he wanted and left her alone to think. So Lo was gone. What had to happen had happened. She knew it would happen. She knew it had happened before. She didn't know how she knew, but felt no sorrow, only the pain of inevitability bearing down with physical pressure in her breast and in her head. More immediate was indignation that Aor knew of her shameful dream. It didn't matter how. He knew. And it was so private. She blushed once more as memory of the dream again invaded her. Who

was the young man? Why did he use force when she had not shown herself unwilling? Given pain instead of pleasure? And who had torn him off her, to the fury of the Fair One who watched?

A strangely scented breeze carried the sound of piping from the Giant's Harp. Elmo piping? The tune was certainly not a sad one.

Rat of the Field

Bit Ist on the heel

And how her blue blood flowed,

Filling his belly,

His silver blood bucket

And spilling all over the road

Was it possible he didn't know about Fo? But what was there to know of Fo? What had there ever been to know of Fo? Or of herself for that matter? They were both nothing. Ciphers. The letters of a forgotten word in a forgotten tongue. They were written. Events would proceed as decreed. But whose thoughts was she thinking, just now? These were not thoughts of her own. How could she think them and think about them at the same time? Something was wrong. The pressure in her head grew. The scent in the breeze grew stronger. The piping grew shrill.

Echo drew the bucket and ran from the well, crossing the path Elmo and Fo had walked together yesterday. She'd seen them separate, watched Elmo wander toward the Harp. Fo had entered Aor's house, then left again, heading toward the Giant's Harp. Echo held back an urge to make herself known and urge Fo not to go. Another part of her wanted it so. That part prevailed.

She remembered sitting in the mimosa patch listening to Elmo puff on his whistle. She was feeling dazed and giddy, more from the silent,

savage attack of Fo's jealousy than from her tumble down the well. Someone had caused her fall, she knew of a certainty, but there was none to answer for the crime. A tiny push, or more of a tug it was - enough to upset her balance as she gazed at the moon's reflection. And that scent of some unknown flower, the scent that accompanied her now. . . that had been there too.

And then there was the dream of last night, the woman with blue diamonds for eyes who had stared and stared at her, sucking her life out with the gaze, sucking it into herself until, right before Echo awoke with a start, she had found herself watching herself through those diamond eyes, watched herself dying away to nothing - and enjoying it! At that moment Gia had entered the dream, but Gia in another form, no longer old, blazing with anger, both eyes wide open . . . and then she remembered no more.

Out of sight of the well now, she stopped running, but her heart kept pounding. It was hard to catch her breath. It came in shallow, sharp gasps. Memory of the other dream invaded her again, erasing last night's dream like sunlight a shadow. Through it all, she heard the song Elmo played, faint but persistent.

Rat of the Field

Bit Ist on the heel,

Shed her bright blue,

Sweet as a honeycomb,

Bitter as brine, blue blood.

Blood of the mortal,

Blood of the gods,

Ran in the Fair One's veins

But Rat of the Field

Bit Ist on the Heel

Thinking her only

A country girl

Faden with ribbons

And trinkets to sell,

Dressed in velvet

With tinkling bells,

A hawker of wares,

A blender of spells,

As oft the Fair One

Dressed herself

To walk among men

As one of themselves.

The sky blue blood

Cried out to the Sun:

Too late, too late,

There's nowhere to run

O Rat of the Field

Destruction has come.

The day before Echo had seen Elmo return alone from the Giant's Harp shortly after sunset. An intensified interest in Fo's protector bade her sit watching in the mimosa. She watched another hour, but Fo did not appear. Jaba left the Harp limping. Someone else appeared, hurrying toward the mining path. It had been too dark to see who it was.

She'd decided to go home. It was growing very cold, a wind whipping up. Sod the wheelwright, snored drunk on the doorstoop. Echo stepped across him and emptied the bucket into the dish tub, leaving the day's dishes to soak while she lit the fire. She broke an egg into a pan and held it over the fire. She ate from the pan then placed it in the tub to soak with the other dishes, put on her warmest clothes and her wolfskin, stepped over Sod and went back to the mimosa patch.

The night was black. The moon had set before the sun. The Giant's Harp glimmered faintly, an eerie opalescence that seemed to reflect the coldness of starlight. It grew brighter as Echo sat patiently gazing at it; the blue light of visions beginning to form. A pulsing warmth came from it, soothing her perpetually chilly skin. There was something familiar about the pulse, the warmth. Her troubling dream invaded her reverie and for a moment she saw the face of the young man, felt his fingers penetrate her skin.

A gnat settled on Echo's nose and she brushed it away. The dream retreated. The glow of the Harp diminished. Then slowly it returned, began to enfold her like a cocoon. The gnat returned and would not be dismissed, reducing Echo to slapping her face in the dark. The insect couldn't be heard above the crickets, nor be seen due to the inky blackness. It stung her face and neck repeatedly.

She had no wish to return to Sod's snores, nor could she abide the gnat, so she wandered aimlessly. She tried to stop and sit several times, but the gnat would not allow this. Eventually she found herself at the steps of the Giant's Harp. She had no wish to enter, but any other direction she took was met by repeated attacks by the invisible insect. Only when she

entered the Great Hall was she left in peace.

The marble retained the heat of the day despite the coldness of its color by starlight. Its warmth was inviting. It had been the right place to come after all.

The obsidian altar, commanding the invisible Northern vista, reflected no light, just nothingness carved into the ghostly sheen of the pillars. It seemed a natural place to sit. She knelt and sat back upon her heels, hugging herself against a breeze from the sea.

The glassy berries of the Harp Plant tinkled, stirred by the wind. Crickets chirped slowly. The golden tendril of a Schula tone, finding its accompaniment prepared by this drapery of sound, began to meander, continuing a song from earlier in the day where it had left off abruptly, detailing the revenge of Ist on the Rat of the Field who shed her bright blue blood.

She took his voice,

So sweet and fair,

Left only the squeak of a gate

On a rusty hinge

She took his hair,

Yellow as corn,

Turned it to gray with a laugh of scorn.

She took his eyes,

Blue as the sky,

Turn them to misery's red

To search out the dead

Upon which he fed.

She withered his hands

She crabbed his feet

Oh, but her blood had tasted sweet!

His tail so fine

A wormlike vine

From out of his haunches turned

Until at last the Rat of the Field

Begged he might be allowed

To keep one thing,

Most precious of all

And the rest be disavowed

Next to which his handsomeness

Was only a paltry loss

He pleaded his lot,

He begged for her ear,

"O spare but the thing

I hold most dear!"

"What is it you want?"

The Fair one demanded,

Her anger much abated,

"Of all you had

Of form and face,

Keenness, health,

Music and grace

Choose one to keep

The rest erase!"

"My loyalty,"

The Rat explained,

"And love for Ist,
All else is vain!"
"Then keep it,"

The Fair One replied,

"And add to them besides:

Cunning arts and

A knowledge of hearts,

For mine you've won this day."

Since that day

The Rat of the Field

Runs by her heel to serve,

With hope the chance

Might come to taste

Her sweet blue blood once more

Echo felt hands rest gently upon her shoulders, but took no notice. She often felt them. They were never attached to anyone. The song had soothed her into a pleasant trance and the dreadful chill had melted from her bones. She heard the whir of gentle wings behind her as the warm hands began to squeeze and knead her flesh sending ripples of pleasure through her. The opal light of the Giant's Harp gradually brightened to the intensity of early dawn. The sound of the sea came nearer, until the distant roar sounded like the actual splashing of water. Suddenly, full dazzling daylight illuminated the Giant's Harp. To no surprise of Echo, sea waves rolled right up the terraced steps now and splashed their salt spray against the pillars.

An ominous broiling began in the swells, as if before the eruption of one of the molten glass hemispheres the Schulas competed to shatter with their highest, truest tones. The waters churned into a whirlpool, out of whose mouth Ist, in the form of a Schula, arose on the back of a terrapin. At the upper terrace of the Giant's Harp, she dismounted.

Each footstep rang out like a different tone of a bell as the Fair One drew nearer the altar upon which the girl in the wolfskin knelt. Echo watched the approach from many angles at once. She saw the feet of Ist from beneath, as though looking up through glass, saw the violet ripples of the bells that rang with each step. As though perched in the nave of a high arch, she saw the floating copper-gold tresses of Ist shining far below. Echo saw her own body, separate from herself, through the blue diamond eyes of Ist, but the wide staring eyes of her own empty face saw nothing.

Ist stood before the shell of Echo, looking deeply into the sightless eyes. Then she knelt before the altar facing Echo, uncrossing the self-protecting arms and placing them upon her own shoulders. She embraced the girl's form and kissed her gently. As she did so, mortal sight flooded into the blank eyes and darkness returned.

Echo came to herself still kneeling, arms stretched forward to embrace someone who wasn't there. Utter silence surrounded her. The crickets had stopped, the wind had died. The surf beat far below the precipice again, a hushed roar that made the silence quieter still. A deathly chill pierced Echo once more as she pulled her wolf skin cloak tightly to and rose to

go-

As she left the porticos of the Giant's Harp the sounds of night started up again, louder with each step she descended, until the din was as loud as upon her arrival.

She ran home, stepped over her father and went into her bedchamber. She opened the window wide, inviting the night sounds as buffer to the thunder of Sod. "Ah to be deaf," she wished aloud.

She piled every blanket and piece of clothing she owned on her bed and the wolfskin atop all. She crawled under them and huddled into a ball to preserve her heat, to no avail. The chill came from within.

She thought of the youth who had gone down the well to her rescue that afternoon. She had felt warm then, awakening in his embrace, though the baffling darkness had frightened her and she had cried out. She had felt so warm as they gazed at one another, safe by the well's edge. It was a warmth that had not entirely fled even when Lo arrived in a chill blast.

Remembering that warmth, she could feel it not far off. At least a candlepower's worth of heat it gave. She attempted to crawl inside the memory, surround herself with it, burrow deeper into the sweet heat in which her rescuer's face, the memory of coming to in his embrace, burned a steady warm beacon.

The warmth eluded her like a puddle of mercury flees the touch of a foreign substance.

Echo fell asleep in pursuit of the comforting warmth which she managed at last to achieve, plunging into the delicious heat. It surrounded and entered her; warmed her blood and flesh. But her bones remained

sticks of ice, a chill in the very marrow. She realized it was necessary to become the heat itself were she ever to escape the chill.

Within the dream, she dreamed that she dreamt another dream. Inside that dream she had another dream yet, in which Ist approached her, steps ringing with bells. Once more she saw her own body through the other's eyes. She kissed herself gently as before, and profound warmth entered her again, at last thawing her bones, rekindling the sight of her eyes.

She came awake with a start to find herself staring wide eyed in the darkness, kneeling on the altar of the Giant's Harp, naked and shivering, arms stretched in supplication, wolfskin tied around her shoulders by its forepaws.

XIII

The Desert of Bones

° ° °

In the wake of the hurricane, Jabajaba returned to the Giant's Harp. He dipped his pen in ink and began to copy symbols from the floor. But the ink wouldn't flow from the nib to the page. He pressed harder, causing a sudden page-ruining blot. He ripped the page from the notebook and crumpled it.

Lo was gone. Colorless Lo with the mild gray eyes which had looked right through him as he had risen to go back to his work, leaving the distracted young woman to her melancholy, despite her expressed desire for his company. His precious work.

Sorrow, kept in check by yesterday's sheer confusion, suddenly stepped from its shadow to reveal his work as an exercise in futility, a pastime. Lust for knowledge and the recognition it would bring had easily taken precedence over Lo's last request, which was only to sit with her. Did she have a premonition? Of course she did! Her whole attitude had been distant as a dream. And the Schula had provided appropriate music, that song about Ist. Looking back, the very air had been thick with omen, but had he noticed? There were symbols to transcribe. Knowledge and

honor to be won. No, he had not noticed. A scented breeze touched his cheek.

There was no Schula singing in today's brilliant sunlight. Jabajaba dared one to come. He would grab its golden thread and haul the perpetrator up by her own song, like a fish on a line. The futile imagining gave a moment of comfort, but a moment only. A shudder shook him and he felt tears begin to well. As he tried to fight them back, through their brimming waver he noticed an object on the bottom terrace. Lo's blue book.

He climbed down, heedless of his sore ankle, bent over and picked it up. As he stood up, the blood rushed from his head and he realized he was standing only a handspan from the sheer drop to the beach. He teetered and retreated quickly, sat and swallowed hard to prevent his pounding heart from leaping out of his throat. After awhile, he edged along the terrace, back flat to the marble, until he reached the corner of the Western side where he hopped to the ground. Only when both feet touched solid earth did the vertigo leave him.

Strange, this overpowering fear of heights. He'd felt nothing like it standing on the hundred foot rock which rose out of the desert a few days journey from Nikaba. For a moment he longed deeply for his home. The omenless air of the delta. The scholarly chatter of fellow scribes. If anyone in Terrapin could actually read, they kept it a deep, dark secret. Literacy in these parts had all the status of a contagious disease.

A sharp pain, resulting from his hop to the ground, reminded Jabajaba of the twist he'd given his ankle. He favored it as he crossed the pasture, breaking a dried branch from a dead alder to lean on. He did not return to Gia's silent and shrouded house, but stopped across the street from it, at the Nine Hammers.

Aor sat under the amber window, brown-yellow light thinning the color of his black beer. He had been drinking steadily since he left Gia's, two hours ago.

"Come sit, my friend. I can see it finally hit you too."

"Yes, it did."

"It always takes awhile. Dor, bring beer for my friend Jabajaba of Nikaba. Now what's that you've got?"

"Lo's book. I found it on the western terrace."

"What's in it?"

"I haven't really looked. She wanted to show me once, but I was too busy to look. She didn't offer again." He opened it randomly and his eyes widened. A familiar but unknown script met his eye, replete with dotted circles. He slapped it closed, dropped it to the table and clapped his hands to his face until the beer came, frothing over the lip of the pewter mug. He drank in earnest. Aor did not diminish his lead. He was of a mood to talk.

"After Echo fell down the well, Lo came home and my wife says she wasn't too happy. I saw for myself why. Echo and Elmo staring at each other like a couple jackanapes after he pulled her out of the water. Lo always had a fancy for that boy, not that he ever took notice.

"I knew it for what it was right off, been smelling it in the wind, so to speak. Ist blows through the town until she spots the makings of trouble, then she applies a little leverage to make it worse. The stronger she gets the more trouble she makes. Feeds off it. She starts with the weakest minds, like Eliot, and works her way up. Pretty soon . . ."

Jabajaba interrupted: "If you knew, why didn't you do something?"

"Here now - my glass is empty again. Why don't you just step outdoors and fetch me a measure o' that wind? And mind the hammers. Do something about it! There's nothing anyone can do but watch and wait... the more you know the more there is to be afraid of. The only folks not frightened to death are those who don't know what's going on at all. Do something!" He snorted.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to criticize. It's more my fault than anyone else's. Another round, Dor!"

Aor reached into the pocket of his flowing wool coat and produced a large onion, white and round, and took a thoughtful munch, offered it to Jabajaba who shook his head. He took another bite and pocketed his fruit.

"No one's fault, son. Ist applies those little pressures. You said you didn't look at Lo's book. Now, you being a scholar and all, that's not very like you, is it?"

"Now that you mention it, no ... I remember a beam of sunlight breaking through the clouds and falling across a row of symbols at the time - just as Lo was offering to show me the book. I had a sudden feeling that I knew what those symbols meant - and I did, it all just seemed to come together in that moment. The meaning just sort of entered my head . . ."

"Aye. A thought not there a moment before suddenly fills your head. Like as not it's a lie, but not always. Depends on how much trouble it can cause. Odds are, the way you slammed that book closed, you had more to glean from its pages than from the signs on the floor. So sly, the Fair One.

"Ist steps in and over they go. This isn't the first time, you know."

Jabajaba realized someone was finally telling him something. Remembering Gia's caution, he wondered if he really wanted to know, but opportunity was on offer. Aor was deep enough into his drink to be indiscreet.

"It isn't? What do you mean?."

"Lo's mother and her grandmother went the same way. Zip - over the edge, as far as anybody knows. Nobody ever saw, but there's no place to go in these parts, so it's certain they didn't run off. Each time the whole business began around the time a stranger came out of the desert, just like you." Aor stopped.

"And?"

"I'm blabbing. That's not good of me. It would not be a friend who told you any more. Perhaps not one who'd tell you so much!"

"I won't tell Gia you told me anything. This concerns me, Aor. What's going on here!"

The old Rough looked thoughtful. "No. . .I'm thinking better of it, drunk as I be. Let me tell you something, take advice where you get it. If Gia didn't think it needful for you to stay in town, I'd advise you to pack light and run fast. Two more, Dor!"

"I don't see why you defer so much to Gia." Jabajaba tried the challenging approach.

Aor leaned forward and breathed his ominous onion laden reply: "You don't, hmm? You'd be wise to do the same, young friend. Without Gia to stand guard over things none of us know the half of, the Giant's Harp would cry out for blood from generation unto generation, with no end in sight. Think on those who wrote those strange writings you're trying to read. Where did they go, leaving their great gravestone behind them? Now you've heard a pile more than's good for you. Be it on your own head if you don't forget all I've said quick as you can nor be fool enough to press for more!"

Aor's eyes suddenly widened, "The Devil!" A strong gust had blown the door open. Eliot stood there, pick in hand.

"That man," he screamed to the small crowd, his finger trembling accusingly at Jabajaba, "killed my niece!"

Eliot was immediately surrounded, pushed into the room and forced against the wall. "I was up there, I saw. He tried to put his hands on her and she wouldn't let him! He slapped her and she fell over he edge! My niece. My brother's daughter! That man killed her!"

"I'll go for the magistrate," said Aor loud and officially to the crowd as he took Jabajaba firmly by the arm and hustled him out the open door before anyone thought to object. "Mind the hammers," he added to the startled and compliant younger man. The hammers were still whirling from the gust which had revealed Eliot at the door.

"Well done, Jabajaba, for a pair in our condition," Aor said as they crossed the street directly to Gia's.

Gia opened the door as they walked up the path. She sized them up with her good eye, which dwelt a moment on the blue book Jabajaba carried along with his notebook. She contained her fury; wasted no time and no words.

"He has come?"

"If you mean Eliot, yes. He's in the tavern!"

"Sit here and admit no one," she replied. "I must write a letter."

"A letter!" both exclaimed at once.

"But shouldn't I go get Ro to take a statement from Eliot?"

"No. Not yet. And not another drunken word from either of you while I write!" She disappeared for half an hour, returning with a sealed envelope which she gave to Jabajaba. "It will be necessary for you to go immediately, Jabajaba. Now that Eliot has appeared your life is in danger."

"Will anyone believe him?"

"Some will, most won't. It's of no concern, the truth will out soon enough. But you must go right away. Deliver this letter to Nikaba to the address I have written. If there is no one there to receive it, see that it gets to the second address in Sax, by carrier if you will, for it will be of less importance then. Look at the seal, Jabajaba..."

Jabajaba took the letter and looked at the red wax seal imprinted with nine hammers.

"This letter is not for your eyes. You would encounter grave danger on the desert were you to read it, more I cannot tell you without calling that very danger down at once. I have here a duplicate," she showed him a second similar envelope sealed with the nine hammers,

"by which I may divine when the first seal is broken and by whom. Throw your necessities in your pack, and take that little book along. Collect your water skins and get out while there's time. Go!"

"May I return when the letter is delivered?"

"Return you must! It will be over then, and I may well be dead. If I am, you may have my house for your studies - Aor be my witness. Here is the remainder of the money you entrusted me with. You will find it less than a quarter spent."

Jabajaba went to his room and packed his more important transcriptions and necessities: a knife, flint and a tinder box, a vial of healing ointment, a bowl and Lo's blue book. His hooded robe he wore, hung his empty water skins around his neck.

"I will see you past the South gate and a little into the desert," said Aor. "The walk will do my head good; had a good knock o' the nine, for certain."

"Not another word, Aor. You have told him quite enough; enough to make his dreams conspire or I miss my guess. Farewell, Jabajaba of Nikaba. You will see me again before I see you." She handed him a bag of dried provisions.

"What do you mean, Grandmother?"

"Farewell. Off with you!"

Aor obeyed Gia's command to silence. In spite of the younger man's questions he would tell no more until they reached the Southern gate, where stood Eliot's deserted cottage, door ajar.

"Here I turn back. Be cautious of the winds, the wings and strange dreams, but fear them not. Only what affrights you can harm you. It is her way. And be sure of your balance near any heights or cracks in the desert! Goodspeed and Yu be with thee." He embraced Jabajaba and clapped him soundly on the back.

° ° °

Despite all that had occurred since he came to Terrapin, the time spent between desert crossings suddenly seemed short indeed as Jabajaba contemplated the trials of the Desert Of Bones. They were known trials

this time. He smiled at the memory of the uninitiated high spirits with which he left Nikaba. He had only to walk with the rising sun at his back and follow its course across the sky. By night he had but to keep the North Star at his right shoulder, move his legs and his destination would come to him: the Eagle Mall, whose inscriptions would reveal their meanings naturally enough to him, where others had failed, their records either lost or, it might well be, jealously hidden away from those more adept at translating than at crossing deserts.

Now he need only walk into the sun and keep the star to his left. . .and in a fortnight he'd walk the streets of Nikaba. But Nikaba would not "come to him" by the simple act of moving his legs; no more than had Terrapin.

The heat of Summer was past. That much was gained. Less of his water would be robbed from his skin by the sun. His ankle ached, but six tall measures of stout black beer made the slight sprain easy. A night's sleep would mend it.

A half hour's trek gained him the Ebo Oasis, where the Roughs held their Wintertide vigil. Without knowing it, he spread his robe on the very spot where Aor had massaged life back into the half-frozen Echo; the spot where she'd had her disturbing dream of the young man with the burning hands.

The sun had set, but a long twilight lingered, enough to read by. Jabajaba opened Lo's blue book in the middle again, right to the same page which had startled him so in the tavern. He half expected it to be gone, ripped out, self-erased, or simply a product of his overwrought nerves. But no. It was there. Lines of familiar writing - the first sequence of lines he'd copied into his own notebook a moon and a half ago, taking care to get each curve and line correct, the flowing letters, the jagged glyphs of punctuation, the subtle variations, the dotted circle everywhere present.

Elmo had casually said the dotted circle was the sun. A rough sense could be made of that, assuming the arrowlike portions of script were verbal prepositions, indicating direction of movement (forward, backward, up, down, etc.) and spatial relationships between persons and objects: coming toward, going away, being together, moving apart and so forth. An arrow with leglike strokes under the line apparently told how fast the action was happening: One stroke, slow. Two, less slow. Three strokes, not so slow and four strokes fast.

It was all supposition, of course. He was too good a scholar to let his fondness for a theory convince him. The test was whether or not a coherent story could be read from, or into, the writing, based on a patchwork of grammatical hunches. Or a convincing accounting and tallying system be discovered. A code of law and justice adduced. Legal documents were much the same in any writing system: no scarcity of the expressions "Whereas," "In the event of," or "Party of the first part."

Tales were another matter. Jabajaba was certain it was a tale he was transcribing, no bill of sale for corn and hogs. His theories had wormed a possible storyline from the inscriptions, crude but plausible:

The Sun came to the world on long legs

with a hatful of precious stones

to reward his faithful worshippers

but no one would come close to him

because he was so bright they were

afraid he would burn and blind them.

Only the king of the world's daughter was not

afraid to hold his hand and look into his face.

The sun became so angry with the people

that he threw the jewels on the ground

where they grew into mountains of fire

that burned down the world. The Sun

took the king of the world's daughter

back to the sky with him. She is the Moon.

Such a primitive story belied the sophistication of the script. However, it could be an archive of traditional tales. The blue book said something rather different. It was history. It was a warning!

Ist came to Earth from the City of Eagles

with a bright and vengeful eye

determined to slay all the generations

of those who had turned from her worship

to the adoration of signs and symbols.

Long had the people labored to build

a City of Eagles upon the Earth itself,

one to rival Yu's magnificent dwellings,

and to carve upon its avenues all of

the wisdom humankind had discovered,

their history and the names of kings,

their heroes and the tales and tunes,

that elsewise might be lost, of balladeers.

To effect her wrath, the Fair One took

two girls in their sleep and entered them,

one with hair like flame and one with

black hair and skin of alabaster's pallor

Everything was there! Tenses agreed, what we though to be verbal prepositions were adjectives! What he had read as "Moon" was a metaphor comparing the color of skin to a stone. The flush of revelation was so strong, it was more than a few heartbeats before he tended to the substance of the story itself.

As he turned the page to read on, a sudden wind off the desert blew a handful of sand into his eyes. He dropped the book and the wind scooped it up and ran with it. He could almost hear a merry laugh! Not hear so much as feel it. Cursing, he sprang to his feet, and ran after the flying book. Just as he was about to capture it, he tripped on a branch and sprawled to the ground. Even as he fell, he kept his wits about him enough to snatch the book out of the air.

He hobbled back to his resting place, ankle afire, eyes stinging from the sand. He thought he heard the sound of wings rushing away. He lay down, using the book as a pillow, and rubbed ointment into the angry ankle.

° ° °

At dawn, Jabajaba filled one water bag with a small amount of water and left the Ebo leaning on a stick. He would fill the rest of the bags at the Last Oasis and begin his trek in earnest. Another resting spot lay half a day's journey between Ebo and the Last Oasis. If his ankle held out, he would proceed to it, if not return and wait till he could. He knew that

returning to Terrapin was out of the question. Gia's command, combined with what he'd seen in Lo's blue book, snatched from his hand by old Ist herself he half believed, left no doubt. Trouble was coming on long legs. Did it bear a hatful of exploding jewels?

Night had passed without event but for a vivid dream about Lo which he couldn't remember. His ankle was painfully serviceable till noon when it began to throb. He passed the rest of the day at the Crack in the World Oasis, where he'd been directed by Aeoui.

There were signs of a recent camp - cinders and a sleeping hollow dug with a pick, chip marks still evident in the earth. On a bush an anomalous blue ribbon fluttered in the strangely scented breeze.

Jabajaba had an afternoon to pass and eagerly opened Lo's blue book, again at the middle, noticing that the spine had been creased to make this happen, it was no magic. He turned to the next page. The writing was a form of demotic he well knew, though it was strange to think it had been written in Terrapin, in what he now recognized as the hand of Lo's father Lit.

My greetings, Wanderer, for such thou be

into whose hand's this book I pray doth fall.

Within it's pages all you seek is to be found,

for all has happened before and must again,

women die and babes be born to follow in

their mother's fateful footsteps until the land

is delivered from the scourge of the Lair One,

Ist, the dying gasp of gods dead and better so.

There is nothing I can tell which would be

wise for you to know - my knowing what I do

foretells a fate for me I shall not dwell upon.

Suffice to say I shall be gone, and like as not

my daughter, the one small grace in this being

she will not bear another like herself and this

may help diminish the power of the one who,

but half human herself, has need of thralls.

This much is yours to know and all the rest

is written on the floor of Eagle Mall, the Harp

whose strings are the memories of races.

Do thou, Wanderer, as the Sorceress of Sax

commands thee do, but only so much as is in

your nature to do. Fear not. She knows thee,

for thy father is not thy father and who

thy father is she knows and therefore thee.

Do not obey what is not in thine own nature,

Gia would expect no less of thee and counts

heavily that she be not mistaken. Forgive my

liberties with the demotic which I am sure

you command with more skillful ease than

your humble tutor,

Jabajaba flipped to the first page. This was not for him. It was a child's primer, words introduced in poetry and maxims no doubt the work of Fit himself, no mean poet, if in a less than lofty sense. A good man, humorous and adept with a sentence, a bit overfond of puns - a malady common to scribes and others overtly versed in language.

He read the book with pleasure as evening thickened, coming at last to the place where the spine was cracked. He flipped past the tale and Fit's prophetic message to discover an index of signs followed by many tables of grammar constructions. He sighed, almost with sorrow. The work had been done for him. How could he not find this elating? And yet it was not what he wanted. The glory lay in discovery, not in learning what has been already discovered. He dutifully studied for awhile but closed the book readily as twilight deepened, using for bookmark the piece of blue ribbon from the bush, first untying the knot. Eyes still smarting from the sand tossed in his face, ankle throbbing, Jabajaba of Nikaba was suddenly not at all sure what he was doing sitting in the Crack in the World Oasis by command of a squint eyed woman who assured him knowledge of his situation was a dangerous thing.

Twigs and wood were already gathered near the fire by the former occupant. The night was warm, but he lit a blaze for company. He thought of the letter Gia had given him to deliver. Who in Nikaba could possibly have any connection to this sordid drama of arcane forces and necromancy? A fine young woman was missing, presumably dead, but was it prestidigitation, murder or simple accident? Fo's blue book would have it another way yet, divine ill will. The book rested its case on some startling prophecies, most notably the foretelling that the book itself would come into his own hands and, coincidentally, solve the very problems he was puzzling over.

Despite all this, his skepticism was not entirely extinguished. It could, of course, be all a carefully orchestrated drama played for his benefit,

though several points were clearly not to be engineered, such as the event of his arriving in Terrapin just in time to keep Eliot from murdering Lo. The book could, of course, have been written quickly by someone like Ro, with Gia's help, and placed on the terrace for him to find, only its cover resembling Lo's own volume. But this scenario would involve Lo's complicity and, Echo's as well, and somehow that didn't quite figure. Unless they were as much the thralls of Gia as the book suggested they were tools of the Fair One.

No, Lo couldn't have been any part of such a scheme, her soul's scars suffered at the hands of Eliot were too evident. What, he wondered, had she meant to tell him at their final meeting? Did she mean to show him the blue book? She had it with her. Whatever it was she intended to say or show, something had made her think better of it.

And what of Echo? No, Jabajaba allowed himself to believe no ill of that one, given to transports and visions as she was. That she was in a state of enthrallment to a demi-goddess was, frankly, easier to believe of Echo than that she played any part in a plot of mere mortals. As he mused on Echo, the face of Lo suddenly pushed her out of his imagination. He saw her as he'd last seen her, gazing out to sea, but the gaze was now turned on him, dark, frightened and unfocused.

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The next morning Jabajaba was awakened from a dream by a bird brushing his cheek. By the time he was fully awake, he realized there were no birds at the oasis. He could remember none of the dream beyond an impression of Lo, especially her eyes. He shook the remnant of the dream off and went prowling the oasis for something to eat. He wanted to save the food Gia had given him for the trek itself.

He breakfasted on boiled roots, a kind of edible rope, and his hunger was satisfied if not his palate. His ankle seemed about as serviceable as when he'd set out from the Ebo. There was not reason not to set off for the

Last Oasis, so he did.

From his last experience of this part of the desert, he swung well wide of the great canyon known as the Crack in the World. Aor's advice to avoid precipices and abysses was well taken. No sense in tempting that tricky wind.

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Jabajaba arrived at the Last Oasis about the same time of day he'd come to the Crack in the World. Beyond this haven of well springs and date palms, there would be no more water, no shade save clouds, nor any living thing to encounter but himself for fourteen days.

He sat by the side of a cold spring and let the water draw the heat from his ankle, opening the blue book at its ribbon marker with the intention of feeding his scholarship, if not his thwarted ambition.

His morning trek had been troubled, both by memory of last night's peculiar dreams, and by unpleasant self-revelation. He was not proud of his attitude toward seeing his work done for him. It was an uncomfortable surprise to realize how similar was his own motivation to the blatant political ambition of certain scribes he affected to despise. The revelation of his own meanness bid fair to haunt his journey like a ragged shadow. He remembered one of the verses he'd translated from Ardri for his Master's dissertation:

The desert offers many a mirror

Some of beauty, some of terror,

But none so haunt the wanderer

As the shape of his shadow there

His translations had been received which much approval by the senior scribes, which was only right. He was aware that they were excellent,

cleverly rendered in each detail while remaining true to the text. But the truth of the sage's verses had been of less concern to the candidate than the rendering. He pondered their construction, not their wisdom. Their quality of observation was gainsaid.

He turned the page of the blue book and found another section of text transcribed from the Giant's Harp, with a translation on the adjoining page. He decided, if prompted by vanity he couldn't say, to try his hand at translating it for himself, based on what he'd learned from Lit's lexicon. He covered the translation with Gia's letter and wrote on the back of the sealed envelope with a charcoal pen, lightly so he could erase.

Twilight grew dim before he finished, and a strange piece it was:

I went upstairs and there I slept

My face upon the stones yclept

My breath upon the wind a mist

A scarlet river at each wrist

I woke from sleep and slept again

Dreamt of mountains, clouds and men

Ocean depths, the silver sky

And all which in between doth lie

I went downstairs, three flights in all

My hat and cloak hung on the wall

My shadow hung upon a hook

Beside a candle, bell and book

I lit the candle, first to tell,

I read the book, I rang the bell,

Donned the hat and wore the cloak

Listened while the Fair One spoke:

Three am I and two to come

And yet was never more than one

Legions of the deaf and blind

With this spell I to me bind

By the last of the light, Jabajaba uncovered the hidden page. To his expectation, the gist was the same in most particulars. The difference between "donning" and "wearing" had been obscured in Lit's translation. He'd used the verb "put on" for both senses, neglecting the subtle difference in verb tense. In all fairness, Jabajaba had to admit his own translation was more adept.

His sleep that night was again disturbed by dreams of Lo, a ghostly figure who would take wavery form for a moment then fade away, hands outstretched as though beseeching. Come morning, he decided to rest another day at the Last Oasis, judging his ankle not yet fit to bear an additional fifty pounds of water in eight sacks plus another ten pounds of dates in addition to the dried food Gia had provided. He spent the day studying the blue book and weaving a mat of palm fronds, ankle dangling in the cold spring.

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Dawn brought a sigh of dry breeze, rustling the date palm. With an effort of will, Jabajaba arose from another night of dreaming of Lo, the images repetitive but less wavery than in the previous dreams. He thought no more about it but bathed for the last time in cold spring water, ate a

handful of dates, drank his fill, shouldered his load and stepped decisively from the green oasis into the consuming element. As his foot touched the sand, he suddenly remembered the state of miserable thirst in which he had first come to this oasis several moons ago. A quick breeze darted through his hair and he thought he heard a tinkle of bells, as though the oasis bade him farewell as he headed toward the verging sun.

The walk was fine until mid afternoon when sun on the sand became wearisome and his eyes longed for a patch of greenery. With eight bags of water, his plan was to drink little the first day, having filled himself at the oasis, but by sun set he finished the first bag. Drinking had made him sweat more freely. Like a fool he'd forgotten to bring salt. He filled the bag with foodstuff to readjust his load.

His ankle giving next to no complaint, he walked on and off till dark, resting whenever he wearied, then pressing on. He slept several hours, sometime after midnight, but awoke from the repetitive dream of Lo and trudged on, North Star bright to his left, coolness agreeable. But the dream did not go entirely away. In the walking trance of desert crossing, the beseeching figure became a frequent if inconstant companion.

If he had had his choice, Jabajaba would have preferred the illusory company of Echo; found his thoughts often turning to her of their own accord. He regretted not saying good-bye to her. He'd meant to see more of Echo, but intention had not advanced beyond the mutual look they'd exchanged at Midsummer's by moonlight, so occupied were all his waking thoughts with Eagle Mall, or the "Giant's Harp" as he himself had begun to think of it.

He paid little heed to the blue book now, nor did he expect to do more than take a few glances during his journey. To wake was to walk and to stop was to nap or to sleep, as long as his ankle agreed - or even if it didn't as his water supply dictated.

Venus shone clear and full in the pre-dawn sky, the orange glow of the unrisen sun accentuating her brilliance. The sun came up somber red

thirty degrees to Jabajaba's right and he adjusted his course to walk straight toward it. The fertile Delta lay some two hundred and fifty miles of sand Eastward, less the day's covered distance.

Come the heat of the day, he rested in a tent comprised of walking stick, palm frond mat and cloak of thick black cloth over his head and across his face, so only his eyes showed, appearing the veritable embodiment of ill omen. He catnapped only to be awakened by the dream, but continued resting for the benefit of his ankle. Later in the day when his shadow lengthened, he remembered previous traffic with his shade during the Western trek. It had grown a more real companion day by day, until he found himself talking to it and almost expecting an answer. He had reached Terrapin before he received one. Any small fixation was apt to loom large viewed against a vast empty horizon. Ardri knew whereof he spoke.

As he pushed deeper into the desert, its odd but familiar characteristic odor grew ever more present. Something like the scent of orchids flavored the air of the Desert of Bones, wafted from no discernible source.

Wind from the west intensified the odor and favored mirages; wind from the north blew both away. Infrequent mirages of the Southern wind were liquid and often horrible; rarer still, those of the East wind wore filigree coverlets and shimmered by night.

When no wind blew and the moon was dark, the desert was so quiet the stars made audible sounds. The howl of the moon obscured all other celestial sounds, its voice deepening from soprano at crescent to contralto at fullness.

Jabajaba's thoughts turned progressively less to the sheaf of papers tucked safely in their pouch, many items of which, if translated at all by Lit, were nevertheless not in the blue book. Days passed when he didn't think of them, or the blue book, at all. They no longer seemed important. Only crossing this desolate barrier was of the slightest significance.

A thought could get stuck in the head of a traveler and stay there, with no outer stimulus to change it. One whole day of walking had been accompanied by an unwonted thought of something Gia had said one evening when he returned from a transcription session. Whether it was a recitation or an original observation he had no idea:

"The walls have ears and the window, eyes. The door has teeth and the Harp has wings - wings and a ravenous appetite. Feed it songs and it will listen, so long as it takes delight. But feed it reason, my over-tutored scribe, and it will bite!" Perhaps. But the events of Terrapin, the attitude of mystery its denizens clothed their doings in, grew distant in his mind, except in dreams where Lo now seemed, almost, a real companion of the desert.

The Sun set on the fourth day and the third pouch of water was consumed. Jabajaba decided to rest awhile then walk through the entire night and sleep during the heat of the following day to conserve water. He catnapped for an hour, leaving his face uncovered so that the irritation of fine grit in a continual light breeze would keep him from deep sleep.

The hot breeze, which had blown throughout the day, had made him decide to travel by dark for it hastened the evaporation of sweat absorbed by his thick desert cloak, designed of old to cool the skin with its own moisture, minimizing further water depleting perspiration.

Jabajaba first crossed the Desert of Bones in early Summer. Now, in late Summer, the wasteland presented different problems. It was hotter, windier, and the nights were shorter. Mirages were more frequent on the earlier crossing, though rarely as long lived as the juxtaposed Eagle Mall which now towered behind him in the dusky darkness. It had glimmered into visibility at sunset and persisted through twilight. A faint silver outline of it was visible even by dark until washed out by moonrise.

During his nap, he dreamed of Lo. She appeared walking toward him with arms outstretched. He reached out his own in response, but as they were about to touch, her eyes flared wide and she screamed. A new

dimension had been added to the dream.

A gust of sand in the face reminded Jabajaba of his schedule. He arose and hiked on through the cooled and windy night, the five remaining bags sloshing against his back and chest weighting him by fewer pounds than before. He remembered how the progressive lessening of the burden had made him feel nearly able to float by the time he reached Terrapin, compounded with dehydration, two weeks of steady sun and utter solitude except for the company of his shadow.

He didn't think his nearly a bag a day consumption to date was excessive, since it lightened his load appreciably, though he had now reached the boundary of caution. He'd planned his crossing strategy carefully while at the Last Oasis. Desert of Bones obliging, he would reach the Delta in ten days, ready to collapse with thirst, his food pouch empty.

On his first trip through the desert, he had amused himself by remembering his life backwards. Now he attempted the feat forwards. He reached his eighth year by the end of the sixth day. He had worked for a year in the shop of his father, Potter Foolish, who had acquired his nickname due to a severe affliction which caused him to spontaneously erupt in tirades of blasphemy and obscenity.

Jabajaba's mother, who had died the year before, was deaf and mute, so she was not aware of the problem. Her son grew up in a largely silent environment, except for the explosions of cursing. Other than that, the potter only spoke when there was no alternative.

It was natural that Jabajaba took to reading and writing at which he showed sufficient promise to gain appointment as an apprentice to the Guild of Scribes. He served as quill sharpener and copyist of lesser documents while receiving instruction in the mysteries of the written word.

His kinship with Potter Foolish caused trouble and he was often forced to defend himself against jeers imitating the old man. His defense was so

convincing that the jeering eventually stopped, but not before Jabajaba felt secure in the use of his fists. An unusual accomplishment for a scribe.

He affected to be proud of his father, but deep down felt a burning sense of shame which was not lessened by the absurd manner in which the potter chanced to die, suffering a seizure while sitting in the public outhouse swearing his soul out.

"She knows thee, for thy father is not thy father and who thy father is she knows and therefore thee." What had Lit meant by that? Assuming the remark of a dead man who did not know him could have any relevance whatsoever? But he had been correct in other matters, if the whole business was not a hoax. The presence, if not the very substance, of the translations in the blue book argued something more serious than an elaborate joke at his expense. Time would tell.

Shame, Jabajaba knew, fired his ambition to excel, so that he became a Journeyman Scribe by the age of eleven and mastered five tongues and as many scripts by sixteen, obtaining the degree of Master Scribe upon his eighteenth birthday. None had been granted the degree younger than he. Twice eighteen would be considered young for such an honor.

Raised above his peers and viewed as somewhat of an upstart by the elder scribes, he had devoted his time to solitary work and the cultivation of a beard. He'd meant to return from Terrapin with world shaking revelations that would command respect from his elders and admit him into their circle as a recognized equal, despite his youth. Now, all he had to offer was a discovered key to the Eagle Mall in someone else's hand. Unless . . . But no. He couldn't memorize and destroy the book. Or claim ignorance of it. The respect of others was one thing, self-respect quite another. The desert made that clear. His shadow was watching. The sun was watching. The wind was listening. The key to the Giant's Harp was critical. In what way he couldn't guess, but something more important than his status among scribes hung in the balance.

Jabajaba walked until the growing heat of the new day drew the first drops of sweat, then lay down in the shadow of a dune, eating a handful of dates and taking a good swallow of water to make them swell in his stomach.

He fell asleep the moment he drew his cloak over his head and shut his eyes. Again he dreamed that Lo approached him, gray eyes pleading, arms extended. This time, as he reached his hands out, she stepped right through him as though he were a fog. He saw behind himself without turning. Lo staggered, as though caught by the ankle, and fell from the cliff. Her scream shattered the dream.

Awakening with a start, he saw the stars shining. He wet his lips and chewed a date, strode into the gathering twilight of the Desert of Bones thinking about the dream. Keeping the North Star to his left, he watched the Big Dipper, known as the "Box of O" revolve around his guide star as the night progressed. It was the box, belonging to the goddess O, in which all the things made to be placed on Earth were kept until needed.

At the end of creation, according to the pre-Istian legend, all things will be returned to the Box of O, and the goddess will shut the lid which now hangs open in the sky. The outer corners of the box pointed the direction he was to travel: toward the Great Rock, the only outstanding landmark of the journey, three days walk from the springs, grasses, lush fruit trees and greenery of the Delta.

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Of all the devices in illusion's repertoire, none surpasses moonlight mirage in splendor of enchantment. Shades of black merging to violet predominate, shapes are sensuous and animated, shimmering in waves as ripples of heat escape the sand. When the sand cools they disappear.

Demons would sometimes jump from them, confusedly evolved with many faces. Other times they shimmered with serene beauty, presiding over an invisible horizon, sometimes doubling themselves by reflection in

the sand.

The seventh night of journeying, the moonlight produced a violet harp standing far away in the direction Jabajaba headed. Suddenly he heard the rush of large wings close behind him and threw himself to the sand, terrified.

He looked up and there was nothing there, nor could have been. There were no predators and no prey so deep into the Desert of Bones. He moistened his suddenly dry mouth and continued on, but with a tingle of fear in his heart. He kept looking back every few steps. The sound had been so close. He imagined he could feel black wing-driven talons pierce his flesh, reaching through the ribs to grasp his heart.

The walls have ears and the Harp has an appetite, Gia had said. The wind has wings. Had she said that? He couldn't remember. His mouth was still dry, in spite of the earlier drink, so he took another. It remained dry. The recurring dream appeared to him vividly, the black desert an easy screen for imagination.

He knew it would be strange if he did not suffer hallucinations, considering the strain of the journey.

He saw Lo coming toward him, arms outstretched, against the backdrop of the mirage. The only way to banish the vision was to walk with closed eyes, which he did.

He remembered Gia's letter, with its seal that would allegedly signal when it was broken, for the first time in days. He wondered if he looked so untrustworthy that the precaution of hocus-pocus was thought necessary to command his obedience. Queer old woman. He wondered about the message. What if it related to himself? What if she suspected him of murdering Lo and had found a roundabout way to deliver him to the authorities? The letter grew warm in his pouch, but he left it unread. There was no light to see it by and by morning he was too tired to care.

He slept the day through, waking only once to still a dream of tempting waters with a few swallows. He again had the dream of Lo. This

time he knew he was dreaming and noticed that the dream progressed in detail. He saw a golden tendril circle her ankle before she staggered and fell. Though he knew it was a dream, he could not keep the scream from jarring him rudely from sleep yet again.

He couldn't remember if this was his eight day or his ninth and tried to figure it out by recalling the times of day he had emptied various water bags. He'd started with eight and now had two and a half. He hoped it was the ninth day. In case it wasn't, he drank little that night.

The tenth day, if it was the tenth, he slept fitfully, awakened several times by what seemed a whir of small wings, like a large insect or a small bird. He knew he would see nothing, but the sound was so vivid he couldn't help opening his eyes. He decided it must be the sound of dunes settling, though he'd not heard such a thing on the first crossing. Probably a seasonal thing.

His thirst disappeared toward the end of the day. That was a bad sign. He'd read an account by a desert traveler who advised drinking slowly until thirst returned, then stopping.

It took much of one of his remaining two bags to reach the point of returning thirst, but the injunction had been strict and it seemed best to obey. He was able to walk through the night without drinking again, the awakened thirst continual but not overpowering.

He had the dream again. This time he was not only aware, but had some choice within the dream. He found he could walk to the edge of the terrace and peer over, without vertigo, as Lo stumbled on the brink. He saw a Schula singing on a rock, though the dream was silent. From her mouth issued a golden tendril that wrapped around Lo's ankle and gave a gentle tug. The silence of the dream was broken by the usual scream. The images fled and he woke with the customary start.

He made one bag of water stretch between the eleventh and twelfth days, sucking date pits to keep his mouth moist. He was pestered while asleep by the whirring of a small insect, but he kept his eyes shut and slid

easily back into deep slumber 'til awakened by the inevitable scream. No matter how much he prepared for it, he could not prevent it from destroying the peace of his slumber. Although, independent volition increased within the dream with each repetition, until it now seemed an alternate awakeness in which he was free to move about and inspect at will until the scream sounded.

On the thirteenth day he came to the Great Rock, to his relief. The landmark indicated that he was still three days journey from the Delta, meaning he'd added at least a full day distance to his journey by wandering off course one starless night when it would have been wisest to wait for dawn.

He had one gallon of water left and his step was light since he cast off appreciable weight with each emptied bag. He felt he'd be able to fly into the Delta when the last bag was done.

Climbing to the top of the obsidian rock, a hundred feet above the sand, he could see the penumbra of the Delta, where its evaporating moisture caused tall mirages to form.

Mirages were in play around the full circumference of the horizon in the cloudless early morning. Pillars stood in each direction. Above the Delta rose a likeness of the lyre pillars of the Eagle Mall.

The dream suddenly returned, though Jabajaba was wide awake. Until now the dream had been silent save for the scream which ended it, but now he could hear the rush of distant waves and the melody of the golden tendril from the Schula's mouth. It no longer sought the foot of Lo, who was not in this waking dream, but wrapped around his own foot. Suddenly he heard a whir of great wings at his back, lost his balance and fell. His own scream completed the vision as he fell twenty feet to a porch in the obsidian, landing hard on his previously injured foot. A hot pain shot through it. As soon as his adrenaline subsided he tested the ankle. It was sprained, along with all hope of arriving at the Delta less than half dead.

He lowered himself painfully down the Great Rock and tried using his staff as a crutch. It wouldn't do, the sand was too soft. He realized that he would have to crawl the rest of the way. The sooner he began the better.

For the next five days, Jabajaba crawled through the Desert of Bones, falling into sleep in mid crawl, waking with the sound of Lo's scream of mortal terror. The thought of Gia's letter, which he dragged along with his bag of scrolls, did not enter his mind. Nothing crossed it except determination to survive and a fear that the wings might return. He knew now whose wings they were.

XIV

The Cat's Eye

° ° °

The nine hammers whirled round their axle, driven by torrential rain. The tavern was empty; three days of storm kept Dor's customers beneath their own eaves. The gale strummed the Giant's Harp with thick fingers, sounding its triominous chord modulated by the lashing of the wind. Terrapin was benighted, then splashed to sudden full, shadowless illuminations of lightning followed by thunder claps which shook windows and outdinned even the snoring of Sod.

Echo put on her boots and tied a bandanna over her crimson curls, pulled low to keep the driving rain from her eyes. She wondered if it had been absolutely necessary for Jabajaba to leave without a good-bye; hoped it was so. He had been much in her dreams lately, as had pale Lo. Echo made no clear distinction between dreams and waking events. She could not understand why Lo pursued Jabajaba through the desert of the dream. Echo, too, awoke with each repetitious scream. Between the dream and the snoring of her father, there was no sleep to be had. She left the house.

There was purpose to her step, though she scarcely knew where she was going. One quick bite of icy rain and blue blossomed in her cheeks, replacing the rose with lavender.

Two others were abroad in Terrapin that day: Elmo, who dared the gale through sheer restlessness, and Gia who, beneath an umbrella, watched the Giant's Harp with fierce interest from the mimosa patch, her eye unblinking in the rain. She saw Elmo pass her observation place; saw Echo follow shortly after. All occurred as Gia expected: the gale stopped roaring soon after the couple met at the Western terrace. They did not themselves know why they had come. Gia knew it was because they could not do otherwise.

The storm stopped and the sky cleared. Within the hour, the moon shone and crickets took up their chorus in the mimosa. Gia scuttled home, countenance dark.

She sat by the fireside sipping tea, two cats on her lap, another on her knee. Jabajaba was dead or at the Delta now. She did not think he'd died. But was the letter intact? Was the seal broken? Much hope rested on the condition of that seal.

She held the duplicate sealed letter and smiled grimly. All the cleverness of her years had gone into the writing of the letter and the injunction to deliver it with seal intact. Ist would not ignore the challenge. So long as Jabajaba obeyed the injunction not to break the seal, the Fair One might storm her heart out to discover the intent of the missive. Nothing would be revealed. But if he disobeyed ... ah! That would be an interesting matter. She believed she knew her man - how far he could be trusted, how far not.

Gia realized the near impossibility of successful intervention. Still, might not Ist be losing her grip just a bit? The queen's pawn, Eliot, could have been more cleverly deployed. His reappearance had been so premature it only served to give warning and hasten the departure of Jabajaba, Gia's queen's knight.

Could it be that Eliot's own will had something to do with it? Always possible. Doesn't do to underestimate the enemy. It could be a mere ploy to make Gia relax her guard. Just in case, she re-doubled her vigilance, slept now not at all. The sacrifice of the Fair One's king's rook, poor Lo, was a matter of course. Gia's own two bishops, Ro and Aor, were ready for deployment, her king's knight, Elmo, unable to move for fear of leaving a hole in the ranks: useless but as a defense of her king's rook, Echo. Oh, damn the metaphor! It wasn't chess, it was lives on the line! A stir of wind against her cheek ended the reverie. She was thinking too loudly. Her mind went momentarily blank as a field of snow and the wind vanished, leaving only a hint of its scent. So! Now she would need to tend her thoughts as well as her words!

This three day blow was decisive, unmistakable. The fatal links were connecting. Her face hardened at the thought of the Fair One beguiling the brute Eliot. How easy to twine his stupid motives with her own. There was a time when mighty Ist would not have stooped that low. No more would Old Howl, the Wolf O'the Wild, with his rape of blood-haired Echo. There'd been a time when the game had been different. Never refined, but different. Ah well! There was a reason. This was the last game. Winner take all. The stakes were entire. It was poison to think on.

And Aor was little better than the rest when it came to it. He had not had the stomach to let Echo perish, while Ist was yet in fragile imminence. Now the Fair One had gathered strength, her diamond power hardening. Where was Aor's stout Rough's heart when needed? Townified and he might as well admit it. Or maybe it was loyalty to the pack after all, though he'd sworn it wasn't. Allies were as confusing as enemies in any battle with Ist. That much, at least, was predictable. It was a game of chess only if one admitted cruelty, jealousy and eavesdropping winds into the rules.

Eliot was even now under lock and key, but that meant little should Ist choose to free him. She had a way with doors and hinges. Possibly he was

of no further use and would languish in jail, though a knife in the throat would provide more comfortable assurance. Yes, but that was not the way Gia's side of the board was to be played. Ist fed and grew strong on fear. Out and out murder would rebound in her favor. An act of violent passion was one thing, but the time for that had passed. Passion ran thin in the blood of the civilized warriors at her command. It had not always been so. More than once the Fair One had been stalemated from an unexpected source. Echo's great grandmother for instance. This time there would be no stalemate. Gia knew this with certainty.

She hoped Jabajaba would prove adequate to the attacks which must plague his trip. Useless to warn him. By the time he figured out what was happening, the assault would be over. That drunken fool Aor had already told him enough to make safe crossing difficult. Gia did not know what form the attacks would take, only that they'd prey on exhaustion, disturbing sleep and judgment, rendering him more susceptible to little tricks of leverage by the wind. Touch him otherwise, the Fair One could not.

Gia closed her hand around the duplicate seal then abruptly tossed it into the fire. The red wax ran over the hot black andiron like a drop of blood. The cat on her knee, disturbed by the motion, stood, arched its back, yawned mightily, settled and began to wash.

A quick, decisive breeze rushed under the door, caught up the flaming letter, and bore it up the chimney.

"Make what you will of a burning blank letter," muttered Gia, who would have been surprised only if such a thing had not happened. So, Ist was powerful as that now! Her eyes functioned as well as her ears. The Fair One had tipped her hand. Gia chuckled at the gust of angry wind that rattled the front window. A wind of predictable reproach...

"Shake your fist at me, will you!" said the ancient warrior, receiving a questioning glance from her black tomcat, Eos. The chuckle died on her lips. Despite so many repetitions, varying only in detail, she could not

resign herself to the cruel course of the battle. Else she would have given up warfare long ago.

"Come kitties!" the old woman summoned her other cats, poured each a separate saucer of cream. Their three tails waved right and left in tandem while they lapped, as though tied to a common pendulum. When finished, they turned in a body, mewed thanks, washed in phalanx.

Gia hobbled to the door and opened it just as Echo, returning from the Giant's Harp with a determined set to her face, passed by.

"Come in Echo! Have a cup of tea and I will tell your fortune."

"I don't want any tea, Grandmother, and I don't believe in fortunes, but I'll come in. I can see you want to talk to me."

"You are wise girl, but not tactful."

"I'm sorry. I've been snapping at everyone."

"Worried? What need? You are young and pretty. Come, I'll tell your fortune in love. Your gypsy Roughs cannot do that half so well as I."

"I'm not in love. "

"No, not love, friendship then. Sit down and show me your knuckles. Hmm, is this knuckle always more prominent than the others?"

"I never noticed..."

"Oh, it's a changeable thing. See, the matching knuckle is not so large on your other hand."

"No."

"The way it's dented in the center shows that you spoke to someone recently whom you found interesting. The red mark to the side shows that you find more than one person of more than passing interest."

"I've met some interesting people, Gia, but it seems unlikely they would make my knuckles swell."

"Unlikely indeed. That's why it's rarely noticed. From the shadings of the mark I see that one of them is dark haired."

Echo's interest perked up, despite herself: "I know someone like that."

"You needn't tell me that. The knuckles never lie unless the hand is clenched. I can see by this curling hair growing to the side of the knuckle that this one is musical, and by the direction it curls that he has recently lost a close friend."

"Yes, he has, that is, a...well you know that already, don't you? Why are you pretending to tell my fortune?"

"Believe as you will, but hear me out. It's dangerous to break the spell of a fortune telling, once begun. You need tell me nothing, it is all plain enough. By this freckle the hair grows from, I can see he is fickle in nature and would test your friendship often. It would be good if you overlooked his rudeness, it is only bluff and he is good at heart. He has a wandering eye and it would not do to become too upset when it seeks out another than yourself. Patience with this trait would gain you much." Echo flushed angrily and tossed her head. "This cross hatching of lines below the knuckle shows that he will honor your friendship in the end, providing you demand nothing of him."

"What are the names of your cats, Grandmother?' Gia let go of Echo's hand. She'd said what she wanted to say, received the response she desired. Gained a small tactical advantage, two to be precise, in less than an hour's time. A hundred tiny but pivotal actions would be needed to thwart the designs of the Fair One, to disrupt alliances favorable to the destruction of the participants. It was all so drearily predictable. No longer exciting. A duty, pure and simple.

"The fat brown lass is Zee. Zee, say 'how do you do?' to Echo. The calico asleep on your foot is Tio. My long black tom with the tattered ear is Los.

"They are all very sweet. I must go now, Grandmother."

"Does Sod still snore as of old?"

"He does. I'm surprised you can't hear it from here."

"Take this little pouch and brew a pinch with his tea. It may bring you relief."

"Thank you, Grandmother. I'll try it."

"You do that girl, and tell me the result. And think on what I've said."

"Los looks as though he wants to go with me."

"He would be a good guard, but I need him here. Good-bye, Echo."

"Good-bye, Grandmother."

Gia shut the door and the pleasant expression dropped from her face and shattered on the stone floor. Looking into that most probably doomed child's eyes, while giving her information that could help Echo's own situation little, had cost dearly. She felt her strength ebbing and lay carefully on the bed, drawing her feet up one by one with her stiff hands. She called her living blanket of warm cats to duty with a kissing sound.

"You replace the flesh which has withered away from my bones, my darlings. You must look to feed yourselves soon. Aye, such business is upon us not even little cats are safe!"

Quietly alert amidst the carpet of purring she waited and watched, listened and thought. Perhaps she should talk to Elmo. No, thick as a board that one. He would run true to form. Leverage had to be applied through Echo, who was plainly interested in the boy. Jabajaba could influence the course of that. The sensitive girl's reaction to Elmo's fickle nature, in Jabaj aba's absence, could spark the collected tinder.

She let go her nearly constant vigil on Ist for a moment and attempted to look out over the desert, but her vision was blocked by the fanning wings of a black bird. When she returned her attention to the room again, the cats had stirred and she smelled the after odor of an intruding breeze.

That had been close. Dangerously close. Leaving her body unattended was no longer an option. This feeble frame must be her sole vehicle for the rest of the course of events. But she knew something she hadn't known for certain moments ago. The Fair One could be two places at once. The beginning of her grand division had begun.

Los hopped off the bed and darted out the cat door into the night. In Ro and Elmo's back yard, the fragrance of supper scraps from a garbage

bin attracted him. He knocked the lid off and climbed in. Done feasting, he hopped on the window sill and spied on Ro laboring at his charts. Cast by candlelight, the broad shadow of the astronomer's writing hand darkened the wall. The shadow jumped ominously as the busy wind looked in at the window also, causing the candle to gutter. The cat's fur rose in alarm and he jumped off the sill to the ground.

He looked in at Elmo's bedroom window. A beam of Ro's candlelight through a crack in the door provided the cat with light enough to see that the bed was empty.

The black tom dropped to ground and made his way toward Echo's house. He dislodged the bin top and crawled in to complete his supper. He was disappointed, there was nothing but cold oatmeal leavings. A wood fire burned in the house and he jumped up to see if scraps lay on the table. Yes, there they were, but Sod, rapt in thunder, didn't look very likely to arise and discard them, so the cat checked the window of Echo's bedroom: empty; bedding undisturbed.

The black cat rounded off his supper at the Nine Hammers, howling at the back door until it opened and a pig's foot was thrown out The door was left ajar and after Los finished dining he entered. He strutted through the cigar smoke and collected strokings on the way to the front door where he sat and called to be let out.

"That cat is on some business tonight."

"The business of fish heads."

"Most likely. Draw us another pint, Dor."

"I bid the Ax Knight and his Queen."

"Three Circles captures."

"I fold."

"Me too."

"Whose deal? Dor, beer for all with my winnings."

"Myself included, Aeoui?"

"Yourself included, Dor."

"You're in town early for Autumn Fest. Have they tired of your tales down the way? I jest, of course."

"There are matters which bring me to Terrapin. Let us not speak of them."

"Let us not."

"No, no, we say too much to say 'don't speak.'"

"Listen, the door bolts rattle."

"Who will deal next?"

"Let the cat out, will you?"

Los strutted out the door which suddenly closed with a windy bang, barely missing his tail which twitched offended. He jumped on a banister and stood on hind legs to sharpen his claws on the lower of the nine hammers. The sign creaked and moved with his weight. Then he headed toward the Giant's Harp at a trot.

When he came to the mimosa clump, he climbed one of the trees. Two figures were upon the Giant's Harp, but even his keen eyes could not identify them at this darkened distance. Curious, he backed down the tree and headed across the dry grass to see who they were.

"You disappeared this afternoon."

"Oh, did I?"

"I looked up and you were gone."

"I was? I didn't notice."

"Didn't notice what?"

"That I was gone. Must you play those dreary Schula songs?"

"They are kind of gloomy, aren't they?"

"Don't you ever make up any of your own?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"I don't know. I would. If I played anything."

"You want to learn how?"

"Not really. I'd rather listen."

"Well, I could teach you if you did."

"I love music, but I like quiet even better."

"Must be the way your father snores."

"You're right about that. I hate him."

"I could make up a song based on Sod's snoring for you!"

"Oh stop it. Be quiet."

"No, I'm serious. There's music in any sound if you listen for it."

"Very profound."

"No, wait a minute . . . listen . . ."

"Ho, that's good, but mind you don't swallow your pipe. How can you get such a low sound out of such a small pipe?"

"By using my chest as a sounding board."

"What do you mean?"

"I stop all the holes and hold it as close to my glottis as I can without gagging. Then I vibrate my throat like a cat purring. Want to try?"

"No, its disgusting."

"It is, isn't it? Why don't you like the Schulas?"

"It's all so pretty it becomes a bore."

"Careful Ist doesn't hear you. She's a friend of the Schulas."

"So, you're religious. I wouldn't have thought it."

"No I'm not. I don't believe in Yu or his terrapin. And it's not a question of believing in Ist. She's around whether I believe or not. Are you still religious? You used to be."

"I don't think about it much. I wouldn't go speaking of it lightly though."

"Maybe. Have you heard the Rough tune the Schulas learned?"

"I don't like it. It sounds false in their mouths."

"I taught it to them."

"I doubt that."

"No, really. I went down there not long ago."

"Whatever for?"

"Oh. . . for the exercise."

"I can believe you went, but I can't believe you got back."

"Well, here I am. That proves it."

"You really went down?"

"Nobody talks about it, huh?"

"I wouldn't know. How did you get back?"

"On a kite."

"You're lucky you didn't break a leg. You're much too big to ride a kite."

"Very lucky. I'll play you a song..."

"That's nice. What's it called?"

"I made it up."

"When?"

"Just now. I call it the dance of the Nine Hammers."

"Play it again."

"Another time. It takes too much wind. I'll get dizzy."

"Play a sad one then."

As the lament echoed through the Giant's Harp, a Schula joined in. Elmo adjusted his melody to blend.

A cloud is pressed against the sun

The moon is sinking low

My days of life are almost run

And soon now I must go

In sorrow I have lived my days

In sorrow I must die

Bad the good so oft repays

O do not ask me why

Sure it is that Summer comes

And sure that Summer goes

Sweet the Giant Harper strums

The full blown briar rose

I have tasted love and pain

Each proper to its season

Would I taste of each again?

O love, give me good reason

Circle twice around the rose

Another 'round the stone

Out of pleasure sorrow grows

Where each must walk alone

In sandy soil the nettle blooms

The dock so green beside

Many voices, many rooms

Within my thoughts reside . . .

During the forlorn duet, Echo slipped away unnoticed, except by the black tom who met her at the bottom step as she lowered herself to the grass.

"Los! You followed me after all. . . well, come on home with me then, I have some scraps for you."

Los knew all about the scraps at the end of Echo's trail. He twitched his tattered ears in acquiescence and led the way, darting off now and then

to silence a cricket.

A gust of wind tangled her red hair. Los leapt at it, as though at a rat. It was a moist gust, with a strong odor of salt. It vanished as though the cat had truly silenced it. Echo felt a sudden surge of anxiety.

Just as she reached the mimosa patch, she heard Elmo calling her name. It could be no one but Elmo, though the way her name resounded it seemed as though the Giant's Harp itself called: "Echo, Echo." She didn't answer, but thought about what Gia had said about not getting too upset when someone's wandering eye sought out another. Elmo's duet with the Schula had angered her. But when she thought it over, she didn't know exactly why. What should she care? The more she thought about it, the more she realized she didn't.

Erasing Elmo from her thoughts, she suddenly remembered the young man of the dream, the one whose hands had burned like fire. But not about him so much, strangely enough, as of someone else who had been in the dream... Who was it? Not Aor, though he seemed to know more than anyone should of someone else's dream. No, it was someone else, someone powerful, protective - and feminine - who had chased the attacker away. Sod's snore, as she approached her door, broke off her reverie.

Gia's black tom was rewarded with the promised scraps. Echo persuaded him to stay until she fell asleep, which happened more easily than usual due to the efficacy of Gia's potion on Sod's snore. It was an anodyne if no cure. She'd slipped some in his jug before she'd left the house.

Los stopped again at the tavern to whet his claws on the Nine Hammers before returning to Gia's. Once home, he jumped on the old woman's bed, rejoining Zee and Tia in providing a living coverlet for the old woman who was ever cold.

Early the next morning, Elmo knocked on Echo's door. Sod answered.

"What brings you here? A broken wheel if I'm lucky!"

"No, sir. I've come to see if Echo would like to come for a walk."

"Ah, so you fancy my little Echo, huh? Ho, Ho. Well I never thought I'd see this day. This a big day indeed, I can hear wedding bells already," he leered. "Tell me, just between us men, what's she like? Ho Ho Ho!"

Elmo reddened. "Sir, I just wondered if she'd like to come walking."

"Echo! Echo! Young Elmo here seems to fancy you; wants to take you walking! I hope that's all he wants!"

"Father! Stop it."

"Would you like to come for a walk?"

"I'm sorry, I can't. I have housework to do. Another time."

"Ho, girl! You don't know what luck this is for a strange one like you to find a beau! Go, and count yourself lucky!"

"Another time, Elmo. I have much to do."

After the door slammed, Echo was upon her father, cursing and hammering his barrel chest with her fists. It took all Sod's dexterity to guard his eyes from her fingernails until finally he caught hold of both wrists and held them fast, laughing loudly the whole time. When she dissolved in tears of frustration, he let go of her and she ran from the house.

Without any decision on her part, her feet headed South, into the Desert of Bones. She trotted, tears streaming, until her wind gave out, then walked the rest of the way to the Ebo Oasis. There she spent the remainder of the day sitting, unknowingly, on the spot where she'd had the dream, staring straight ahead. She slept there that night.

XV

Breaking the Seal

° ° °

Vision ringing, hearing blurred, nothing focused but thirst climbing his throat to cracked lips . . . mind baked to brick, no thought beyond ON. No water for how long? two days? Try and count. More? Sun so hot, so hot, ankle puffed and painful from trying to run in desperation, trying to escape the dream become so real ... the only real thing, the dream of Lo, everything else focusless sky, desert, wind. Flock of buzzards overhead, circling for days now, since the water gave out. . . easy to die, could slip into darkness . . . cool there, wet, but the scrolls would crumble to sand . . . lost. . . they must not be lost. They must not. Dying would be good, but saving the scrolls better yet. . . why so important? Can't remember. A letter to deliver. Reason to go on, any reason . . .

How long is it, then? two days? since the water gave out? three days after the ankle sprain, five days in all? two with buzzards. Crawl, stop, fall asleep, scream, start, crawl, stop...the scrolls: Deliver Them.

A flash of lightning and a minute later, thunder, a gust of almost cool wind from the north, rain far away, could it be? The sky had darkened as Jabajaba crawled, flat on his belly, face to the sand.

Yes, great torrents of rain, drops big as water bags, thudding everywhere, quivering on the sand swirling colors like the glass domes of the sea around Terrapin. Not just colors in the immense rain drops, but visions! There was Lo, sitting on the terrace of the Giant's Harp, beckoning to him, holding a goblet of sweet, cold water. He found he could rise, effortlessly, by a simple act of will, float into the vision, accept the goblet and drink.

Lo had her own goblet and they drank and drank and drank while the Schula sang sweetly:

Lips of water,

Lips of wine,

Drain your cup

And drink of mine

Cups of reason

Cups of war

Drink from mine

And thirst no more

He stared into Lo's eyes, but did not stop drinking. He was able to see right through her eyes, out the back of her head, down to the sea below. Her eyes were no longer gray, but the very blue of the waves. She finished drinking and put down her cup, but Jabajaba couldn't leave his. Lo showed displeasure, demanded that he put down the cup. It wasn't possible.

Lo stormed off in a fury shaking her black curls, walked over to the edge of the cliff. She turned to look angrily at him, beckoning impatiently for him to follow. He wanted to, very much, but couldn't move or do

anything but drink without pause.

She turned and walked away, over the edge of the cliff, continuing to walk on the air itself until she vanished in the distance. The song stopped and the water in Jabajaba's cup turned to sand.

He woke from the delirium trying to swallow a mouthful of sand. The festering flesh of his lips protested in agony. He got to his knees and resumed crawling.

He crawled across a floor of wickedly shining knife points, then across a lake of prickly starfish. Fountains of laughing spray tormented his senses. He could hear, see and smell the fountains, but no drop of moisture did they give.

Gia came to him; watched with no expression on her face. He noticed that her bad eye was a well and that he could look deep within to where the full moon was reflected in the water.

"You are dry and ready to be fired, like one of the bowls of Potter Foolish."

"I am fired already, let me be filled."

"Arise and crawl."

"I do crawl."

"Arise!"

"I am risen."

He had collapsed again into the sand. He struggled to his hands and knees and crawled on. He felt lighter. He was lighter. The scrolls were gone. He turned back and half an hour later came to the place where he'd dropped them.

He still could not remember why they were so important. What was he carrying them for? And why had he returned for them? Must. That was why... He'd explain it to himself later. He crawled back to where he'd seen Gia. She was still there.

"You are fired, now be filled."

"Begone, mirages do not talk."

She was gone. In her place, the distant outline of a tree. The Delta, beyond a wavering curtain of mirage, awaited.

After five days and nights of crawling, he had reached the margin. The deity of the place sent forth a stream, bubbling from a spring. The desert ended as abruptly as the arbitrary boundary line of a map.

As he pulled himself over the lip of the spring, Jabajaba saw his face reflected for the first time in three weeks. A stranger. He plunged in, the cold water lancing his flesh with slender needles. He gulped until his stomach rebelled, then retched it up. He drank again, greedily, but the thirst would not go away.

He forced himself to quit drinking. Now was the test of any remaining strength. He sat on the bank and soothed his ankle in the stream.

After a few minutes, he scooped water with one cupped palm into his mouth, slowly, then lay back and fell asleep in the shade of a tree, ankle dangling in the water.

He woke and it was morning again. The dream of Lo had not come for the first time since he began his journey. For once his slumber was not shattered by her scream.

A few yards away, currant bushes and a blackberry bramble grew. A banana tree stood nearby, but it wasn't worth disturbing the ankle to crawl to it. Hunger had not come back yet, only renewed thirst. He drank, then dozed, woke at mid day, again without dreaming, drank, ate a handful of blackberries, fell asleep.

Two days passed before he felt well enough to take interest in his surroundings. It was here that he had prepared for his journey to Terrapin, filling his waterbags at the spring and provisioning himself with dates after filling his belly with fruit. He'd hidden some things in the bramble thicket before setting off. Suffering a few scratches, he retrieved them intact.

There was a canteen, no use on the desert because of its smallness, but handy for the trek from and back to Nikaba, and a change of clothing,

provision for just this time, that he might appear less a wildman when entering the city. Also scissors and a small mirror which allowed him to trim his red beard and shaggy yellow hair. He avoided looking at his eyes: they were still frightening for their owner to behold. They'd seen too many visions of terror as he crawled nearly senseless in the direction of the rising sun. What the visions were he no longer remembered, only the sound of endless screaming and whistling wind. And laughing. A woman's voice, silvery and cold.

By the fourth day at the spring, the swelling left his ankle. It was almost as thin as the good one, but wouldn't yet bear his weight the day's journey to Nikaba. He'd left his walking stick behind, so cut a new one out of manzanita and spent the day carving intricate figures into the hardwood flesh while he studied one of his scrolls. He suddenly remembered Gia's letter for the first time in two weeks.

Somehow or other, his mind was made up. There was no longer a question as to whether he should read it or not before delivering it up to it's sendee, one Urther of Pribcote near Underly, Nikaba. Gia had required no oath of him, he reasoned, merely requested he remain ignorant of the letter's contents. No doubt she was correct in so doing. All the dangers she'd forewarned had indeed overtaken him. He was prepared to believe that, had he known more, his trouble would have been the greater. But the trouble was gone now. It's domain apparently ended at the desert's edge, for the days were windless and the recurring dream only a frightening memory.

Of course he must read the letter. He'd known he would eventually do so when she handed it to him, with all the hocus-pocus about double seals. He started to break the embossed red wax, but hesitated. What if, in some unfathomable way, the contents of the letter were such that, if known to him, harm could come either to him or Gia? He couldn't imagine how that might be so, but still hesitated.

He looked at the seal: nine hammers, as on the tavern, but reversed. They seemed to begin rotating as he looked, and he could suddenly hear the tapping of tiny hammers. He realized it was only the sound of a fat black cricket on his back pack and broke the seal.

The strong, archaic handwriting of the letter, not at all the penmanship of a frail old woman, read:

Jabajaba of Nikaba, I salute you.

You are startled to see the ancient script of the Guild. Read on and be surprised further.

You are recuperating now at the Delta and have at last had time to wonder about this letter you are carrying. Had you believed an old woman about the twin seals and been so incurious as to follow her instructions against your inclinations, this letter would pass out of your hands and into those of one who, reading this, would know without needing to ask further what has come to pass in Terrapin. I would be prepared to wager my remaining eyesight this will not be so.

If I have misjudged and it be thou, Uther, now reading, I salute you sadly as you will realize that I must be dead, failing in this, my last hope. Dispose of my property in Sax to your profit with this letter as testimony of my will.

Jabajaba, you have been sent away for several purposes. Your safety is critical to the well being of all concerned. The winds and dreams which have bedeviled your crossing are as nothing compared to what they would have been had you remained in Terrapin. The Fair One must needs reach far across the sands to plague you, but here she would not need to reach further than the living flesh our own dear Echo to work your mutual destruction.

You must mend yourself in body and return to Terrapin as soon as your legs are fit to carry you. Return you must, if not for love of us then for the reason that I can give you the key to unlock the scripts of the Giant's Harp and spare you fruitless toil. There are many misdirections

purposely added to the writings simply to confuse, nor were these known to Lit whose work you will by now have digested. These keys are mine alone and will soon be yours. But you must pay for them.

There are, among the writings, some signs which pretend to be script but are only patterns to thwart the curious. Which these are, I know. In earnest of my knowledge, I will tell you that the dotted circle is often, but not always, one of these. Whenever it appears next to the symbol A , its meaning is: Sun. When the symbol A is nowhere in proximity, above, below or adjacent, the dotted circle has no meaning whatsoever except upon the third repetition, when it refers to the Fair One in her immanence as wind, though her usual symbol is another sign besides.

I anticipate you will have been too busy dealing not only with hardship but attack, for that is what your dreams have been, to disregard my request to keep the seal intact until you reach the Delta. With time to recuperate, I trust that boredom coupled with your keen curiosity will lead you to disregard my warning. Should you have been frightened to do so by my injunction, it would betray a superstitious nature I do not suspect you of, one which would render you useless in the situation facing us, which, though it smacks of all things superstitious is indeed a reality of the most corporeal sort. I trust you have begun to discern the truth of this, though are by no means convinced. This is as it must and should be for you to be as valuable to me as you might. Ist finds the simple and believing heart a royal road toward her purpose, which is, quite simply, murder and revenge.

If I have predicted wrongly and you have opened this before reaching the Delta, I warn you to flee to Nikaba as quick as ever your legs have carried you, for your innocence of the contents of this letter is your protection from the full fury of forces which will have plagued you and which you know well by now, even if you are but a few days gone from us. The Fair One kens not that you are to return before the game is played out. I have introduced a new element in our age-old game in hopes of

confusing her and achieving critical advantage. I will sound abroad the misconception that you have fled in fear of Eliot and his accusation. Ist will bask in false triumph and her attacks on you will be but idle thunderbolts thrown with no purpose besides vengeful amusement. I wot not you have heard her laugh on occasion.

Once at the Delta you are well beyond her reach, and you may rest and repair your injuries in peace. Her bedeviling forces will by then be entirely employed in the mischief she is so anxious you do not disrupt.

You have been gone at least three weeks now. You will find in this packet a needle and a shank of fine strong thread. While you rest, make for yourself water bags from the leaves of the blue palm. They are light and preserve moisture better than skins. Carry ten of them a day's walk into the desert and return, leaving nine. The next day carry ten more to the first pile and sleep there. Then carry nine forward another days walk and leave them by the Great Rock, returning for those left behind.

Return to the Great Rock and carry the remaining bags to Terrapin.

This is the method I and my long dead friend, whom you will one day know about, used when we crossed the Desert of Bones and I recommend it to you, that you may arrive in strength and not exhausted or too weak for the demands awaiting.

Do not tarry beyond the time of your recovery nor return a moment before.

Gia of Sax

*

The old style writing was practiced and fluent. Numbers were spelled out, all substantives were capitalized, many terms were archaic.

It was the hand of someone trained as a scribe in the methods of two hundred years ago. Jabajaba reacted to the appearance of the document first, the contents almost as an afterthought. Had he met the ghost of his great-grandfather on the street, he could not have been more startled and

amazed.

Had Gia not offered other enticement, he would still have returned to Terrapin to question her. He felt humbled. Of course he would obey the command. He felt suddenly ashamed of breaking the seal, even realizing he'd been expected to. It was not the seal of Gia the goodhearted charlatan and busybody which he had broken, it was the seal of Gia the Scribe, daughter of Sax, founder of the principality which bore his illustrious name.

Revered as the "Scribe Prince," Sax was among those most responsible for elevating writing beyond an exclusive tool of commerce; was instrumental in the writing of the first history, lost in the fire which destroyed the Great Library a century ago.

Strength poured into Jabajaba of Nikaba, son of Potter Foolish (but what had the letter of Lit said: thy father is not thy father . . .?). He was not just to bring a parcel of undeciphered documents, along with the translations of a few by another, to the Guild; he was to receive the understanding he'd hoped for when first he'd braved the Desert of Bones. He arose exalted, then winced with pain. The nearly occluded memory of recent hardships came back in a flood: the thirst, the heat, the scream, the wings.

It was good that the ankle cautioned him this first day of Autumn. He knew that he would otherwise, in renewed enthusiasm, be up and away before he was truly rested and repaired.

The Blue Palm grew near the spring and he made the prescribed water bags from the lightweight non-porous leaves. It took two days to stitch them perfectly water tight. He tested the bags by filling and hanging them from a tree limb. If a drop of water oozed from any bag during the ten days he spent at the delta, it was stitched tighter.

He studied his scrolls, still attempting translation by his own devices. In his pride, he preferred not to have to be told everything by Gia later. The studies were much more fruitful now that he knew the dotted circle

was, more often than not, an impostor among signs. Its mystery had continually confounded his previous attempts. He searched for other symbols which might be similarly misleading.

When the ankle allowed him to walk some distance without pain, he began moving the bags into the desert as Gia instructed. He found that ten bags were more than his ankle could bear, so he carried five bags half a days walk into the desert and returned to the Delta to sleep. He did this for four days. On the fourth, he rehid his things, including the writings, except for Lo's blue book, which he packed in his knapsack. Whatever this business about malevolent forces, he was returning to the library with keys rather than questions. Feeling stronger, he set out with seven bags of water.

He repeated the procedure for three days, walking by night and sleeping by day in the shade of the Great Rock. Each time he lay down to rest, he feared the re-occurrence of the dream or the rushing of the wings, but they did not return. Gia must be right. The Fair One was otherwise occupied.

He departed from the Great Rock with ten bags full to bursting, his shadow lying long behind him.

XVI

Equinox

° ° °

A rat slipped from the hedge. The black tom pounced, but the rat escaped. Los ran to the other side of the hedge and crouched low, tail switching. General gloom had settled with Autumn. A snowfall of mimosa blossoms, burned brown by the last scorchings of Summer, tumbled in fitful heaps before the constant wind, which bore the scent of pastures burned off, plowed and left to lie fallow. The Giant's Harp rose in lunar whiteness over the horizon of the blackened fields.

The Schula did not sing much these dreary days. The season did not invite song and Elmo had reached an unspoken agreement with Echo, who simply slipped away whenever he attempted to cajole melodies from the Schula with his flute. He found he preferred Echo's company to musical companionship and, though he was still good for a tune, he stopped playing when Isa added her voice. After a few such insults, the forsaken Schula joined no more.

Echo sat alone at the foot of the Western terrace of the Giant's Harp, overlooking the sea, legs dangling into the abyss, thinking things over. Though the continual wind tangling her long red hair was chilly, Echo did

not feel the cold quite so severely as once she had. Her companionship with Elmo had something to do with it. For what reason that was, she was not at all sure. She wasn't in love with him, that was for certain. Not since the incident that happened minutes after he'd rescued her from the well. For one moment she had been, that was only to be expected. He was her hero. But the feeling had died abruptly when Lo showed up with Sod, and Elmo had nearly wet himself further trying to placate the girl's stupid jealousy. Well, better not to harbor ill thoughts of the dead, she decided, opening her eyes to banish a sudden vivid mental picture of leering Sod, dripping Elmo and vindictive Lo.

For what reason her newfound flicker of inner warmth seemed connected to Elmo's face was a disturbing mystery, but it led her to seek his companionship. Disturbingly, when he played music with the Schula, the warmth seemed to vanish. It would have been better, she decided, if the warm feeling were to arise at the memory of Jabajaba's face. There was, at least, some substance to the man. But he was gone now. Run away for fear of Eliot's accusation, if rumors could be believed. Of course, she didn't believe them. It was inconceivable that Jabajaba had tried to get fresh with Lo. She was like a sister to him. There was none of that spark that signaled amorous possibility.

Was it only because Elmo was near at hand, and Jabajaba gone, Echo wondered, that she felt the warmth for the younger man? After all, Jabajaba had not even bothered to say good-bye. Elmo's face was certainly handsomer than Jabajaba's. On the other hand, the latter's kind and studious, if distracted, manner reminded Echo very much of Lo's departed father Lit, who had taught her the alphabet and what other bits of education she'd managed to absorb in her dreaminess. He had always been kind and was, truth told, the object of her first girlhood crush. She had secretly cried for days after he died. To cry, other than in secret, was to risk the ridicule of Sod. Oh, how she hated him!

She dwelt upon her first meeting with Jabajaba at the well. She'd mistaken him for a Rough, at first glance, but his yellow hair and red beard proclaimed otherwise, as did his eyes, though not completely. She felt a small flicker of warmth as she recalled the meeting, which she often did. Then, abruptly as always, the window to the memory slammed shut with a cold blast as though such recollection was forbidden by the wind itself.

Why, she wondered, did the wind forbid this memory, but permit warming thoughts of Elmo as they'd stood drenched and gazing at one another when Lo arrived? It was hard to reconcile the selfish young man she knew Elmo to be with the hero who, without hesitation, she presumed, plunged himself into the icy well to her rescue.

She heard footsteps behind her and felt the sudden pleasurable heat radiate through her body. That would be him. Without looking over her shoulder, she asked: "Elmo, how much do you know about what happened to Lo?"

"My father didn't tell me anything. They're all like that now. Caught it from Gia."

"Did you ask?"

"Of course I did. He said he'd explain everything when it was over. They're all scared silly of the wind."

"Aren't you?"

"I'm not saying I don't wish it'd stop, but I don't see what has them all too frightened to even talk. My father surprises me most of all. He looks over his shoulder before he asks the time of day!"

"So you haven't even heard what happened after you rescued me from the well?"

"All I know is I haven't seen Lo since and nobody will say a thing about it except that Eliot showed up yelling that Jabajaba had pushed her off this terrace. But I know better than that. At least, I think I do. Actually, I don't know what to believe except that Jabajaba disappeared.

Is there something I don't know?"

"Do you think Lo is dead?"

"How should I know?"

"She has been gone six weeks, Elmo! And didn't you hear the scream?"

"That was the Schula. It was part of her song."

"Don't you even wonder about Lo? I haven't heard you say a word about her."

"Of course I wonder, but I haven't found that girls appreciate hearing about other girls, at least from me. Anyway, I didn't hear you asking. What did you mean about what I didn't know about after the well?"

"How's that?"

"You said something happened after I fished you out of the well."

"After you rescued me. . . yes. Something did happen. Lo followed you up here but you didn't notice."

"What? How do you know?"

"I was in the mimosa. I saw you go down the mining path before she got to the pasture, so she didn't see you. It got dark, but I thought I might have seen Eliot come up here too."

"Why didn't you tell anybody?"

"I wasn't sure - anyway I did tell Aor the next day. I watched for a long time, but she never came back. I heard a scream."

"I told you, it was the Schula."

"It was not the Schula, Elmo. I saw Jabajaba run away and maybe Eliot a minute later. Then I came up here myself. Several times ..." She looked thoughtful, then continued - "She was not here, Elmo. And she didn't leave by the steps."

"Maybe she..."

"No."

They both looked down the abyss. Then they looked at each other. For a long time Elmo's eyes probed Echo's. At last he said: "She's dead, then."

"Obviously."

"Dead. Hmmm..."

"Is that all you think of it?"

"What's there to think? It's not my fault, is it?"

Echo shook her head slowly from side to side, her red hair hiding further expression.

"She loved you Elmo."

"Well, is that my fault?"

"You are thick as a board, son of Ro!" Echo stood to leave. Elmo grabbed her wrist: "It's not my fault!" She wrenched free with surprising strength.

"Grow up before it's too late and you remain a stupid child forever!" She ran.

Elmo was dumbfounded. When he'd collected himself he called after her: "What are you blaming me for? It wasn't my fault!"

° ° °

Gia rocked before the fire thinking, the black tom Los purring in her lap. It was possible Jabajaba wouldn't return, but not likely. Not if he read the letter. She had little doubt he would have read it, if only for the purposeful mystery she had lent it by the hocus-pocus about the sympathetic seal of the twin letter. That was guaranteed to pique his skepticism, just as it would have done that of another Jabajaba she had known in her time, the great-grandfather of the present possessor of the name whose image he was.

She felt sure she could trust him to run true to form, but, again, she might be wrong. He wasn't his great-grandfather, even if she'd often confused the one with the other as she fell into a doze. The sons of that great-grandfather had been very good or very bad men. There was nothing irresolute about the course of that seed as it sought its destined mates and bided its time of return. It was difficult to allude to none of this while

Jabajaba had boarded with her but his ignorance of these strange, deep, convoluted matters was of first importance, both for his own safety and that of others. What others knew, the Fair One knew in time. But now the time of innocence was, of necessity, past. It was time to gird fully for war. Had Jabajaba survived? Would he return? Could he help? Of course he could, but would he? The last was the least of her doubts.

She asked herself these questions many times. All else had been done. There was nothing further to do until he returned. All players were placed on the board to best advantage. The time of utter silence was upon them. She no longer spoke of anything but mundane matters, even to her cats. Her own end was in sight, whatever the outcome. Whether it was to be peaceful or tragic depended on Jabajaba's knock on her door.

The knock did not come, instead the door blew open with a gust of wind, just as Jabajaba of Nikaba, gaunt and gritty with the dirt of the desert from which he'd just emerged, raised his hand to rap.

Three cats sprang to attention, but did not arch their backs. To Jabajaba's consternation, the old woman showed no reaction at all to his return, beyond holding a finger to her lips to warn silence. Only Los the tomcat could detect the powerful surge which stirred in his mistress's frail body as he hopped back to her lap and looked questioningly at her.

Not until the room was free of the wind which had served as door opener to Jabajaba, did Gia say "Welcome, wanderer. We have a bargain but it must be settled only in part for the time being. Sit down, rest while I make tea. I see you have a blue palm bag with water still in it."

"I couldn't bear to dump the last measure after carrying it so far."

"Is it water of the Last Oasis?"

"No, it's from the spring in the Delta where I read your letter."

"Ah! The water of the Delta has a different taste than what I've grown used to here. I long to taste it once more." Jabajaba handed Gia the bag. She poured some into a wineglass, sipped, rolled the draught around in her mouth like a fine vintage.

"Yes, it is sweet as ever. One sip will do. It brings memories enough. I would not dare drink more for fear I'd start to reminisce!"

She emptied the rest of the bag into a tea kettle and set it on the coals.

"What..."

"Ask nothing. Speak little."

"Pardon me if I seem curious, after all I..."

"Silence, child of Niolene!" Jabajaba's eyes widened at mention of his mother's name, which he had never spoken in Gia's presence. "I don't ask your belief in my reasons for my requests, though I expect you saw enough on your trip outward to warrant some, but I demand obedience, not only for what I've promised to reveal to you about the Giant's Harp, but because it is due a Keeper of the Seals by the rules of the Guild, and by the oath you swore as a Senior Scribe. Remember your vow: 'I Serve Who Serveth.' I know what is safe to say. You do not. I will talk and you may ask questions about what I say, provided you stick to the subject and mind the rising of the wind." She busied herself preparing tea.

Two months of desert crossing had left Jabajaba undaunted. He had braved the wings, the dreams, the screams. While in a state of delirium, he had lost the scrolls and dared death to recover them. He had fallen off a mountain and crawled on, arrived at the Delta near dead, only to turn around and cross the desert yet again! But here, before this frail crone, Jabajaba was cowed. He kept his mouth shut as ordered.

"What scrolls have you brought back from the Delta?" she asked, serving tea. "Not many I trust?"

"Just this."

Gia examined the proffered text and began to teach. Her steady finger indicated a symbol whose meaning was unknown to Jabajaba.

"Certain facts cannot be deduced from the text alone. This is a complex vowel lost to living speech. I cannot pronounce it myself. The writers were fond of joining many vowels in sequence and assigning to them a single symbol because their speech was highly melodic. You could

describe this symbol as indicating an arpeggio of vowel sounds, a modulated hexathong. Each of these circular markings constitutes another string of associated vowel sounds, as many as ten, a decathong, are denoted by one mark.

"They were used, among other things, to describe the various degrees of intensity of wind. The authors of this script differentiated, for example, twelve categories of wind intensity between gentle and mild. There are thirty-three such categories of intensity. The same symbols are also used to denote the planets and the stars, ranked not only by name and astronomical position relative to the position of the Midsummer sun, but according to the sound they perceived each celestial body to make."

"Their ears must have been subtle indeed."

"Not the ears, Jabajaba - the language. Once a thing is named, it can be known, but just so long as the word that names it endures. With another name, it becomes another thing; not in itself, but in how it is understood. When a language is lost, a whole way of perceiving the universe is lost with it. That is how worlds come to an end while stars shine on. Nor are they recoverable, for other worlds rush to replace it like water down a drainhole."

"But can we not learn . . ."

"No, we cannot, because we cannot see as they saw, except the language be native to us. Except the ways and beliefs and the particular genius of those people be native to us, and this it cannot be. Even their music would be lost to us, though we heard it with our own ears. We would hear only our own idea of music ill-played, or at best recognize virtuosity to what ends we can only guess."

"Then what is the point of deciphering all this?"

"Point? There is no point. It is there. We are scribes. It is our calling. I do not mean to say there is nothing we can learn. We can ascertain the positions of Mars eight thousand years ago, for one thing. This is of interest to Ro, who keeps track of such things, but not to you or me." At

this point, Gia paused to make doubly certain that no wind had crept into the room, and continued, in a low whisper: "There is another kind of information I seek. The only reliable information on mine own enemy."

"You mean . . ." She placed her finger lightly over his lips and nodded.

"I see by your notes that you've approached this set of figures as a pictographic script. You're partly right. But each consonant symbol, here...here and here, see?...also serves as a noun when followed by a slash mark. There are a dozen of them and they represent the four elements, the four seasons, the two genders and the sun. There was no moon when this language was spoken."

"What is the twelfth?"

"That would stand for the name of their god, but it was never written on any stone or parchment, only on earth, air or water, and so is lost. I will make you a list of the vowels and the consonants." She scratched them on the margin of the paper with a crow quill. "The rest of this script you must try to decipher yourself so I may judge your aptness and decide how much is fittingly entrusted to you. The more you discover for yourself, the more I will tell you.

Who Serve, I Serve."

"I am . . . overwhelmed, Grandmother. And I feel very, very weary. May I take my old place?"

"It is waiting for you, with a comfortable cat to conduct you safely through sleep. Good night, Jabajaba."

The tea had done its work quickly. She felt her own limbs relax and lay down with a smile of satisfaction to watch and wait. A wind down the chimney rattled the cookpot lid, but it did not disturb Gia as it usually did: "That for you," she said snapping her fingers, though not until well after it was gone. She snuffed the candle so that the room was lit only by the glow of coals. She overheated a room in the estimation of most, but she was always cold, except in deepest winter.

Next morning there was a cup of a different tea to revive Jabajaba, the brew which had helped him, unbeknownst, to work tirelessly on his previous stay. He was about to begin working with the clues Gia had given him the night before, when she suggested he go to the

Giant's Harp instead and finish inscribing the incomplete copy directly from the engraved script.

Striding across the charred fields, Jabajaba climbed the knoll, giving the grandeur of the Harp half a nod, receiving stony silence in reply. He no longer thought of it as a friend, this marble stage of his recurrent desert nightmare.

He crossed the vestibule of writings to the Western terrace, feeling drawn to observe the place of presumed tragedy. What he saw dismayed him. Elmo and Echo sat, holding hands, on the very spot visited so often in his dreams. Well, he thought, the little devil works fast! He was surprised at the depth of his own disappointment. . . but what, he wondered, was he to expect? He'd left without a good-bye, forever for all Echo knew, and he'd been too wrapped up in his work to pay attention to her, even when she'd obviously not discouraged it.

The couple did not notice Jabajaba and he called no attention to himself but turned and left the Giant's Harp. Despite Gia's suggestion, he realized he couldn't muster the attention to concentrate on work. He returned to Gia's house.

"Who did you see?" she asked as soon as he stepped through the door.

"No one but Echo and Elmo on the Harp."

"And how were they?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't speak to them."

"What do you mean?" she replied, startled. "You didn't even say good morning?"

"They were. . . occupied," he said lamely.

"They didn't see you?"

"No, Grandmother."

"You are certain Echo didn't see you?"

"Yes."

"I must think." She thought. Then she said, "I think it would be a waste of time to send you back to the Harp. Echo either won't be there or something worse could happen, now that you've shown your face up there."

"I said no one saw me!"

"I believe that's what you said."

"I have no idea what you mean, but I won't ask."

Gia unexpectedly smiled at him, a gleam in her good eye, "You'll do, Jabajaba of Nikaba! You like her, don't you?"

"Well I..."

"Never mind. Study your scrolls until sundown. I must go now and make preparation for tonight's gathering. Come along to Aeoui's fire, but under cover of darkness . . . and wear your hood so no one sees your face. And sharpen your quill. I doubt not Aeoui will have a story worthy of your copybook. You will not be the only stranger in attendance."

Again Jabajaba knew better than to ask questions.

° ° °

It was Fall Festival and the story teller's fire flamed. People were wary, but nevertheless came, driven by gossip and curiosity to risk venturing out of their houses in this season of ill winds. Rumors flew, in guarded whispers, of something special in store, though the rumors had no known source. People gathered early, between first sunset, when the sun sank below the cliffline, and second sunset when it entered the sea.

Echo and Elmo sat at the outer edge of the circle. She allowed him to hold her hand as it got darker and deep chill began to plague her body. Lately, Elmo's presence alone was not enough to drive away the insistent cold, intensified as it was by the slightest breath of wind, but warmth seemed to flow into her from his touch.

Behind the couple, a loud voice suddenly resounded: "Ho! When are the babies coming? When are the little ones due? Ho Ho! So I'm to be a grandfather! Look at the lovebirds, tweet, tweet, tweet. Ho, Echo, my girl! You'll have to start eating your onions again if this keeps up. Ho Ho Ho!" All eyes focused on the unhappy pair.

Echo glared at Sod, her face red as her hair. She said evenly and quietly, through clenched teeth: "Shut your great gaping hole you son of a whore or I will kill you with my bare hands!" She meant it. Stepping back in surprise, as though hurled by the force of her words, Sod lost his balance and fell into a blackberry bramble just as Aeoui began to speak. Once the story teller began, not even Sod would dare speak out again. He extracted himself from the bramble, forming curses with his lips but making no sound.

"Tonight I tell a tale in honor of Ist, the great and glorious! Happy we who are chosen and selected, by the Fair One protected, safe from fear and harm."

Someone blew his nose and Aeoui looked in the direction of the offending sound with a gaze of knives. "Let no mock blight due reverence," he warned, as Jabajaba appeared at the rear of he crowd unnoticed, took a place in the shadow, and began to write.

"Oh no, he's started right out with the lesson," Elmo whispered to Echo.

"Shh."

There was a tremble to the voice of Aeoui as he praised and propitiated the demi-goddess. The crowd grew uneasy at this unusual preface to a story telling. He generally attempted to engage their interest before sermonizing. At last he began the story.

"In Ebilham one hundred fifty years ago the day after tomorrow, there dwelt a money changer, Asilbow Ordorky. In fair weather he set up shop on the street, in foul he did business at a table in a tavern called 'Sign of the Winking Cat.'

"One wet day he was at his table of business when an outland woman appeared with a string of rare stones to sell. She told him that, if his price was fair, she had another string of such stones to sell.

"They were the best Ordorky had ever set eyes upon but he had not funds to pay a tenth part of their value. The outland woman told him to give her what he had, sell the jewels, then pay the rest of their fair price. If he sold them shrewdly enough, stone by stone, she said, he might profit enough to buy the second string.

"Ordorky set out for the jewel market, three days distant, but on the first day of his travel was waylaid and robbed of all but his undergarment.

"When he returned to the Winking Cat, the outland woman was waiting and listened to his sad tale. Bruises proved he told the truth and she took pity and gave him the second string to sell.

"Ordorky went again by the same way. On the second day he was again waylaid by the same robbers and left with only his undergarment. But he was wiser this time and had hidden the choicest of the jewels in his loincloth.

"He sold the jewel for a good price, set some of the money aside, and bought another jewel, which he also sold shrewdly, likewise setting aside some of the profit and purchasing yet another stone. He stayed in that town a year and a day, dealing in this manner, until he had earned enough through trade to pay the woman the fair price of the stolen string.

"But before he reached the Winking Cat, on the third day of his journey home, he was again set upon and robbed. This time he was left without so much as his undergarment.

"Returning to the Inn bruised and naked, he was told that the outland woman had vanished a year ago, so it seemed likely she had come to harm.

"Ordorky gave thanks to Ist for the woman's misfortune, which was good fortune to him, and worked at hired labor until he had earned enough to set up his trade again. He set up his table at the Winking Cat in

fair weather as well as foul and so shrewdly did he trade that within a year he owned both the table and the Winking Cat in which it stood.

"One day the robbers came to town to sell their booty. He recognized his jewels, sent up a cry and had the men arrested. Their hands were cut off on the spot.

"Ordorky claimed one of the hands, which wore a silver ring. He had it embalmed and used it as a paperweight to remind would-be robbers of their likely fate.

"It is hard to reform a robber. It is likewise difficult to reform his hand, for it is the hand that steals. Many a thief merely follows. Ordorky noticed certain of his valuables missing when he awoke mornings and, though he posted a guard, no one was seen to come or go.

"One night he heard a noise: scratch, scratch, scratch. He jumped out of bed and discovered the hand with the silver ring untying his sack of jewels and removing one. 'Since I can't remove you again from your wrist,' he said, 'I'll do the next best thing and deprive you of a finger,' which he did, seizing the hand and hacking off its thumb with his ax."

The crowd stirred with pleasure. They had no such punishment for crime in Terrapin and were thrilled at the bloodiness. Aeoui paused a moment for effect and then continued.

"But as soon as he hacked it off, the thumb jumped right back on the hand. He hacked it off again and again it jumped back. Six times he severed it, six times it reconnected.

"Upon the seventh swinging of his ax, the hand hopped to the floor and the ax stuck so fast in the tabletop Ordorky could not pull it out. So he put a chamber pot over the hand to imprison it while he thought what to do.

"The hand began to knock on the pot while he thought, but it did not sound like the knock of a robber's hand, it was, instead, a delicate rap like that of a lady.

"He lifted the pot to see and found not the grizzly hand of the robber but the fair white hand of a lady. While he watched in considerable fright, the hand began to grow a wrist. From the wrist grew an arm and from the arm a shoulder and slowly, slowly, in this fashion, grew the lady herself to whom the hand belonged.

"It was none other than the outland woman who owned the jewels. Around her neck were the two strings she had entrusted to him. 'You see,' she said, 'I have gone and found my own jewels, one by one, and now you must pay me for them, and for my labor besides!'

"Ordorky gave the lady a fair price, but she was not satisfied. Nor did he dare give her less than she demanded, considering the manner in which she had come to him. All he had earned, she demanded of him: the deed to his property, his coat, cloak, and gold. But she was not satisfied even with that. Nay, she was not content until he gave her also his undergarment, so that he stood ashamed and naked before her.

"Ah! And why, you may wonder, did this outland woman treat this honest merchant so? Why, because she had heard his thanks to Ist for her supposed misfortune!

"The outland woman vanished with all, leaving him the two strings of jewels for which he'd so dearly paid. He slept with them beneath the pillow. But when he awoke and pulled out his treasure, he discovered that the jewels had vanished from both strings. In their place were strung the fingerbones of the robber's hand. One bone still wore the silver ring."

° ° °

Aeoui, now that he had the crowd's rapt attention, launched into his usual sermonizing, twisting the innocent tale to the service of true but tiresome moral precepts. Jabajaba gratefully took advantage of the dreary patch to expand his notes while the story was fresh in his mind.

"Take care you do not rise and float away on your own gases, old windbag," said a loud voice from the crowd. Aeoui was startled into

silence. As his eyes met those of a woman strange to the village, his sunburned old face turned white as his beard. The stunned crowd began to murmur with excitement.

"Give us blood and adventure! Give us tales of love! Speak of the intercourse of gods and men! You bore us with your hypocritical moralizing, you lascivious old sot. Sing to us instead. Sing, I command you!"

Sing he did, though his voice was ill equipped for it. After a few lines, the woman interrupted again. "No, not a serious song, old magpie - sing something bawdy to entertain us!" She was standing now and had thrown off her cloak and hood. Blue diamond eyes glittered with cruel amusement. Her copper-gold hair floated radiantly about her head.

Echo knew that face! In the instant of her recognition, the woman spun to face her, scorn burning in the flashing bright eyes. Her frightening glance moved to Elmo. It softened. She smiled. Elmo smiled back, a broad, artless grin. He dropped Echo's hand like a piece of debris. As the contact was broken, Echo suddenly felt very, very cold. Colder than she'd ever been.

At that instant Gia spoke quietly into her ear. She'd been moving toward Echo since the strange woman first spoke.

"Stay, Echo, stay. This will pass. No man can resist that one's smile. Forgive him, it will pass. Be easy, Echo, trust Gia. Easy now, stay right here and no harm will come, you'll see my darling." She put an arm around the girl's shoulder, found her rigid as an ax handle. Elmo noticed none of this as he moved nearer to the strange woman, drawn by the invitation of her smile.

Echo could stand no more. Eyes streaming tears of rage she tore from Gia's restraining grip and fled into the darkness.

Gia did not waste time calling after her but scuttled over to Jabajaba. Pointing at the girl she said, "It's begun. Quick, after her! Stop her if you can. Fly!"

He dropped his writing things, threw off his cloak and obeyed, lunging through the bramble thicket. Echo was swift as a hare through the bushes. Jabajaba scratched himself badly plowing after, her. Once on the blackened meadow, his long legs closed the distance quickly. Clouds had gathered, filtering the strong full moonlight.

Jabajaba came to within an arm's length of Echo's streaming hair, blood-red in the strange light, when he heard the sudden roar of great wings beating down on him, louder than the wings which had startled him upon the Great Rock. A root hooked his foot and he tumbled full length upon the charred grass, hitting his head on a stone. Pain shot through his ankle just before consciousness left him.

The beautiful stranger turned from Aeoui and pushed through the crowd, which parted fearfully before her. Reaching Gia, she stood majestically still, blue diamond eyes glittering, saying nothing. Gia stood as straight as she was able, a defiant glint in her good eye. At long last the stranger said, "You have seen too much for one life, old woman."

The intruder tossed her head sharply and a lock of her copper-gold hair lashed across Gia's face. She then turned and strode through the crowd, which parted helplessly before her, while Aeoui continued singing foolishly. No one made a move to obstruct or to follow her, except for Elmo who trotted obediently after. She waved him back saying: "Play with your whistle, child, while your father attends to things that matter," and vanished into the thicket.

Elmo, deeply wounded, turned to where Echo had sat, only to discover her absence. At the same moment he heard a scream from across the field. He headed for the sound, running the long way around to avoid the bramble patch. He did not notice the black cat at his heel.

He nearly stumbled across Jabajaba who lay sprawled on the ground but neither recognized him nor stopped. He saw a small heap ahead, lying in the blackened meadow, shining a faint blue, and reached it just in time to see a large black rat scurry away. Echo lay motionless, blood dribbling

from a wound in her heel.

"Echo, are you all right?"

No answer. He put his ear to her mouth. She didn't seem to breathe. Her skin was bluer than when he'd found her in the well. He felt for a heartbeat, but there was no hint of a thump, only a radiating coldness. He picked her up and carried her to the Giant's Harp. He couldn't bring her back to the campfire where he could still hear the frightened voice of Aeoui continuing the ridiculous singing as bidden.

Echo was incredibly light, seemed to weigh no more than an armful of twigs. He'd not noticed that when he lifted her in the well. He had a thought so odd it surprised him: he had saved her once and so was her death not just something owed? Certainly no blame of his. Blame? Well what should be his blame? After all, he had neither chased her away nor bitten her heel.

She wasn't breathing, perhaps she was truly dead, but it didn't seem so. Her muscles weren't slack like those of a dead animal. Maybe it took more time for a human to go slack than an animal. He didn't know; he'd never seen anyone die. If she was dead, maybe it would be best to leave her and go back to the gathering ... let someone else find her. No, that was unworthy and he knew it, even as he thought it, he felt shamed at having such an idea. It seemed to come from somewhere outside himself.

He placed Echo on the bottom step of the Giant's Harp and drew himself up, then lifted her again and placed her on the second step.

At the fire, the villagers were stealing away to the safety of home as unobtrusively as possible. Mothers gathered their little ones under skirts, fathers hovered protectively. Aeoui sang on as commanded:

The plowman ploughed his row

The fiddler drew his bow

And played a merry ditty

While the farmer greased his hoe

The sheep were in the rye

The shepherd passed 'em by

Except a merry little ewe

Who chanced to catch his eye

The tune was interrupted by a sharp voice, "Stop your bellowing, you old fool and come help me."

"Do I dare stop, Gia?"

"Of course you dare. What more harm could come? Help me home. I am blinded."

XVII

Ropes and Reasons

° ° °

Off stalked the black tomcat, stiff-legged, tailtip twitching in irritation at the escape of its fine, fat prey. They would meet again, Los and the blood-lapping rat of the field. He gave the topless trash bin of Ro a contemptuous glance, stopped, considered, turned back and crawled in.

The town lay silent but not darkened as Los climbed out of the bin to continue his rounds. Candles burned, in most windows, from dark to dawn, totem protection against the ceaseless wind and the fearsome demi-goddess whose breath it was rumored to be.

Crickets no longer chirruped in the burnt stubble fields where Los had chased the rat as far the hedge, where it had lived since the yearly burn-off. He paused near the mimosa patch and sniffed the wind. There was no scent but charred grass, even that odor faint. He sprinted across the meadow to the Giant's Harp which was lit by a single moonbeam breaking through banks of mottled clouds.

Echo's red hair appeared black by moonlight, trailing from the edge of the obsidian block where Elmo had placed her unconscious body. She radiated a coldness so intense he could feel the chill on his hands and

face, though he stood an arm's length away from her. A sudden song from the beach below echoed eerily through the marble halls of the Giant's Harp.

Balance bend

Heart's leaf quiver

Night of shudders

Night of sighs

In my heart

An icy sliver

Curtains flutter

A child cries

Love has left

To love another

He will give her

Only lies

Balance bend

Heart's leaf quiver

Night of shudders

Night of sighs

Rise O wind

Your force deliver

Heart's leaf quiver,

Fall and die

Aiiee.

...sang Isa in the moonlight, ending the threnody with a drawn-out scream that echoed around the hall and faded away, just as though someone were falling off the Western terrace into the abyss. He found himself walking toward the sound, waiting, preposterously, to hear a thud. Instead he heard a soft moan. He dashed over to Echo, but she did not appear to have moved. There was still no sign of breath in the slight, blue body.

Elmo could not convince himself Echo was dead. Something was not right. Her coldness did not seem like the cold of death. It was more like the chill of a winter day. It radiated from her. Death didn't radiate.

Suddenly feeling, with the force of conviction, that the scream of the singer and the scream supposed to be Lo's, were from one and the same throat, Isa's, he lifted Echo from the block and carried her down the South steps to the mining path. A lithe black shadow, with a tail and a tattered ear, padded curiously behind.

As Elmo carried the small body down the path, a sudden rush of emotion brought tears to his eyes. A dozen conflicting thoughts, held in abeyance by Echo's plight, suddenly sprang forth: why does everything happen to me? What have I done to deserve this? Why did the strange lady insult me after leading me on, . . . and in front of everybody? Where did she come from? How dared she insult Aeoui, and get away with it too? She only said what I was thinking myself. Did she realize that? Was that why she smiled at me? How did she know? Go play with my toys! What was that supposed to mean! She acted like she was Ist herself. Aeoui certainly thought she was. Old idiot, waiting for her to show up in just such a fashion for years. If I'd raised a pumpkin on a stick he would have believed it was Ist. She smiled at me as though she knew me -

almost feel we've met before but it couldn't be. I've never been outside Terrapin, except to the beach. Well, that's farther than most around here ever go. Echo doesn't weigh much at all, or am I getting stronger? Growing so fast I hit my head on a branch I could walk under with room to spare last year. Ouch! Poor Lo. Where is she now? If not dead, where? Maybe she ran off to Nikaba! Dangerous, but it could be done. Maybe she'd been making preparations all along! After all, it was probably more dangerous to stick around here with Eliot on the loose . . . and she wouldn't have told anyone because she wouldn't want Eliot to know she'd gone until it was too late to catch up with her. But on the other hand, Echo said she'd seen Eliot leaving the Giant's Harp a short while after Jabajaba, right after the scream . . . but then again, she wasn't positive it had been him . . .of course, Eliot said he'd been at the Harp and saw Jabajaba trying to molest Lo, and if you believed him about one thing, why not the other? But why would he suddenly come out of hiding at that exact moment? At this point Elmo's thoughts got too tangled to contend with and he returned to his earlier notion that the Schula was somehow involved.

He carried Echo inside the jade mine, put her gently down on the floor and suddenly felt very, very sleepy. He closed his eyes as he knelt beside her, and in a moment his head sank to her motionless breast. As he snored, the voice of the Schula rose keen and strident.

Wind, storm, howl away howl

Howl up the fish from the sea

Wind, rain, thunder and pain

Howl the leaves from the tree

Blow away, blow away, blow away all

Whip up the waves till they drown

Wind, rain, thunder and pain

What man has set up, knock it down

Hurricane, hurricane, rage from the sky

Rise crested waves from the deep

Wind, rain, thunder and pain

Rock my baby to sleep

*

When Elmo awoke, he jumped back, disoriented, from the strange, cold pillow. Echo was unchanged. Quandary and consternation overtook him. Every few hours a whirring sound, as of wings, seemed to hover before the entrance to the mine, sounding down the passageway to the dark corner where Elmo hid. He felt certain that it, whatever it was, was searching for him. He crept out only once, at dawn, to gather over-ripe crab apples from the ground and to fill a corroded miner's helmet with water from a stream.

He did not ask himself why he hid. He was afraid of no one in particular. He did not feel that Echo's condition was his fault, but that did not remove a feeling of confused responsibility. Later in the morning, people had come by looking for them, calling their names. They had even called into the mine entrance, but he moved deeper into the shadows and didn't answer. A plan was forming in his mind.

Echo was alive; he knew it, but couldn't say how he knew. Dead people just didn't act that way, he was sure, though he'd never seen one except for a brief glimpse of his mother before she was buried. He couldn't remember much about it except that whatever she had been like was not what Echo was like. He'd seen plenty of dead squirrels and such. There was nobody home in the bodies... His instinct knew this was not

true of Echo. She was in there, somewhere... What's more, she was his responsibility and he must do something. None of this was his fault, but it must be somebody's. He figured he knew who. Someone very jealous.

He plotted and planned and, late at night, he went home. The moon was dark and he was careful to keep close to trees and buildings. The door was locked. Strange. It had never been locked before. He didn't even know the door had a lock. Ro must have put one on. What for? To keep him out?

He went around to his window. No lock there. He eased it up gently. It squeaked and he paused for a long while before pushing it up any more. He heard the dog growl as he raised it further. "That's a good boy," he whispered and the beast recognized the voice and went back to sleep. He could hear Ro breathing deep and regularly from behind his closed door.

Elmo crept inside and got a blanket and a loaf of bread. He filled his pouch with candles, knife, Ro's spyglass and heavy work gloves to work his plan. For once, he wished he could write so he could leave a note for Ro. What if his father thought he were dead? Well, he'd notice the missing spyglass in the morning and know better.

He caught his foot on the window sill as he eased himself out and fell with a thud to the ground. Ro's voice called out, "Who goes there? Is that you Elmo?" He didn't answer, instead ran as fast as he could toward the mine.

The next day dawned breezy and unseasonably warm. Echo was as fresh as when she'd fallen, still radiating coolness. A snatch of song could be heard, borne by the wind.

Little boys play with toys

Ladies fair brush their hair

The dead lay flat upon their backs

And have no care, no care

Hearing the mocking voice of Isa, Elmo decided to act. He looked at Echo by candlelight for a long while, then, on impulse, kissed her. The cold burned his lips. He moved her further down the mine shaft and set out.

He headed for the refuse heap where the tarred miner's ropes and other useless gear were abandoned after the mines were worked out. He took three full coils, as much as he could carry, and headed for the monkey climb.

He tied the first rope to a vine and lowered himself until the fifty feet was paid out. He tied the next rope to its end and descended farther. When he'd come to the bottom of all three ropes, he climbed back up again, lacerated with scratches, to collect his blanket and three more coils of rope from the refuse dump.

This time, he wrapped his blanket around himself to protect his hide and descended his first set of ropes again, carrying the three new coils, which he left on the ledge, and climbed back up again. The blanket was soaked with sweat. He carried down another three ropes and fell exhausted on his six coils, but roused himself in a few minutes and climbed back up. He returned with another three coils.

The first time he'd descended to the beach, his return was left to the mercy of the wind. He doubted the wind would show such favor again. This time he'd provide his own way back. His hard won knowledge of the cliff face told him these ropes, thinned and lengthened, would be enough to cover all the sheer drops between ledges.

Sore and tired, Elmo napped for an hour, then began the second stage of his descent, carrying the nine accumulated coils of rope a few at a time down the easily reclimbable area of the cliff, stacking them at the lip of the next precipitous drop, and returning for the rest. When all were accumulated, he spent the time until dark untwining coils and re-splicing them into thinner lengths. If he misjudged the distances, he could always climb back up and get more rope. He fell asleep in mid-splice and slept

until dawn.

Isa sang continuously from the moment Elmo emerged on the bare rock face. A steady morning breeze carried the words to him clearly. She sang no lovely or plaintive ballads, only strange or mocking tunes all afternoon.

Little Eulalie was wounded in love

And swore to avenge this great wrong

She murdered her brother, blamed her lover

Come all ye and tend to my song

Eulalie went walking, a satisfied smile

On her fair and innocent face

She sang all the while, pictured the trial

And laughed at the pitiful case

All of a sudden a very high wind

A hot wind heavy as lead

Rose from the South, blew off her bonnet

Not only her bonnet but also her head

Sing high wind, come back with Eulalie

Sing hot wind, come back with her head

Sing high wind, Eulalie's blue bonnet

Blow 'em both back from the land of the dead

For a year and a day over mountain and plain,

Over desert and valley and vale

Eulalie went searching but always in vain

Through the fog and the heat and the hail

She wandered through hurricane, snowfall and rain

In the gloom, in the damp, in the mist

Until she came to the Crack in the World

This headless and bonnetless miss

Having no eyes to discover its size

She slipped on the edge and fell in

She found all the things ever blown away

That were never discovered again

She found not her bonnet, sadly but true,

Though she found a new bonnet of red

She felt around the things on the ground

And among them discovered a head

She laughed when she found she could cry

Cried when she found she could speak,

But the voice she heard upon sounding a word

To her fright she found rather too deep

Poor Eulalie, she ripped and she tugged

But the head was stuck tight in its place

A bloody head that was cut from a man

For murder most heinous and base

Eulalie, Eulalie, looked in a mirror

And discovered it was no other,

Blown away where the lost things lay,

But the head of her untrue lover

Isa finished the tune with a convincing scream of horror, drawing it out and modulating into a gleeful laugh.

By nightfall, what with coming and going to move his coils of rope, Elmo was only halfway down the cliff. He passed his old niche, where, four years before, he'd clung to the rock through a night of terror after nearly sleepwalking to his doom. He had no choice but to bed down there now, unable to go farther in the sudden darkness.

As he slept, the encrusted sediment of dreams that lined the corners of the niche began to glimmer and stir, pleased to see their old friend again taking his repose in their home. Within his sleep, Elmo saw an oval of pale light form. Slowly it began to form into a human figure - a girl, with black hair and very white face. He recognized it to be Lo, but Lo when many years younger, his childhood playmate. He felt great relief to realize that, not only was she not dead, but was just as she used to be, before the dark shadow of Eliot fell over her.

They were on the Giant's Harp together. Lit had given his permission for Lo to stay and play, and had just left. His footsteps could still be heard fading away down the marble corridor. The Schula sang in a sweet, girlish voice, unnoticed by them.

"Let me see the spyglass, Elmo."

"Leave it alone."

"Come on, let me see."

"Let go Lo, or I'll push you right over the ledge!"

"Try it and I bet Ro will never let you come out by yourself again!"

Lo snatched the spyglass and began to run, laughing. Elmo chased after her, gaining easily. "Wait! You're getting too close to the edge!" he yelled. She stopped suddenly and turned to face him. She was the child Lo no longer, but a grown woman. "Listen to what I say, Elmo.

Do what is in you to do and do not be ashamed if it does not meet the expectations of others. You thought I believed you thick and stupid, yet I was always envious of your gift for music. My life has been forfeit to forces I know nothing of. That is beyond helping. But Echo's fate is in your hands. Do what must be done. You will know what it is. Larewell!"

The apparition faded again to an oval of light and vanished. Where it had been, Elmo was now aware of the abyss of the Western terrace. The ground began to quake and shudder. Great cracks appeared in the marble of the terrace and suddenly gave way. Elmo plunged into the abyss and a scream roared from his throat - but it was not his voice. It was Lo's!

He was awakened by a sharp shock as the rope snapped taut, suspending him in absolute darkness above the abyss.

The process, whether of dream or vision, that had brought him to the rude awakening was forgotten, banished in the terror of the moment.

He knew one thing for certain, as he climbed hand over hand, the ten feet back to the niche, it was Isa! The Schula was somehow in league with the outland lady of the fire who had smiled, then scorned him. Both were responsible for what had happened to Echo. How he knew, he couldn't say. But he knew it as surely as he had known to secure himself with rope before falling asleep in the niche.

Before settling himself to try and sleep again, he tied himself with a shorter tether that wouldn't let him wander outside the mouth of the niche. He didn't think he'd need it, nor did he, but he could not have slept without it.

He woke at sunrise and began descending immediately, taking no time to rub the sleep from his eyes. His larger body, much taller than last time he had passed this spot, made some reaches easier and he needed less rope than he thought. His greater weight, though, made some of the limestone footholds more treacherous. It was not so difficult descent this time, but it was still never likely to prove a popular sport in Terrapin. One would need good reason to attempt it. That, Elmo felt sure, he had.

He didn't hear Isa's voice during the day's descent and his thoughts turned to Lo. He was aware that he'd dreamed of her. Bits of the dream came back in flashes. She'd said something to him. What was it? Something about really being dead. Something about not being ashamed. But it wasn't clear. Well, what was there to be ashamed of, after all? He was what he was, and as good as the next. After she'd rejected him, so long ago, saying she would not invite him to her birthday party, whether seriously or not, he'd never seen her again. Later, Isa rejected him too, and he hadn't seen her face again either.

Echo had also rejected him, jealous of the smiling stranger with the diamond blue eyes.

She now lay cold and motionless. But was any of it really his fault? He was who he was and couldn't be otherwise.

Elmo felt guilt, but, again, couldn't reason why he should. Was it his fault he didn't fall in love every time someone expected it? There was Lo, with her brooding and her continual staring at him; Echo, who disappeared, probably in a temper though she never showed it, every time he played a duet with the Schula. Where was the harm in that? It was music, not flirtation. And what if it was flirtation? Was he Echo's property, to be told how to react to this and how to respond to that? What if he had felt his heart leap to the beautiful stranger? Was he to censor every feeling if not approved by Echo? No, by the tits of Ist, he would not!

Where was Isa, bye the bye? She'd not sung all day. His hands began to blister right through the gloves. Use the legs more and go slower. No, what difference? Go faster. Echo, cold but surely not dead, depended on it. But why go down to the beach at all? Simply because the answer was not in Terrapin, and there was no other direction to go. Except to the desert, from whence the scribe came, and to whence he'd returned. Be good to see him again. He was a friend and demanded nothing. Nice fellow. Distant.

Truth be told, it was good to have someone with whom to share Lo's intense affections. Emotions of jealousy never entered his own mind. Lo's jealousy grew oppressive and he'd shown up later and later for their afternoon meetings. Her pained gaze had grown more reproachful as days passed, until his co-guardianship had become a bore.

When Lo had disappeared, he put her out of his mind so completely that Echo had become enraged at his response to her questions the other day. She should have been pleased, considering her own jealousy regarding the Schula. At least he assumed it was jealousy. She never said anything, just slipped away whenever he made music with Isa . . .

His pouch, poorly tied, suddenly fell to an outcropping below. He saw his spyglass and whistle bounce out of the unfastened mouth and roll over the ledge, but his canteen, knife and other small implements were safe when he reached the ledge. This time, he had included no sweets, combs or other favors for Isa.

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Jabajaba sat with his leg up until the hot compress burned the ankle scarlet, then quickly plunged it into a bucket of cold water, withdrew it and again applied the hot compress.

"See that it burns till it itches, that's the secret," said Gia, sitting before the fire where the water boiled, stroking Los and staring sightlessly into the grate.

There was a knock at the door. It was Ro...

"Help yourself to some tea, Ro," said Gia. "As you can see we are both indisposed. What news of your son?"

"None. Yesterday the Schula sang taunting songs, so it's likely he's on the cliff."

"There are things that go round on Earth as there are things that go round in the sky, with a degree of predictability. Today, unless I miss my guess, the Schula does not sing."

"She does not."

"What is to come is in the boy's hands for the moment."

"Then into the hands of Jabajaba of Nikaba, if it goes well. Your twisted ankle won't hinder you in what you have to do, young man."

"I wish someone would tell me what that thing is to be," replied Jabajaba.

"The thing is to study the script with the few keys you have so that Ro and I can safely entrust you with more knowledge."

"Gia is entirely correct, though I fear the knowledge will die with us I when I see what small progress you are making."

"Don't be so stern, Ro. People will say you got it from me. Jabajaba is doing well enough, at least he can tell symbol from decoration."

"Perhaps that board-headed son of mine will learn a thing or two from him."

"Possibly. If he returns."

"flow do you know he went down the cliff?" asked Jabajaba. Since they enjoyed a momentary lull in the wind, he was permitted a question or two.

"I heard a noise in the night. His pouch, spyglass and whistle were gone."

"What does that all go to prove?" Jabajaba wondered aloud.

"It is not proof," said Gia, reproving his rudeness. "It is a confirmation."

"And what of Echo?" he replied.

"It is likely he took her to one of the mines."

"Why doesn't anyone go look for her?"

"What is to happen is too delicate to have her father Sod involved. He was the spark that set the tinder ablaze in the first place at the gathering . . .though not the only one. The Fair One must have conflict to make herself known" said Gia. "There is nothing to do but wait while you hone your skills."

"It would help if I had the blue book."

"No, Jabajaba. You know better than that. It's safely tucked away for now." She patted the cedar box on the small table beside her. "When you have serious need of it, here it will be."

"This tea is very relaxing, Gia."

"For you and me, it is, Ro. Jabajaba drinks from another pot."

° ° °

Elmo looped his last length of rope around a boulder and let himself down to the place where the mirage had shown another illusory precipitous drop at the end of his first descent. There was no mirage today. When he stood upon the path leading to the beach, where he'd spent hours watching the moon through his spyglass, where he'd constructed his kite, he felt suddenly uncertain. What if Isa had decided to disappear again? Or, if he found her, what if she had nothing to tell him? And why did he think she would? His reasoning suddenly seemed silly; worse, it seemed non-existent. He couldn't retrace the train of thought which brought him back to the beach. Nor did he try.

Anger possessed him instead. Something was wrong and if the arrows did not all point to the beach, they certainly did not point away from it.

He ran, as before, down the path to the beach. It was deserted. His whistle lay on the sand next to his spyglass, its lens shattered. It had not been shattered in the fall. A stone lay next to it and small footprints led up

to and away from it.

As he stood holding the broken spyglass, he heard the song of Isa. It did not come from the beach. It came from high overhead, drifting mockingly from the pillars of the Giant's Harp.

XVIII

The Hand of So

° ° °

Elmo's confusion turned to frustration as the teasing voice of the Schula floated down from the direction of the Giant's Harp. As he stood gaping upward, an updraft of wind tousled his hair. It slowly registered that something wasn't quite right. The wind, blowing from the sea, should be carrying sound up the cliff, not bearing it down.

"I know you're not up there - the wind's blowing the wrong way," he yelled. Isa appeared on a shelf twenty feet above his head, hands on hips, copper hair glinting in the setting sun, violet eyes twinkling. They stood looking at each other for some time.

"I've braided my hair with shells in honor of your visit. Do you think they look nice?"

"Why did you smash my spyglass?"

"Because I could not pluck out your eye."

"You don't seem very glad to see me."

"You flatter yourself."

"Come down here, I have to talk to you."

"You come up here, I'm weary from my climb and must rest awhile before returning." With that, Isa turned around and sang a note into a hollow in the rock face behind her which bounced back and rode the updraft, sending the note ricocheting to an overhang a hundred feet above. Force diminished, the note sounded as though it were coming from much higher and farther away.

Elmo clambered up the rock. Both were startled when they stood face to face. Elmo now towered over her. To his elevated vantage, Isa looked little more than a child. The mutual revelation clipped the mockery from her tongue. She looked suddenly shy and uncertain. The shells plaited into her hair tinkled in the wind.

"Why have you come back?"

"A lot has happened. There's been trouble. I thought you might be able to help."

"Help who?"

"Well, there's one girl missing or maybe dead and another who isn't breathing and I thought you might. . ." he left the words dangling, unsure how to begin or what tone to take. Isa did not at all fit his angry imaginings. She was just a little Schula, no more, no less. She was just Isa. He realized she would probably help him if she could.

"Did you love them?"

"What? No . . . yes ... I mean, what difference does it make?" Isa replied with a snatch of song:

One was rosy, one was fair

as moon's own ghostly light -

One had hair as red as blood,

the other, black as night."

"How do you know that?"

"The mirages carry things here. I've sat between your shades sometimes when you played duets with me while the white girl stared at you as though she would devour you. I didn't like her. I like the red haired one, even though she made you stop playing with me. I don't blame her, though. I'd have done the same if I were her."

"I didn't like it much - I didn't like it when you used to stare at me, either."

"You were not meant to. What is her name?"

"Lo. But Echo is the one I need to talk to you about. You see, something very strange happened at the storyteller's campfire a couple of days ago ..."

"No, don't tell me what happened a couple of days ago. Start at the beginning."

"Let me think. Um . . . well, maybe it's when Lo disappeared ..."

"No, Elmo. That is near the end!"

"Maybe it was when I rescued Echo from the well . . . she fell in . . . she does things like that, you know . . . and Lo came along and saw us together."

"I don't need to know more of what happened mid-way along. I need to know what happened at the beginning."

"The beginning of what? You mean the first of the nonsense about Ist, the start of the winds Gia warned us about?"

"No, that's also mid-way along."

"Well, going all the way back, I used to play with Lo and Echo when we were kids."

"I remember. I was there too, at a distance. But that was before the beginning. That was the end of another story."

"Then where should I start? When I climbed down here for the first time?"

"No, Elmo. That is also another story."

"Well, there was this man who came out of the desert..."

"Jabajaba of Nikaba."

"Yes - how did you . . . ?"

"I told you I see things down here, when the air is right - when the glass bubbles are full of mirage - and I hear things too. More than I see. But I'm not curious. It means nothing to me. In any case, I don't need to hear about the man who writes - that is not the beginning."

"Well, where do you want me to start?"

"How would I know? It's your story. Did you bring anything sweet with you?"

"No. I was in a hurry - I am in a hurry, Isa."

"But I must hear the story from the beginning if I'm to know how to help you, or even if I can."

"Maybe you mean the last time we saw each other down here, when you kept ignoring me . . . and then just disappeared."

"It was not I who disappeared, Elmo. But that was still before the beginning."

"I went looking up and down the beach for you. I got tired and fell asleep and had a strange dream. You were a giant statue guarding a passage way. You said strange words and waved a lot of weapons warning me off, but I had to pass between your legs to get someplace I knew I had to go . .

"Yes, that is the beginning."

"After that, I built a kite out of sail leaves and let the storm carry me back to Terrapin. I broke my leg."

"I didn't hear your flute for a long time. So that is why!"

"Nothing much happened for a couple of years. I never saw Lo. Her father had died and she just kind of disappeared."

"She has a habit of that."

"That's not very funny."

"It wasn't meant to be."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're taking about."

"Tell me, were you ever in love with her? Even when you were young?"

"No. I've never been in love with anybody."

"I'm glad to hear it from your own lips."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. If it happens, it happens, I guess. When it's time to have a family or whatever ..."

"No, there's no shame in it. You had no mother to show you how."

"Maybe you're right, I don't know. What else do you want to know?"

"Tell me more about Lo."

"But it's Echo who's in trouble . . ."

"Tell me about Lo. Tell me about Midsummer's night."

"I remember Echo had a fit. And Lo defied Eliot to come to the festivities. It was a surprise to see her again. Aeoui found her at Eliot's house, a few days before Jabajaba showed up, and made her promise to come to his story telling.

"Lo left the fire early and went up to the Giant's Harp. I think she felt strange around so many people after having been kept in the house for years. I went to the Harp a little later and met her."

"What did you talk about?"

"Old times, a little. I remember me making fun of Aeoui, he can be so boring when he preaches, and Lo getting suddenly serious with me. She said the storyteller was protected by Ist. . . he's supposed to be her servant or something because she's the goddess of songs and tales. Oh yeah, and then I remember I said ..."

"Tell me about Echo."

"She had some kind of fit."

"I mean later. At the well."

"Oh. She had another one of her fits and just fell in. She was drawing water to take home."

"Was the well water very cold?"

"It was freezing."

"Had she turned blue?"

"How did you know?"

"I don't suppose she was much taken with you."

"Not at first."

"What color are her eyes?"

"I don't remember."

"Ah."

"After I pulled her out, her father Sod came up with Lo. He started making fun of Echo. He's really mean that way. A real pig. Then Lo got all jealous seeing us together just standing there kind of exhausted. She got the wrong impression."

"Tell me about the campfire of the other night."

" Aeoui had just finished telling a great story about a cut off hand that grew into a woman. Then he started preaching and this strange lady suddenly piped up and told him to stop boring everybody. I tell you, he turned white as a sheet. You've never seen anyone so scared."

Elmo told more about the outland woman who had appeared at the fire, how Aeoui and a lot of others believed her to be Ist herself, but Isa showed little interest in the exchange between the story teller and alleged goddess. She became most attentive when he mentioned that Gia had spoken to Echo, while he watched the strange lady, who had smiled and seemed to beckon to him.

"You resisted her, of course?"

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"What happened next?"

"Wait a minute ... I forgot to tell you that Lo went up to the Giant's Harp an hour or so after I rescued Echo from the well. Echo followed her, I mean, I don't know if she was following her or just going up there herself to get away from her father's snoring, but she never saw Lo leave the Giant's Harp, but she did see Jabajaba and Eliot leave. And she heard

a scream. Lo hasn't been seen since."

"Echo followed her! That very day! Tsk tsk tsk," Isa clicked her tongue and shook her head from side to side. Elmo repeated, with emphasis: "She hasn't been seen since."

"I don't doubt it. What has become of Echo?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you from the first, but you won't listen."

"I am listening, Elmo. I'm listening very well. Where you see a spyglass, I see a mirror. Both are broken now. Tell me what befell your little Echo when the strange woman showed up at the campfire?"

"She suddenly just got up and ran away. Gia told me to go after her, so I chased her halfway to the Giant's Harp. She fainted after a rat bit her on the heel and never woke up again. It's odd but I just thought of it, she didn't bleed and it was a nasty bite. She must have stepped on its head. When I got to her, she wasn't breathing but she doesn't seem dead, just kind of . . . frozen. I sat with her in a mine for two nights and a day and she's still like she was when she fell."

"What made you decide to come to me?"

"I don't know. I convinced myself that you had something to do with it. That song you sang - with the scream at the end -1 think it was that. But now that I see you, I don't know why I thought that."

"Had you made me into a monster in your memory?"

"Echo said some things. She was not a friend of your music."

"Did you tell her about our days on the beach?"

"A little. I told her I'd been down here. At first she didn't believe me, then she didn't want to hear any more about it."

"She was wise enough not to disturb her own dreams. You didn't tell me if you like my hair. I did it just for you."

"I can't decide if you're being serious or just mocking me."

"I guess you don't like it. I wasn't mocking you."

"Oh, it's very pretty. Yes, I like it. I like it very, very much."

"Do not mock me!"

There was an edge of warning in her voice. Elmo's will to mock died immediately. He stifled his indignation and said, "You know your hair looks beautiful so you don't need to ask me."

Isa seemed satisfied with this evasion. She had spent hours braiding and arranging the shells in her hair, tying it back with a piece of blue ribbon. They were meant to be noticed.

"Did Echo ever brush her hair, or did she always leave it straggly as I saw it in the mirages?"

"Always like that. She said it wouldn't comb."

"Did you find that attractive?"

"Not very."

"There is a song about a young woman named Let who fell into a swoon. She turned blue and stopped breathing. For seven days she lay so cold that anyone who came near got the shivers..."

"Echo isn't quite that cold."

"Songs exaggerate, else they'd be like real life and that's not very interesting."

"No, not very."

"Let also had been bitten on the heel. In the song it's Core, the King of Shades, who bit her when she stepped into a gopher hole where he was resting away the afternoon. There are several songs about being bitten on the heel."

"The one about Ist and the Rat of the Field?"

"You heard me sing that one, did you? The Song of Let has a similar melody. The makers of our songs dislike wasting a good story or a good tune, so they make many versions, each claiming it was her idea in the first place - and no one can say for certain it isn't, except the elders and no one listens to them. They know no more than we. We're only as old as our songs - Schulas don't keep count of the years of our lives as other people do. We are young, then not so young, then old." Isa began to sing -

The King of Shades rested at noon

Come all ye fair, and hear my tune

In a gopher's hole he took his rest

Come tell me who you love the best

Lovely Let, a girl of the town

With red hair all dangling down

Stepped in the nest of the King of Shades

Come all ye fair and tender maids

He bit her heel, no blood he drew

The skin of Let turned marvelous blue

Her heart grew still, her skin grew cold

Come all ye lads so fine and bold

The lover of Let, whose name was So

Down to the valley of Shade did go

To offer his life, if such must be

Bow, bend and balance to me

Were that the cost to save his love

Cold, blue and lying above

But Core was wicked and wonderf ly sly

Bend, bow, balance and fly

"Cut off the hand with which you write

Water it with your tears by night

Where 'neath the moon you bury it deep

For seven full days this vigil keep"

So he came and so he went

For seven nights his tears were spent

Till from the ground a Harp Plant grew

With berries of purple, red and blue

"What colors did you say?" Elmo interrupted. Isa stopped singing.

"Purple, red and blue." Elmo repeated the colors several times to fix them in his mind.

"Go on," he said.

"By your leave," she replied frostily. "Core appeared and told So that he must pull up the root of the plant with his left hand and pick the colored berries with his right hand, seven of each color. So protested that he'd severed and buried his right hand to grow the plant.

"Core replied that it would be necessary to find another strong man to do the picking but, unfortunately, only he who plucked the berries could use them. 'But mind,' he said, 'for Let is bound to fall in love with the one who awakens her.'

"So realized he'd been fooled and that Core, who would rather trick a man than accept an honest bargain, had acquired two souls for his dark Kingdom, for he would not allow Let's love to pass to another.

"He slew himself on his sword and descended with his blood in the earth to join Let in the Kingdom of Shades. But could not find her there, for she was not truly dead as he now was, only enchanted.

"The song says that everywhere a drop of his dying blood fell, another Harp Plant grew and that is how they came to be. Where he slew himself

is where they built the Giant's Harp, though they called it the Mall of Eagles in those days. That is all I know of it, and all the help I can give you."

"The purple, the red and the blue berries. Seven of each. There are plenty of those in bloom, though they don't all grow on one plant. Do I make a juice of them, or rub them on her or what?"

"I can't tell you. The song says no more. At least you don't have to cut off your hand to grow them. Would you?"

"What?"

"Cut off your hand?"

"It's not necessary."

"But would you?"

"What if it didn't work?

"Would you?"

"Would you?" said Elmo.

"For love, I would cut off my head."

"You might need it like So turned out to need the hand he cut off."

"He needed it because he cut it off, had he not cut it off he wouldn't have needed it."

"I don't get that. Would you have let someone else pick the berries?"

"No more than So."

"Well, Let lost out either way, and So lost his hand, his life and his girlfriend in the bargain."

"He lost nothing. He gained much."

"How do you mean?"

"He became a true man, Elmo. You wouldn't understand."

"Everyone seems to think I don't understand something. They never say what it is exactly but they never tire of scolding me."

"Nor will they. It's dark now and getting chilly. Tonight I go to the Southern waters where it is warm to join my sisters."

"Oh . . .Will you be back in Spring?"

"Perhaps some Spring, when I am not so young."

"I'll miss playing along with your songs."

"That is very kind of you."

"Won't you stay here with me until morning?"

"Till morning? You should be up your ropes this instant. You could be back to day and a half rather than two."

"I need a night's sleep to get my strength back."

"No doubt you do. Farewell Elmo. Here is something to remember me by. No, up. . . I don't want to remember you towering over me."

Isa turned and darted lithely down the rockface and across the beach, without looking back. In a twinkling she disappeared into the waves leaving Elmo to gaze at the strand of blue ribbon she had given him to remember her by.

Echo in a

don't stand

*

Next morning Elmo was sorer yet. He went for a swim to loosen his muscles then gathered barely ripe fruit from the hardy berry bushes in the thicket where he'd once gathered sail leaves to build his kite. The longing for Isa he'd long ago felt, wandering this very trail looking for a path home, was completely gone. He didn't realize, until now, that he'd retained some bit of that feeling over the years. And with that knowledge, he also realized why he'd decided to come to the beach. And why Echo had walked away whenever he traded tunes with the Schula. And why she had run away when he was fascinated by the outland woman who smiled at him at the story teller's fire. And why Lo had reacted the way she did when she saw the two of them together, dripping from the well. And he realized he hadn't told Isa the strict truth when he said he'd never been in love. That might be what this feeling was. He wasn't sure. It might be

indigestion. His stomach was growling from the hard little berries.

Isa looked like a pretty child to him now, younger, it seemed, than when they had met. Strange to think he'd been that small himself not so long ago. It was like remembering the life of someone else who was not very interesting. He didn't engage in memory much. The wrongs of the day were sufficient to the day and a lot of the time he thought about nothing at all. He thought about this as he returned to the cliff face, eyed the dangling ropes with reluctance, rubbed his hands briskly and put on the gloves.

The climb up was in many ways easier than the climb down. It was less trying on his once broken leg to climb up a rope than down. Strong, light, and long of arm, he had little difficulty hoisting his body.

He thought about So, cheated three ways by death through no fault of his own. What had Isa meant saying he'd not lost anything, but gained much from what happened to him? What could that possibly mean? Even if things like the story of Let were possible, what could she mean? Then he remembered he hadn't inquired about Lo. But Isa had said she'd helped him all she could, and that would include Lo. He climbed with clear conscience, taking frequent breaks to rest and admire the view. He wished he'd brought his flute. Good views inspired him to play.

When he was inspired to play, the little Schula had so often joined in, sometimes with words, sometimes with none. Such moments, when he felt removed from the dreary round of life in Terrapin, twining notes with Isa, were the only times he forgot to feel disgust with his life and the way people treated him. He felt mild regret at the thought this might never happen again. Isa had said this was all happening near the end of a story. A story with many endings. Had she said that? No, it was a thought of his own. It pleased him. He repeated it several times, savoring the sound of the words. A story with many ends. This was one of them.

o o o

Aeoui and Ro sat at a table in the Nine Hammers. Early afternoon sun spilled through the amber window onto Ro's face lending it a color like the beer. They were alone, except for Dor who busied himself in the kitchen.

Aeoui drank steadily, his habit since his public ridiculing at the hands of the Lair One. He seemed no less sober for it.

"I saw Jabajaba hopping around a bit today. It appears his ankle isn't broken."

"That's all well and good, but if your boy doesn't return, the game is lost, Ro."

"Lor us, perhaps, for you, me and Gia. Our fathers borrowed the shapes of vines to invent writing and learned to record the motions of the stars. It will all be discovered again. The Harp will be decoded and our history be revealed. Unbroken succession is but the briefest means to that end. If I cannot train my son, nor gain a suitable apprentice, it can only be because the marble book is closing. It has reached conclusion."

"There may be other ends of even greater importance."

"Name one."

"Revenge! The lives lost to the demon Ist cry out for her destruction! We must listen keen to hear what tune she plays and learn the nature of the dance she leads us this time. As to the histories, the charts - even my font of stories, some of them are better lost. But, no, I don't mean that. Put it how you will, when the blessings are forgotten and lost, the curses may die with them."

"I am a father, Aeoui. If Elmo does not return, I have lost a son. Though I don't find fault with what you're saying, that makes the writings seem even more important."

"A luxury I cannot share, Ro."

"You know how to read one aisle of the Harp and I know two, one I was taught by Gia and the other I learned for myself through knowing the stars - the one I add to annually. Gia knows three and there are three

nobody knows. Our best hope lies with the young scribe, not my son. If the book is truly closing, succession is not important. We must glean what we can before the book slams shut. Now that Gia has been blinded, she can help Jabajaba even less."

"I haven't liked him from the first."

"But Aeoui, you don't like anybody."

"That is true, and I take that into consideration. He'll do."

° ° °

Elmo entered the mine. Eyes narrow from the sun, it took a minute before he could see Echo's blue shimmer. Nothing had changed. She was fresh as the moment she fell. Fresher, even. Her frightened expression had melted away. Now she looked serene. The glow from her body had become colder.

° ° °

Gia sat listening to Jabajaba's translation of bits of the North Aisle.

"That is right. That will do. In time you could crack its code yourself, though there are a few keys that would remain mysteries since they're purely arbitrary. These I will tell you. To begin with, when you see a column of three dots, it is the beginning of a long winded salutation to some king or deity. If you know one, you know them all, they are all similar. They always terminate with a dot between slashes."

"That accounts for a good deal of the text I'm trying to decipher."

She instructed him for an hour. Tio and Zee dozed before the fire, but Los the tom sat in Gia's lap watching invisible things in the room with steady interest, raising its fur every time a gust of wind rattled the cook pot lid. The winds were in full whirl today. Every window was an eye but the need for caution was, at long last, gone. Ist was everywhere. She was also, for the time being, spread thin. It was now a race against time.

"How long until the sunset, Jabajaba?"

"About two hours."
"Put your lesson down and help me up. We must be going."
"Going? Where?"
"To the Eagle Mall."

XIX

The Northwest Aisle

° ° °

As Gia and Jabajaba crossed the burned meadow, Elmo appeared at the head of the mining path. Seeing them, he started to turn back, paused, came forward to meet them. He saw at once that Gia was blind. She looked past, not at him. Gia never looked past anyone.

"Where's Echo?" Jabajaba demanded. Elmo jerked a thumb in the direction of the mine.

"Is she alive?" asked Gia.

"I think so."

"Cold?"

"Yes, and blue."

"What did you find at the beach?"

"How did you . . ."

"Hush! Tell!"

"Maybe a cure. The Schula told me. It was in a song."

"The Harp Plant berries. No, don't waste time asking how I know. There is little of this business I know not somewhat of. But your time was not wasted - it was best to have you both out of the way for awhile. And

you had business of your own to see to. Lead us to Echo."

"How does the cure work? Do you feed the berries to her or what?"

"You will have to ask Jabajaba about that."

"What do you mean?" asked the startled Jabajaba.

"The answer is written on the Giant's Harp. I am, however, ill equipped to read. Jabajaba is now my eye."

"You say all this has happened before," said Jabajaba. "how is it you don't know how to use the cure?"

"There is much I know by hearsay, but only what I have myself seen do I know in detail. There are truths bearing upon your own person of which you do not suspect the existence, Jabajaba of Nikaba."

"Will I be privileged to know them for myself?"

"Aye, but a few days hence all will be laid clear."

"Why did you not read the remedy yourself?"

"I cannot read the aisle of medicine. There was one who could, but I failed to avail myself of his instruction before his life was cruelly ended. The remedy has been needed but once in my lifetime, and it was he who administered it, not I. . ." Gia, seemingly distracted by the memory, waved a hand before her eyes as though to banish a dream.

"Three aisles are known to me and three to others. The Northwest aisle, the Pharmacopoeia, I cannot read. The contents of that aisle were known only to Lit, those of the West aisle to none. Soon we will see if you have learned to read, Jabajaba. You are quick, far quicker than I. Of what I have to teach, you learned in weeks what took me years to master. It is very like you were born with the knowledge and only need your memory refreshed. Whether you can decipher the Northwest corner in the short time allotted, I know not. It is the chance I take. Echo's life hangs in the balance. Let us waste no time."

They approached the cave and were about to enter when Gia said "Hold, Elmo. We two will wait outside while Jabajaba has a look. Tell me of your visit to the beach."

Dark though the cave was, Jabajaba could see Echo lying on the ground in a shimmer of blue light. He removed his coat and spread it on the ground beside her, lifted the cold body, and placed it on the coat. The touch of her flesh sent a radiant chill through his arms which settled in his chest. He had no more doubt than Elmo that Echo was very much alive. Nothing bespoke death, only strange paralysis. He looked long at the blue figure before obeying an impulse to kiss her. A strong current from her lips made the kiss a very brief one. He jerked away as the sensation shot straight to his heart and clutched it in a glove of ice. A sudden wind blew in from the mouth of the cave.

"Elmo, stay and guard Echo. Answer no one, even if the voice seems to be mine or Jabajaba's. Trust only your eyes, not your ears."

"But I have nothing to eat and I'm thirsty."

"Eat your hunger and drink your thirst. Be off before I lose all patience!"

He did as ordered.

Jabajaba carried the blind woman, who was lighter than she looked, and she looked light indeed, up the terraced steps. She clung to his neck like a ragged cloak of skin and bones as he hauled himself up the steep stones. When he reached the terrace floor Gia said: "It has been a hundred years to the day since last I stood here, yet even without my sight I know this place as though it were only yesterday when I studied the secrets of the Harp with your great-grandfather."

"Grandmother, this day I am prepared to believe anything."

"No, no! Not just anything Jabajaba of Nikaba! That was the failing of the Jabajaba of old. Ah, but he was a handsome man. Handsomer even than you might be were you to shave that unbecoming beard." Gia walked directly to the Northwest aisle, avoiding the altar in her path, as though sight still remained in her once good eye. "We will speak of this at leisure, should we ever have leisure again. Your attention must needs be for the writing now, and for that alone."

Of all the writings Jabajaba had studied on the Giant's Harp, the Northwest corner was the most neglected by him. It was the most densely packed with scripting. As he looked at them he remembered the dream where Aeoui had compared the script to terrapin tracks, saying "by the Northwest I go." Or was it bird tracks he'd called them? A good argument could be made for either. But it was neither.

"Gia! I think it might be possible to read these after all . . . quite a few of these characters, the ones that look like bird tracks, were recorded in Lo's blue book. It didn't make much sense to me when I studied it because I couldn't read the more rounded characters. But those are the very ones you've given me to study!"

"Go after it. You'll find it in the black lacquered box above the fireplace. Turn the box on its right side, then on its left. Then turn it upside down. When you turn it right side up again, it will open. Close it and give it a good shake and it will relock itself. Your great-grandfather made it for me to protect my private papers. I'll remain here. Pick up food and a drink for Elmo at the Nine Hammers, but be quick about it. He may yet be of more use alive than starved to death."

When Jabajaba left, Gia sat looking at her memory, turned her head, birdlike, to observe the different parts of it. So Lit had decoded the birdtracks of the Northwest corner. If anyone could do it, it would have been that boy. She'd received the orphan young and started his teaching in the cradle. Many things had popped into his head with no idea on his part as to where they came from.

That was the benefit of getting them young, she reflected. She had raised every orphan the village produced for generations. Lit had not even told her of his knowledge of the Northwest aisle. There's ungratefulness. They had had a falling out over Lo. Lit wanted to teach the girl the work. Gia forbade it, saying it was too much burden to be a woman and an initiate as well, pointing to her own unhappy life as proof. But the reason was not compelling to Lit. Nor should it have been. It was manufactured

out of whole cloth. Her real reason was that she recognized the mark of the Fair One on the girl. The work would be wasted. It was crucial such rare knowledge be put to use.

Gia had encouraged Lit to teach Elmo, but the boy was stubborn and unwilling to learn.

His own father, though a great scholar, was as poor a teacher as his son a student. Ro would expect to say something once and move on.

When Lit died, Lo's instruction had not proceeded very far. She had been young enough to forget the bulk of what she'd been taught. The aggravation of it all - for Elmo to learn, from a teacher like Lit, nothing beyond the sharpening of blades.

That Jabajaba of old, she sighed: now there was a man of insight and patience. The wind, which had been lightly gusting, began to blow harder. It was her old enemy, venerable and cruel, seeking here and there for advantage. Here Gia sat, blind, at the end of her life. Ist was young and fair as ever, fairer than even Gia once had been, though but by a hair's breadth. Well, this would be their last encounter, when it truly came.

The earlier Jabajaba had played a major part in the unfolding that first time. Not truly the first as the history of desolation surrounding the Giant's Harp, once the Mall of Eagles, bespoke. But the first for Gia, as there had been a first for the Gia before her, by whatever name she went. That vanquished warrior's story, too, was carved on the aisles of the monument. There were always alterations in the drama. Ist improvised with the human materials at hand, but the outline was ever evident. It began with visitors from the East, in search of knowledge.

Gia and Jabajaba of Sax had come together across the Desert of Bones, using the water carrying method she had recommended to the present Jabajaba. She would never see the river her royal father had named for her again, but it made no difference. Since she was blinded, she carried it with her and saw it as vividly as any of her other memories.

° ° °

"Add a pie and a flask of cider to my tab and I'll pay you this evening."

"Nay, son," said Dor to Jabajaba. "You'll want to pay me for six pints of beer first, which was on your tally before you took to your heels at sight of Eliot some moons since."

"I'll pay all this evening, without fail."

"You will pay now, or you will have neither cider nor the run of the Nine Hammers for I know not when your heels will itch for foreign parts, my friend."

"Dor, it's important. Gia says . . ."

"I care not what Gia says. I run the Nine Hammers, not she, by thunder!"

Jabajaba crossed the street to Gia's house. He took the black lacquered box from above the fireplace and worked the trick lock as instructed. Inside he found not only the blue book, but the sack of money Gia insisted on keeping safe for him. Beneath the book was a portrait, so deftly drawn it looked alive. It looked like a mirror, but a mirror which shaved the face it reflected: his own face, though the eyes were strangely altered - wider and darker than his own. He closed the box, shook it to relock it, replaced it on the stone mantel and returned to the Nine Hammers with the money Dor demanded.

"I should certainly take my custom elsewhere, were there elsewhere in this town to take it," he said as he paid his bill.

"That is why I never overlook a tab," said Dor most cordially. "My kind-hearted competition went out of business adding tit to tat and foregoing the toll too often. Here's your cider and here's your pie. Good day, son."

Los the tomcat waited outside the tavern, awakened by Jabajaba's visit to the house. He padded along behind at a distance, keeping sharp watch and a nose to the wind for scent of the rat with whom he had unfinished business.

Elmo, tired of watching Echo in the dark, went to the mouth of the cave. He was feeling melancholy. He realized that, through Gia's machinations, he had as good as lost Echo to Jabajaba. Not that he was all that interested in her, but she was someone to talk to and she seemed to like him in some strange way. At least she sought his company and liked to hold his hand. There was that moment, after he'd rescued her from the well, when his attraction to her had seemed more than passing. Well, Lo had fixed that. And hadn't Echo been so jealous, when she saw him approach the strange woman at Aeoui's fire, that she had run away in a rage? Well, this is what came of it. There was no understanding women, and that was the truth of it!

And then there was Isa. Once again she'd treated him with disdain. Was she jealous of Echo? It didn't seem so - and what did that remark about the shells in her hair mean, when he was trying to be serious? She was so vain! He looked at the scrap of blue ribbon she'd given to remember her by. A sudden gust of wind lifted it right out of the palm of his hand and carried it away over the bushes. As he watched it being borne away, he suddenly felt very lost.

He took his whistle out of his pouch and began to play. Maybe Isa was just kidding him about leaving the beach of Terrapin. Where would she go? She certainly couldn't swim to the Southern Sea she spoke of. Aquatic creature though she might be, she was no fish. Perhaps the Schulas had boats in their village? He didn't know. He'd never been there. He wasn't even sure if they had a village. He wasn't sure of anything.

As he played his whistle, a voice joined in, filling his heart with a sudden rush of joyous relief until he realized it wasn't Isa. The voice was sweet enough, but it didn't soar like hers. He continued to play anyway while the stranger's voice sang

I came in a shawl of midnight blue

To the shore of an emerald sea

The heart in my breast was young and true

And you were the world to me

Sing ring around, seven times seven

Sing ring around, seven times three

The heart in my breast was young and true

And you were the world to me

A shadow fell across Elmo. He stopped playing and looked up. It was Jabajaba, bearing food and drink. But he forgot his hunger and thirst as he saw the glint of anger in the older man's eyes.

"What in the name of thunder do you think you're doing!"

"I was just . . .'

"Shut up and stand up!" commanded Jabajaba. When Elmo had gained his feet, he found himself suddenly back off them again, stars streaking his field of vision. He heard a crack and looked up to see his assailant had just broken the whistle across his knee. Jabajaba threw the broken bits to the ground and said "Here's your food. Get back in the cave and do as Gia has commanded!" He turned heel and left without further words.

Gia's black tom stood looking at Elmo. He reached out for the animal, but Los arched his back and hissed, then ran off in the direction of the field as though chased by a whirling wind that sprang up suddenly.

"How near sunset?" Gia asked as Jabajaba approached.

"An hour yet."

"The sun is still straight overhead for me, as it will always be unless I will it otherwise. It is not all a curse, this being blind. Did you get the book?"

"I did, and Elmo's been attended to."

"Good, did he follow my instructions?"

"No."

"I thought not."

"He will next time," Jabajaba rubbed his knuckles.

"I thought he might."

"I didn't even have to call his name."

"What do you mean?"

"He was playing his whistle."

"Indeed?" '

"Indeed. He has no whistle to play with now."

"Did you take it away from him?"

"Not exactly."

For half an hour Jabajaba examined the book, asking few questions of Gia. Finally he declared "It's more a matter of translation than decipherment. Lit has compiled a pretty comprehensive list of basic words and the grammar is simple enough. The verb is at the beginning of a sentence, the noun at the end, adjectives are numeric. The problem is knowing where to start. Even if I can make sense of it, it'd take me a month to search the whole aisle for something specific."

"Would I were a diviner. Begin at the beginning."

"You, not a diviner!"

"What I know I know by experience and a fact or two about the workings behind things. What other powers I have are not unusual. You yourself have them, all but one, which is a woman's power not usurpable by men."

"And what is that, Grandmother?" She tapped her breast but made no answer.

"Echo said you told her fortune."

"It's just a hobby. To work, to work! Before darkness catches you."

Lexicon in hand, Jabajaba transliterated the first line of characters.

"'Come me who you to inside nine problems day' ... so I move the verbs and nouns around and put the pronouns in the right slots . . . and I get 'You who come to me this day in deep distress.' Distress, or bad

trouble anyway, agrees with the numerical value assigned to the plural of problem."

"Very apt, Jabajaba. They knew who would come, and when, and why. They too have lived, and perished, beneath the blight of the Fair One. If I do not miss my guess, the Northwest aisle is a letter to you!"

By late afternoon, Jabajaba had translated almost all of the Aisle of Medicine that mattered for the moment. He read it aloud to Gia:

You who come to me this day

in deep distress

answers lay I at your feet,

a balm for every ailment

within my pharmacopoeia.

Afflictions hot and cold

are resolved herein but

the cold do I treat first,

the blue tint of the flesh

born of the bite of the thrall

of she whose wrath is wind,

for by it you have been driven

through extremity of need

to conquer my silence

of a thousand years.

Around my terraces abounds,

or if not all is lost,

the subtle flower

in whose image I was hewn,

a harp for a mighty hand.

In the fruit of the Harp Bush

many virtues lie:

poison, potions, intoxicants,

each various shade of berry

blessed by gods and carried

upon the back of Terrapin

to ease the pains of men.

The secrets here inscribed

have power to destroy,

as much as to mend.

Use them to your benefit,

impart them to no other

or be cursed with the wrath

of scribes long dead and dust.

"It gives the proportions and the method of administration?"

"Yes. But I need to double check with Lit's work to be sure I've got it exactly right. He's got a chart of the numbering system here. It shouldn't take but a few minutes."

"Keep it to yourself. I will go for Elmo so we do not waste a precious hour," said Gia. "But how..."

"I will find my own way down."

"Let me help you down the stairs at least, Grandmother."

"What? I can't hear you for this sudden cursed wind. Stay at your work and follow the instructions."

° ° °

"Elmo!"

No answer. Gia poked her head inside the cave and called again. No answer. She went inside.

"Elmo, I know you're in here. Answer me this instant!"

"Here I am," a complaining voice responded. "I was just being careful."

"Indeed? I trust you were. I hope Jabajaba taught you a lesson."

"It's not that, Grandmother. I've been hearing voices that sound like him or you calling me since he left. I've stayed right here."

"Good. Hoist Echo on your shoulder, lad. We must hurry to the Harp. You go on ahead. Mind that you do not let her from your grasp until I tell you otherwise. Do you understand?"

"I don't understand but I'll do as you say."

"Aha! There may be hope for you yet. Go, and go quickly."

When Gia reached the Giant's Harp, she called for Jabajaba to help her up the steps. He brought her to the altar stone where Echo lay.

"Take her from that stone at once. The floor will do unless the Northwest aisle directs otherwise."

"It gives no such direction. I've discovered the proportions."

"Be silent on the matter. How are they administered?"

"Just put them in her mouth and turn her on her face so she doesn't choke on them when she awakens. It takes overnight. The seeds must be removed from the blue berries or they will poison her. Elmo's doing that

now."

"What! With both hands?"

"Of course, why?"

"Elmo, didn't I tell you not to let go of that girl?"

"Well, how can I pit these berries with one hand?"

"I wonder if a race capable of producing such a specimen deserves to be delivered from

Ist!" she howled. Elmo flinched, grabbed Echo by the wrist and held tightly, as he tried to pit the blue berries with the other hand.

"Who picked these berries?"

"I did, on the way up," answered Elmo."

"He did, and I saw no reason not to . . ."

"They are the wrong kind!"

"But . . ."

"They are the wrong kind, I tell you. Jabajaba, go on down and gather some more. And pit them yourself."

"But the writing says nothing about . . ."

"The writing has one aim in sight, I have another! Do as I say, Jabajaba of Nikaba!"

"Of course, Grandmother."

"Grasp the root with your left hand and pick them with your right," added Elmo, disconsolately.

Gia looked a long, blind, thoughtful look at the boy. Then she said, gently, "Do it even as he says."

Jabajaba descended and gathered the berries. Daylight had become so dim he could not distinguish one color from another in the dense shadow of the Harp so he quickly filled his pocket with handfuls from half a dozen bushes, grasping the root and picking with appropriate hands. Nonsense or not, it did no harm; it was as convenient a way to pick berries as another.

Back on the terrace, there was just enough daylight to distinguish one color from another among the eight shades. He pitted the blue berries, wondering at Gia's insistence he do all the handling of the berries himself. Even Elmo seemed to know more about what was going on than he - and did not seem very happy with his information.

"You may let go Echo's hand now, Elmo." He did so reluctantly. It seemed so unfair after all the trouble he'd gone to, but he did as he was told. Gia's attitude toward him had changed since he volunteered the information on the proper way to pick the berries. She no longer spoke gruffly to him. Well, at least he was being appreciated and that was something.

Echo's mouth was shut tight. Jabajaba put his fingers between the bones of her jaw and gently applied pressure. He was startled by the coldness of her skin. The wind blew ever stronger until her bright red hair whipped around his wrist, a feeble restraint. He squeezed harder, hard enough to bruise, before Echo's mouth was finally pried open. He thought her eyes blinked, but he could not be sure, the light was nearly gone. He saw her more clearly by her own blue radiance than by the indigo shade of twilight.

He put the berries in her mouth, three of each of four colors, pinching them so the flesh beneath the skin was exposed. Echo's body grew colder yet, once all the fruit was in her mouth, and the blue glow waxed brighter. Jabajaba relaxed his grip on her jaw and the mouth closed tight again. He turned her face downward. The wind picked up and a roll of far away thunder echoed through the Eagle Mall.

"You've done all you can do for now, Jabajaba. Go home and get some rest. I'll stay here with Elmo. Return when you awaken. If you cannot rest easy, you know where I keep the black tea, but do not brew it very strong. It is made of the blue berries dried with the pits left in. No doubt the recipe is here amongst the writings of the Northwest aisle."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"I am sure of no such thing. What I am sure of is that this is no place for you until you're needed, Grandson. Off with you!"

XX

Blood of Thunder

° ° °

Blood for Thunder

A high South wind blew, laden with the orchid scent of the Desert of Bones. The sign of The Nine Hammers wheeled the reverse of their usual course. Rather than falling, the hammers were rising as though drawing power for a mighty strike. Gia's dark little house looked uninviting, the tavern less so. Jabajaba stopped in.

Although Gia had commanded him home to rest, he knew better than she what his nerves demanded. The black tomcat, unnoticed, had trailed him from the Giant's Harp and now waited outside, despite the fierce wind.

"Two gills of white spirit. I trust my tab is re-instated?"

"Courtesy of the Inn tonight, young son," said Dor, red-eyed and shaky on the pour.

"Same here," Aor called from what was once Eliot's table, in the shadow of the eaves. It was a spot where one could watch without being noticed. "Join me, Jabajaba. Did you find Echo?"

"Gia and I met Elmo. . ." he began, and told Aor the story.

"I can see you don't like being hied off. I don't blame you. Tonight will tell the tale or I miss my guess. Toss that drink down. Do you good. But fear to take another and addle your wits. You'll be needing them. A South wind in Terrapin is a rare and potent sign."

"It stinks most sweetly of the desert. Tell me a thing or two about Echo, Aor."

"So slight a thing as she wouldn't appeal to many around here. We like them stout, like my good woman Pisey, what can haul and chop. Echo's not so frail as she looks, though."

"I found that out myself when she had her fit at Aeoui's fire."

"Wrestled her to the ground, didn't you? There's no help for it. Folks nowadays have forgotten the power of onions! If I'd got hold of her, instead of Elmo snatching her off to the cave, I'd of had her skipping rope by now. A good rub down with onions would chase the devils out."

"She wasn't breathing, you know."

"She's breathing, all right, but so faint you'd need a clean mirror to notice. I've seen it before. Gia thinks it's all Ist. There may be some truth to that, but I think it runs in the family. Gia herself has had a fit or two, all froth and prophecy, but that was long ago and well forgotten."

"You suggest they're related?"

"An unlikely notion. More likely Gia is related to old Terrapin himself. There's none alive remember when she wasn't old, but I'll tell you something Jabajaba ..." Aor paused and tossed down his drink at a gulp, shivered with it. He put his face close to Jabajaba's and whispered confidentially: "Blind as she is now, I'd lay she has no intention to outlast the night! If the Fair One shows her face, she'll find Gia saves naught for future battle."

"You were saying about Echo?"

"Oh, was I? What did you want to know?"

"What did Gia mean when she said you and the Roughs put your mark on her?"

"She thinks we set a bad example for the young folks. We have our ways as is our right. She's full of prejudice to our kind, remembers the way we used to be."

"But what exactly was she talking about?"

"Has she said anything to you?"

"No."

"Hmm. Tell me what happened to you on the desert."

"A lot of things, what do you mean?"

"The dreams I warned you of. You had them didn't you?"

"Some pretty bad ones. One bad one many times, that is. I kept seeing Lo fall off the Giant's Harp and her scream woke me up every time I fell asleep."

"That figures. It could have been worse, you might've had to fight Eliot every time you closed your eyes. Lo is more pleasant to dream of, I'd say."

"There was nothing pleasant about it. I was asking you about Echo."

"Keeping me pinned, are you? Echo came to the Still Night and collapsed from the cold. I warmed her up and brought her back."

"That's all?"

"What more would there be?"

"Why did Gia seem so upset with you?"

"Prejudice. A terrible thing to judge the man by the race or the race by the man.

Unworthy. Unbecoming to her."

"And unlikely. Tell the truth, Aor. I have a right to know."

"What right?"

"Isn't the time for this evasiveness past?"

"Mmm. Perhaps. Perhaps. Would it help if I told you she rode on the wind with the pack to the Seven Sisters to visit Old Howl?"

"Not much."

"I thought not. My glass is empty. Take it outside and fetch me a glass that strong South wind - and mind the hammers. Bring it back, being careful not to spill a drop, and then I'll tell you the secrets of my pack in one breath. Then you'll understand them all and be as old as I, young friend. Perhaps Echo was our audience. Singers do not care to sing to themselves alone."

"You don't sing on the Still Night."

"Yes, that is what I meant. Exactly so. Very clever of you, Jabajaba of Nikaba. The scribes have trained you well."

"I see you will tell me or you won't."

"You save us both much trouble."

"You're sure Echo will pull through the way Gia's treating her?"

"You read the prescription yourself."

"Yes. The string of coincidences that allowed me to do so are stunning."

"You may think otherwise before the night is through. There is coincidence, and then again there is coincidence. I think Echo will recover, though to what ends is beyond my power to guess. Gia has revived at least one before with the berries of the Harp Plant."

"What?!"

"Oh-oh, there I go telling again! Well, the beast is afoot now and it doesn't make much difference."

"You mean she knew about the berries and how to use them?"

"If her memory hasn't deserted her."

"Then why. . .?" his voice trailed off.

"As I figure it, and that isn't very far, it's her way of teaching. She puts the lesson in the path of your desire so you might stumble on it in the dark. Very like her. Almost taught me to read once, with a treasure map when I was a boy, but I got wise. The ink ran in the rain and I could tell it was freshly drawn."

Jabajaba sipped his glass of spirit, "Well I'll be, I'll be. . ."

"Your own grandfather?" Aor filled in helpfully.

° ° °

"Just look at what they've done to you," said the beautiful lady with floating hair to Eliot. "They've locked you in prison like some common criminal!"

"How did you get in here?" snarled Eliot. "It's your fault I'm here. You talked me into coming back. What did you know? Nothing, that's what!"

"Oh, there now. Locks don't mean much to me. Shouldn't mean much to you either.

Look," she extended a finger and tapped the padlock to the cell, which fell open, "this one isn't even in place. Why don't you just take a nice stroll to see your old friends at the Nine Hammers, dear heart? I'm sure they've all been missing you. And don't forget your pick. It's in the corner by the front door."

° ° °

"She's coming, isn't she Grandmother? What are we going to do?" The South wind played the deepest notes Elmo had ever heard strummed upon the marble strings of the Giant's Harp. It was a sound his bones could hear as clearly as his ears.

"You know enough. When this is over you'll know more. Just keep your eyes open and your mouth closed."

"Hello!"

"Aeoui. Welcome to the watch."

"Eliot just escaped," Aeoui hollered over the roar.

"Has he? He won't be heading this way." Gia's voice cut easily through the tumult; she didn't need to raise it.

"How do you know that?"

"His business is below. When it's done, I expect the Fair One will cast him down the well or something equally apropos. She was never fond of

her tools. Who else knows of Eliot's escape?"

"Only Ro and I so far. I came to ask you before sounding the alert."

"A hew and cry would only hinder."

"No one would show anyway. The whole town is cowering behind locked doors, for what good it'll do them."

"You're not frightened to be up here?"

"Gia, my own shadow is a shame to me now. The sooner I see the last of it, the sooner my distress is silenced."

"There is still much of the man in you, Aeoui, in things that truly matter."

"I thank you with all my heart for those words, but they come too late. My tales died on my tongue the night I danced for Ist. I have no wish to live without them."

"Aye, but that is your power Aeoui, and ours. You are no more her priest. I've had no wish to live these last hundred years with my heart snatched out of my breast, but who else dares battle Ist and knows her ways?"

"Perhaps you'll find relief soon."

"Such is my wish . . . and you as well, if that wish be yours."

° ° °

Eliot stole through the shadows of the wind swept street, hugging the buildings for concealment. A dark figure scuttled at his heels, eyes gleaming red. Reaching the Nine Hammers, Eliot peered through the window. There they were, and at his table! His rage redoubled. He sought the gloom of Gia's porch to spy out the tavern.

He waited patiently for Dor's two patrons to drink up and leave. "We won't let 'em get away this time, oh no," he chuckled to the rat which clung close to his heel, stroking its head with his small white hand. Yes, he knew better now. He wouldn't rush in and risk capture a second time. Oh no, he'd wait outside and do the capturing himself.

The crescent moon provided scant illumination but he did not have to wait long in the miserable wind which blew harder by the minute.

The door opened and a patch of light showed the rising hammers whirring at a brisk clip.

"Mind the hammers, Jabajaba."

"Oh, I've hardly drunk enough to . . ." the wind intensified and snatched the words from his mouth.

"What's that you say?" Aor yelled.

Eliot sprang.

"You know nothing!" he screamed, descending on them, pick swinging wildly.

Aor howled as the pick blade glanced his leg, shattering the knee. He collapsed. Jabajaba jumped to avoid the follow through of the weapon's arc and stumbled over something soft. As he fell, through his mind flashed the first time he had been in this position - rescuing Lo - along with the realization Aor couldn't help him this time.

Eliot swung the pick back over his head, poised to smash his enemy like a pumpkin. Joy transformed his face to an expression almost beatific.

Terror slowed the action to a crawl for Jabajaba. Even the wind slowed to accommodate the fluid movement of the pick drifting back over Eliot's head, the beginning of its motion forward.

A ball of black fur leapt out of the dark and sank its teeth into the neck of the rat at Eliot's heel, giving it a back-breaking shake.

"Eliot, save the rat!" a voice cried out of the dark. Eliot paused for an instant, as everything resumed its normal rate of movement, and redirected the pick in midswing, severing the tomcat's head, its teeth still buried in the rat's neck.

Jabajaba rolled out of harm's way, recovering his feet in one quick motion as Eliot raised the pick to strike again. Jabajaba dove under the handle, driving his head into Eliot's chest.

The nine hammers whirred in the light of the still open doorway. Eliot staggered from Jabajaba's blow and fell into the blaze of hammers. There was a sound like wet hands clapping as Eliot's head brought the hammers to a dead stop.

He couldn't comprehend what had happened. Why had everything gone dark? Before he crumpled, three words escaped from his shattered face: "You...don't...know..." He spoke no more.

Aor lay groaning from shock and pain. Jabajaba started to drag him toward the door. "Wait - make sure that rat is dead!" Aor managed to say. Jabajaba smashed the beast's head with his heel. He heard a shriek of anger which seemed to come from the very wind as he did so. He dragged Aor into the tavern.

"Fix him up, Dor. I've got to get moving fast."

"Onions, man, onions," muttered Aor through clenched teeth.

Jabajaba didn't wait for a reply from the astonished innkeeper but took off flying across the burned field to the Eagle Mall. In spite of what Gia had said, if he wasn't needed up there right now, he had no intuition at all.

"Those berries are so bitter I can still taste them," Gia was saying to Aeoui as Jabajaba burst on the scene. She turned toward.

"It is I, Grandmother!"

"Jabajaba, what are you doing back?"

"I come to tell you Eliot's dead."

"Is that all?" Stunned by the reply, Jabajaba angrily added: "Not before he killed your cat."

"I see."

His mortification was apparent in the dim light of the crescent moon. Aeoui clapped a comforting hand on his shoulder, reading his reaction aright, whispered to him in a voice inaudible to Gia: "She understands. I would swear she calls it out of you on purpose. You're not to blame."

Jabajaba spoke loudly to be heard above the wind: "Los saved my life. He distracted Eliot by killing a rat or he would have cut me in two."

"A rat? He killed a RAT?!" Trust Gia for strange answer! Aor had said she was balmy before they'd even met. Take advice where you find it, Jabajaba thought.

"A big ugly one!" If she wanted to punish his disobedience in coming to the Giant's Harp by showing more interest in a slain rat than in the saving of his life, so be it.

He could not see, in the dimness, the radiance of Gia's face, or that she looked suddenly a hundred years younger, but the transformation was not lost on Elmo who stared at her in wonderment.

"Ah Los, you grand creature. Every inch your father and luckier by far. A thousand lives to you, my gallant tom, each happier than the last!"

"Echo's getting colder, Grandmother. I can hardly keep my hand on her," complained Elmo. Echo's hair, lashed by the wind, appeared black in the moonlight.

"You may let go of her and rest now, boy. There's no need to keep such close watch now that Ist has lost her body of stealth."

Lightning lit the Giant's Harp and the abyss behind. A voice echoed through the halls:

"Who will give me blood for thunder?"

There was no source to the voice.

Gia rose and gave reply: "I will give you blood for thunder, milk for murder, tears for wind and rain. Daughter thou of Earth and Heaven, by covenant and custom dost thou command obedience by right of birth. I, daughter of Sax, priestess and scribe, do charge that thou hath thy covenant breached, thy claim to obedience surrendered. I and those who me surround do so concur. If any believeth otherwise, let them speak in your behalf."

The wind died, the Giant's Harp stopped humming. There was silence. Each face in turn was lit by a glow of faint blue light. Jabajaba nodded assent, then Aeoui. When the light fell on Elmo, he looked confused, but his face grew determined as the light rested on him. He gave a quick nod

of assent. Then the light passed to Echo and lingered, seemed to enter and glow within her. She cried out, but the voice was not her own. It was the long, mournful howl of a wolf. The light vanished and she was still again. But in that light Jabajaba noticed that her wounded heel had begun to bleed.

He staunched the wound with his shirt sleeve. The blood stain was black, but her hair again shone red by moonlight as it had the night he carried her from the fire.

"What winds do you command to do me battle, Priestess of Sax?"

"I do central stand, from the North summon Elmo, son of Ro.

From the East I summon Jabajaba of Nikaba, descendent of thy adversary sworn of old. From the South I summon Aeoui, son of Aeoui, Priests of Ist in succession unbroken to the foundation of thy legend. From the west I summon Echo, flesh of my flesh through generations of succession, whose flowing blood bears testimony to the breaking of our covenant."

"Covenant? I honor no covenant with such as thee!"

"Then no covenant is honored! Thou shalt not take this woman."

"I will have the girl!"

"Through thine own cruelty have come the means to prevent thee."

Lightning again illuminated the Giant's Harp in crackling sheets. The voice at last came visible. She stood blue-white and haughty, diamond eyes flashing anger.

The woman of Echo's dream, Eliot's companion, Elmo's fickle stranger, the mocking laugher of Jabajaba's desert journey, Gia's lifelong foe and Aeoui's downfall stood at the end of the Northern aisle, copper-gold hair streaming contrary to the wind. She held a fan of coral like a scepter which she pointed at Gia. Slowly she opened it, and as she did the wind sprang up again.

"Breed my thunder! Howl my winds! Lightning hold fast, but come at my command. You, old woman, have come to your end!"

"Take me and welcome. I gladly surrender this dry husk, but I will have my price for it. I remember, oh Fair One, when you would have disdained such puny sacrifice. But take it if it please your appetite. Your gums are perhaps grown too soft to crunch more supple fare." Thunder answered the unspeakable insolence.

"I will have the girl. . . and the boy!"

"I never did anything to you! What do you want me for?" cried Elmo.

"Be silent," Gia commanded.

"You dare command in my presence?"

"I dare what I dare."

Aeoui spoke. His voice was loud, clear, without tremor. "Take me instead, Fair One, fair no longer, who doth the name of beauty befoul! Take me and end your vain and cruel reign!" The Fair One waved her fan and the wind raged more fiercely to drown the words, but Aeoui's mighty story teller's voice pierced them.

"Take me, demon Ist, and with me take the stories which make your legend and your glory, for none will ever tell of you again. You are a demi-goddess, but I am your renown.

Through me do you touch Earth, and through my caution and my praise alone do men fear and do reverence to you. You are wind clothed in words, oh mighty Ist, soon to be wind alone!"

"Thou hast served me well, Aeoui. I will pardon this one insolence and spare thee."

"I do not want pardon!"

He lunged toward her, but the wind pushed him into the track of the Northwest aisle. He fought his way against the preventing gale until its fury knocked him flat, then he crawled. He reached the steps and disappeared over the top terrace stair where the wind was stopped by the broad slabs of marble. Utter darkness fell as a roar of black wings blotted out the light of the moon.

"From the songs of my fathers you have risen. With my death so die you too, the chain is broken!" rang Aeoui's voice from the final step fronting the abyss.

"Then fetch my fan, thou dog and son of dogs," cried Ist, flinging her fan after him into the abyss, illumined by one last flash of lightning.

The wind stopped abruptly. The wings folded. All was silence. Then the voice of a Schula rang out - one long, bitter and anguished note. Ist was gone.

"Grandmother!" Elmo exclaimed. "Echo's warm, she's waking up!

XXI

Heritage

° ° °

"And then what happened?" asked Ro.

"Then Ist, or whoever she was, just disappeared."

"You can still doubt who it was, Elmo?"

"I'm not sure I'll ever accept anything the way it looks again."

"There might be some wisdom in that but you won't get a lot accomplished. They say that when Ist dies, the desert will bloom. What happened then?"

"I haven't seen any flowers out there yet. Echo sat up and looked at me in a way she'd never done before. She just stared at me, the way Lo used to do. I almost thought she was Lo for a minute. Oh, another funny thing, when the blue light was on her she howled just like a wolf, then her heel began to bleed."

"Wolf O'the Wild," said Ro quietly.

"Beg pardon?"

"Then what happened? Tell me every detail you can remember."

"I tried to take her hand, but she yanked it back and gave me the strangest look - like she'd never seen me before in her life. She sat there

without saying anything for the longest time and then she said, 'Jabajaba, come here,' very sharply, the way Gia used to talk. He came over and she held out her hand so he could help her stand. She was pretty wobbly on her feet and he had to keep his arm around her. They just stared at each other. I tell you, from ten feet away by moonlight I could almost swear it was Lo. She was white as a sheet."

"I don't doubt it after a week unconscious."

"No, it wasn't that. . .1 don't know what it was, but after a while I asked 'Is everything all right?' and she looked at me strangely again and started to laugh. Jabajaba laughed too, but I don't think he knew what he was laughing at, probably just relief that it was all over."

"All over! I imagine it might be. Oh yes, I imagine it might, if there's any mercy in this world. What happened then?"

"She kept laughing, then she said, 'how is your Schula, little one? I heard her voice a moment ago. You'd better go down and have a look for her,' or something like that. I got mad then, after all I'd done for her, which of course she doesn't even know about and I said 'don't call me "little one," who do you think you are?' and she laughed some more, but Jabajaba stopped laughing and looked a little worried."

"Were you jealous?"

"I don't know. Maybe. She was my kind of my girl, after all."

"She was?"

"Well, I thought so, but she isn't any more. She could have stayed dead for all I care."

"Temper, temper," said Ro, which didn't help things. Elmo looked close to tears as it was.

"Then, the strangest thing of all, she said, 'never mind, perhaps your Schula will come to you' and then she started to sing. And Father. . ."

"Yes, son?"

"It was Isa's voice."

"You go to bed now. It's been a long night."

The sun was already risen and shining through the window of Ro's study. Elmo gladly did as he was told.

Ro took a large sheaf of papers from his desk. They were securely wrapped, tied and sealed with a drop of red wax bearing the motif of nine hammers. He looked long at the package. He would dearly love to peruse its contents, but the contents were not his to know. He left the house deliver the papers to their rightful owner, just as Gia had directed.

° ° °

Echo slept soundly on Gia's bed, Tio and Zee curled purring beside her. She looked somewhat older and her coloring had changed. Small wonder, thought Jabajaba, as he sat by the side of the bed watching her. He'd never realized, even when first attracted to her, how truly lovely she was, or perhaps she hadn't been quite this lovely before. The changes were subtle, except for her loss of skin color. The rose quartz blush had given way to an ivory paleness. Perhaps with sufficient rest and nourishment. . .

He heard Ro coming up the walk and met him at the door, holding a finger to his lips. "Echo's still sleeping," he whispered.

Ro forced a smile, said nothing, handed him the package and left.

Jabajaba brewed a cup of tea, seated himself at the table and broke the seal of nine hammers.

Son of Nicolene, my Grandson and dear pupil,

If you are alive to read this, we have triumphed! I salute you and entrust these writings to your keeping. They are the records of my years, the history of the area and of many things besides, some best forgotten. I leave you to be the judge.

Herein I bequeath to you all of the lexical keys to the Giant's Harp in my possession, my home and my cats. Moreover, I bequeath to you my great-great-granddaughter, Echo. I recommend her excellent qualities and entrust her to your care.

Between the North and Northwest aisles of the Eagle Mall, between the margins of both, there courses a ninth aisle, unmarked, which is to be yours. Upon the first quarter of that aisle I request that you see inscribed those things contained in these papers which are set off in brackets of red.

Before you leave Terrapin, as leave you must along with Echo, who on all accounts must be delivered from her baboon of a father, make a copy of those sections marked in red, and give them to Ro, who will be much interested. It probably breaks his heart to deliver this package at all. It is my hope that his son has been strengthened and matured by the events which bring these writings into your hands. If this be so, and I see not how it could be otherwise, take him as your apprentice and see that these writings are inscribed by him on the ninth aisle. It will take several years to perform this and Elmo has this virtue, if little else: he can keep his chisel sharpened.

Tell Ro of my request and he will keep a sharp watch to see that the work is accurately done. It will do his worthy heart good to see the boy occupied. If the seed of the father is in the son, Elmo will turn out well, for his father was much like him in his youth and needed to be dragged by the ear to accomplish anything.

The name of Ist must be effaced from the Eagle Mall. All of import which deals with her is written in the Southwestern aisle. If Aeoui has survived the trial, he will attend to it. If not, I entrust the task to you and have hopes that your keen intelligence will unravel their code, for, I confess, I cannot.

It is meet now that you learn of your heritage. These things may shock you, but they are so and not otherwise. It has been difficult to keep them from you, but the nature of our adversary was such that all knowledge might be turned by her against the holder and your safety was of more importance to me, by far, than my own.

To begin: the father that you know was not your father. Much strange parentage exists within the annals of Terrapin, as in other places. You

have heard that my pupils Lit and Ro once traveled to Nikaba to further their studies beyond what they felt I had to teach them. In this they were mistaken, though not in their desire to expand their experience beyond the narrow horizons of Terrapin.

Whilst in that land, Lit was smitten by the beauteous Nicolene, daughter of Izumi. Though both my pupils had been lately married in Terrapin, Nicolene's charms proved too great a temptation for Lit to resist, and to his undying shame -1 correct myself; a shame that ended only with his death - he won her love and left her with child. This greatly angered Ro, for he loved the wife of Lit. Both had vied for her hand and Ro was heartbroken to be rejected. He contracted a loveless marriage, ending in his wife's early death, which explains in part his dour countenance and his son's difficulties with women. In all of this may be rightly read the machinations of the Fair One, whose delight it is to destroy the felicity of our little country for reasons I now make known to you.

When the worship of her half-divine self was abandoned by the builders of the Eagle

Mall in favor of the religion of reason and the arts, she swore vengeance on their heads unto all generations, until no sprout of their seed prevailed. Yet her power was local. Other gods were venerated in Nikaba. Yet so greatly did the mysteries of the Eagle Mall interest the culture of scribes which flourished there, under the benign rule of my royal father, Sax, that pilgrimages across the desert were undertaken periodically and blood of Terrapin and Nikaba did naturally intermingle, complicating things for Ist and all concerned.

But I digress, it is your intersection with these events I mean to speak of here. So great were the misfortunes that beset Lit in consequence of his unruled passion in Nikaba that Ro, a forgiving man by nature, set aside his grudge. But before he did, to his discredit, while drinking in Nikaba he let slip the fact of Lit's marriage. The family of Nicolene drove Lit from town. Knowing that these men were pupils of mine, the head of the

College of Scribes arranged for a hasty marriage between Nicolene and one Jabajaba of Tarsa, later known as Potter Loolish because of his affliction with the cursing disease, great-grandson of Buel of Sax, brother of my own Jabajaba of whom I have spoken.

I feel your ears must be burning by now, but there is more to tell, which is yours to know and hold in secret. There are those who know, Aor among them, but they are few and it is no man's business.

Both Lit and Ro had been away a year when they returned to Terrapin together to discover a tragic situation. Lit's wife had been raped by his brother Eliot during Lit's absence. The child, Lo, was born soon after Lit's return. So it is your own cousin you delivered from Eliot. You will perhaps now understand why I exerted a little meddlesome guidance in your choice of partners. Lorgive me. As it happens, you resemble the father of Lit and Eliot, as a young man, so strikingly that Eliot could not, even in his stupidity, have failed to realize the power that had raised against him to stay his hand from murdering his own flesh and blood the day you appeared from the desert.

The mother of Lo, also named Lo, having heard Lit's confession of his circumstances in Nikaba - and driven to distraction by the manner of her daughter's conception - was driven to suicide.

All of these unfortunate doings I place squarely at the feet of Ist - for you must know that events similar to these have happened many times before, thrice in my own lifetime. The particulars are recorded in the Western aisle of the Giant's Harp which you will one day return to Terrapin to read; or if not you, your son, who will be my grandson three times removed, perpetuating the line of Jabajaba and Gia of Sax.

Again, take thee, I most highly commend, the lovely Echo to wife. With the defeat of Ist, you will find her less strange and more approachable than before. Her thrall to the Lair One is passed. Aor, bless his shaggy heart, was her protector, though his protection was nearly as dangerous as the force from which he protected her. Knowing what you

know, you can explain a frightening vision to her, concerning the Wolf O'the Wild, an experience which still troubles her deeply. Aor can tell you more of that someday, if she permits.

Be it by spell of the Harp Plant berries which the Northwest aisle will have suggested that you pick, or under my direction should you have failed to decipher the script, which I doubt, or by virtue of her uncommon good instincts, Echo loves you.

She does not know that she does as I write this, but I have plumbed her mind in conversation and have enough of the diviner's art to know a match when I see one. Fate has delivered you two together, with a little gentle nudging.

Echo is a cousin to you by a route I have no wish to describe, only to note that my Jabajaba perished at the hands of Ist while I was still quite young and thought by many to be uncommonly attractive. But this is no man's business and the secret dies with me. I see myself in Echo. My very image. Among the children of Terrapin she was ever first in my heart.

This is the final mystery the Giant's Harp holds for you. The rest is the history and science of a vanished civilization. Decipher it if you will. If not, one day another Jabajaba will finish the task. The Mall of Eagles will endure.

In closing, let an old woman advise you not to fear or hesitate to do what your considered impulse tells you to be a right course of action. Many beings of excellent worth have joined to form your body, your mind, and your blood. Listen to them. Trust in them.

There is no better time to cross the desert than at present. It is cool and there will be no dreams, wings or evil winds to plague you. Nor, I think, will there be many mirages.

I will close this letter before I give vent to sentimental prattle, but know this Grandson: if the Fair One has been conquered, and you live to read this letter, I died content.

My blessing be on you and Echo.

Gia of Sax

*

"No, angle the chisel away from yourself and give a good firm tap, not too hard, not too light. That's better," said Ro.

"I'll never get this done," complained Elmo.

"You will in good time. It's just a knack like knife sharpening."

Aor sat watching, crutch on lap, grinning widely. "You'll be as old as me before you're done with that."

"At least he'll be able to write his name, Aor."

"The circles are the hardest."

"Just leave a space and come back to them later. No, now you're not angling the chisel right."

° ° °

"All right, the cats go to Aor and then we can close up the place and go," said Jabajaba.

"Let's look around once more," replied Echo, and make sure we're not forgetting anything."

"Remember we have five hundred miles to walk and we're already loaded down with fifty pounds of paper."

"What's this?" She took a black lacquered box from its shelf above the fireplace. "It's locked!"

"Let me see it, " said Jabajaba. He turned it on its right side, turned it on its left, turned it upside down and back again. "Try it again."

"Look! It's a picture of you without your beard! Wherever did that come from?" As she removed it from the box, she was struck with amazement.

"What's that?"

"Underneath . . .oh Jabajaba, look! it's a portrait of me! But the paper is so yellow it must be a hundred years old."

° ° °

Sod stood blubbering at the Southern gate as his daughter and new son walked away into the Desert of Bones. "My child! My dear, darling child! Ohhhh. Don't forget your father my dear love. Oh, don't go, don't go!" Tears streamed from his swollen eyes and his nose glowed incandescent red - red as the hair of his departing daughter.

Echo stopped, turned back and gave him a last embrace, held her breath and planted a kiss near his mouth.

The couple could hear his mighty wail nearly halfway to the first oasis.

"Jabajaba. Look!"

"What? Well, that's strange!"

From the sand sprang a single blossom. A daisy. He plucked it for her and she put it behind her ear.

Epilogue

° ° °

Elmo sat on the edge of the Western terrace, dangling his legs into the abyss. His fingers felt clumsy on the pipe holes - workman's fingers now, thickened from chiseling Gia's testament into the Giant's Harp.

After seven seasons, the job was nearly done. Soon he would lay aside the shank and mallet for ink and a crow quill. Gia had left an allowance, which, should he choose to devote himself to writing, would continue. Even from the grave, her guidance over the fate of Terrapin continued. He'd had nearly two years to think it over.

He'd begun the work under the direction of Jabajaba, but, with the coming of Spring, the scribe had set off to Nikaba with his new bride, satisfied that the face of the Eagle Mall would not be marred by the deft fingers of the musician turned engraver.

The work was tedious, allowing time for dreaming and feeling sorry for himself. After a full season of chipping, his father had said: "The words you're cutting in stone will be read by those whose great-grandfathers are not yet born. Have you no desire to know what they say?" Assuming the question would fall on deaf ears, Ro was surprised by the tone of the response.

"Well yes, but it's all secret, isn't it?"

"Only for those without the power to read."

"I guess it would make it more interesting to know what I'm writing, since I'm spending the time at it anyway."

"You admit to curiosity?"

"I just thought it was all sort of . . . private."

"Nothing carved on a monument is private, Son. Sit down. Let's take a look at the section you plan to inscribe tomorrow."

After Elmo went to bed, Ro continued to study the manuscript, often consulting the accompanying syllabus, written in Gia's own hand. Her testament was a copy made by Jabajaba, left for safekeeping with Ro. The original document was carried back to the College of Scribes. It was official business, a report commissioned over a hundred years ago, now complete. Only a small portion, written in red letters, was destined for inscription on the Giant's Harp. Ro had some small acquaintance with the script from his studies at the College in Nikaba. It was written in Paladian, the official language of the scribes of a century past. Though precise, fluid and phonetically regular, it had fallen into disuse in modern times, except for ceremonial inscription.

Jabajaba's contemporary hand was unlike Gia's decorative penmanship. It avoided curlicues, serifs and non-functional flourishes of any kind, resembling more the letters of stone masonry than the inkpot script of former days.

Gia wrote of her childhood in the court of her father, the Earl of Sax. The early part of the document spoke of the political climate and intrigues of that time. This was not for etching on the Giant's Harp. It was a journal of local history for the records of the College.

Much was already known to Ro from conversation with Gia. But there were also revelations for her old student, who had often pondered the mystery of her mission and the circumstances of her continuing residence in Terrapin, away from the true fount of her interest. When she spoke of the College and the area, it was in alternate tones of longing and of cynicism. At long last, the astronomer was privileged to see the true shape

of the constellation containing Gia's star. The old woman he had known so well concealed within herself a very different creature than he suspected. He knew there was a mystery, but had scarcely dreamt the sort of mystery it truly was. Nothing very arcane, but a very human circumstance.

The text reported that Gia had become adept in tongues while quite young. Her father had founded the College of Scribes, and his court was ever rife with scholars. The daughter had inherited her father's ear for language and, with the Earl's influence, was able to enter the College despite her sex.

Though the text did not allude to the fact, having been written in large part some fifty to a hundred years ago, years when Grandmother was cut off for decades at a time from intercourse with Nikaba, other women were to enter the College. The numbers would increase year by year. Ro knew this to be so from his own days at the College. One in twenty students was a woman then, and from conversations with Jabajaba he knew that proportions were now roughly one in ten. There was talk of the old decorative script making a return and it seemed likely it would one day do so. The austere College grounds had acquired willow paths and gardens, and scholarship did not in consequence.

"Roses grow where once but thorns resided," Jabajaba had quoted from a piece of student doggerel he once, deep in his beer, confessed to have written, inspired by the rhapsodic style of the poet Ardri, whose work he had translated to much applause. His own style, as he was aware, would never reach beyond caricature - a sore spot with the sensitive scribe.

Even Gia's most begrudging colleagues admitted her as an equal, indebted to her quick insight for solutions to vexing problems of translation. She could speak each of the fourteen tongues of antiquity as though she were born in their respective centuries.

By the time she was thirty, she was accepted in the council of elders and issued the false beard which clean-shaven scribes were required to wear at official ceremonies.

When, eventually, a successor to the Head Scribe was due to be selected, Gia, being a woman, was not considered, although the position was not appointive but based on achievement and knowledge of tongues.

When the Earl received word of this slight, both to integrity and the honor of the House of Sax, he made an unannounced midnight appearance at the home of the Head Scribe, and demanded that the Council of Elders meet immediately, along with all candidates for successorship. He ordered examinations to proceed forthwith, himself in attendance.

As each candidate concluded his questioning, the Earl said to him: "Vedo kvintes reteo sadintest qvibellium!" Each candidate, in turn, failed to understand the phrase.

Gia was the last of the candidates. When her examination was complete, just as dawn lit the Head Scribe's window, the Earl called all the elders and the candidates together. Instead of directing the mysterious phrase to his daughter, he pronounced it to the Head Scribe. The elder could only shake his head, ignorant of the meaning, whereupon Sax spoke the words to his daughter. She replied:

"Incilus vindit inditica plepeperen." The Earl replied in the mystery tongue and they conversed for fully fifteen minutes, the Earl twice throwing back his head in boisterous laughter.

"What is that language and the meaning of the phrase?" asked the Head Scribe, when they at last fell silent.

"It is the tongue of the race who built the Eagle Mall, across the desert in Terrapin, two thousand years ago," replied Sax. "A fine language for jest, though imprecise in matters mathematic!"

"The meaning of the phrase," answered Gia, containing her smile, "is this: 'Bring me a measure of your best red wine, and swiftly!' "

"Aye, such a thirst I had all night - and none here to slake it!" laughed Sax, in reply to which Gia had answered: "It seems to me thou hast had one measure too many already!"

That a woman would one day assume pre-eminence among them was, in the end, acceptable to the men, considering that the woman was Gia. Respectful of her royal rank, each of those who loved women loved her, at least a little. Many would rather have slept on boar's hide than admit it. (Gia candidly records this fact.) Chief among these were the monotheist devotees of Mitra, avatar of He Whose Name May Not be Written, an order devoted to celibate meditation.

Inevitably, there were some who viewed Sax' intimidation of the Head Scribe and Council as a political act. The Regency Scholars, on retainers from various earldoms, were interrogated by their masters, who feared the act foreshadowed an effort by Sax to achieve dominance among them. In this they were not entirely mistaken. Gia's qualifications to become successor meant little to the statesmen. Larger issues were at stake. The earls preferred to settle quarrels among themselves and desired no king to mediate between them.

In Spring of the year following Gia's election, a scribe of low rank, a handsome young monk of Mitra, fell in love with Gia and she reciprocated his affection. Try as she might, she could not conceal it. Soon, there was something beyond mere affection she could not conceal.

Ro translated until the tall candle burned out, then retired, pleased with his progress. He'd had more trouble than expected helping Elmo read. His cursory knowledge of Paladian was far from fresh, but sufficient to read far enough ahead to instruct his son without trying the young man's patience. Elmo's interest was not so deeply engaged he dared test it yet.

Several weeks later, Elmo's flagging interest was suddenly rekindled as he came upon the passages relating to Gia's romance with Jabajaba of Sax. This motivation did not receive Ro's highest approval, though it was those very passages, sensitively wrought, that earlier caused him to burn

the candle to a stub. He reminded himself that any motivation was welcome since his son showed signs of becoming a believable successor, should he show any flair for charts and calculations. Gia could pay to make the young man into a scribe, but no amount of post-mortem manipulation could make him an astronomer.

Elmo's chisel-stiffened fingers loosened as he piped. The Giant's Harp echoed the sound, but no familiar voice suggested a divergent or impromptu melody. On rare occasions, a strange Schula replied with song, but her voice was muffled and distant, could not cut through the wind like Isa. Nor did she know how to shape her notes to his.

The only truly happy moments of his life, Elmo was tempted to believe, were spent playing duets with Isa, immersed in story and song. It was pleasant to make music alone, but the workaday world didn't vanish as when the Schula's voice rippled the still air or rode an updraught of wind. Under the charm of her music, he'd scaled the dangerous cliff in search of a mermaid; found instead a moody young woman with whom he could never agree.

Or almost never, he remembered as the warmed-up pipe began to generate notes without conscious effort... There was an occasion several days after his first descent to the beach when Isa had sung while he played a whistle cut from a reed. Their eyes had locked together and after awhile he'd lost all sense of playing the instrument and there was only music. It was unclear who played the instrument and who sang. All was simply song: the boy, the girl, the rush of the surf and the screech of gulls.

The stairs were all of amber

The gate was made of horn

Another gate of ivory

Swung open in the morn

A voice warned "fly"

Another said "Stay -

And climb the steps of amber

On this your dying day

The Gate of Horn shall open

The Ivory Gate will close

All the dreams of morning

Dissolve into the rose

Come when you are bidden

Across the other side

A child among the children,

A reed upon the tide

Where stars are made of seashell

The moon is made of sand

Someone dressed in billows

Will take you by the hand

Her first touch is silver

Her second touch gold

Her third touch a story

That has never been told

'Twas you who made her happy

When all the leaves were green

And from the gate of Ivory

There flowed a gentle stream

She will wait forever

However long that be

Beside the steps of amber

That rise out of the sea

After the song they walked hand in hand along the beach, the setting sun casting their shadows to the very foot of the cliff.

"The Schulan men have no music," said Isa. "I tire of singing with my sisters. None of them stray beyond the notes they were taught in the cradle."

"Aren't the boys taught music?"

"It's not considered manly to make music."

"No one in Terrapin plays music either, except the Roughs - but mostly only during the Howling."

"There's a story that says our people are kin to the Roughs."

"That would be hard to believe, they're kind of ugly and you're so beautiful." Isa had blushed and tightened her hold on his hand.

"I don't know if any of the stories in my songs are true."

"I wouldn't think so. I'd say they're mostly fables, from what I've heard."

"You would, would you?" retorted Isa, letting go his hand. Elmo realized he'd tripped over his tongue. But he was only being honest. He reached for her hand again. She let him take it, but the hour's sweetness was broken.

"Bracing tune!"

"Good morning, Aor," said Elmo, putting down his pipe. "How did you get up here?"

"With the aid of a stout staff. The 'Palanitos' you've been playing drew me. Haven't heard it in years."

"How's your leg healing?"

"Won't be the same after Eliot. But a good salve of lard and onions helped the scar grow slick as marble."

Aor's fragrance of onions joined with the floral breeze from the desert, adding a culinary tinge to the scent of wild harp and rambling rose. The old Rough reached in his wide pocket and produced one of the helpful herbs.

"Here's for your lunch, lad."

"Thanks."

"Took a look at your work while you were whistling. Can't make heads nor tails of writing, but you've done a lot of chipping by any man's reckoning. Any notion what it says?"

"More or less. It's hard going. Father helps, but he won't read it for me. I learn a little every day."

"But you know the gist?"

"The story is clear enough. It's details I miss."

"Aye, the details might well be missed. It's a sad tale Grandmother has to tell. The names are the same as our own, though generations dead."

"Is that so? Father says once you learn one script, the others come easier. He says they're mostly versions of the language we speak and the older they are, the simpler they are to follow, once you learn the alphabet and a few tricks of grammar."

"I'd wager the difficulty is less with the alphabet than with the thoughts of the writers. They knew more than we're likely ever to learn. Strange things that are not easy to think, some of it to do with shapes and numbers, if what I've heard from my own folk is true. People like to think we progress, but I fear we forget even what our ancestors knew. "

"Why do the people of Terrapin fear learning so much?"

"'Twas Ist - Ah! Hang me! I spoke the name! I'll seize my tongue and yank it from my throat before I speak it again! But she it was who murdered our teachers and their pupils, left education to her priests. Their stories are all we have to know the past by."

"I guess she wanted history to be all about her?"

"Aye. As a result we have no history but what you scribes record in stone, which we cannot read."

"Why didn't she destroy the writings?"

"Because her name and legend live there. She knew not which words contained her tale, so destroyed none. In my opinion, the Fair One could not read."

"Not read! That's hard to believe?"

"Do you study the meaning of the spider's web, or translate the antics of flies into music? The Fair One toyed with men for amusement. She set brother against brother and drank the discord like wine. She ravaged the souls of the daughters and brought them to grief in dreams. She was daughter to both gods and men, but in her pride the Fair one had no use for either. Had she not ridiculed her own priest in public, her sway would have remained complete. Now tell me somewhat of the things you've been learning, scribe!"

"There's a lot of stuff in the script I'd never have guessed about Grandmother. Not in a thousand years!"

"Concerning Schula, for example?"

"You know about that?"

"What do you think we sing about during the nights of the Howling, my friend? Such secrets are sacred to the Roughs. We keep our own history none knows but us. Nor even the Fair One knew our lingo. She plugged her ears to us, gave no more thought to our song than to the braying of beasts in the field."

"I guess we all looked like beasts to her."

"Indeed! You felt her wit and charm at Aeoui's Midsummer campfire. Enchanted like a snake you were, boy! And none among us could have done better, had she chosen him to work her spell upon!"

"It didn't make a lot of sense later."

"It made sense enough, but not the sort a man could discover and keep his pride. But the short of it is, as I said, having no respect for the gods, she had none for the things they wrought. And why should she, when old Yu himself was given the horns by the harping giant Bran, who sired the Fair One on the god's own wife? 'Tis said among Roughs that the Fair One brought disrespect into the world. Before her, there was none. It was her gift to us."

"I can see why she chose a rat for her companion."

"A rat and a wolf. Old Howl himself was known to trot behind her a time or two. My people say: 'The tiger hath the pride of his stripes, the rat, red eyes to thieve in the night; the squirrel setteth by store for the Winter, but the wolf hath only his cunning.' Does Gia write of the days when there were tigers in Terrapin?"

"Nothing like that."

"Then perhaps she's not so old as some believe. 'Tis said that once the edge of a frozen sea touched the very step you sit upon. In those days there were tigers with teeth like horns. The Giant's Harp was old, even then. It's said the father of Ist..."

"You said the name again, Aor!" Elmo cautioned.

"Have you a set of pincers among your mason's gear? I'm afraid I've left mine at home or I'd rip out my tongue by the roots! But forbear . . . Some say it was Bran who hewed these pillars and set them in place. And they say he strung and strummed it, winning the heart of Yu's wife, from afar."

"The Song of File. I've heard it from Isa."

"It's one of ours."

"Those things are written in the Southwestern aisle, where Father says Aeoui's stories are all contained."

"The Aisle of Tears. But the story is ours, stolen by Aeoui's grandfather. As is known of old, the renegade Georg gave more than one song of the pack to Schula, and the priests of Bran's daughter heard it from them and took it for their own."

"The Aisle of Tears! Is that it's name? That's where I'm supposed to chip her name out of the record."

"You haven't done that yet?"

"No. Father doesn't want me to go any faster than I learn the words I'm chipping."

"Sensible of him. Destroying symbols you know naught of would never lay her ghost so well as striking the blow with knowledge. I wouldn't have thought Ro would make such distinctions."

"I don't think that's the reason. He's just anxious for me to learn."

"Carrot before the donkey? Ro is a good master. A scholar to the teeth, with ink for blood and a telescope for an eye. But a kind man and just. Thou hast music, which he never had, nor others of his race. From your mother's milk you drank the gift of music, for there was that in Henrietta, if no pretty face. Your mother sang a lovely lullaby, might be that you remember?" Elmo only nodded as Aor continued: "A drop of Schula's blood in her, or I miss my guess.

But good for Ro and good for you! It does you no harm to stretch that brain of yours. Always knew you had one. Many didn't."

"That's comforting to know," said Elmo, who was not sure how to take these off-hand remarks about his parents with gratuitous insult appended.

"Ah, you're not slow to take offense, lad."

"You think so?"

"Only put folks on their guard with you, Til they fear to speak freely around you. Offense is rarely intended but often taken in this world. You and little Lo, when young, often exchanged wounding words, as I

remember."

Elmo was not sure he liked the direction the conversation had taken, but answered out of respect for the old man who had taught him to fly and held the string of his kite.

"She always acted like I was stupid."

"Each worse than the other. You have a better brain than you credit yourself with. 'Thy brains art thy brains for all any saith, e'en thine own self.' You were never the fool you thought yourself to be, Elmo."

"I never thought I was. Other people did. I just wasn't interested in what they wanted me to learn."

"The ultimate folly in any man's eyes."

"I never understood why they didn't care for music."

"Their heads are in their hearts. They have no room for songs."

"Then they have no room for me."

"No. You must make extra room for them."

"I guess you could look at it that way."

"It's a profitable view."

"A thing's one way or it's another."

"Things are how you take them."

"Like your faith in onions?"

"Ah, you've got me there. It doesn't do to examine everything too thoroughly. Better to believe a thing or two on faith and seek example to prove it. One example convinces the heart of what it wants sorely to believe."

"I don't know that I ever wanted to believe anything in particular."

"A belief in itself, lad. It marks you as a certain sort of man - the sort others don't willingly share beliefs with. I don't suppose our Echo told you much of what went on beneath that red mop of hers?"

"She mostly didn't say much of anything."

"She had much wanted telling."

"I guess I'm not much good for either."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean talking or listening."

"You seem to be listening well enough. And talking too, or so it would seem."

"Well that's because you're easy to talk to. It was different with Echo. And Isa."

"The Schula granddaughter? A fine voice on that one!"

"She talked all right, but I couldn't figure much of it out. It always meant something else than what she said, like a joke she had that I wasn't let in on. And she was bound to take offense if I said the wrong thing, when I didn't even know what she was talking about. And she'd take offense if I said nothing."

"When you took offense, you mean! What's to understand beyond the fact that she is a woman, you are a man? There is interest or there is not. I assume there was?"

"I thought so for awhile. But then she turned quiet and moody all the time. Then she just left."

"And you returned on wings of wind to Terrapin. Fortunate updraft! Not every dealing between woman and man is so easily ended, even at the cost of a broken leg."

"You think I made her feel stupid, like Lo?"

"It means much that you ask. You know many things she would never have been aware of. She lives on a beach among simple folk. But there are other things she knows that a boy raised by a widower might find difficult to understand."

"She knows as many songs as my father knows stars."

"She has her songs by heart as does a bird. Her intelligence is of another kind. She cannot match words with you, only melodies. Yet you might have brought her to speak of things of her own way, if she didn't feel judged by the silence of your easily offended heart."

"She was just as silent to me sometimes - especially later."

"It doesn't surprise me."

"I guess I did make her feel stupid. I never thought of that."

"Perhaps for a time - but it's likely she grew to think you the stupid one."

"Most likely she was right."

After Aor limped away, Elmo looked at the gift the old Rough had given him for his lunch. He rolled the onion around on his open palm for awhile, over the tiny well-healed scar of the middle finger, then suddenly bit into it, raising tears. What a child he had been.

° ° °

Elmo worked until evening, then climbed down the steps of the Giant's Harp and struck across the meadow. Behind him, the glow of the sinking sun colored the marble of the aisle, pouring crimson in the crevices of the newly chiseled words, so that they would have appeared written in blood on golden paper, were there anyone on the Giant's Harp to see them:

This day have I, Gia of Sax, come to Terrapin accompanied by Jabajaba of Sax, father of our unborn child whose hour is at hand. We are sent hither from Nikaba by order of the Council of Scribes, in consequence of our union, which, as onetime designated successor to the Chief Scribe, I cannot condone, nor as a woman regret. Of our journey across the Desert of Bones, there is little I would wish to remember. I will tax neither this record nor the conscience of the Council with details of our tribulation. Suffice it we are alive, all three, if barely, and housed in the home of Elmo, scribe, astrologer and onetime citizen of Nikaba, former instructor in mathematics at the College founded by my father, Simon Earl of Sax.

We are under orders to conduct investigation of the Mall of Eagles and attempt to translate the several strange scripts known to be inscribed there. My husband is to return with evidence of our findings at the end of seven years. I am to remain in Terrapin and train apprentices to research

the script wherein, carved in the aisles of what they call the Giant's Harp, rest secrets long lost to history.

It is to the writings of the Cult of (the name is crossed out on the ms.) that I am especially requested by my colleague Azuma, good, staunch and unsuccessful defender of my honor, to direct my initial studies. Belief in the primitive demi-goddess (name again scratched out) flourishes in this community. She is supposed the last issue of the gods who built the world with the aid of Terrapin, first creation of the god Yu, equivalent of Zophar in the mythology of ancient Nikaba. The demi-goddess, known colloquially as the Fair One, is believed to be vengefully jealous of her worship. She is said to have destroyed the lives and works of those who built the Mall of Eagles, keeping only the monument to serve as temple of her rites. Upon it are said to be inscribed her legends, by means of which her worship is encouraged by a hereditary priest devoted to her service.

The previous words are from the hand of a young woman, given here as evidence the innocence with which first I came to Terrapin. That very attitude early marked me as an enemy to she who is called the Fair One. My studies were to prove more than academic.

Our daughter Schula was born on the Still Night, when the Roughs commune with Loup Aru, who, in his dotage, gorges on blood spilled by the Fair One. Her death will be his death as well, for he is an attendant spirit, substance of her substance. This is the way with gods, whose every attribute takes a different form, able to breathe and walk the earth or assume the face of elemental forces. As wind, as rat, as any of the many thralls she took unto herself to work her will, did the Fair One disport herself.

Schula, at the age of fifteen years, was abducted by a Rough for sacrifice to Loup Aru, but his design did not succeed, for he fell in love with her and she with him. The child's father had been dead for twelve years and Schula was not one to heed the council of her mother over that of her own heart.

Concerning the circumstances of the death of Jabajaba of Sax, I must of necessity be brief, for I write these words quickly under threat of conclusive battle with our enemy. His life and death concern only me. The things I write herein are of historical significance to the people of Terrapin and are true and trustworthy according to my certain knowledge.

My lamented husband was murdered by the Fair One, whose proper name I shall not write herein in order to speed the work of he who strikes these words in stone; who must efface the cursed name where ere it appeareth upon Eagle Mall, should she suffer defeat in our impending battle and there be one who survives of our company to do so.

This place has been called Terrapin through the memory of twenty generations, though once it was Urala, before the birth of she whose name must be forgotten, until none live who give credence to her legend. This is the final death of gods.

I have lived this needfully long life of mine in insurrection against she who killed my husband and deprived our daughter of a father. Schula, against all caution, mingled our blood with that sanguine race who worship the god dog Loup Aru and hold his mysteries close, preserved in the song of an unwritten tongue which hath no root in the fourteen tongues of antiquity known to this scribe.

When I came first to Terrapin, the Roughs had not yet outlived their days of rapaciousness, though their numbers had diminished. Their power waned as their blood was thinned by lawless couplings whose issue did not join the pack. My daughter was shunned by the good citizens of Terrapin, as was I held excommunicate from the company of scribes in earlier days. Though I am long forgiven, I have not the strength to return to my homeland. Nor was Schula to return to Terrapin.

The Rough, Georg by name, was likewise banished from his own tribe, having broken the custom: not to marry but to rape, leaving children to be raised by mothers. Through the banishment of Georg, bearer of an uncharacteristic and unwelcome conscience, the blood of the pack grew

thinner yet.

The couple fled to the beach. Four daughters were born to them in course of time. All learned the songs I taught my Schula in her cradle, as well as those she learned from Aeoui, son of Aeoui and great-grandfather of Aeoui, upon whom I count much in the coming battle, for he has suffered sore at the hand of she whom he serves.

Over the five generations of my lifetime, four young men have been called to the beach by the music of the daughters of Schula. Only one, Elmo, the great-grandson of my benefactor, returned to Terrapin. By this I know that the final battle with the Fair One is upon us, for by virtue of his ignorance and innocence he hath weakened the thralldom of the enemy over the race of Schula and confounded her designs. Only one death was claimed by the Fair One in recompense, Fo, the daughter of a family destroyed by intercourse with the demi-goddess. This vengeful move, if I interpret correctly, leaves the enemy with but one thrall to pursue her attack upon us, and must hasten the appearance of the demi-goddess herself. She believes she has two in thrall and may overestimate her power over the one, Echo, and may have lost her purchase on the other, Aeoui, through her own arrogance. Our power lies in the possibility that she underestimates our resolve and overestimates her own strength. The battle may be a moment when small balances prove decisive.

With the coming of Jabajaba of Nikaba, the stage is fully set for the first time since my tragic youthful encounter with the demi-goddess. There have been many minor incursions, a score of years apart, but this time the power gathering is greater, the preparation longer, and the names of the players are the same names, five generations removed, as in my first encounter with the ageless enemy. The old band gathered against the old foe. To live long is to see full circles. I shall not live to see another. However it fare, this battle is my last. May it prove decisive!

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Elmo finished chipping the last words written in red on the document into the marble aisle. A quarter of its length was covered. Then he opened an envelope appended to the document with instruction that it was not to be read until work was complete. He was relieved to find it written in his own language.

My dear Elmo,

You have been instructed to strike the proper name of the Fair One from the annals of the Giant's Harp. Omit not that this thing be done. This will be her second death. Her third and final death comes when her name dies from the lips and memory of all, especially from the songs of my granddaughters, the Schulas. Go to them when this effacement is accomplished, if you would finish the work you have begun, and live among them for awhile. Instruct them to refrain from teaching their daughters the tales which tell the history of our enemy, which Schula learned from Aeoui, setting music of her own to them, and taught to her children in their cradles by the sea. They may learn the songs of the Roughs and such songs as I myself taught my daughter. There are songs of gods which thrived before the coming of the Fair One which they may learn, though gathered from the priest of our enemy. It is important that the Schulas sing of the old gods, for when such testament dies, strange and foreign gods, or none at all, will rule Terrapin, as in days beyond clear recall. Go to Isa and seek her help in performing the last request of her grandmother and thine,

Gia of Sax.

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Ro set aside his astronomical work reluctantly to consider the writings of the Southwest aisle. After some days of study, he confessed to Elmo that he had no clue to guide him.

"Perhaps you must just proceed and strike the dotted circles from the aisle."

Elmo looked at the Aisle of Tears with a perplexed frown for a long time, then said: "If these are the tales of Aeoui, and were passed on from father to son, why would they be written in any other language than the one Aeoui told them in?"

"What you say has merit! The writings may not be a strange language at all, but a code! Where has my head been? I'm so accustomed to difficult answers, I'm afraid the simple ones escape me."

"I know some of the tales as well as Aeoui from playing my pipe while Isa sang them."

"Yes, but the rhyming is likely an addition of the Schulas."

"Some perhaps - but a few of Aeoui's tales were rhymed. "The tale of the Doubly Drowned" for one. I've heard the same words from Aeoui and from Isa."

"And others Jabajaba wrote down at fireside! He left those notebooks with me for safekeeping, though I've not examined them. I had no particular interest in Aeoui's stories."

"It's strange he didn't think to copy the writings directly from the aisle."

"Without your knowledge of the songs, or a text to guide him, what seems so clear to us might not have occurred to him. He was interested in another aisle entirely. He recorded Aeoui's tales, I think, as a diversion - but his interest lay elsewhere, in the work he carried with him to Nikaba."

"Then it only remains to find out which tales fit."

"How do you propose to do that, Son?"

"We just match up the dotted circles with the places the name is mentioned in a song or in Jabajaba's transcriptions... Matching even one song should give us a good start in breaking the code."

"Let's go home and look for the book."

"If you don't mind, Father, I'd like to stay and play my pipe for awhile."

"Do as you wish, Son."

Ro trudged back home smiling. His feigned perplexity regarding the simple solution of decoding the Southwest aisle had actually inspired his son to think. Perhaps he wasn't a dead loss as a teacher after all.

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Elmo placed the chisel squarely on the name of Ist, the dotted circle in which the final remaining cipher of her name was spelled. The blood pounded through his veins and he heard a ringing in his ears. As he raised the mallet, the air seemed to thicken, almost as though an invisible hand tried to stay the hammer. An orchid-scented wind whipped up, the old familiar haunted scent of the once barren Desert of Bones. He felt his strength suddenly ebbing. Eight times he tried to raise the hammer and failed to do so.

He thought of Isa, of Grandmother's death and of her final trust in him. Of Echo. Of Lo. Gathering all his strength, he managed to raise the mallet to the apex on the ninth attempt, eyes steady on the target, and brought it down with a commanding blow, square on the chisel. A brilliant blue spark flew from the stone, as though the morning star momentarily glittered from the marble.

Unearthly silence dampened even the roar of the ocean below - and then a scream echoed through the halls of the Giant's Harp, a scream like that of Lo when she plunged to her doom. The scream hung in the air for a moment, then modulated into a suspended tone, a sung note of great beauty and rich timbre. It was the voice of Isa.

Elmo dropped his mallet and chisel with a clatter and picked up his pipe, answering the note... The note lapped and twined around the melody he chose, an old chant of the storyteller, and joy blossomed in Elmo's heart as the Schula began to sing in the gathering twilight.

Inspiration lend me sight

Unfold daylight from the night

O Sprite of flame and air

Loose the power at your command

Sifting every grain of sand

Find the stories written there

Shade the firelight's glare

With tales of Terrapin

When the dawn glows in the East

Lay us down again in peace

Beneath the light of Venus

Rising just before the sun,

All our stories told and done

Every knot untied but one

Which binds the restless soul to life

Until its time is run

With this hourglass nearly spent

Time has flown, nor where it went

Can I come back to tell you

Though this song be newly sung

Spare me till the tale is through

Nothing comes, if not by you

Strummed upon a harp unstrung

Forever fresh and true

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in memory of JJG

November 1, 1996

ANALYSIS · A CRITICAL ESSAY

A Stone Library With Its Arms in the Clouds

Myth, Decipherment, and Eternal Recurrence in Robert Hunter's The Giant's Harp

ABSTRACT

Composed between 1984 and 1996 and published serially on the World Wide Web rather than through any commercial press, Robert Hunter's The Giant's Harp is the longest sustained work of prose fiction by the principal lyricist of the Grateful Dead. The novel is set in Terrapin — the same imagined geography invoked obliquely in the 1977 Hunter/Garcia composition "Terrapin Station" — and unfolds across twenty-one chapters and an epilogue as a multigenerational mythopoeic narrative concerning the threatened return of a demi-goddess, Ist, to a small, illiterate coastal town built atop the ruins of a vanished literate civilization. This paper offers a structural and thematic reading of the novel. It argues that The Giant's Harp is best understood not as fantasy in the conventional generic sense but as a deliberate exercise in mythopoesis — the construction of a self-coherent mythological cosmos — built around four braided concerns: (1) the epistemic conflict between oral and literate cultures; (2) decipherment as both narrative engine and metaphor for the recovery of lost meaning; (3) the doctrine of eternal recurrence, in which persons and situations repeat across generations and across the boundary between the living and the dead; and (4) the inheritance of

vocations across paternal and pedagogical lines. The paper situates the novel within Hunter's larger Terrapin cycle, which extends from the abandoned 1968–69 "Eagle Mall Suite" through the 1977 song to the 1980 Jack O' Roses extensions, and argues that the novel is the only place where the cycle's mythic substructure is fully articulated.

Introduction and Critical Context

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The Giant's Harp occupies an unusual position in twentieth-century American literature. Its author, Robert Hunter (1941–2019), wrote some of the most widely heard lyric poetry of his generation — "Ripple," "Box of Rain," "Brokedown Palace," "Terrapin Station," "Dark Star" — yet his single completed novel was never issued by a publisher. Hunter posted it chapter by chapter on his personal website during 1996, where it remained as the "Giant's Harp Gateway." The novel's only physical existence has been through fan-compiled PDF and EPUB files preserved on the Internet Archive, accompanied in some versions by a 2019 framing essay by music journalist Jesse Jarnow ("From the Eagle Mall to Terrapin Station: A Skeleton Key to Robert Hunter") originally published at Aquarium Drunkard.

This publication history matters analytically. The novel's marginal position within Hunter's reception — vastly less read than the songs whose world it elaborates — has produced a critical lacuna. The most substantial scholarly engagement to date appears in Grateful Dead studies, particularly papers presented at the SWPACA Grateful Dead Scholars Caucus, which have examined the novel through the lenses of legendarium-construction (after Tolkien) and comparative mythology (after Eliade and Campbell). Yet the novel resists the assumptions of fan criticism. It is not "expanded universe" in the franchise sense, nor is it fan

service for Deadheads; substantial portions of its world contradict or simply ignore the imagery the song "Terrapin Station" had established by the time the novel was begun. Jerry Garcia, by all accounts, never read it.

The compositional dates carry their own argumentative weight. Hunter began the book in 1984, the leanest creative year of his partnership with Garcia, when he was simultaneously scripting episodes of the rebooted Twilight Zone under Harlan Ellison and writing songs for an unmade film of George R.R. Martin's Armageddon Rag. The novel was substantially drafted by 1986, with Hunter's father — a retired McGraw-Hill editor named Norman Hunter, then in his eighties — serving as primary editor. Hunter completed it in 1996, the year after Garcia's death. The closing song of the novel is dedicated, in the author's voice, to JJG, November 1, 1996. The book is thus framed at both ends by personal grief: it begins as a creative response to the dormancy of Hunter's most important collaboration and ends as an elegy for it.

ANALYSIS

Plot Summary

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The novel opens at the Giant's Harp itself — a megalithic monument of marble crowning a cliff above the sea, its origins beyond recorded local history. Ten-year-old Elmo and his father Ro, the town astronomer, watch a Schula (a singing sea-creature, half-siren, half-woman) on the rocks far below. From this opening tableau the novel establishes its central setting: Terrapin, "an inbred town bordered on three sides by desert, set on a cliff facing the sea," a place whose inhabitants are largely illiterate and live among ruins they cannot read.

The central characters are introduced as two interwoven generational pairs. Ro, the widowed astronomer, and his son Elmo represent one line; Lit, the schoolmaster, and his pale, black-haired daughter Lo represent the other. Ro and Lit are intellectual companions and former classmates at the College of Scribes in Nikaba, the literate city across the Desert of Bones. Both have been quietly mentored, decades earlier, by Gia — an apparently ordinary old woman of Terrapin whose true identity as a former Head Scribe of Nikaba is concealed throughout most of the novel.

The plot is set in motion by Lit's death early in the book. His daughter Lo passes into the guardianship of Lit's brother Eliot — a brutal, half-witted, paranoid wheelwright who imprisons her in his isolated cottage at the southern edge of town, beats her, and surrounds the

property with elaborate booby traps (sharpened shafts, spring-action nooses, pits of barbed wire). Lo's confinement and slow psychological dissociation form one of the novel's principal threads. A parallel thread follows Echo, the red-haired epileptic daughter of the snoring wheelwright Sod — Elmo's childhood playmate, whose seizures appear, with mounting clarity, to be episodes of possession by the demi-goddess Ist.

The novel's second principal plot is initiated by the arrival, at the end of a fourteen-day desert crossing, of Jabajaba of Nikaba, a scholar who has come to translate the carvings on what his people call the Eagle Mall and the Terrapinians call the Giant's Harp. Jabajaba's slow decipherment of its eight scripts — cuneiform, pictograph, alphabet, rune, hieroglyph, cursive, "one that looked like worms and broken twigs," and another resembling a maze network — provides the novel's intellectual through-line and is the structural counterpart to its supernatural plot.

The two threads converge at the climax. The figure who has been moving through Echo, and through Lo, and through certain weather phenomena, is Ist herself: a demi-goddess, daughter of the giant Bran and the goddess File, whose worship was abandoned by the builders of the Eagle Mall in favor of "the religion of reason and the arts," and who has sworn to destroy their successors unto all generations. Gia, the apparent old woman of Terrapin, is in fact a centuries-old emissary from the College of Scribes, sent on a hundred-year mission to monitor and ultimately constrain Ist. Her death at the novel's center allows her sealed testament — bequeathed to Jabajaba as her great-great-grandson — to be opened and read. The final chapters narrate the ritual confrontation with Ist, the awakening of Echo from a week-long trance, and Gia's posthumous instructions: that Jabajaba is to inherit her papers, her cats, and her great-great-granddaughter, and to take Echo and depart for Nikaba; that Elmo is to spend years chiseling the testament's

red-bracketed sections into a previously unmarked ninth aisle of the monument; and that the name of Ist is to be effaced from the Eagle Mall entirely.

The epilogue, set seven seasons later, finds Elmo on the western terrace of the Giant's Harp, his musician's fingers thickened by the chisel, completing the work. The novel's closing image is one of literate transmission. The book's last verse, reproduced in the voice of the Schula Isa, is dedicated to Garcia.

Setting and Cosmology

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Terrapin is a post-literate society in a precise sense: its present inhabitants are largely illiterate, but they live among monumental evidence that earlier inhabitants were not. The Giant's Harp itself is described as "a megalithic monument of marble, ancient beyond known local history," its T-square-and-compass bas-reliefs and goddess-of-architecture statuary indicating a vanished civilization of mathematicians, builders, and scribes. The town's name for the time before — "Time Before" — is a tellingly impoverished construction, the linguistic correlate of cultural amnesia. Hunter establishes early that Terrapinians regard literacy itself with suspicion. Even the few who can read (Ro, the late Lit, the elderly Gia, and possibly the storyteller Aeoui) conceal the fact:

“It was not considered good form in Terrapin to know things.”

This is a crucial inversion of the standard fantasy-novel relationship to its setting. In Tolkien, the past is grand, the present diminished, and the gap between them is filled by elegiac longing. In Le Guin, knowledge is power deployed within ethical constraint. In The Giant's Harp, by contrast, the past is grand, the present diminished, and the gap is filled by active forgetting — a willed cultural refusal to engage with the inheritance physically present in the landscape. Terrapin's ruin is

epistemic, not material. The columns still stand. The acoustic resonance of the marble corridors still functions; characters who play whistle on the upper terraces find the monument supplying their missing pentatonic notes as overtones. The civilization of the builders has not vanished from the world. It has vanished from the consciousness of those who walk through it daily.

The geography reinforces the epistemological scheme. Terrapin sits on a cliff between two zones of unknowing. Below it is the sea, bordered by a beach reachable only by a perilous descent; this is the realm of the Schulas, who sing the surviving fragments of the antediluvian tradition but who do not, by Gia's own report, ever invent a new song. To the south and east is the Desert of Bones — a wasteland of mirages produced, in the storyteller's account, when the demi-goddess Ist banished the spirits of Terrapin's once-flowering gardens into the air. Across that desert lies Nikaba, a literate city with a College of Scribes, where eight of the fourteen tongues of antiquity are still studied. Terrapin is, in other words, geographically marooned between an oral culture below it and a literate culture beyond it, having lost contact with both.

Mythological Structure

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The novel's theology is consistent and unusually well-developed for a work of contemporary fiction. The pantheon proceeds from a creator god, Yu, who fashioned the terrapin as the first creation; Yu's daughter File; the giant Bran, who fathered Ist on File and was subsequently transformed into a floating island as punishment; Po, god of the sea; and Ist herself, the demi-goddess who acts as the novel's antagonist. Mortals frequently invoked are the storytellers' grandfathers, particularly the original Aeoui, in whose garden Ist first manifested and whom she punished by demanding the future as well as the past be told.

What is striking is how rigorously Hunter holds to the internal logic of this pantheon. Ist's defining attribute — her capacity to take "many sizes, many faces" and to manifest through wind, water, sky, and the bodies of mortal women — is established in the opening chapter as a piece of folklore reported by Ro to his son, then progressively confirmed as actually true within the diegesis. The reader is invited, with Elmo, to disbelieve Ist; the novel then enacts her existence. Yet her existence does not resolve into the simple realism of fantasy: Ist's manifestations remain compatible with naturalistic explanations (wind, epilepsy, mirage, possession-as-trance) until the climax forces commitment. Hunter holds the ambiguity longer than most fantasy writers would, and the ambiguity itself becomes thematic.

The cosmology is, additionally, deeply scribal. The decisive feature distinguishing Ist's faction from the builders of the Eagle Mall is not power but literacy: the Eagle Mall builders abandoned Ist for "the religion of reason and the arts." The novel's spiritual conflict is therefore between an older, oral, embodied, cyclically returning divine femininity and a newer, written, geometric, generationally cumulative scholarly tradition. Gia's hundred-year mission, executed largely through silence, is to ensure that the written tradition prevails — and the ritual mechanism by which it prevails is itself an act of inscription: Elmo chiseling Gia's testament into the unmarked ninth aisle, while the name of Ist is effaced from the Southwest Aisle.

ANALYSIS

Decipherment as Narrative Engine

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Few contemporary novels make decipherment so central a structural device. Jabajaba's progress through the Eagle Mall's eight scripts is, in narrative terms, the equivalent of a detective's progress through a case. Hunter handles it with attention to the actual mechanics of the discipline: Jabajaba reasons from the recurrence of a particular sign — a dotted circle that appears in similar positions across all eight scripts — to the working hypothesis that this is the Rosetta-Stone-like comparative element. He proceeds by guess, retraction, and partial confirmation, in roughly the manner of a real philologist.

The breakthrough, when it comes, arrives from the most unliterate source imaginable. Elmo, who has refused his late teacher Lit's offers of instruction and considers reading a useless skill, casually informs Jabajaba that the dotted circle is the sun. He knows because his father once told him. The information is not the product of scholarly effort but of overheard domestic conversation — the residue of an oral tradition that Elmo himself dismisses. Hunter's irony is precise: the literate scholar, after weeks of toil, is unlocked by the oral child who does not value what he knows.

This decipherment plot operates as a metaphor at several levels. Most directly, it figures the novel's own act of self-revelation to its reader: like

Jabajaba, the reader works with partial signs, comparative texts (the Schula's songs, the storyteller Aeoui's legends, Ro's astronomical interpretations), and gradually assembles a coherent picture of a cosmology. More distantly, it figures the predicament of the Grateful Dead listener attempting to read the lyric corpus as a unified mythology — a project Hunter himself had alternately encouraged and disowned, but which he commits to fully here. Most distantly, it figures the recovery of any cultural inheritance under conditions of partial transmission: what survives is fragments in eight scripts, and the work of reading them is the work of remaining a culture at all.

The Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence

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Hunter, in correspondence reproduced in Jarnow's foreword, identified the unifying motif of the entire Terrapin cycle as "circularity and eternal recurrence of persons and situations." The novel makes this principle structural rather than ornamental. Characters double across generations: Ro and Lit are former students of Gia; Elmo and Lo, their respective children, are themselves doubled by Echo (who appears, at the climax, to be possessed by something of Lo's spirit and to speak in Gia's commanding tones and Isa's singing voice). The novel's late revelation — that Lit fathered Lo on Nicolene of Nikaba, not on his Terrapin wife, with the consequence that Lo and Jabajaba are related by blood through Gia's lineage — collapses the apparent separateness of the two plots into a single hereditary line. The Schula Isa sings songs taught to her by predecessors stretching back to the Beginning; Aeoui the storyteller carefully reproduces his grandfather's coughs along with his grandfather's words, since the persons of the past survive only so long as their utterances are repeated exactly.

Recurrence in The Giant's Harp is not the cheerful Buddhist circularity sometimes attributed to the song "Terrapin Station." It is closer to Nietzsche's eternal return: a doctrine experienced as both consolation (the dead live in our retelling) and burden (Lit's adultery, Ro's loveless marriage, Eliot's cruelty are all repetitions of older patterns the characters

cannot escape). Gia's testament identifies these very patterns as "the machinations of the Fair One" — Ist's principal weapon being not direct violence but the exploitation of repetitions that destroy felicity across generations. Defeating Ist therefore requires, paradoxically, interrupting recurrence: effacing her name from the monument, and substituting Gia's testament in its place. The novel's resolution is the substitution of one form of repetition (oral curse) for another (written record).

ANALYSIS

Character Analysis

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Hunter's principal characters are constructed less as psychological individuals than as inheritors of vocations.

Ro is the astronomer-as-skeptic, whose long-suffering rationalism is constantly tested by his own observations. His vertigo while watching his son near the cliff edge is treated by the narrator as a symptom of overprotective parenthood, but it functions equally as a symptom of his cosmological position: he is the man who has looked too long through telescopes and is "sometimes felt in danger of tumbling into the sky." Ro's defining gesture in the novel — his quiet annual additions to the astronomical inscriptions on the Giant's Harp — establishes him as a member of the writing tradition the Eagle Mall represents, even though he conceals this membership from his neighbors. He is, in miniature, the figure the novel valorizes: a literate person who maintains a working public illiteracy.

Elmo is constructed as the resistant heir. He is uninterested in his father's calculations, refuses Lit's literacy lessons, and dismisses scholarship as something that produces nothing but "a trade and something to pass the time." His defining instrument is the whistle — the most directly oral, most directly resonant musical instrument in the novel, whose sound the Giant's Harp itself harmonizes. The trajectory of his arc

is the conversion of the oral son into the literate scribe: by the epilogue, he has voluntarily exchanged his whistle for the chisel and is asking to be told what the words he is engraving actually mean. Hunter has, by this conversion, dramatized his own ambivalence — the lyricist who spent decades writing for an oral medium, then turned in middle age to producing a written novel that no oral performance could contain.

Jabajaba is the foreigner-scholar, conceived in a register of dry comedy that Hunter does not deploy elsewhere in the book. His arrival scene with Aeoui — a rapid-fire exchange about how far it is to the next oasis, how deep the Crack in the World, how much sand there is in the Desert of Bones — establishes him as a comic intellectual, a figure of high competence and low judgment. By the epilogue, he has married Echo, inherited Gia's library and her cats, and returned with both to Nikaba. He is the only character whose arc is unambiguously upward.

Lo is the most painful figure in the novel. Her chapters under Eliot's roof are written with a clinical attention to the psychology of confined abuse — the matted hair, the practiced stillness, the surreptitious window-gazing, the suppressed whimpering — that is unusual in a novel otherwise pitched in mythic register. Hunter handles this material soberly. Lo is rescued, eventually, but the rescue is not psychological; she is rescued by absorption into the figure of Echo, who carries her qualities forward after Ist's manifestation. The novel's treatment of Lo embodies the very doctrine of recurrence it elsewhere theorizes: persons survive into other persons.

Gia, the apparent old woman of Terrapin, is the novel's structural keystone. The epilogue's revelation — that she was the centuries-ago Head Scribe of Nikaba, daughter of the Earl of Sax, the first woman admitted to the College, whose love affair with a young Mitran monk produced the child whose lineage would eventually descend through Lit and Nicolene to Jabajaba — recasts everything that has come before.

Hunter has, throughout the body of the novel, been telling a story whose true protagonist appears only in posthumous documents. This is one of the boldest structural decisions in the book and is the device by which the novel achieves the depth of the legendarium it has attempted to construct.

Form: Prose as a Container for Verse

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The Giant's Harp is hybrid in form. Its prose is interrupted at regular intervals by ballads, riddle songs, and the long, formal verse interludes sung by the Schula Isa. Hunter establishes early that these are not authorial intrusions but real cultural objects within the world: songs the Schulas have always sung, ballads the storyteller Aeoui delivers from a tradition older than memory. The "Lady With a Fan" verses of the song "Terrapin Station" are themselves, in the world of the novel, an example of this oral tradition — the Storyteller delivering one of the canonical ballads to a rapt crowd.

The decision to embed verse in prose has a precedent in the very mythopoeic tradition Hunter is working within (Tolkien, Dunsany, William Morris), but Hunter's deployment is distinctive in two respects. First, his verses are technically musical: written with awareness of meter, refrain, and the kind of melodic shape that would actually permit setting. Second, his verses are diegetically musical: the Giant's Harp itself supplies the missing pentatonic notes when Elmo plays whistle on the upper terraces, an effect that is at once a description of a real acoustic phenomenon (large stone colonnades do produce sympathetic resonance) and a metaphor for the entire novel's formal procedure. Prose supplies the melody; the inherited tradition supplies the harmonics.

The closing song of the novel, framed as an invocation in the Schula's voice but signed in Hunter's own dedication to Garcia, makes the formal hybrid explicit. The book ends not with prose but with a song the prose has been laboring to make audible.

Intertextuality with the Grateful Dead Corpus

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A serious reading of The Giant's Harp cannot avoid the question of its relation to Hunter's lyric output, but the relationship is less straightforward than it might appear. The novel is not an exegesis of "Terrapin Station." It contradicts the song at several points (there is, for instance, no train and no station in the novel; the canonical Lady With a Fan, Soldier, and Sailor of the song appear only as references to a ballad already part of the world's oral tradition). What the novel is is the only place in which the deeper substructure of the abandoned 1968–69 "Eagle Mall Suite" — a song cycle Hunter pitched to the Dead and Garcia rejected — is fully articulated.

The "Eagle Mall Suite" survives in lyric form in Hunter's 1990 collection A Box of Rain and in scattered live recordings from his 1980 Jack O' Roses solo tour. Its central conceit — a stone library whose inhabitants speak forgotten languages, "brick by brick the wall evolves" — is the seed from which The Giant's Harp grew. The novel can therefore be read as the prose realization of a project Hunter had been carrying since 1968, briefly attempted as a Grateful Dead suite, briefly attempted as a solo extension of "Terrapin Station" (the Jack O' Roses tracks "Ivory Wheels/Rosewood Track" and "Jack O' Roses"), and finally completed

only as a novel after the partnership with Garcia had effectively ended.

Read in this light, the novel's compositional dates of 1984–1996 acquire additional significance. The book is the long form of a project that the song form proved unable to contain. Garcia's celebrated rebuke to Hunter — that the Dead were a dance band and Hunter should write something with a beat — is the inciting condition of the novel's existence. The Giant's Harp is what Hunter wrote when no one was asking him to write a beat.

Conclusion

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The Giant's Harp is best understood as a serious work of mythopoesis whose unusual publishing history has obscured its literary ambition. It is more carefully constructed than its reputation as a curiosity of Grateful Dead studies would suggest, and its central concerns — the conflict between oral and literate cultures, the labor of decipherment, the inheritance of vocations across generations, the substitution of written record for oral curse — are pursued with rigor across a long structure. Its failures are real: the abuse plot involving Lo is more harrowing than the rest of the novel's mythic register can entirely accommodate, and the late-arriving revelations about Gia's lineage, while structurally elegant, ask more of the reader's retroactive credulity than some readers will be willing to extend.

But the book accomplishes what it sets out to do. It builds a coherent cosmos. It articulates a doctrine of recurrence that is neither sentimental nor nihilistic. It dramatizes, with unusual self-awareness, the conversion of an oral artist into a written one. And in its closing dedication to Garcia, it makes explicit what its entire form has been quietly enacting: that the songs of a partnership now ended could, if their author labored long enough, be inscribed into something that would outlast them. Elmo at the end of the novel is not a bad image of Hunter at the end of his collaboration. The whistle is set down. The chisel is in hand. The work,

by definition, is for those whose great-grandfathers are not yet born.

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Giant’s Harp

A novel by Robert Hunter