A Preview of

A STRANGER IN OLONDRIA

Being the Complete Memoirs

of the Mystic, Jevick of Tyom

a novel by

SOFIA SAMATAR

"Sofia Samatar is a merchant of wonders, and her *A Stranger in Olondria* is a bookshop of dreams."
—Greer Gilman

"*A Stranger in Olondria* reminds both Samatar's characters and her readers of the way stories make us long for far-away, even imaginary, places and how they also bring us home again."
—Karen Joy Fowler

"Gorgeous writing, beautiful and sensual and so precise—a Proustian ghost story."
—Paul Witcover

"A story of ghosts and books, treachery and mystery, ingeniously conceived and beautifully written."
—Jeffrey Ford

Jevick, the pepper merchant's son, has been raised on stories of Olondria, a distant land where books are as common as they are rare in his home—but which his mother calls the Ghost Country. When his father dies and Jevick takes his place on the yearly selling trip to Olondria, Jevick's life is as close to perfect as he can imagine. Just as he revels in Olondria's Rabelaisian Feast of Birds, he is pulled drastically off course and becomes haunted by the ghost of an illiterate young girl.

In desperation, Jevick seeks the aid of Olondrian priests and quickly becomes a pawn in the struggle between the empire's two most powerful cults. Even as the country simmers on the cusp of war, he must face his ghost and learn her story before he has any chance of freeing himself by setting her free: an ordeal that challenges his understanding of art and life, home and exile, and the limits of that most seductive of necromancies, reading.

A Stranger in Olondria was written while the author taught in South Sudan. It is a rich and heady brew which pulls the reader in deeper and still deeper with twists and turns that hearken back to the Gormenghast novels while being as immersive as George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones.*

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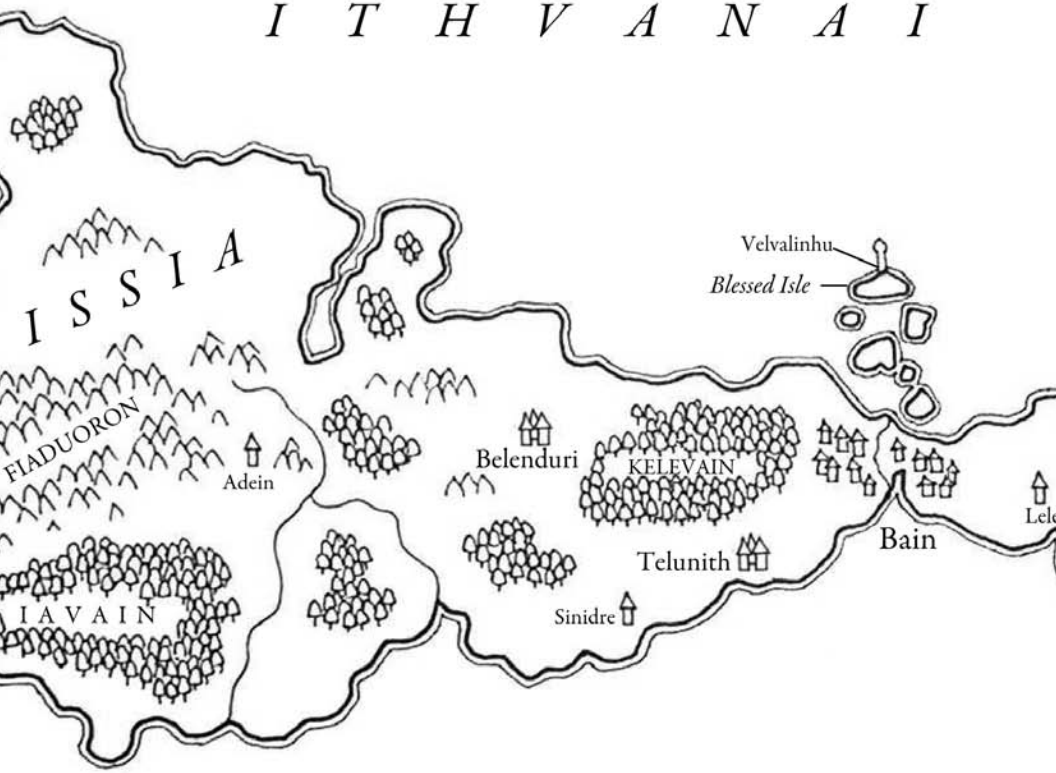
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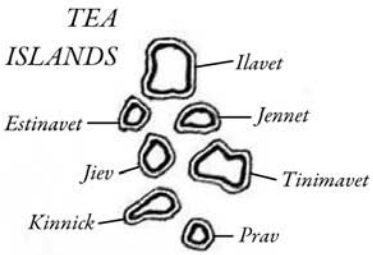
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The EMPIRE *of* OLONDRIA

with NISSIA *&* *the* TEA ISLANDS

For Keith

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Book One: The Wind of Miracles

Chapter One: Childhood in Tyom

As I was a stranger in Olondria, I knew nothing of the splendor of its coasts, nor of Bain, the Harbor City, whose lights and colors spill into the ocean like a cataract of roses. I did not know the vastness of the spice markets of Bain, where the merchants are delirious with scents, I had never seen the morning mists adrift above the surface of the green Illoun, of which the poets sing; I had never seen a woman with gems in her hair, nor observed the copper glinting of the domes, nor stood upon the melancholy beaches of the south while the wind brought in the sadness from the sea. Deep within the Fayaleith, the Country of the Wines, the clarity of light can stop the heart: it is the light the local people call "the breath of angels" and is said to cure heartsickness and bad lungs. Beyond this is the Balinfeil, where, in the winter months, the people wear caps of white squirrel fur, and in the summer months the goddess Love is said to walk, and the earth is carpeted with almond blossom. But of all this I knew nothing. I knew only of the island where my mother oiled her hair in the glow of a rush candle, and terrified me with stories of the Ghost with No Liver, whose sandals slap when he walks because he has his feet on backwards.

My name is Jevick. I come from the blue and hazy village of Tyom, on the western side of Tinimavet in the Tea Islands. From Tyom, high on the cliffs, one can sometimes see the green coast of Jiev, if the sky is very clear; but when it rains, and all the light is drowned in heavy clouds, it is the loneliest village in the world. It is a three-day journey to Pitot, the nearest village, riding on one of the donkeys of the islands, and to travel to the port of Dinivolim in the north requires at least a fortnight in the draining heat. In Tyom, in an open court, stands my father's house, a lofty building made of yellow stone, with a great arched entryway adorned with hanging plants, a flat roof, and nine shuttered rooms. And nearby, outside the village, in a valley drenched with rain, where the brown donkeys weep with exhaustion, where the flowers melt away and are lost in the heat, my father had his spacious pepper farm.

This farm was the source of my father's wealth and enabled him

to keep the stately house, to maintain his position on the village council and carry a staff decorated with red dye. The pepper bushes, voluptuous and green under the haze, spoke of riches with their moist and pungent breath; my father used to rub the dried corns between his fingers, to give his fingertips the smell of gold. But if he was wealthy in some respects, he was poor in others: there were only two children in our house, and the years after my birth passed without hope of another, a misfortune generally blamed on the god of elephants. My mother said the elephant-god was jealous, and resented our father's splendid house and fertile lands; but I knew that it was whispered in the village that my father had sold his unborn children to the god. I had seen people passing the house nudge one another and say, "He paid seven babies for that palace"; and sometimes our laborers sang a vicious work-song: "*Here the earth is full of little bones*." Whatever the reason, my father's first wife had never conceived at all, while the second wife, my mother, bore only two children: my elder brother Jom, and myself. Because the first wife had no child, it was she whom we always addressed as Mother, or else with the term of respect, *eti-donvati*, "My Father's Wife"; it was she who accompanied us to festivals, prim and disdainful, her hair in two black coils above her ears. Our real mother lived in our room with us, and my father and his wife called her "Nursemaid," and we children called her simply by the name she had borne from girlhood: Kiavet, which means Needle. She was round-faced and lovely, and wore no shoes. Her hair hung loose down her back. At night she told us stories while she oiled her hair and tickled us with a gull's feather.

Our father's wife reserved for herself the duty of inspecting us before we were sent to our father each morning. She had merciless fingers, and pried into our ears and mouths in her search for imperfections; she pulled the drawstrings of our trousers cruelly tight and slicked our hair down with her saliva. Her long face wore an expression of controlled rage, her body had an air of defeat, she was bitter out of habit, and her spittle in our hair smelled sour, like the bottom of the cistern. I only saw her look happy once: when it became clear that Jom, my meek, smiling elder brother, would never be a man, but would spend his life among the orange trees, imitating the finches.

My earliest memories of the meetings with my father come from the troubled time of this discovery. Released from the proddings of the rancorous first wife, Jom and I would walk into the fragrant courtyard, hand in hand and wearing our identical light trousers, our identical short vests with blue embroidery. The courtyard was cool, crowded with plants

in clay pots and shaded by trees. Water stood in a trough by the wall to draw the songbirds. My father sat in a cane chair with his legs stretched out before him, his bare heels turned up like a pair of moons.

We knelt. "Good morning father whom we love with all our hearts, your devoted children greet you," I mumbled.

"And all our hearts, and all our hearts, and all our hearts," said Jom, fumbling with the drawstring on his trousers.

My father was silent. We heard the swift flutter of a bird alighting somewhere in the shade trees. Then he said in his bland, heavy voice: "Elder son, your greeting is not correct."

"And we love him," Jom said uncertainly. He had knotted one end of the drawstring about his finger. There rose from him, as always, an odor of sleep, greasy hair and ancient urine.

My father sighed. His chair groaned under him as he leaned forward. He blessed us by touching the tops of our heads, which meant that we could stand and look at him. "Younger son," he said quietly, "what day is today? And which prayers will be repeated after sundown?"

"It is Tavit, and the prayers are the prayers of maize-meal, passion fruit and the new moon."

My father admonished me not to speak so quickly, or people would think I was dishonest; but I saw that he was pleased, and felt a swelling of relief in my heart, for my brother and myself. He went on to question me on a variety of subjects: the winds, the attributes of the gods, simple arithmetic, the peoples of the islands, and the delicate art of pepper-growing. I stood tall, threw my shoulders back and strove to answer promptly, tempering my nervous desire to blurt my words, imitating the slow enunciation of my father, his stern air of a great landowner. He did not ask my brother any questions. Jom stood unnoticed, scuffing his sandals on the flagstones—only sometimes, if there happened to be doves in the courtyard, he would say very softly: "Oo-ooh." At length my father blessed us again, and we escaped, hand in hand, into the back rooms of the house; and I carried in my mind the image of my father's narrow eyes, shrewd, cynical and filled with sadness.

At first, when he saw that Jom could not answer his questions and could not even greet him properly, my father responded with the studied and ponderous rage of a bull-elephant. He threatened my brother, and, when threats failed to cure his stubborn incompetence, had him flogged behind the house on a patch of sandy ground by two dull-eyed workers from the pepper fields. During the flogging I stayed in our darkened bedroom, sitting on my mother's lap, while she pressed her hands over

my ears to shut out my brother's loud, uncomprehending screams. I pictured him rolling on the ground, throwing up his arms to protect his dusty head, while the blows of the stout sticks descended on him and my father watched blankly from his chair… Afterward Jom was given back to us, bruised and bloodied, with wide staring eyes, and my mother went to and fro with poultices for him, tears running freely down her cheeks. "It is a mistake," she sobbed. "It is clear that he is a child of the wild pig." Her face in the candlelight was warped and gleaming with tears, her movements distracted. That night she did not tell me stories, but sat on the edge of my bed and gripped my shoulder, explaining in hushed and passionate tones that the wild pig-god was Jom's father; that the souls of the children of that god were more beautiful, more tender than ordinary souls, and that our duty on earth was to care for them with the humility we showed the sacred beasts. "But your father will kill him," she said, looking into the darkness with desolate eyes. "There is flint in his bowels, he has no religion. He is a Tyomish barbarian."

My mother was from Pitot, where the women wore anklets of shell and plucked their eyebrows, and her strong religious views were seen in Tyom as ignorant Pitoti superstition. My father's wife laughed at her because she burned dried fenugreek in little clay bowls, a thing which, my father's wife said with contempt, we had not done in Tyom for a hundred years. And she laughed at me too, when I told her one morning at breakfast, in a fit of temper, that Jom was the son of the wild pig-god and possessed an untarnished soul: "He may have the soul of a pig," she said, "but that doesn't mean he's not an idiot." This piece of blasphemy, and the lines around her mouth, proved that she was in a good humor. She remained in this mood, her movements energetic and her nostrils clenched slightly with mirth, as long as my father sought for a means to cure Jom of his extraordinary soul. When the doctors came up from the south, with their terrible eyes and long hats of monkey-skin, she served them hot date-juice in bright glazed cups herself, smiling down at the ground. But the dreadful ministrations of the doctors, which left my brother blistered, drugged and weeping in his sleep, did not affect his luminescent soul, and only put a shade of terror in his gentle pig's eyes. A medicinal stench filled the house and my bed was moved out into another room; from dusk until dawn I could hear the low moaning of my brother, punctuated with shrieks. In the evenings my mother knelt praying in the little room where the family *janut*, in whose power only she truly believed, stood in a row on an old-fashioned altar.

The *jut* is an external soul. I had never liked the look of mine: it had

a vast forehead, claw-feet and a twist of dried hemp around its neck. The other *janut* were similar. Jom's, I recall, wore a little coat of red leather. The room where they lived, little more than a closet, smelled of burnt herbs and mold. Like most children I had at one period been frightened of the *janut*, for it was said that if your *jut* spoke to you your death was not far off, but the casual attitudes of Tyom had seeped into me and diluted my fear, and I no longer ran past the altar room with held breath and a pounding heart. Still a strange chill came over me when I glanced in and saw my mother's bare feet in the gloom, her body in shadow, kneeling, praying. I knew that she prayed for Jom, and perhaps stroked the little figure in the red jacket, soothing her son from the outside.

At last those unhappy days ended in victory for my brother's soul. The doctors went away, and took their ghastly odor with them; my father's wife reverted to her usual bitterness, and my bed was moved back into my room. The only difference now was that Jom no longer sat in the schoolroom and listened to our tutor, but wandered in the courtyard underneath the orange trees, exchanging pleasantries with the birds.

After this my father took a profound and anxious interest in me, his only son in this world; for there was no longer any doubt that I would be his sole heir, and continue his trade with Olondria.

Once a year, when the pepper harvest was gathered and dried and stored in great, coarse sacks, my father, with his steward Sten and a company of servants, made a journey to Olondria and the spice markets of Bain. On the night before they left we would gather in the courtyard to pray for the success of their venture, and to ask my father's god, the black-and-white monkey, to protect them in that far and foreign land. My mother was very much affected by these prayers, for she called Olondria the Ghost Country, and only restrained herself from weeping out of fear that her tears would cause the ship to go down. Early the next day, after breakfasting as usual on a chicken baked with honey and fruit, my father would bless us and walk slowly, leaning on his staff, into the blue mists of the dawn. The family and house-servants followed him outside to see him off from the gateway of the house, where he mounted his fat mule with its saddle of white leather, aided by the dark and silent Sten. My father, with Sten on foot leading the mule, formed the head of an impressive caravan: a team of servants followed him, bearing wooden litters piled high with sacks of pepper on their shoulders, and behind them marched a company of stout field hands armed with short knives, bows, and poisoned arrows. Behind these a young boy led a pair of donkeys laden with provisions and my father's tent, and last of all a third donkey bore a sack

of wooden blocks on which my father would record his transactions. My father's bright clothes, wide-brimmed hat and straw umbrella remained visible for a long time, as the caravan made its way between the houses shaded by mango trees and descended solemnly into the valley. My father never turned to look back at us, never moved, only swayed very gently on the mule. He glided through the morning with the grace of a whale: impassive, imponderable.

When he returned we would strew the courtyard with the island's most festive flowers, the *tediet* blossoms which crackle underfoot like sparks, giving off a tart odor of limes. The house was filled with visitors, and the old men sat in the courtyard at night, wrapped in thin blankets against the damp air and drinking coconut liquor. My father's first wife wept in the kitchen, overseeing the servants, my mother wore her hair twisted up on top of her head and fastened with pins, and my father, proud and formidably rich after four months in a strange land, drank with such greed that the servants had to carry him into his bedroom. At these times his mood was expansive, he pulled my ears and called me "brown monkey," he sat up all night by the brazier regaling the old men with tales of the north; he laughed with abandon, throwing his head back, the tears squeezing from his eyes, and one evening I saw him kiss the back of my mother's neck in the courtyard. And of course, he was laden with gifts: saddles and leather boots for the old men, silks and perfumes for his wives, and marvelous toys for Jom and me. There were musical boxes and painted wooden birds that could hop on the ground, and were worked by turning a bit of brass which protruded from under their wings; there were beautiful toy animals and toy ships astonishing in their detail, equipped with lifelike rigging and oars and cunning miniature sailors. He even brought us a finely painted set of *omi*, or "Hands," the complex and ancient card game of the Olondrian aristocracy, which neither he nor we had any notion of how to play, though we loved the painted cards: the Gaunt Horse, the Tower of Brass. In the evenings I crept to sit behind a certain potted orchid in the hall which led from the east wing of the house into the courtyard, listening to my father's tales, more wonderful than gifts, of terraced gardens, opium, and the barefoot girls of the pleasure-houses.

One night he found me there. He walked past me, shuffling heavily, and the moonlight from the garden allowed him to spot my hiding place. He grunted, paused and reached down to pull me upright. "Ah—Father—" I gasped, wincing.

"What are you doing there?" he demanded. "What? Speak!"

"I was—I thought—"

"Yes, the gods hate me. They've given me two backward sons." The slap he dealt me was soft; it was terror that made me flinch.

"I was only listening. I wanted to hear you. To hear about Olondria. I'll go to bed now. I'm sorry. I wanted to hear what you were saying."

"To hear what I was saying."

"Yes."

He nodded slowly, his hands on his hips, the dome of his head shifting against the moonlight in the yard. His face was in darkness, his breathing forced and deliberate as if he were fighting. Each exhalation, fiery with liquor, made my eyes water.

"I'll go to bed," I whispered.

"No. No. You wanted to hear. Very good. The farm is your birthright. You must hear of Olondria. You must learn."

Relief shot through me; my knees trembled.

"Yes," he went on, musing. "You must hear. But first, younger son, you must taste."

My muscles, newly relaxed, tensed again with alarm. "Taste?"

"Taste." He gripped my shirt at the shoulder and thrust me before him through the hall. "Taste the truth," he muttered, stumbling. "Taste it. No, outside. Into the garden. That way. Yes. Here you will learn."

The garden was bright. Moonlight bounced from every leaf. There was no light in the kitchen: all the servants had gone to bed. Only Sten would be awake, and he would be on the other side of the house, seated discreetly in an alcove off the courtyard. There he could see when the old men wanted something, but he could not hear me cry, and if he did he would let me be when he saw I was with my father. A shove in my back sent me sprawling among the tomato plants. My father bent over me, enveloping me in his shadow. "Who are you?"

"Jevick of Tyom."

A burst of cackling rose to the sky from the other side of the house: one of the old men had made a joke.

"Good," said my father. He crouched low, swaying so that I feared he would fall on me. Then he brought his hand to my lips. "Taste. Eat."

Something was smeared on my mouth. A flavor of bitterness, suffocation. It was earth. I jerked back, shaking my head, and he grasped the back of my neck. His fingers tough and insistent between my teeth. "Oh, no. You will eat. This is your life. This earth. This country. Tyom."

I struggled, but at last swallowed, weeping and gagging. All the time he went on speaking in a low growl. "You hide, you crawl, to hear of

Olondria. A country of ghosts and devils. For this you spy on your father, your blood. Now you will taste your own land, know it. Who are you?"

"Jevick of Tyom."

"Don't spit. Who are you?"

"Jevick of Tyom!"

A light shone out behind him; someone called to him from the house. He stood, and I shielded my eyes from the light with my hand. One of the old men stood in the doorway holding a lantern on a chain.

"What's the matter?" he called out in a cracked and drunken voice.

"Nothing. The boy couldn't sleep," my father answered, hauling me up by the elbow.

"Nightmares."

"Yes. He's all right now."

He patted my shoulder, tousled my hair. Shadows moved over us, clouds across the moon.

Chapter Two: Master Lunre

My father's actions were largely incomprehensible to me, guided by his own secret and labyrinthine calculations. He dwelt in another world, a world of intrigue, bargains, contracts and clandestine purchases of land all over the island. He was in many ways a world in himself, whole as a sphere. No doubt his decisions were perfectly logical in his own eyes—even the one that prompted him, a patriotic islander, to bring me a tutor from Bain: Master Lunre, an Olondrian.

The day began as it usually did when my father was expected home from his travels, the house festooned with flowers and stocked with coconut liquor. We stood by the gate, washed and perfumed and arrayed in our brightest clothes, my mother twisting her hands in her skirt, my father's wife with red eyes. Jom, grown taller and broad in the shoulders, moaned gently to himself, while I stood nervously rubbing the heel of one sandal on the flagstones. We scanned the deep blue valley for the first sign of the company, but before we saw them we heard the children shouting: "A yellow man!"

A yellow man! We glanced at one another in confusion. My mother bit her lower lip; Jom gave a groan of alarm. At first I thought the children meant my father, whose golden skin, the color of the night-monkey's pelt, was a rarity in the islands; but certainly the children of Tyom were familiar with my father, and would never have greeted a council-member with such ill-mannered yells. Then I remembered the only "yellow man" I had ever seen, an Olondrian wizard and doctor who had visited Tyom in my childhood, who wore two pieces of glass on his eyes, attached to his ears with wires, and roamed the hills of Tinimavet, cutting bits off the trees. I have since learned that that doctor wrote a well-received treatise, *On the Medicinal Properties of the Juice of the Young Coconut*, and died a respected man in his native city of Deinivel; but at the time I felt certain he had returned with his sack of tree-cuttings.

"There they are," said Pavit, the head house-servant, in a strained voice. And there they were: a chain of riders weaving among the trees. My father's plaited umbrella appeared, his still, imposing figure, and beside him another man, tall and lean, astride an island mule. The hectic screams of the children preceded the company into the village, so that they advanced like a festival, drawing people out of their houses. As they approached I saw that my father's face was shining with pride, and his

bearing had in it a new hauteur, like that of the old island kings. The man who rode beside him, looking uncomfortable with his long legs, kept his gaze lowered and fixed between the ears of his plodding mule. He was not yellow, but very pale brown, the color of raw cashews; he had silver hair, worn cropped close to the skull so that it resembled a cap. He was not the leaf-collecting doctor, but an altogether strange man, with silver eyebrows in his smooth face and long fine-knuckled hands. As he dismounted in front of the house I heard my mother whispering: "Protect us, God with the Black-and-White Tail, from that which is not of this earth."

My father dismounted from his mule and strutted toward us, grinning. I thought I caught an odor off him, of fish, sea-sickness and sweat. We knelt and stared down at the bald ground, murmuring ritual greetings, until he touched the tops of our heads with the palm of his fleshy hand. Then we stood, unable to keep from staring at the stranger, who faced us awkwardly, half-smiling, taller than any man there.

"Look at the yellow man!" the children cried. "He is like a frilled lizard!"—and indeed, with his narrow trousers and high ruffled collar, he resembled that creature. My father turned to him and, with an exaggerated nonchalance, spoke a few foreign words which seemed to slip back and forth in his mouth, which I later learned were a gross distortion of the northern tongue, but which, at the time, filled me with awe and the stirrings of filial pride. The stranger answered him with a slight bow and a stream of mellifluous speech, provoking my mother to kiss the tips of her fingers to turn aside evil. Then my father pointed at me with a gesture of obvious pride, and the stranger turned his piercing, curious, kindly gaze on me. His eyes were a mineral green, the color of seas where shipwrecks occur, the color of unripe melons, the color of lichen, the color of glass.

"*Av maro*," said my father, pointing to me and then to himself.

The Olondrian put one hand on his heart and made me a deep bow.

"Bow to him," said my father. I copied the stranger ungracefully, provoking hilarious shrieks from the children who stood around us in the street. My father nodded, satisfied, and spoke to the stranger again, gesturing for him to enter the cool of the house. We followed them into the courtyard where the stranger sat in a cane chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his expression genial and bemused.

He brought new air to our house: he brought the Tetchi, the Wind of Miracles. At night the brazier lit up his face as he sat in the humid courtyard. He sat with the old men, speaking to them in his tongue like a thousand fountains, casting fantastic shadows with his long and liquid hands. My father translated the old men's questions: Was the stranger a

wizard? Would he be gathering bark and leaves? Could he summon his *jut*? There were shouts of laughter, the old men grinning and showing the stumps of their teeth, pressing the stranger to drink our potent home-made liquor and smoke our tobacco. He obliged them as well as he could, though the coconut liquor made him grimace and the harsh tobacco, rolled in a leaf, sent him into a fit of coughing. This pleased the old men enormously, but my father came to his rescue, explaining that allowances must be made for the northerner's narrow ribcage. In those days we did not know if our guest were not a sort of invalid: he vastly preferred our hot date-juice to the liquor the old men loved; he ate only fruit for breakfast and turned very pale at the sight of pig-stomach; he rose from his afternoon sleep with a haggard look, and drank far too much water. Yet his presence brought an air of excitement that filled the house like light, an air that smelled of festivals, perfume and *tediet* blossoms, and drew in an endless stream of curious, eager visitors, offering gifts to the stranger: yams baked in sugar, mussels in oil.

My father swelled like a gourd: he was bursting with self-importance, the only one who was able to understand the illustrious stranger. "Our guest is tired," he would announce in a grave, dramatic tone, causing his family and visitors to retreat humbly from the courtyard. His lips wore a constant, jovial smirk, he spoke loudly in the street, he was moved to the highest circle of council and carried a staff with hawk-feathers; and most wonderful of all, he seemed to have lost the capacity for anger, and ignored annoyances which formerly would have caused him to stamp like a buffalo. The servants caught his mood: they made jokes and grinned at their tasks, and allowed Jom to pilfer peanuts and honeycombs from the back of the kitchen. Even my father's wife was charmed by the northerner's gift of raisins: she waited on him with her smile drawn tight, an Olondrian scarf in her hair.

My mother was most resistant to the festival air in the house. On the night of the stranger's arrival she burned a bowl of dried herbs in her room: I recognized, by their acrid smoke, the leaves that ward off leopard-ghosts. They were followed by pungent fumes against bats, leprosy and falling sickness, as well as those which are said to rid human dwellings of long-toed spirits. Her face as she moved about the house was exhausted and filled with suffering, and her body was listless because of her nightly vigils by the clay bowls. My father's wife, strutting anxiously about in her Bainish pearl earrings, lamented that my mother would shame us all with her superstition, but I think she secretly feared that the stranger was in fact some sort of ghost, and that my mother would drive him away, and

with him our family's new status. "Talk to your nursemaid," she begged me. "She is making a fool of your father. Look at her! She has a ten-o'-clock face, like somebody at a funeral." I did try to speak to her, but she only looked at me mournfully, and asked me if I was wearing a strip of charmed leather under my vest. I tried to defend the stranger as nothing more than a man, though a foreigner; but she fixed me with such a dark, steady look that my words died out in the air.

The Olondrian tried, in his clumsy way, to set my mother at ease, knowing that she was the wife of his host—but his efforts invariably failed. She avoided his shadow, kissed her fingers whenever she heard him speak, and refused his raisins, saying in horror: "They look like monkey turds!" Once, in the courtyard, I saw him approach her, at which she hurriedly knelt, as we all did in the first days, being unfamiliar with his customs. I had already seen that the northerner was disturbed by this island tradition, so I hid myself in the doorway to see how he would address my mother. He had learned to touch the servants on their heads to make them rise, but seemed reluctant to do the same with my patiently kneeling mother; and indeed, as I now know, to his perplexed Olondrian mind, my mother was in an exalted position as a lady of the house. A sad comedy ensued: the northerner bowed with his hand on his heart, but my mother did not see him, as she was staring down at the ground. Evidently he wished to ask for something, but knowing nothing of our language, he had no means of making himself understood but through gestures and facial expressions. He cleared his throat and mimed the action of drinking with his long hands, but my mother, still looking down at the ground, did not see, and remained motionless. At this the Olondrian bent his long body double and mimed again, trying to catch her eye, which was fixed studiously on the flagstones. Seeing my mother's acute distress, I emerged at this point from the doorway. My mother made her escape, and I brought our guest a clay beaker of water.

It was proof of the stranger's tenacious spirit that, through his friendship with Jom, he convinced my mother that he was, if not of this earth, at least benevolent. In those early days it was Jom, with his plaintive voice of a twilight bird, with his small eyes of a young beast, who was at home in the stranger's company. Jom was my mother's child: he wore strips of leather under his clothes, iron charms on his wrists and a small bag of sesame seeds at his waist, and she had so filled his clothes and hair with the odor of burning herbs that we thought our guest would be blown back into the sea if he went near my brother. Yet Jom was excited by the stranger and sought every chance to speak to him—of all of us, only

he did not know that our guest could not understand. And the stranger always met him with a smile of genuine pleasure, clasping his hand as Olondrians do with their equals and intimates. In the green bower of the shade trees with their near-transparent blue flowers, the two spoke a language of grunt and gesture and the eloquent arching of eyebrows. Jom taught the northerner his first words in the Kideti tongue, which were "tree," "orange," "macaw," "finch" and "starling." My brother was fascinated by the stranger's long graceful hands, his gold and silver rings, his earrings set with veined blue stones, and also, as we all were, by the melodies of his speech and his crocodile eyes: another of Lunre's early words was "green." One afternoon Lunre brought a wooden whistle from his room, brightly painted, with three small pipes like the flutes of western Estinavet. On these he could play the calling notes of the songbirds of the north: music which speaks of vineyards, olive trees, and sacred rivers. At the strange music my brother wept and asked, "Where are the birds?" The stranger did not answer him, but seemed to understand: his smooth brown face was sorrowful, and he put the whistle away, brushing the leaves with his fingertips in a gesture of despair.

I do not know when my mother first joined them under the flowering trees. She must have begun by watching to see that no harm came to her son; sometimes I saw her pause, a tall pitcher balanced on her hip, staring into the trees with alarm in her lovely eyes of a black deer. Bird-sounds came from the shadows, the Olondrian's low chuckle, the sound of my brother's voice saying patiently: "No, that one is blue." Somehow my mother entered the trees, perhaps to protect her son—and somehow the Olondrian's humble expression and sad eyes softened her heart. In those days she began to say: "May good luck find that unfortunate ghost! He sweats too much, and those trousers of his must keep his blood from flowing." She no longer knelt when she met him, but smiled and nodded at his low bow, and one morning pointed firmly to her chest and said: "Kiavet."

"Lunre," the stranger said eagerly, tapping his own narrow chest.

"Lun-le," my mother repeated. Her sweet smile flickered, a feather on the wind. Soon after this she presented him, shyly, yet with a secret pride, with a vest and a pair of trousers she had sewn for his lanky body. They were very fine, the trousers flowing and patterned with rose and gold, the vest embroidered in blue with the bold designs of both Tyom and Pitot. The stranger was deeply moved and stood for some time with his hand on his heart, his silver head bowed, thanking her earnestly in the language of raindrops. My father's wife did not fail to sneer at my mother's kind-

ness to her "ghost," but my mother only smiled and said serenely: "The Tetchi is blowing."

When the miracle wind had blown for a month my father dismissed my old tutor, a dotard with hairy ears who had taught me mathematics, religion and history. The Olondrian, he explained to me as I sat before him one morning, was to take the old man's place, tutoring me in the northern tongue. His eyescontracted with pleasure as he spoke, and he waved the stump of his narrow cigar and patted his ample stomach. "My son," he said, "what good fortune is yours! Someday, when you own the farm, you will feel at ease in Bain, and will never be cheated in the spice markets! Yes, I want you to have a Bainish gentleman's education—the tall one will teach you to speak Olondrian, and to read in books."

The word for "book" in all the known languages of the earth is *vallon*, "chamber of words," the Olondrian name for that tool of enchantment and art. I had no idea of its meaning, but thanked my father in a low voice, as he smoked his cigar with a flourish and grunted to show that he had heard me. I was both excited and frightened to think of studying with the stranger, for I was shy around him and found his green gaze disconcerting. I could not see how he would teach me, since we shared no common language—but I joined him dutifully in the schoolroom that opened onto the back garden.

He began by taking me by the wrist and leading me around the room, pointing to things and naming them, signing that I should repeat. When I had learned the names of all the objects in the schoolroom, he took me into the kitchen garden and named the vegetables. If there were plants he did not know he pointed and raised his gull-gray eyebrows, which meant that he wished to learn the Kideti word. He carried with him always a leather satchel of very fine make, in which he kept another leather object, dyed peacock-blue; when he opened it sheets of rich cotton paper spread out like a fan, some of them marked with minute patterns which he had made himself. The satchel had a narrow pocket sewn to an outside edge, fastened shut with a metal clasp and set with bits of turquoise, and in this my new master kept two or three miraculous ink-pens, filled only once a day, with which he made marks in his *vallon*. Whenever I told him a word in our language he took out his blue leather book, wrote something in it rapidly and thanked me with a bow. I was puzzled, for though I admired the book as more cunning than our wooden blocks, I could not understand why he wished to keep track of the number of words he had learned.

At last one morning he brought a wooden box with him into the

schoolroom, a splendid receptacle covered with patterns in gilt, paint and mother-of-pearl. Orange flowers danced on its dark blue lid, and in a cloud of golden stars a pair of ivory hands floated, the hands of spirits. I knew that the box had come from my master's heavy, ornate sea-chest, with which my father's servants had toiled through the damp forests of the island, in which he was said to keep the awful trappings of a magician, as well as the bones of his wife, her skull as flawless as a bride's. He set the box on the round, flat stone that served us as a table. I knelt on my mat with my elbows on the stone, cupping my chin in my hands. My master preferred to sit on a stool, hunkering over the table, his legs splayed out, his crooked knees rising above the level of the stone. He did so now, then removed his satchel and set it on the table, and drew from it a slim book bound in red leather.

"For you," he said in Olondrian, sliding the little book toward me.

I felt a rush of excitement and a tightness in my throat. I took up the book and tried to put my gratitude into my eyes, while my master grinned and cracked his spider's knuckles, a habit he had when pleased.

The schoolroom was already warm. The long light came in through the garden archway and the voices of the servants reached us from the kitchen next door. I turned the little book tenderly in my hands, fingering the spine, and at last, with a sharp intake of breath, I opened it. It was empty.

I touched the blank paper and looked at my master reproachfully. He chuckled and squeezed his knuckles, apparently charmed by my disappointment. I knew enough of his speech to ask at last: "What is it, Tchavi?"—addressing him, as I always did, with the Kideti word for "Master."

He held up a finger, signaling for me to wait and pay attention. He opened the book before me at the first page and smoothed the paper. Then he unlatched the ornate box, revealing a neat shelf suspended inside the lid, flecked with diamonds of yellow paint. Humming cheerfully to himself, he removed several small clay jars, each with a tiny cork in it, and a little red cut-glass bottle. His fingers hovered over the shelf for a moment before selecting an engraved silver pen from an ivory case. Swiftly, with fluid, dexterous movements, he unstoppered one of the jars, releasing the dark odor of rust and aloes. He added a few drops from the glass bottle, which made the room smell of pollen, and stirred the resultant brew with a slender reed. The reed came out very black, and he rested it in a shallow dish. Then he filled the pen from the jar by turning its tip. He wiped its nib on a silken cloth much stained by streaks of ink; then

he leaned toward me, bent over my book, and wrote five intricate signs.

I understood now that my master meant to teach me the Olondrian numbers, and how to record accounts, as he did, in neat, small rows in a book. I leaned forward eagerly, imagining how it would please my father when he saw his son writing numbers on paper just like a Bainish gentleman. I had my own secret misgivings, for though the book was easy to carry, much more so than the blocks on which we wrote with a piece of hot iron, it seemed to me that the pages could be easily ruined by seawater, that the ink could smear, and that this was a flimsy way of keeping records. Nevertheless the strange signs, fluted like seashells, captivated me so that my master laughed with pleasure and patted my shoulder. I moved my finger slowly under the row of graceful figures, memorizing the foreign shapes of the numbers one through five.

"Shevick," my master said.

I glanced at him expectantly at the sound of his familiar mispronunciation of my name.

"Shevick," he said again, pointing down at the signs on the page.

I said to him proudly, in his own tongue: "One, two, three, four, five."

He shook his head. "Shevick, Shevick," he said, tapping the paper. I frowned and shrugged, saying, "Forgive me, Tchavi, I don't understand."

My master put up his hands, palms outward, and pushed gently at the air, showing that he was not angry. Then he bent forward patiently. "*Sh*," he said, pointing with his pen at the first sign on the page; then he moved the pen to the second sign and said distinctly: "*Eh*." But only when he had described all the signs several times, repeating my name, did I understand with a shock that I was in the presence of sorcery: that the signs were not numbers at all, but could speak, like the single-stringed Tyomish harp, which can mimic the human voice and is called "the sister of the wind."

My back and shoulders were cold, though a hot, heavy air came in from the garden. I stared at my master, who looked back at me with his wise and crystalline eyes. "Do not be afraid," he said. He smiled, but his face looked thin and sad. In the garden I heard the sound of the Tetchi disrobing herself in the leaves.

Chapter Three: Doorways

"A book," says Vandos of Ur-Amakir, "is a fortress, a place of weeping, the key to a desert, a river that has no bridge, a garden of spears." Fanlewas the Wise, the great theologian of Avalei, writes that Kuidva, the God of Words, is "a taskmaster with a lead whip." Tala of Yenith is said to have kept her books in an iron chest that could not be opened in her presence, else she would lie on the floor, shrieking. She wrote: "Within the pages there are fires, which can rise up, singe the hair, and make the eyelids sting." Ravhathos called the life of the poet "the fair and fatal road, of which even the dust and stones are dear to my heart," and cautioned that those who spend long hours engaged in reading or writing should not be spoken to for seven hours afterward. "For they have gone into the Pit, into which they descend on Slopes of Fire, but when they rise they climb on a Ladder of Stone." Hothra of Ur-Brome said that his books were "dearer than father or mother," a sentiment echoed by thousands of other Olondrians through the ages, such as Elathuid the Voyager, who explored the Nissian coast, and wrote: "I sat down in the wilderness with my books, and wept for joy." And the mystic Leiya Tevorova, that brave and unfathomable soul, years before she met her tragic death by water, wrote: "When they put me into the Cold, above the white Lake, in the Loathsome Tower, and when Winter came with its cruel, hard, fierce, dark, sharp and horrible Spirit, my only solace was in my Books, wherein I walked like a Child, or shone in the Dark like a Moth which has its back to a sparkling Fire."

In my room, in my village, I shone like a moth with its back to a sparkling fire. Master Lunre had taught me his sorcery: I embraced it and swooned in its arms. The drudgery of the schoolroom, the endless copying of letters, the conjugation of verbs—"*ayein, kayein, bayeinan, bayeinun*"—all of this led me at last through a curtain of flame into a world which was a new way of speaking and thinking, a new way of moving, a means of escape. Master Lunre's massive sea-chest did not hold the bones of a murdered wife, but a series of living wives with which he lay down voluptuously, caressing the hair of each one in turn: his books, some written by hand and some from the printing press, that unearthly invention of the wizards of Asarma. I soon understood why, when I went in to call him for the evening meal, my master could always be found stretched out on his pallet in the same position: his head on his hand, his bare

chest gleaming, a thin sheet over his hips, his earrings glinting, his spirit absorbed in the mists of an open book. I too, soon after I read my first book, Nardien's *Tales for the Tender*, succumbed to the magical voices that called to me from their houses of vellum. It was a great wonder to me to come so close to these foreign spirits, to see with the eyes and hear with the ears of those I had never known, to communicate with the dead, to feel that I knew them intimately, and that they knew me more completely than any person I knew in the flesh. I confess that I fell quite hopelessly in love with Tala of Yenith, who was already an old woman when the printing press was invented. When she heard of it, she is said to have danced in ecstasy, crying out, "They have created it! They have created it!" until she fell down in a dead faint. Her biographer writes: "When she rose she began her rapturous dance again, shouting 'They have created it!' until her strength was wholly exhausted. She continued like this, beyond the control of the people of her House, who feared to subdue her with force, for seven days, whereupon she died…"

The books of my master's sea-chest were histories, lyrics and romances, as well as a few religious texts and minor philosophical works. In their pages I entered, for the first time, the tree-lined streets of Bain, and walked in the Garden of Plums beside the city's green canal. I fought with the rebel Keliadhu against Thul the Heretic, and watched the sky fill with dragons, unfurling fires like cloth-of-gold. I hunted mushrooms in the Fanlevain and fleet wild deer on the plains, and sailed down the swift Ilbalin through the most radiant orchards on earth; I stood in a court in Velvalinhu, the dwelling-place of the kings, and watched a new Telkan kneel to receive the high crown of black and white silk. My dreams were filled with battles, haunted woods and heroic voyages, and the Drevedi, the Olondrian vampires whose wings are like indigo. Each evening I lay on my pallet, reading by the light of an oil lamp, a tear-shaped bowl made of rust-colored clay—a gift from Master Lunre.

My master's gifts to me were those whose value cannot be reckoned. The education he gave me was erratic, shaped by his own great loves; it was not the traditional education of wealthy Olondrians, which consists of the Three Noble Arts of riding, music and calligraphy. It was more like the education of novices dedicated to Kuidva, yet still it deviated, rejecting some classics for more obscure texts: I knew almost nothing of Telidar's seminal *Lectures on Poetry*, but had read many times a small volume entitled *On the Nine Textures of Light*. Thus, while my father imagined that I was becoming a Bainish gentleman, I was in fact ignorant of almost all that such gentlemen know. I had only seen horses in pictures, I could not

play the flute or guitar, my handwriting was neat but uninspired, and I knew only five classic writers. What I knew, what I learned, was the map of a heart, of the longings of Lunre of Bain: I walked in the forests of his desire and bathed in the sea of his dreams. For years I walked up and down the vales of his heart, of his self-imposed exile, familiar with all he loved, looking out of his eyes, those windows of agate.

He was as reticent as a crab. Or, he was reserved about certain subjects: there were things of which, in the course of nine years, I could never persuade him to speak. One of these was his former trade, the one he had followed in Bain: he would never say what he had been—a tutor, a printer, a merchant, a thief? My boy's mind dreamed up fierce romances for him, but he would not be baited, and only laughed when I said he had been a sorcerer or a pirate. When I asked him why he had left he quoted Leiya Tevorova: "I was spoken to by a God, and I found myself unworthy of Him."

His face, neither old nor young, grew dark as an islander's with the sun, and his brows and close-cropped hair were bleached like sand. With his gangly limbs, in his island clothes, he resembled a festival clown, but he had too sad an air to be truly comical. He grew to love our valleys and forests and spent many hours outdoors, roaming the slopes with a staff of teak-wood or exploring the cliffs by the sea. He would come home with completely ordinary flowers or shells and force me to look at them while he praised their inimitable loveliness. "Look at that!" he would say, elated. "Is it not finer than art? Is it not like a woman's ear? Its curves are like notes of music. . ." On subjects such as the beauties of nature, books, and the colors of light, he spoke with an unrestrained passion which often drove me to groan with exhaustion. He spoke to my mother as well: he studied our language doggedly, until he could praise the trees and the play of light and shade in the courtyard. When my mother explained how the shadows echoed the pelt of my father's god, he rubbed his hands with delight and jotted some notes in his private book. "Let me tell you," he said to me once, resting a hand on my shoulder, after drinking a glass of our liquor, to which his tastes had become accustomed: "Let me tell you about old men. Our appetites grow like vines—like the hectic plants of the desert, which bear only flowers, and have no leaves. You have never seen a desert. Have you not read Firdred of Bain? 'The earth has a thousand thirsty tongues.' That is what old age is like."

He never seemed old to me, though he certainly had a great appetite—for sights, for the sounds of birds, for the smell of the sea, for the words of our language. And sometimes, too, he would take to his bed,

his body wracked with fevers, with the stricken expression of one who has not long to live, and whose life is unfinished. I nursed him through his fevers, reading aloud from the *Vanathul* because he believed words had the power to cure all ills. I loved him as if we were partners in exile, for only with him could I speak of books, enjoying that conversation which Vandos calls "the food of the gods." And yet there was something unyielding in him, something unconquerable, an unknown center which he guarded with care, which was never revealed to me, so that, while I knew him best, he seemed to hold me at a distance. Even in his delirium he let fall no shining thread.

In the islands the old word *tchavi*, by which I always called my master, originally referred to a teacher of ancient and cryptic lore. The *tchanavi* were few, and their houses were built on mountains so that those who sought them could only reach them after prolonged struggle. They were strange, solitary, at home in forests, speakers of double-voiced words, men without *jut*, for they cast their *janut* to the sea, a symbolic death. Their disciples passed down laments in the form of sighing island chants, bemoaning the dark impenetrability of the *tchanavi*'s wisdom: a Kideti proverb says, "Ask a *tchavi* to fill your basket, and he will take it away." They were difficult spirits, and made men weep. Yet the greater part of their pupils' laments do not mourn the enigma of wisdom, but rather the failure of the disciples to find their masters at all: for the *tchanavi* were known to melt away into the forests, into the mists, so that those who had made hard journeys discovered only the mountain and silence. These songs, the "Chants of Abandonment," are sung at festivals, and express the desperate love and grief of the followers of the *tchanavi*. "*Blood of my heart, on the mountain there is no peace in the calling of doves/ My master has pressed a blossom into the mud with the sole of his foot*."

My people called Lunre "the yellow man" or "the stranger." Their stares in the village hurt me, the old men's grins, the shouts of the children who followed us through the streets. Sometimes they even called him *hotun*—a soulless man, an outcast, a man without *jut*. I coaxed him away from them, away from the broad clean roads. He knew it, regarding me amused and compliant as I led him through knotted patches of jungle and onto the dangerous cliffs, through heavy forests where cold air rose from the earth, where I breathed raggedly, striking dead vines away from us with a stick. Leaves split under my weapon, spraying milk. When we broke through at last and emerged on the cliffs my vest was so wet the sea-wind chilled me.

About us the crags lay tumbled and white with guano, and beyond them a sea the color of spittle moved in regular heaves.

"How do you bear it?" I muttered.

Lunre stood calm in the midday glare, chewing a shred of ginger-root. "I am not sure what you mean."

"You know what I mean. This place."

"Ah. This place."

"You've been to Bain, to the great library. You're Olondrian. You've been everywhere."

"Everywhere! Indeed not."

"Other places."

"Yes." He shrugged, looking out to sea. The breeze was growing cooler and fat clouds blocked the sky. In places the sun shone through them, silver, making them glow like the bellies of dead fish. Every day, I thought, every afternoon, this rain.

Lunre slapped my back, chuckling. "Don't be so gloomy. Look!" He darted back to the edge of the forest and plucked a bell-fruit from the undergrowth. "Look around you!" he went on, returning to wave it under my nose, dispersing a sickening odor of hair-oil and liquor.

I batted his hand away. He laughed as if it were a game, but at once regained his usual pensive look, his hair standing up in the wind. The sky turned the color of dust while in my mind there were porcelain tiles, medallions embossed with the seals of Olondrian clans, monuments of white chalk. I longed for wide streets loud with the rumble of carriage wheels, for crowded markets, bridges, libraries, gardens, pleasure-houses, for all that I had read of but never seen, for the land of books, for Lunre's country, for somewhere else, somewhere beyond. Thunder broke in the distance and the afternoon darkened around us. Lunre spat out his scrap of ginger-root and it whirled on the wind. We hurried home beneath the shrieks of agitated birds, arriving as the storm fell like an avalanche of mud.

At home the archways were full of sound. In the hall I looked at Lunre, barely able to see him in the rain-dark air. He lifted one pale hand and spoke.

"What?"

"I'm going to read," he repeated, louder.

"Me too," I lied, and watched him melt away in the south wing.

When he had disappeared I went to the stone archway that gave on the courtyard. A low gleam pierced the storm from a window on the opposite side: my father was in the room where he kept his accounts.

I dashed across the courtyard, soaked in seconds, and pounded on the locked door.

A click, then a juddering sound as the bolt slid back. Sten, my father's steward and shadow, opened the door and stepped aside to let me in. I rubbed my hand over my face, throwing off water, and blinked in the dull radiance of the little brazier at my father's feet.

He was not alone. Two elderly men from the village sat with him beside the brazier, men of high rank with bright cloaks on their shoulders. Their beaky faces turned to me in surprise. My father sat arrested, an iron rod in his hand, its tip aglow. A servant knelt before him holding a sturdy block of teak wood; similar blocks were stacked beside him ready for use. Behind the little group, silent and ghostly, arranged in rows as high as the ceiling, were other blocks, my father's records.

I threw myself on my knees on the sandy floor. "Forgive me, Father!"

There was a pause, and then his expressionless voice: "Younger son."

I raised my eyes. He had not touched my head, but he was too far to reach me, the brazier and the kneeling servant between us. I scanned his face for anything I could recognize: anger, acceptance, disappointment. His eyes were slivers of black silk in the fat of his cheeks.

I waited. He lowered his iron rod to the brazier, turning it in the coals. "This is my son Jevick," he explained the old men. "You'll have forgotten him. He doesn't compete in games. I brought him a foreign tutor and now they spend all their time gossiping like a pair of old women."

One of the men laughed briefly, a rasp of phlegm.

"Father," I said, my arms taut at my sides, my fists clenched: "Take me with you when you go to Olondria."

He met my eyes. My heart raced in my throat. "Take me with you," I said with an effort. "I'll learn the business… It will be an education…"

"Education!" he smiled, looking down again at the rod he was heating. "Education, younger son, is your whole trouble. That Olondrian has educated you to burst in on your father in his private room and interrupt his business."

"I had to speak to you. I can't—" I stopped, unable to find the words. Rain roared down the roof, pounding the air into the ground.

"Can't what?" He lifted the rod, the tip a ruby of deep light, and squinted at it. "Can't speak to your age-mates? Can't find a peasant girl to play with? Can't run? Can't dance? Can't swim? Can't leave your room? What?" He turned, drawing the burning iron briskly across the block his servant held. Once, I remembered, he had slipped, searing the man's arm, leaving a brand for which he had paid with a pair of hens.

"I can't stay here."

"Can't stay here!" His harsh, flat laugh rang out, and the old men echoed him, for he had too much power ever to laugh alone. "Come now! Surely you hope and expect that your father will live for a few more years."

"May my father's life be as long as the shore which encircles the Isle of Abundance."

"Ah. You hear how he rushes his words," he remarked to his companions. "It has ever been his great failing, this impatience." He looked at me, allowing me to glimpse for the first time the depths of coldness in the twin pits of his eyes.

"You will stay," he said softly. "You will be grateful for what you are given. You will thank me."

"Thank you, Father," I whispered, desolate.

He tossed the hot iron aside and it fell with a thud. He leaned back, searching under his belt for a cigar, not looking at me. "Get out," he said.

I do not know if he was cruel. I know that he was powerful; I know that he loved power and could not endure defiance. I do not know why he brought me a tutor out of a foreign country, only to sneer at me, at my tutor, and at my loves. I do not know what it was that slept inside his cunning mind, that seldom woke to give his eyes, for a moment, a shade of sorrow; I do not know what it was that sprang at last at his heart and killed him, that struck him down in the paradise of the fields, in the wealth of pepper.

The morning was cool and bright. It was near the end of the rains and the wind called Kyon rode over us on his invisible serpent. The clustered leaves of the orange trees were heavy and glistened with moisture, and Jom stood under them, shaking the branches, his hair dusted with raindrops. His was the voice we heard, that voice, thick with excess saliva, calling out clumsily: "There is a donkey in the courtyard!" His was the voice that brought us running, already knowing the truth, that hoofed animals were not brought into houses except in cases of death. I arrived in the doorway to see my mother already collapsing, supported by servants, shrieking and struggling in their arms, whipping her head from side to side, her hair knotting over her face, filling the air with the animal cries which would not cease for seven days. In the center of the courtyard, under the pattern of light and shade, stood a donkey, held with ropes by two of my father's dusty field workers. The donkey's back was heaped with something: a tent, a great sack of yams, the carcass of an elephant

calf—the body of my father.

The body was lashed with ropes and lolled, dressed in its yellow trousers, the leather sandals on its feet decorated with small red beads; but the ceremonial staff, with its arrogant cockscomb of hawk-feathers, had been left behind in the fields, as none of the field workers could touch it. I brought that scepter home, resting its smooth length on my shoulder, climbing the hill toward Tyom as the wind came up with its breath of rain, followed by the fat white mule who had been my father's pride, whom the field workers had abandoned because a death had occurred on its back. When I reached the house I stepped through an archway into the ruins of the courtyard, where every shade tree had been cut down and every pot smashed on the stones. I stood for a moment holding the staff in my arms, in a haze of heat. From the back rooms of the house came the sound of rhythmic screaming.

That screaming filled my ears for seven days and seven nights, until it became a drone, like the lunatic shrilling of cicadas. The servants had gone to the village to fetch eleven professional mourners, ragged, loose-haired women who keened, whipping their heads back and forth. Their arrival relieved my mother who was hoarse and exhausted with mourning, having screamed unceasingly ever since she had seen my father's body. The mourners sat in the ravaged courtyard, five or six at a time, kneeling among the broken pots, the dirt, the remains of flowers, grieving wildly while, in our rooms, we dressed in our finest clothes, scented our hair, and decorated our faces with blue chalk.

Moments before we left for the funeral I passed my mother's room, and there was a *tchavi* there, an old man, sparse-haired, in a skin cloak flayed by storms. He was crouching by my mother where she lay face-down on her pallet and his thin brown hand was resting on her hair. I paused, startled, and heard him say: "There now, daughter. There, it's gone out now. Easy and cold, like a little snake." I hurried back down the passage, guilty and frightened as if by a sign. My mother appeared soon afterward, unrecognizable under the chalk. I could not tell if her grief was eased by his visit, for she was like a shape etched in stone. As for the *tchavi*, he left the house in secret, and I did not see him again.

The women keened, their voices mixed with the raucous notes of horns, as we walked through the village slowly, slowly, under the gathering clouds, we, my father's family, blue-stained, stiff as effigies, with our blank, expressionless faces and our vests encrusted with beads. We walked in the dusty streets, in the cacophony of mourning, followed by the servants bearing the huge corpse on a litter. Master Lunre was with us, in

his Olondrian costume, that which had caused the village children to call him a "frilled lizard." His face, unpainted, wore a pensive expression; he had not mourned, but only clasped my hand and said: "Now you have become mortal…"

He sat with us for the seven days in the valley, beside the ruined city, the city of Jajetanet, crumbling, cloaked in mists, where we set my father's body upon one of the ancient stones, and watched his flesh sag as it was pelted by the rain. "*Where shall I go to find the dawn?*" the hired singers chanted. "*He has not pricked his foot on a thorn, he leaves no trail of blood.*" My father's *jut* was beside him, pot-bellied like him, kept bright through years of my mother's devoted polishing, its feathers drooping.

Because of my father's high position the mourning was well-attended: most of the people of Tyom were there, and some had come from Pitot. The green and gentle slope which led down into the ruined city was covered with people sitting cross-legged on mats under broad umbrellas. Harried servants walked among them bearing platters of food, begging them not to refuse nourishment in the ritual phrases of mourning. The people turned their heads away, insisting, with varying degrees of vehemence, that they could not eat; but at last they all accepted. "May it pass from me," we said, swallowing coconut liquor, sucking the mussels from their shells, the oil dribbling down our chins.

Before us rose the ancient ruins of Jajetanet the Desired, that city so old that none could remember who it was that had desired it, that city of ghosts inhabited by the ashes of the dead, where damp mists crept along the walls and a brooding presence lingered. At night when the fires were lit and the mourning rose to a frenzied pitch, the women with their knotted hair imitating the throes of death, Jajetanet rose above us, massive, blocking out the stars, She, the soul of loss, who knew what it was to be forgotten. The mourners shrieked. My father's body lay on a block of stone, surrounded by lighted torches, in his gold trousers and beaded sandals. Did his hands still smell of pepper? I thought of him, inspecting the farm, while within his ribs his death was already waiting, coiled to spring.

All at once, through the shadows of drink, I realized that I had not wept, and recognized the strain in my heart as the secret elation of freedom. I saw, looking into the blur of fires in the night, how it would be, how I would descend like a starling into the country of guitars. I trembled with excitement as, on the block of crumbling stone, my father's *jut* was consumed by a burst of flame; I felt within me the moment when I would bid my mother good-bye and canter down into the drowning valley, riding toward the north. I had that moment within me, and many

other moments as well: the moment of touching my father's wife on the top of her head as she knelt, weeping and imploring me not to cast her out of the house; the solemn moment of taking snuff with the old men of the village; the moment when I would pack my satchel, moths about my lamp. My journey was already there, like a word waiting to be written. I saw the still, drenched forest and the port of Dinivolim. The ship, too, that would bear me away, arresting as a city, and beyond it, like light rising up from the sea, the transparent coast of the north.

The one thing I had not foreseen was that Lunre, my foreign master, would refuse the chance to return with me to the country of his birth. He shocked me when, with a small, hard smile, he shook his head and said: "Ah, Shev, that way is barred. 'I have cast my helmet into the sea' . . ."

"Ravhathos the Poet," I murmured numbly. "Retiring from the wars . . . secluding himself in a cottage made of mud, in the Kelevain. . ."

"You have been a fine student," Lunre said. I glanced up at him. He was shadowed, leaning, framed in the archway, the bright kitchen garden behind him. A touch of light caught one earring with its blue stone, a silver eyebrow, the steady green of an eye, a shade of expression: resigned, resolute.

"I am still your student," I said.

He laughed and made a light, uncertain gesture, opening one pallid palm in the glow that came in from the garden. "Perhaps," he said. "I have been a student of Vandos all my life; and I believe your *tchanavi* tended not to release their disciples."

His teeth flashed in a smile; but seeing my still, crestfallen look he added gently: "I will be here when you return."

I nodded, recognizing the secret iron at my master's core, the adamantine vein that never yielded to my touch. I narrowed my eyes, looking into the sun, my lip between my teeth. Then I asked: "Well—what can I bring you from Bain?"

"Ah!" He drew in a sharp breath. "Ah! For me? Don't bring me anything. . ."

"What?" I cried. "Nothing? No books? There were so many things you wanted!"

He smiled again, with difficulty: "There were so many things I *spoke* of—"

"Tchavi," I said. "You cannot refuse a gift, something from your homeland."

He looked away, but not before I saw his stricken expression, the anguish in his eyes, the look he wore in the grip of fever. "Nothing," he muttered at last. "Nothing, there's nothing I can think of—"

"It can't be, Tchavi, there must be something. Please, what can I bring you?"

He looked at me. He wore again his grim, despairing smile, and I saw in his eyes the sadness of this island of mist and flowers. And I thought I saw, as well, a tall man walking along a windy quay, and spitting the stone of an olive into the sea.

"The autumn," he said.

Book Two: The City of Bain

Chapter Four: At Sea

The ship *Ardonyi*—in Olondrian, "the one who comes out of the mists"—bore me northward along the coast of Jennet, the still hours punctuated by the sound of the captain's gong announcing meals of odorous fish stew clotted with bones. I stood at the front of the line with the other paying passengers while my steward Sten and our laborers waited behind, shifting their feet and snacking on the crescent-shaped rolls the sailors called "prisoners' ears," which were abandoned, rather than served, in a row of sacks. A great heat came from the galley next door, a rough voice singing, the clanging of metal, a creeping odor of rot and a reddish glow, while outside, on the smooth sea, which was both dark and pale in the moonlight, the Isle of Jennet floated by with its peaks of volcanic stone. We took no passengers from that tortured island of chasms and ash, where double-tongued salamanders breed among flowers shaped like pitchers, and where, according to island lore, there dwells Ineti-Kyan, the Devourer of Mouths, who runs up and down the black hills with his hair in the wind.

I had almost fought my way through the stew by the time Sten joined me with his own bowl. He set it down with the tips of his fingers, his nose creased in distaste. About us the walls vibrated with the movement of the ship, the old wood gleaming in the light of whale-oil lamps.

I nodded in greeting and spat a collection of bones into my hand. "Come," I laughed, "it's better than what we had at the inn."

"At the inn there was breadfruit," Sten replied, looking gloomily into his bowl.

"Breadfruit dulls the brain. Try this—there's eel today."

"Yes, Ekawi," he said. The title, uttered in a quiet, resigned and effortless tone, made me start: it was the way he had addressed my father. That title now was mine, along with the house, the forests, the pepper bushes, the whole monotonous landscape of my childhood. And it means nothing to me, I thought, crunchy spiny morsels of fish, my momentary unease absorbed in a rush of exultation. The sacks of pepper we've stuffed in the hold, the money we'll make, the farm—to me all this weighs less than the letter *fi* pronounced in the sailors' dialect…

They pronounced it *thi*; they whistled their words; they sang. They

hunched over other tables, tall rough men, their ruffled white shirts stained dark with sweat and tar. Some wore their hair cut short in the Bainish fashion, but others left it to fly out over their ears or knot itself down their backs. They raised their bowls to their bearded lips and threw them down again empty, and when they turned their heads their earrings flashed in the light. They were nothing like my master: they told coarse stories and wiped their mouths on their sleeves, and laughed when one of their fellows struggled against a bone in his throat. "The Quarter," I heard them say. "You drink with the bears. Gap-toothed Iloni, the smell in her house." In their speech ran the reed-sounds of Evmeni and the salty oaths of the Kalka; they used the Kideti words for certain fruits and coastal winds, and their slang throbbed with the sibilant hum of the tongue of the Kestenyi highlands. At last they rose, one after the other, spitting shells on the floor. As they passed our table I lowered my head to my dish, my heart racing, afraid they might notice me and yet longing to be one of them, even one of the galley slaves who wore their crimes tattooed underneath their eyes.

When I looked up Sten was watching me.

"What?"

He sighed. "It is nothing. Only—perhaps you would ask the cook if there is fennel."

"Fennel! What for?"

"Prayer," he replied, raising his spoon to his lips.

"Prayer."

"The Old Ekawi was accustomed to pray while at sea."

"My father prayed." I laughed, flicking my bowl away with a finger, and Sten's narrow shoulders rose and fell in a barely perceptible shrug. The light of the lamp shone on the implacable parting in his hair and the small white scar that interrupted one eyebrow.

I rested my elbows on the table, smiling to put him at ease. "And where will our prayers go?"

"Back to the islands. To the nostrils of the gods."

"My poor Sten. Do you really believe that a pinch of dried fennel burned in my cabin will keep the gods from crushing this ship if they choose?"

Again his shoulders moved slightly. He drew a slender bone from his mouth.

"Look," I argued. "The Kavim is blowing. It blows to the north, without turning! How can the smoke move backward?"

"The wind will change."

"But when? By that time our prayers will have disappeared, inhaled by the clouds and raining over Olondria!"

His eyes shifted nervously. He was not *hotun*, after all, not one of that unfortunate class who live without *jut*: he had *jut* at home, no doubt in one of the back rooms of his strong mud house, a humble figure of wood or clay, yet potent as my own. Naturally it would not do to bring *jut* northward to Olondria: to lose one's *jut* in the sea would be the greatest of calamities. Burnt fennel was said to make the gods favorable to keeping one's *jut* from harm; but it shocked me to think that my father had held any faith in such superstition. Sten, too: his iron features were softened by dejection. He looked so forlorn that I laughed in spite of myself.

"All right. I'll ask for fennel. But I won't say what I'm going to do with it. They'll think they've picked up a cargo of lunatics!"

I stood, took my satchel from the back of my chair and left him, swinging myself up the steep stairs to the deck. The wind tossed my hair as I emerged into the sunlight where the great masts stood like a forest of naked trees. I walked to the edge of the gleaming deck and leaned against the railing. As the wind was fair the rowers were all on deck, slaves and free men together, the slaves' tattoos glowing like blue ornaments against their flesh, their hands sporting rings of carefully worked tin. They crouched in the sails' shadow playing their interminable game of *londo*, a complex and addictive exercise of chance. The planks beneath them were chalked with signs where they cast small pieces of ivory, first touching them to their heads to honor Kuidva the god of oracles. Some went further: they prayed to Ithnesse the sea or to Mirhavli the Angel, protectress of ships, whose gold-flecked statue stood dreaming in the prow. The Angel was sad and severe, with real human hair and a wooden trough at her feet; as a prayer the sailors spat into the trough, calling it "the fresh-water offering." When a man ran off to perform this ritual, the soles of his bare feet flashing chalk-white, the others laughed and called merry insults after him.

I drew a book from my satchel and read: "*Now come, you armies of glass. Come from the bosom of salt, unleash your cries in the conch of the wind.*" All through that journey I read sea-poetry from the battered and precious copy of *Olondrian Lyrics* my master had sent with me. "*Come with your horses of night, with your white sea-leopards, your temple of waves/ now scatter upon the breast of the shore your banners of green fire.*" I read constantly, by sunlight that dazzled my eyes, by moonlight that strained them, growing drunk on the music of northern words and the sea's eternal distance, lonely and happy, longing for someone to whom I might divulge the thoughts of my heart, hoping

to witness the pale-eyed sea-folk driving their sheep. "For there is a world beneath the sea," writes Elathuid the Voyager, "peopled and filled with animals and birds like the one above. In it there are beautiful maidens who have long, transparent fins, and who drive their white sheep endlessly from one end of the sea to the other…" Firdred of Bain himself, that most strictly factual of authors, writes that in the Sea of Sound his ship was pursued by another; this ship was under the sea, gliding upon its other surface, so that Firdred saw only its dark underside: "Its sails were outside of this world." In Tinimavet there are countless tales of sea-ghouls, the ghosts of the drowned, and of magical fish and princesses from the kingdoms under the sea. I wondered if I would see any of them here, where the sea was wildest—if at night, suddenly, I would catch in the depths the glow of a ghostly torch. But I saw no such vision, except in my dreams when, thrilled and exhausted with poetry, I stood on deck and watched the glow-worm dances of the ghouls, or caught, afar off, the rising of a dreaded mountain: the great Whale which the sailors call "the thigh of the white giant."

Above me, on the upper deck, the island merchants sat: men of my own rank, though there were none as young as I. There they yawned through the salt afternoons under flapping leather awnings, drank liquor from teacups, predicted the winds and had their hair oiled by their servants. The Ilavetis, slowing sipping the thin rice-wine of their country, also had their fingers and toes dyed a deep reddish-brown; the smoky scent of the henna drifted away with the fog from their Bainish cigars, while one of them claimed that the odor of henna could make him weep with nostalgia. I despised them for this posturing, this sighing after their forests and national dishes mingled with boasts of their knowledge of the northern capital. None of them knew as much as I; none of them spoke Olondrian; their bovine heads were empty of an appreciation of the north. The Olondrian boy who knelt on a pillow each evening to sing for their pleasure might as well have sung to the sails or the empty night: the merchants would have been better pleased, I thought, with a dancing girl from southern Tinimavet, plastered with ochre and wearing mussel-shells in her hair.

The boy sang of women and gardens, the Brogyar wars, the hills of Tavroun. He knew cattle-songs from Kestenya and the rough fishing songs of the Kalka. The silver bells strung about his guitar rang gently as he played, and the music reached me where I sat beneath the curve of the upper deck. I sat alone and hidden, my arms clasped about my knees, under the slapping and rippling of the sails, in the wind and the dark.

Snatches of murmuring voices came to me from the deck above, where the merchants sat under lamps, their fingers curled around their cups. The light of the lamps shone dimly on the masts and rigging above; the lantern in the prow was a faint, far beacon in the darkness; all was strange, creaking and moving, filled with the ceaseless wind and the distant cries of the sailors paying their *londo* forfeits in the prow. The boy broke into his favorite air, his sweet voice piercing the night, singing a popular song whose refrain was: "*Bain, city of my heart.*" I sat enchanted, far from my gods, adrift in the boat of spices, in the sigh of the South, in the net of the wheeling stars, in the country of dolphins.

Halfway through the voyage a calm descended. The galley-slaves rowed, chanting hoarsely, under a sky the color of turmeric. The *Ardonyi* unrolled herself like a sleepy dragon over the burnished sea and sweat crept down my neck as I stood in my usual place on deck. The pages of my book were limp with heat, the letters danced before my eyes, and I read each line over and over, too dull to make sense of the words. I raised my head and yawned. At that moment a movement caught my eye, an object beetle-black and gleaming in the sun.

It was a woman's braided hair. She was climbing up from below-decks. I closed my book, startled by the strangeness of the image: a woman, an island woman with her hair plaited into neat rows on the crown of her head, aboard an Olondrian vessel bound for the city of Bain! She struggled, for she grasped a cotton pallet under her arm which made it difficult for her to climb the ladder. Before I could offer to help, she shoved the pallet onto the deck and climbed out after it, squinting in the light.

At once she knelt on the deck, peering anxiously into the hole. "Jissi," she said. "You hold him. Jissi, hold him." I detected the accent of southern Tinimavet in her speech, blurred consonants, the intonation of the poor.

Slowly, jerkily, an elderly man emerged from below, carrying a young girl on his back. The girl's head lolled; her dry hair hung down in two red streams; her bare feet dangled, silent bells. She clung to the old man's neck with a dogged weariness as he staggered across the boards of the deck toward the shadow of an awning.

Several sailors had paused in their duties to stare at the strange trio. One of them whistled. "*Brei!*" he said. *Red.*

I turned my back slightly and opened my *Lyrics* again, pretending to read while the woman dragged the pallet into the shade and unrolled it.

The girl, so slight, yet straining the arms of the others like a great fish, was set down on it, the end of the pallet folded to prop up her head. Her thin voice reached me over the deck: "There's wind. But there aren't any birds."

"We're too far from the land for birds, my love," the older woman said.

"I know that," said the girl in a scornful tone. Her companion was silent; the old man, servant or decrepit uncle, shuffled off toward the ladder.

Ignorant of my destiny and theirs I felt only pity for them, mingled with fascination—for the girl was afflicted with *kyitna*. The unnatural color of her hair, lurid against her dark skin, made me sure of her malady, though I had never observed its advanced stages. She was *kyitna*: she had that slow, cruel, incurable wasting disease, that inherited taint which is said to affect the families of poisoners, which is spoken of with dread in the islands as "that which ruins the hair," or, because of the bizarre color it gives, as "the pelt of the orangutan." Not long ago—in my grandfather's time—the families of victims of *kyitna*, together with all of their livestock and land, were consumed by ritual fires, and even now one could find, in the mountains and wild places of the islands, whole families living in exile and destitution, guarding their sick. Once, when I was a child, a strange man came to the gate of the house, at midday when the servants were sleeping, and beat at the gate with a stick; he was grimy and ragged and stank of fear, and when I went out to him he rasped through his unkempt beard: "Bring me water and I'll pray for you." I ran back inside and, too terrified to return to him by myself, woke my mother and told her that someone was outside asking for water. "Who is it?" she asked sleepily. "What's the matter with you?" I was young, and, unable to name my fear, said: "It is a baboon-man." My mother laughed, rose, rumpled my hair and called me a dormouse, and went to the cistern to fill a clay pitcher with water for the strange man. I kept close to her skirts, comforted by her smell of dark rooms and sleep, her hair pressed into her cheek by the pillow, her gentle voice as she teased me. I felt braver with her until, just outside the courtyard, she started and gasped, kissing her fingertips swiftly, almost upsetting the pitcher of water. The man clung to the gatepost, looking at us with a desperate boldness. His smile was a grimace, and had in it a kind of horrible irony. "Good day to you, sister!" he said. "That water will earn you the prayers of the dying." My mother gripped the clay pitcher and hissed at me: "Stay there! Don't move!" Then she took a deep breath, strode toward the man, handed him the pitcher,

turned on her heel without speaking, walked back to the house and pulled me inside. "You see!" I cried, excited to see my fear confirmed in hers: "I told you it was a baboon-man! He stank, and his teeth were too big." But my mother said sadly, gazing out through the stone archway: "No, he was not… he was one of the *kyitna* people who are living on Snail Mountain."

The thought of any kind of people living on Snail Mountain, where the earth breathed sulfurous exhalations and even the dew was poisonous, shocked and terrified me. How did they live? What did they eat? What water did they drink? But my mother said it was bad luck to think of it. Later the empty pitcher was found standing beside the gate, and my mother had the servants break it in pieces and bury it in the back garden. And some days after that we heard that a party of men from Tyom, armed with torches and spears, had driven the *kyitna* people away: "They had a small child with them," whispered the women in the fruit-market: "Its hair was red, they could see it in the torchlight—as red as this palm-nut!" I wished, at the time, that I had been able to see the *kyitna* child. Now I studied the girl who lay motionless in the shade of the awning, who took up so little space, who seemed without substance, a trick of the light, who flickered under the flapping shade like the shadow cast by a fire.

She was not as young as I had thought her at first, she was not a child, though from a distance she appeared to be so—she was small even for an islander. But her waist, showing between her short vest and the top of her drawstring trousers, was gently curved, and the look in her face was too remote for that of a child. She seemed to be wandering, open-eyed; her skin was dark, rich as silt; the crook of her elbow, dusky in the shade, was a dream of rivers. She wore a bracelet of jade beads which showed she belonged to the far south, to the rice-growers and eel-fishers, the people of the lagoons.

I think she had spoken to me twice before I realized it. She struggled to raise her voice, calling: "Brother! You'll get sun-sick." Then I met her gaze, her tired, faintly mocking smile, and smiled back at her. The older woman, no doubt her mother, hushed her in a whisper.

"It's all right," said the girl. "Look at him! He wouldn't harm anyone. And he isn't superstitious. He has the long face of a fish."

I strolled toward them and greeted the mother, whose eyes darted from my gaze. She had the flat, long-suffering face of a field-laborer and a scar on her forehead. The young girl looked at me from inside the fiery cloud of her hair, her lips still crooked in a smile. "Sit down, brother," she said.

I thanked her and sat in the chair beside her pallet, across from her

mother, who still knelt stroking the girl's long hair and would not meet my eye. "The fish," said the young girl, speaking carefully, her breathing shallow, "is for wisdom. Isn't that right? The fish is the wisest of the creatures. Now, most of our merchants here are shaped just like the domestic duck—except for the fat Ilaveti—the worst of all, he looks like a raven…" She paused, closing her eyes for a moment, then opened them again, and fixed me with a look of such clarity that I was startled. "Ducks are foolish," she said, "and ravens are clever, but have bad hearts. That is why we came up here now, at noon, when they're asleep."

I smiled. "You seem to have had ample time to study all of us. And yet this is the first time that I have seen you come out of your cabin."

"Tipyav," she answered, "my mother's servant, tells me everything. I trust him absolutely. He has slow thoughts, but a very keen eye. My father—but I am talking too much— you will think me poorly behaved—"

"No," I said. But she lay very still and silent, struggling for breath.

"Sir," said her mother in a low voice, looking at me at last, so that I saw, surprised, that she had the deep eyes of a beautiful woman: "My daughter is gravely ill. She is—she has not been well for some time. She has come here for air, and for rest, and this talking taxes her so—"

"Stop," the young girl whispered. She looked at me with a trembling smile. "You will forgive us. We are not accustomed to much company."

"It is I who should ask forgiveness," I said. "I am intruding on you—on your rest."

"Not at all," said the girl, in a manner peculiarly grave and formal. "Not at all. You are a very rare thing: a wise man from the islands. Tell me—have you been to this northern ghost-country before?"

I shook my head. "This is my first visit. But I do speak the language."

"You speak their language? Olondrian?"

"I had an Olondrian tutor."

I was gratified by the older woman's look of awe; the girl regarded me silently with an expression I could not read.

"We have heard that one can hire interpreters," her mother said.

"I am sure one can," I answered, though I was not sure of it at all. The woman looked relieved and smoothed her dark dress over her knees, moving her hand down to scratch discreetly at her ankle. Poor creatures, I thought, wondering how they would fare in the northern capital. The woman, I noticed, was missing the two smallest fingers of her right hand.

The girl spoke up abruptly. "As for us," she said in a strange, harsh tone, "we are traveling to a place of healing, as you might have guessed. It is called A-lei-lin, and lies in the mountains. But really…" She paused,

twisting the cloth of her pallet. "Really… It's foolish of us…"

"No, not foolish," her mother interrupted. "We believe that we will find healing there. It is a holy place. The temple of a foreign goddess. And perhaps the gods of the north—in the north there are many wonders, son, many miracles, you will have heard of them yourself…"

"It is certainly said to be, and I believe it is, a place of magic, full of great wizards," I said. "These wizards, for example, have devised a map of the stars, cast in brass, with which they can measure the distance of stars from the earth. They write not only in numbers, but words, so that they may converse across time and space, and one of their devices can make innumerable replicas of books—such as this one."

I held out the slim *Olondrian Lyrics* bound in dark green leather. The women looked at it, but seemed loath to touch it.

"Is that—a *vallon*?" the girl asked, stumbling slightly over the word.

"It is. In it there are written many poems in the northern tongue."

The girl's mother gazed at me, and I guessed that the worn look in her face came not from hard labor, but from an unrelenting sorrow. "Are you a wizard, my son?"

I laughed. "No, no! I am only a student of northern letters. There's no wizardry in reading."

"Of course not!" snapped the girl, startling me with her vehemence. Her small face blazed, a lamp newly opened. "Why must you?" she hissed at her mother. "Why? Why? Could you not be silent? Can you never be silent even for the space of an hour?"

The woman blinked rapidly and looked away.

"Perhaps—" I said, half rising from my chair.

"Oh no. Don't *you* go," said the girl, a wild note in her voice. "I've offended you. Forgive me! My mother and I—we are too much alone. Tell me," she went on without a pause, "how do you find the open sea? Does it not feel like freedom?"

"Yes, I suppose—"

"Beautiful and fearsome at the same time. My father, before he stopped talking, said that the open sea was like fever. He called it 'the fever of health'—does that not seem to you very apt? The fever of health. He said that he always felt twice as alive at sea."

"Was your father a merchant?"

"Why do you say that—was? He isn't dead."

"I am sorry," I said.

"He is not dead. He is only very quiet."

I glanced at her mother, who kept her head lowered.

"Why are you smiling?" asked the girl.

My conciliatory half-smile evaporated. "I'm not smiling."

"Good."

Such aggression in a motionless body, a nearly expressionless face. Her small chin jutted, her eyes bored into mine. She had no peasant timidity, no deference. I cast about for something to say, uneasy as if I had stepped on some animal in the dark.

"You spoke as if he was dead," I said at last.

"You should have asked."

"I was led astray by your choice of words," I retorted, beginning to feel exasperated.

"Words are breath."

"No," I said, leaning forward, the back of my shirt plastered to my skin with sweat. "No. You're wrong. Words are everything. They can be everything."

"Is that Olondrian philosophy?"

Her sneer, her audacity, took my breath away. It was as if she had sat up and struck me in the face. For an instant my father's image flared in my memory like a beacon: an iron rod in his hand, its tip a bead of fire.

"Perhaps. Perhaps it is," I managed at last. "Our philosophies differ. In Olondria words are more than breath. They live forever, *here*."

I held out the book, gripping its spine. "*Here* they live. Olondrian words. In this book there are poems by people who lived a thousand years ago! Memory can't do that—it can save a few poems for a few generations, but not forever. Not like this."

"Then read me one," she said.

"What?"

"Jissi," her mother murmured.

"Read me one," the girl insisted, maintaining her black and warlike stare. "Read me what you carry in the *vallon*."

"You won't understand it."

"I don't want to understand it," she said. "Why should I?"

The book fell open at the *Night Lyric* of Karanis of Loi. The sun had moved so that my knees were no longer in shadow, the page a sheet of blistering light where black specks strayed like ash. My irritation faded as I read the melancholy lines.

Alas, tonight the tide has gone out too far.
It goes too far,
it stretches away, it lingers,

now it has slipped beyond the horizon.

Alas, the wind goes carrying
summer tempests of mountain lilies.
It spills them, and only the stars remain:
the Bee, the Hammer, the Harp.

"Thank you," said the girl.

She closed her eyes.

Her mother took her hand and chafed it. "Jissi? I'm going to call Tipyav."

The girl said nothing. The woman gave me a fearful, embarrassed glance, then stumped across the deck and called down the ladder.

"Brother." The young girl's eyes were open.

"Yes," I answered, my anger cooled by pity. She is going to die, I thought.

A puff of air forced itself from her lungs, a laugh. "Well—never mind," she murmured, closing her eyes again. "It doesn't matter."

Her mother returned with the servant. I stood aside as the old man knelt and the woman helped the girl to cling to his curved back. The old man rose with a groan and staggered forward, his burden swaying, and the woman rolled up the pallet, avoiding my eye… I pulled my chair further into the shade of the awning and opened my book, but when they reached the ladder the girl called back to me: "Brother!"

I stood. Her hair was vibrant in the sun.

"Your name."

"Jevick of Tyom."

"Jissavet," said the dying girl, "of Kiem."

In my twenty-ninth year, having lost my heart to the sea, I resolved to travel, and to come, if I might, into some of the little-known corners of the World. It was with such purpose in mind that I addressed myself to the captain of the Ondis*, as she lay in the harbor of Bain; and the captain—a man distinguished, in the true Bainish style, by an elegant pipe and exquisitely fashioned boots—declared himself very able to use the extra pair of hands on board his ship, which was to go down the Fertile Coast. We would stop at Asarma, that capital of the old cartographers, and go on to fragrant, orange-laden Yenith by the sea, and finally travel up the Ilbalin, skirting the Kestenyi highlands, into the Balinfeil to collect our cargo of white almonds. The arrangement suited me perfectly: I planned to cross into the mountains, and enter the formidable country of the Brogyars. I little knew that my*

wanderings would last for forty years, and bring me into such places as would cause many a man to shudder.

I will not, O benevolent reader, spend time in describing Bain itself, that city which is known to lie in the exact center of the World—for who, indeed, who reads this book will be unfamiliar with her, incontestably the greatest city on earth? Who does not know of the "gilded house," the "queen of the bazaars," where, as the saying goes, one can purchase even human flesh? No, I begin these modest writings farther south and east, at the gates of Asarma, which, seen from the sea, resemble a lady's hand mirror . . .

I lay on my pallet, surrounded by the rocking of the sea, reading Firdred of Bain in a yellow smear of candlelight. But I could not keep my mind on the words: the letters seemed to shift, rearranging themselves into words which did not exist in Olondrian. *Kyitna*. And then, like a ruined city: *Jissavet of Kiem*. I laid the book aside and gave myself up to dreams of her. I remembered the clarity of her eyes which were like the eyes of Kyomi, the first woman in the world, who had been blessed with the sight of the gods. I thought of the city whose name she had said so carefully, A-lei-lin, Aleilin, Leiya Tevorova's city, the city of violent seasons. What I knew of that city was Leiya's story of how she was declared mad, and shut up there for the winter in a great tower of black bricks. I looked at the city on Firdred's map, which, like all Olondrian maps, showed painted cities of exaggerated size. Aleilin: a city like the others. The Place of the Goddess of Clay. And near it the moon-colored oval of the Fethlian, the lake where Leiya had drowned, where a nurse, as I knew from the preface to her autobiography, had found her with her shoe caught in the weeds. There, after long torments, the girl from Kiem would die—for was it not futile to struggle with *kyitna*, the just punishment of the gods? "And perhaps, the gods of the north—" the mother had said, hesitant, desperate; but what had the gods of the north to do with us? They were tales, pretty names. I turned on my side, restless, thinking of the strange girl with sadness. The bones of her face as she lay beneath the awning like a jade queen. She came from the south, from the land of doctors, wizards and superstition, from the place which we in Tyom called "the Edge of Night."

At length I blew out the candle and slept, but did not dream of the girl, as I had hoped I would; she had fled with the tiny light of the candle. I dreamed instead of the sea, raging, crushing our fragile boat, drowning the spices, splintering planks and bones with its roaring hands… And then of the monkey, leaping from tree to tree, weighing down the

branches. The way it looked over its shoulder, the way its tail hung, teeming with lice. And last of all the courtyard, patches of sunlight, the sound of hurried footsteps, closer now, the sound of breath. *Jevick*. My mother's voice.

Chapter Five: City of My Heart

On the bridge of Aloun I gave up the great sea
Bain, city of my heart
That I might never weep for the memory of thee
Bain, city of my heart.

Let me gather the light that I saw in the square
Bain, city of my heart
And the jewel-haired maidens who walked with me there
Bain, city of my heart.

Oh the arches, the lemons, the cinnamon flowers!
Bain, city of my heart
What we abandon must cease to be ours,
Bain, city of my heart.

Bain, the Gilded House, the Incomparable City, splits the southern beaches with the glinting of her domes. On either side the sands stretch out, pale, immaculate, marked with graceful palms whose slender figures give no shade. Those sands, lashed by rain in the winter, sun-glazed in the summer, give the coast the look of a girl in white, the Olondrian color of mourning. Yet as one approaches the harbor this illusion is stripped away: the city asserts itself, Bain the exuberant, the exultant. And the vastness of the harbor mouth with its ancient walls of stone, with its seemingly endless array of ships, blocks out the southern sands.

From this raucous, magnificent port the Olondrian fleet once set out, adorned with scarlet flags, to conquer the land of Evmeni; from this port, ever since the most ancient times, "before the Beginning of Time," long merchant ships have embarked for the rivers, for apples, for purple, for gold. Still they come, laden with copper and porphyry from Kestenya, with linen and cork from Evmeni, with the fruits of the Balinfeil, ships that have sailed north as far as the herring-markets of the Brogyar country and south as far as the jewels of the sea, as far as Tinimavet. Here they gather, so many that the sea itself is a city, with rope bridges thrown between ships so that sailors can visit one another, with the constant blasts of the brass horns worn in the belts of the harbor officials, the *sinsavli* weaving among the ships in their low yolk-colored boats. "Forward!"

they cry. "Back! You, to the left, a curse on your eyes!" And before them, around them, rises that other city: a glittering mosaic of wind-towers, terraces, flights of whitewashed steps, cramped balconies and shadows hinting at gardens of oleander.

Bain is, of course, the name of the Olondrian god of wine, whose eyes are "painted like sunflowers," who plays the sacred bone-flute. "Come before him with honey," exhorts the Book of Mysteries, "with fruits of the vine both white and red, with dates, with succulent figs." Perhaps it was the presence of this strange god with the ruddy cheeks, who bewilders men with his holy fog, that dazzled my eyes and brain—for though I thrust myself against the rails and gulped the air, though I looked wildly about me, staring as if to devour the harbor, my first few hours in Bain—and indeed, the whole of that first day—I dwelt in a cloud pierced now and then by images like sunbeams. There was the great neighborhood of ships, most of them almond-shaped, blue and white, the Olondrian river boats with their cargoes of melons; there were the shouts, the clankings, the joyous, frenzied activity, as we made our way to the bustling quay and the gangplank rattled down; there was the heat, the brilliance of the light, the high white buildings, the shaking of my legs as I stood at last on the quay, on land, the way the stone seemed to roll beneath my feet, the shifting trees, and the sudden, magical presence of what seemed more than a hundred horses. Olondrians love these noble beasts and harness them to carriages, and the city of Bain is full of them—their lively, quivering noses, the ammoniac smell of their hides, their braided manes, their glittering trappings, the clop of their hooves and the piles of their dung steaming on the cobblestones. My fellow Kideti merchants and I disembarked under jostling umbrellas with our clusters of servants and porters, eyeing the carriages anxiously, and at once a number of slit-eyed, disheveled youths with leather knapsacks descended on us, crying out "*Apkanat*," the Kideti word for "interpreter." One of them clutched my arm: "*Apkanat!*" he said eagerly, pointing to himself and breathing garlic into my face. When I shook my head and told him in Olondrian, "There is no need," he raised his eyebrows and grinned, showing a set of narrow teeth. For a moment there was the vivid sight of his black, greasy curls, his head against the blinding white of the sunlit wall behind him—then he was gone, bounding toward the others of his mercenary trade who crowded around the gangplank, shouting.

The success of our journey lay entirely in the hands of Sten, who seemed immune to the charms of that exotic capital. While I stood gazing stupefied at the towers, the glazed windows, he arranged for one of the

large open wagons to carry us and our merchandise. When he plucked at my sleeve I followed him numbly and climbed the wooden steps into the wagon where my fourteen servants crouched among sacks of pepper. The wagon-driver leaped into his seat and snapped the reins on the backs of his horses: "Ha!" he cried, and the tall vehicle lurched into life. I came sharply out of my daze for a moment, long enough to gasp, long enough to think, now it is true, we are leaving the harbor, long enough to turn and look back at the elegant *Ardonyi*, floating against the quay, her gangplank thronged with interpreters. Another ship was unloading fruit; the air reeked of oranges. In the crowd I made out the Tinimaveti woman: she was arguing with the interpreters. And there, being borne away on a sort of litter, the sick girl with the coppery hair…

The wagon turned a corner and the ship disappeared from view. The harbor receded after it, shrinking between the walls of the buildings. Sten, sitting at my side, neat, drab and unruffled as ever, touched my knee. "Ekawi, you will soon be able to rest. Your father always frequented a particular hotel, not far from the harbor and also conveniently near the spice markets. I hope that it will suit you as well. The price is not overly high, and nearby there are smaller inns, very cheap and, I think, ideal for the men…"

I stared at him and muttered: "Of course, of course." His face was the same, dark, triangular, with the pale scar over one eye; yet it was framed by the passing white walls, the walls of the city of Bain with their wrought-iron gates, their carved doors crowned with amaranths. We rattled under narrow stone bridges connecting these high, solemn buildings, raised walkways with curved parapets above the echoing street, we passed under balconies trailing languid white and indigo flowers, through sunlight and abrupt shadows cast in that stone-paved passageway. With a shock that came over me as a physical chill, making me feel faint, I recognized the moment in which the imagined becomes visible. For these were the streets, despite their carefully cultivated blossoms, of which Fodra had written: "There it is autumn, and always deserted." The old iron gates were eaten by rust, the walls streaked with green moisture, the buildings encircled by empty alleys too narrow for carriages; these were the streets which that doomed, exalted, asthmatic youth from the Salt Coast, whose poetry seduced a nation, called "the unbearable quarters." "*O streets of my city*," I whispered, "*with your walls like faded tapestries*." Sten glanced at me swiftly with a trace of alarm in his eyes. I clutched the rough material of the sacks on either side of me and breathed the hot, dry, scented air of the passageway. Eternal city of Bain! We turned a corner, the street went on,

we burst into a secluded square with walls of rose-colored stone; a flock of swallows, disturbed by the wagon, lifted into the air; and the statue of a young girl watched us go by, her arms stretched out.

The Hotel Urloma, the "Arch of the Dawn," stands in the Street of Copper, in the lively mercantile district to the north of the Great Harbor. Here the walls of the buildings are thin, so that one can hear voices and thuds from inside, feet clattering up and down the stairs, flute-playing, the cries of cats. The hotel is a tall old building of wood and stone with a roof of coppery slate, one of those roofs, turned greenish now, which gave the street its name. As we drew up before its wide, pillared porch flanked by a pair of cypresses, a fresh burst of sweat bloomed over my skin like a cool dew, and I shivered.

"The hotel," said Sten, looking at me with veiled eyes, gauging my approval. I nodded and tried to smile, my dry lips cracking. Then the door flew open and a tall, portly Bainishman emerged and hurried down the steps, clumsy in loose leather slippers.

"Welcome, welcome!" he cried out in abominable Kideti, waving his arms in their billowing white shirt-sleeves. He hastened toward the wagon as the driver took down the wooden steps and placed them at the side for our descent. "Welcome," shouted the gentleman. His mild, gold-colored eyes flickered nervously across my servants' faces. "*Apkanat?*" he asked, again mangling the word in Kideti. "No *apkanat*? You have no *apkanat*?" Meanwhile the driver, ignoring the gentleman's impatient cries, looked up at me with black and steady eyes, reached out his hand and stamped one boot on his steps with an almost scornful confidence, as if declaring that I might trust them absolutely. I gripped his hand and rose, swaying, surrounded by worried murmurs, the sound of the servants and Sten who placed his hand on the small of my back; the strange hotel and the dark, bristlingspears of the cypress trees seemed to leap and swing in the sunlight as I clambered down from the wagon. When I reached the ground and the driver released me, I stumbled. The portly gentleman supported me with a large hand on my shoulder. "Welcome," he said; and then, in Olondrian, shaking his head as he spoke to himself: "Poor soul! Nothing but a boy! And he calls himself an interpreter!"

I felt that I should correct him, but could not find the words in his language. I looked up into his ruddy face and compassionate topaz eyes; his gray hair, sculpted so that a curl lay precisely on either temple, exuded a powerful odor of heliotrope. I felt that sensation of smallness which our

people must feel in the north: my head barely reached the scented gentleman's shoulder. I was fascinated by his great hands, so moist, with their moon-white nails, on which he wore several rings set with aquamarines.

"*Apkanat*," he said slowly, peering down into my face. I cleared my throat and opened and closed my mouth. He sighed, turned, then rolled his eyes in despair at the sight of Sten and the wagon-driver, who were communicating with energetic gestures. This method, however, seemed to succeed, for Sten hurried toward me and said: "Ekawi, I will escort the servants to their own inn. After some days you may wish to see their accommodations yourself—but for now I suggest you rest, and await me here…" He looked at me uncertainly, then glanced at the Bainish gentleman who was looking at us both with intense interest. I felt, like a heavy blow, the shame of being unable to speak—of proving, at the great moment, such a poor student.

I summoned my courage and nodded. "Of course! I shall see to our rooms." Sten looked relieved and hurried back into the wagon, but I saw him kiss the tips of his slender fingers as he went, and his lips moved rapidly as if in prayer.

The reins struck the backs of the horses. I turned to the Bainishman beside me, squared my shoulders and said: "Good afternoon."

His gold eyes widened. "Good afternoon! What!" He reached out his hand, smiling, and enveloped mine inside it. "Good afternoon to you, *telmaro*!" He leaned in closer, searching my face for any sign of comprehension. "Do you speak Olondrian? Are you the *apkanat*?"

I laughed and answered him clumsily enough, but with delight: "I am a merchant from the Tea Islands. My father—he used—he was coming—"

"Yes, yes!" said the gentleman. "But come in out of the sun." He ushered me toward the hotel along a pathway of pink slate. "So you are the son of the bald gentleman! Yes, I expect him every year! I hope no misfortune…" He trailed off as we went up the stairs to the porch.

"He is dead," I said.

"Ah!" The gentleman's brow was creased with such a look of pain that I was sorry I had not spoken with more delicacy. "That is dreadful, dreadful! And he no older than myself! But forgive me—I am called Yedov of Bain." He put his hand on his heart and bowed, showing me the round patch of pink skin at the top of his skull; when he had risen I bowed also, saying: "Jevick of Tyom." At this he gave a rich, merry laugh. "Marvelous! Such an education! Ah, but your father was shrewd! Come, step inside."

He clasped the brass ring on the door and pushed it open, leading me into a vast, cool room, empty but for a vase of white roses on a table. His leather slippers smacked on the tiles and the tails of his light-green morning coat fluttered as he passed through this hall and into the gloomy corridor beyond. The entire hotel possessed, like its owner, an odor of cedar, old carpets and heliotrope. Somnolent parlors yawned on either side of the passage, each with a high, marmoreal fireplace gleaming in the shadows and shapeless pieces furniture pushed against the walls. At length we came through a set of peaked double doors onto a veranda flooded with sun, and I stood blinking in the robust sea-light of Bain. "I'm here," I murmured in the tongue of the north, gripping the ornate curves of the balustrade. The iron was cold on my palms, unyielding, foreign, delightful.

My host offered me a chair—a long, low object covered with a green silk shawl—and hurried off to fetch me "a drop of the country." I reclined on the chair, breathing in the scent of the garden, the perfume of exhausted pansies mingled with the odors of dust and ancient plaster. The sky was deep blue, the balconies like necklaces. I lowered my gaze: the arm of my chair with its cover of pear-green cloth seemed to pulse in the tireless light. There was my hand, narrow, dark, languid. In Olondria. When my host returned with the wine I had drifted into a blissful sleep.

I awoke rumpled and sweaty and sat up, evening light on my face, thinking of books. It was the *kebma* hour, named for the bread that is eaten at dusk: across the garden I could see lights in the windows and in one overgrown yard a woman's voice called insistently: "Valeth, come in." I started up, turned and went into the hotel, knocking against furniture in the gloom until a light in the corridor led me to my host. He sat at a table laden with food, his face and oiled hair shining in the rays of a splendid table-lamp in a netting of pink crystal.

"Come in, come in," he cried, beaming and standing up so swiftly he bumped the table, provoking a gentle clatter of glass. "I didn't like to wake you, but I'm glad you've arrived at last. I don't mind telling you that our conversation has been strained!"

With a wave of his hand he indicated his sole dinner companion: my steward Sten. Colorless, doleful, looking shrunken beside the tall Bainishman, Sten sat before a plate heaped with an array of foreign delicacies, rose-colored claws and forbidding blobs of aspic.

"Sten," I said, trying not to laugh.

"Ekawi," he returned in a mournful tone. "The gentleman insisted I sit. I felt I could not refuse."

"No, no, you did right. Listen, Sten, I need money, Olondrian money. Just give me half of what you've got in the purse."

The Bainishman, still standing, resting both hands on the table, glanced from me to Sten and back again with a look of indulgent good humor, but when he saw Sten pull out the purse and count a number of bright triangular coins into my hand his brows contracted in dismay.

"What! What's this? What do you want with money? You don't need money in my house," he exclaimed, either forgetting that his house was a hotel, or overcome with native hospitality to the extent that he intended not to charge me for the meal.

"I'm sorry. I can't stay."

"But where are you going? I have *sefdalima,* real *sefdalima* from the country, either with or without anchovies! Come, *telmaro,* I beg you, you haven't eaten!" And at last, in despair, as I opened a door: "Not that way! The other door, if you want the street…"

"Thank you," I called out over my shoulder, hurrying down the passage, my pockets jingling. I soon came out into the antechamber with the white roses. Then all I had to do was open the door, and there it was: sea air, long cypress shadows, the racket of carriage wheels, Bain.

I ran down the front steps of the hotel and into the light of the evening, dazed as a moth released from a dark bedroom. Strangers jostled me, merchants in short cloaks with well-fed, shaven cheeks, students in colorful jackets and the tasseled shirts of scribes. The glad spirit of the *kebma* hour was awakening under the trees: the cafés were crowded with diners laughing through clouds of cigar smoke, tearing the flat, oily loaves of *kebma,* rinsing their fingers in brass bowls, clapping their hands to call the waiters. I darted across the street, dancing to keep away from the carriages, and pressed my face to a window where books lay blanketed in dust. There they were, just as I had imagined, open, within easy reach. I pushed the door, setting off a soft bell, and entered the shop.

Then it was like those tales in which there are sudden transformations: "He found himself in a field, and felt that it was a very vast country." It was like the story in which Efaldar awakes in the City of Zim: "There were walls of amethyst round him, and his couch was upon a dais." In the shop there was a dim, ruddy light and little space to move, for the shelves rose everywhere, filled with books with their names written on the spines: *The Merchant of Veim. Lyrics Written While Traveling on the Canals. The Secrets of Mandrake Root and the Benefits Derived Therefrom.* I ran my fingers over

the books, slid them from the shelves, opened them, turned the pages, breathing in line after line of mysterious words, steeped in voluptuous freedom like Isvalha among the nymphs of the well, a knot in my throat with the taste of unswallowed tears. There were so many books. There were more than my master had carried in his sea-chest. The shop seemed impossible, otherworldly, a cave of wonders; yet it was not even a true bookshop like the ones I would discover later, lining both sides of the Street of Poplars. It was one of those little shops, tucked into various corners of Bain, which sell portraits of popular writers and tobacco as well as books, whose main profits come from the newspapers, whose volumes are poorly bound, and which always seem to be failing, yet are as perennial as the flowers. It is unlikely that anyone before or since has experienced, in that humble establishment, a storm of emotion as powerful as mine. I collected stack after stack of books, seizing, rejecting, replacing, giddy with that sweet exhalation: the breath of parchments.

At last I found a leather-bound copy of the *Romance of the Valley* with which, once they had touched it, my hands refused to part. It was a "two-color copy": the chapter titles were ornamented with elaborate flowers in blue and crimson ink. The cover was also embossed with a pattern of blooms; the paper, though not of the best quality, was of pressed cotton beautifully textured; and through the pages danced the mysterious tale, the enchanted hawks and the sorrowful maiden transformed into a little ewe-lamb. Clutching this prize I approached the bookseller's desk, that hallowed region central to every bookshop, however lowly, in Olondria. This one, like many others, was piled with books and scattered papers, and behind it, in the glow of a lamp, sulked a young girl of great beauty. She had the amber skin of the Laths, the people of Olondria's wine country, and masses of coarse brown hair that snaked among the towers of books. Her hands, grimy and capable with broken fingernails, wrapped up my purchase and clenched my fifteen *droi* with frank eagerness. I thanked her, but she did not look up. Instead she yanked a curl of her hair impatiently from among her charm necklaces. I walked out into the last light of the evening. Bells tolled in the Temple of Kuidva, and over its dome the first stars were coming out.

If you love Bain as I have loved it, then you will know its spell, a heady mixture of arrogance and vitality, which has in it a great sigh, as of an ocean that has been crossed, the sigh of its terrible age from the depths of its stones. You will know the arcades underneath the Golden Wall where

the old men sit, playing at *londo* and sipping their glasses of *teiva*, that colorless, purifying fig alcohol which has no scent, but whose aftertaste is "as chewed honeysuckle." You will know the wood-sellers, the midnight trot of the horse of the nightsoil wagon. You will know also the great glow of the Royal Theater, huge as a castle and lit for its gala events like a temple on fire, with its wide tiered terraces going down to the canal. And you will know the white walls, the smell of sumac, the smell of dust, of coffee roasting, of eggplant fried in batter, the "unbearable quarters" where there is the feeling that someone has been interred, that people cannot live among such ancient towers. All of this I discovered in Fanlei, the "Month of Apples," one of Olondria's happiest and most careless months. There may still be a few in Bain who remember me as I was then: an aristocratic young foreigner in a gray silk suit.

My days began with a carriage ride through the humid morning streets to the great spice markets. Housed on the site of ancient horse and cattle auctions, the vast covered markets, with their arched leather roofs made to keep out the rain, form a jumbled labyrinth that stretches almost to the harbor. Here in the shadows the lavish, open sacks display their contents: the dark cumin redolent of mountains, the dried, crushed red pepper colored richly as iron ore, and turmeric "the element of weddings." One wanders among the cramped, odorous, warren-like enclosures, among elderly men and women, fresh from the country, who sip glasses of tea as they sit beside their wares, their hands smelling perpetually of cinnamon. There are younger merchants, too: slow-voiced men, gentlemen farmers, who dab at their eyes with muslin handkerchiefs; and in one corner a Kalak woman, one of Bain's old fishing-people, sells the wind out of a great brass bell. There are herbs, fresh and dried—mint, marjoram and basil; there are dark cones and mud-like blocks of incense; there are odors in the air that seem to speak to one another, as though the market were filled with violent ghosts. Wandering vendors offer tea and odorless "water of life" which revives those who succumb to the spice-madness: for here there are treacherous substances, ingredients for love-philters, and spices used in war and assassination. I have seen them selling the powder called *saravai*, the "hundred fires," with which prisoners are executed for treason; and there is also the nameless spice which, carried on the wind, infects one's enemies with the falling sickness. There is crushed ostrich eggshell, the "beckoner of women." It seems as if the odors cloud the air—as if, in the half-light, the breath of spices rises up like smoke and wreathes the faces of the merchants.

Here I sat with Sten, bargaining, arguing and laughing, pouring

pepper into sacks for my customers, awaiting with growing impatience the hour of noon, the end of the market day, when I would walk out alone into the city. When that moment came, and my servants tied up the sacks and rolled down the door of the stall, I stood and brushed the pepper from my clothes, and with hardly a word I left them, walking out with the last of the Bainish citizens, mingling with them, no longer a foreign merchant.

It was the season of sudden rains. The wild summer storms came out of the west, pouring on the slate roofs and the white wind-towers, swaying and bowing down the poplar trees in the Street of Booksellers and rolling in sheets from the awnings of the cafés. These were the rains that drove people close to the walls, under the balconies, or sent them dashing madly through the squares, and drenched the fluttering ribbons and bright trappings of the horses so that their flanks were streaked with delicate watercolors. The storms washed the streets so that little streams of brown water went roaring along the gutters toward the sea, and thundered on the roofs of the cafés where people were crowded together laughing in the steam and half-darkness. I loved those rains, they were of the sort that is welcomed by everyone, preceded by hot, oppressive hours of stillness; they came the way storms come in the islands but did not last as long, and often the sun came out when they had passed. I was happy whenever the rain caught me walking about in the streets, for then I would rush into the nearest café, along with all the others who were escaping from the weather, all of us crushing laughing through the doors. The rain allowed me to go anywhere, to form quick, casual friendships, forced to share one of the overcrowded tables, among the beaming waiters who pushed good-naturedly through the throngs carrying cups of steaming apple cider. In this way I was thrown together with students or dockworkers or tradesmen, or the *huvyalhi*, the peasants in their old robes, with their belts of rope and tin earrings and tough shoes caked with dung, and the pipes they smoked carefully in their cracked misshapen hands. As the rain poured down outside we leaned together over our drinks and there was always the weather to talk about for a beginning, and everyone was glad for the sudden excuse to have a drink and for the wild release from the stillness of the air. The cafés smelled of cider, wet clothes, steaming hair and tobacco. The lamps burned valiantly in the storm's darkness; often there was someone playing the northern violin, which is held upright between naked feet and moans like the wind in the towers.

After the rains the city was tranquil and glittering, freshly washed, the high roofs shining, the trees iridescent with moisture, and all seemed

calm and quiet because of the passing of the storm. The clear air sparkled with the cold light of diamonds. The winds coming off the sea were cool and there was no dust in the city, it had all been washed away with the heat and discomfort, and the sky had been washed as well and rose in pale, diaphanous layers of ether, streaked with gauzy clouds in blue and gold. Slowly the cafés emptied and the waiters sat down to play *londo*. Children came out to race painted boats in the gutters; they laughed and shouted down the wet streets in the opalescent air, while above them white-shawled grandmothers dragged chairs out onto the balconies. In these transparent hours I would set off again on my walk, down the Street of Booksellers or toward the intricate trees of the Garden of Plums, often with a girl on my arm, perhaps a student drawn to my strangeness or one of the city's cheerful lovers for hire.

There was never an end to Bain. I never felt as though I had touched it, though I loved the book markets under the swinging trees, the vast array of books, on tables, in boxes, stacked on the ground, and the grand old villas converted into bookshops. I loved the Old City also, which is called the "Quarter of Sighs," with its barred windows and brooding fortified towers, and I loved to watch the canal winding below the streets and bridges and the stealthy boats among the shadows of trees. Laughing, replete, I raised a glass of *teiva* in a café, surrounded by a bold crowd of temporary companions, a girl at my side, some Ailith or Kerlith whose name I no longer recall for she was erased like the others by the one who followed.

"Perhaps I'll stay," I shouted over the singing from the next table. "Perhaps I won't go home. I'd like to know every corner of Bain."

The girl beside me giggled and tossed her hair, her earrings jangling. "Bain!" she said. "You won't know Bain until you've been to the Feast of Birds."

Chapter Six: The Feast of Birds

I think I still do not know Bain. The Feast of Birds taught me of no city on earth, but of another, deeper territory.

It began as all holidays begin, though stamped with the special gaiety of Olondria: the city prepared for the celebration for two days. Revelers spilled from the overcrowded cafés and thronged the streets; when the outdoor tables were filled they sat on the curbs, uncorking bottles of *teiva*. From the balcony of my hotel room I looked down on garden parties, women in brilliant clothing laying tables among the oleanders, stout grandfathers bellowing for more wine and children everywhere shrieking, trampling the marigolds, chasing one another. All the children held flexible wooden wands with tissue-paper birds attached to the ends, their gauzy feathers strengthened with copper wire; when the children played these magical creatures trembled as if about to take flight for the trees, and at night they lay discarded on the lamplit grass. Many houses, I noticed, were dark, without a sign of joy; I once saw a child who was watching the streets pulled in from a balcony and scolded. But the streets were alive, flamboyant, crowded with vendors, vintners and flower-girls who had burst all at once from the markets to conquer the world.

On the day of the procession I put on a clean shirt with a pearl button at the throat, and went downstairs, curious to observe the famous holiday. Yedov was in the antechamber, peering out a window, and he turned toward me with a grave look as I entered.

"Where are you going, *telmaro*?"

"Out to see the procession," I answered cheerfully.

He frowned. I observed that he was not dressed to go out himself: he wore a plain white morning coat, a modest jasper in one ear, and what we in Tyom would have called a ten-o'-clock face.

"Oh, you don't want to go out today," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's the Feast of Birds, *telmaro*. The streets will be full of nasty people, thieves! Your father always took my advice and stayed indoors on the Feast."

I needed no more encouragement. "Goodbye!" I laughed, flinging the door wide.

The Feast of Birds is dedicated to Avalei, the goddess of love and death, of whom my master had said: "Not all that is ancient is worthy of

praise." In my readings Avalei's shadow had passed most often at moments of crisis; I thought she must be like the vegetable gods of the islands, mute and beyond appeal. Yet her great feast day appeared to involve no sacrifice or grief. The cafés were crowded with groups of students pounding the tables and singing, and a boisterous crowd of country people possessed the Garden of Plums, dressed in shades of blue and smelling of charcoal fires.

When the procession began the musicians scrambled down from their makeshift stages and the crowd pressed eagerly toward the Grand Promenade, and I went with them, forcing myself among the straining spectators opposite the gray façade of the Autumn Palace. Drums boomed, deep and solemn. In the gardens of the palace, where in the last century a famous general had hanged himself for love, people climbed up the bars of the wrought-iron fence for a better view, waving banners above an aviary of tissue-paper macaws. "Can you see it?" someone shouted near me, almost into my ear. "No!" I replied. There was the dark march of the drums. Both sides of the street were thronged with people watching from under the trees, and stiff-legged soldiers patrolled the edges of the crowds.

The procession came down the street, heralded by a trembling sigh, a sigh released all at once by the waiting crowd, and then by bursts of music which erupted along the street like waterspouts, and by the loud cries and the waving of scarves. The women were waving their scarves in the air, slow flags of colored silk, waving them with their bare arms, even from the balconies, and singing strange, exhilarating songs that rose and throbbed in the heated air like melodies from the depths of the earth. The drums came into sight, huge, decorated with bells, made from the skins of sacred bulls raised in the temples, creatures fed on wheat and basil and turned to face the west before they were slaughtered, their massive horns preserved in bronze. The drummers wore masks of painted wood and nodded their heads as they struck. Behind them walked young eunuchs with silver censers, their mellow, eerie voices entwined in ethereal cadences, mingling with the dark fumes that billowed around them… The air was filled, all at once, with a strong smell I could not place, an elemental odor like frankincense and charred bone, and under the influence of this scent, more powerful than that of the spice markets, I saw the priests strutting in their skin skirts. They were naked to the waist and their chests were shaved and painted with ochre, they were crowned with the bronzed horns of the slaughtered bulls, and behind them came the priestesses in cloaks of lion skin, bearing lilies and decked with garlands

of cornflowers.

In the winter I go to the Land of the Dead,
I belong to Telduri my brother;
In the spring I belong to Tol,
The God of Smoke and Madness;
In summer only shall I be yours,
O youth with the reddened cheeks,
O player of flutes,
O star who sleeps beneath a tree on the hill.

So sang the priestesses, and with them the women among the crowd. And the Goddess came into view, she or her image, hewn from a great stone and borne by twenty men on a litter, a vast figure spangled with old gilt.

Where is the hunting-knife
with which I slew the milk-white deer?
For I see it not: neither beside my arm, nor under it.

This was the song of the priests, which the men around me sang with them, the notes lifting into an impassioned thunder, pleading and terrible and underscored by the bells and drums. The air was erased by the odor of incense and flowers. The Goddess passed slowly, a thing of such unbearable weight, of such gravity, that I could scarcely look at her, and could not read the expression in her face of indifferent stone. She was a moon, there was nothing animal about her. Her litter was heaped with lilies, jonquils, anemones and narcissi amid flames which were barely discernable in the sunlight; they were the flames of scented candles, and there were urns about her, and carpets, and the men who bore her sweated a scarlet ooze through dyed faces. Behind her came another, smaller litter borne by hooded priests, in which, underneath seven layers of sumptuous brocades, the Book of Mysteries slept in its silver casket as if under the sea, in its dim and fragrant grotto studded with pearls.

All at once the women sang: "*The hunting-knife is within my heart, the hunting-knife is the ornament of my heart.*" And the music swelled, the voices of men and women together now, the men asking, where is the hunting-knife, and the women answering them in ardent notes like shot arrows: *The hunting-knife is the ornament of my heart*. Faces twisted with ecstasy. A woman near me looked toward the trees, arching her back, her bright face wet with tears;

and other women opened their mouths and flung hard, trilling melodies at the procession, songs that jarred with the sacred music. Elsewhere there were cries, sobs, the chattering shrieks of someone who was speaking in a language without words; and as the Goddess passed away a great convulsion of weeping wracked the crowd, pierced with inarticulate cries.

My own cheeks were wet. I was still gazing at the disappearing Goddess, Avalei of the Ripened Grain, when a second tremor went through the crowd—not as profound as the first, but signifying some change, some new excitement. "The Wings!" someone cried. At once the shout was taken up; people were running, but not closer to the procession. They were running back into the square, into the garden, into the alleys, pressed together and laughing, glancing behind them. Children were snatched up quickly and borne away, women picked up their skirts, and a few men climbed the trees of the Promenade, while the balconies above the street grew crowded with curious figures looking eagerly downward, half laughing and half afraid.

"The Wings!"

I stood looking at the street. My face was strangely warm, as if I had drunk a pitcher of new wine. The crowd had grown thin; there were only a few of us who watched, transfixed as if by the track of an errant comet. And we saw them come: young men, running, roaring, linked together, their arms interlocked so that they moved like a wave, like a thick tumultuous flood or else like a dragon, some single beast of a hundred parts, deranged, obliterating the pavements. They moved as if they were running downhill at the mercy of gravity, as if they could crash through forests, armies, stone, and as they came they shouted and some were singing and others wore grimaces of pain, or else of an alien ecstasy. The street performers began to scatter belatedly toward the alleys but the youths came into their midst with the force of a deluge, and those whom they could touch they seized and drowned in their living river, compelling them to run or be crushed underfoot. I watched them, shivering, feeling something like terror, or perhaps longing, seeing their sweat-dampened hair as they came closer, and seeing also that some of them had blood smeared on their foreheads and others were soaked as if they had come through a sheet of rain. Near me a man, his face radiant with tears, released a fearsome cry and plunged like a diver into the moving mass. I saw myself for a moment, a small figure under the trees; and then they cracked over me, and I was with them.

They were students, poets and lovers of the goddess Avalei and they were mad with the love that drove them through the streets. Love made them bound up and down among the walls in a rhythmic dance, clinging to one another, chanting hoarsely: "Riches and glory I do not desire, nor do I wish to be king; I ask nothing more than to be your lover and slave, to remain with you; only stay with me in the hills and you shall fulfill all my desire…." Their dance was like those which are danced on the eve of battle. They tore through the streets with the savagery of an inferno until their passion exhausted itself like a sheaf of lightning among the alleys, and they stumbled, still clutching one another's arms like frightened children, into the shelter of an ill-lighted café. Then I saw for the first time the faces of those who had been my companions in terror, and they were thin and drawn, their expressions stunned, and their bodies wore the shabby clothes of those who drink under the bridges, and their gestures were vague, and they held one another's hands. They were true devotees of the Goddess and had spent the day in the temple drinking heady liquors made from fermented flowers, and some of them had made love to the temple harlots behind the screens and wore the lost and shimmering look of new-slain warriors. The café where we found ourselves, fatigued and sore, our lungs aching, was a great stone room with a domed and blackened ceiling, with smoky lamps along the walls which made me realize that the sun had set and only the blue dusk came through the doorway. Evidently the "Wings" were known there for a fire was quickly kindled, and sleepy girls materialized from the darkness, one with a large pewter basin from which she splashed the face of a boy who had fainted. We looked at each other in the firelight.

"Where are we?" I asked the slight, grimy youth who was holding my hand.

He shrugged. "Somewhere in the Quarter."

"Are you hurt?"

"No," he said, looking at me as if I had asked an odd question, though there was blood mixed with the dirt on his brow and hair. We sat at a table with some of the others on wooden chairs strengthened with twine, and the girls, moving as silently as witches, brought us wine and *teiva* and held out their hands which we pressed with coins, and then melted away, yawning, into the gloom. "I need a drink," said the boy who sat opposite me in a trembling voice. Tears welled up in his eyes, though he was smiling… The others patted his back and one of them said, "Yes, by the gods, I've a dragon's thirst!" and there was a light pattering of laughter. Outside, in the streets, beat the music of fifes and drums, the continuing festival,

which we had stepped out of, if only for a moment; and I found myself wishing fervently, with desperation and sadness, that these strange youths would let me remain among them.

We were young and had been through a fire and so we were shy, we did not exchange names, but after a time we began to behave like young men, and our talk grew louder in that dim room where pork and rabbits crackled above the hearth and the drowsy girls went dragging their feet. Our eyes shone; a boy took a violin from against the wall, removed his boots, and began to play, cradling the instrument; when the meat was done we ate it ravenously, grease on our lips, and the strength it gave us was potent like that of the wine. I found myself in an earnest conversation with two of the youths, explaining things to them I had not known myself, connections between the poets I had never seen before, a clear architecture rising out of excitement and *teiva*. The youths who listened were students at the School of Philosophy and they argued eagerly, with fiery humor. They rolled cigarettes for me and we bent close together, smoking, their eyes alive and sparkling in the dimness. I had answers to all of their contradictions, they looked at me admiringly, they laughed, they began to call me the Foreign Professor. And I felt myself at the height of human bliss as I protested, "No, not foreign, I've been raised on the northern poets…"

The night brought music. A band from the festival invaded the café, armed with raucous pipes, guitars and swollen drums, filling the room with a reek of sweat, demanding money and wine, releasing a deafening, jaunty cacophony of sound. The whole room glittered with girls, perhaps the same ones who had served us earlier, but now they wore long earrings and shrieked with laughter, and the young men caught them and whirled them about the floor in popular dances, their shadows huge in the redness of the firelight. The music called in a troupe of Kestenyi dancers from the street, who were greeted with ragged cheers from the drunken students—they were lithe young men with rouged cheeks and hats that were round at the brim and square on top, made of the piebald skins of goats. They wore long purple tunics that reached to their boot-tops and were slit at the sides to show their voluminous embroidered trousers, and they skipped wildly on their heels and toes, their bodies motionless from the waist up, their faces fixed in sublime hauteur. I watched everything through the deep, resplendent mists that surrounded me, watched the rise of an arm, the toss of a head, watched even the shoulder of the girl who had come to sit on my lap through a starry haze—it was cool to the touch, as if made of enamel. She turned her head to look at me. I was

happy and exhausted, feeling as I had felt on the open sea: as if the world had drowned and something new had taken its place, a ringing brilliance, fathomless and transparent.

The cool girl moved her lips, saying something I could not hear. I told her that no, she was not heavy at all. My desire for her had no beginning, I felt it had always been there, blind and torrential like my desire for the city. She took my arm and led me into the rooms, the elusive corridors, the hanging stairs, the ineluctable darkness, into a room with walls as thin as if they were made of cardboard, where a single candle winked crazily in the gloom. There was music from downstairs. I believe the girl was talking to me, but I could not understand anything she said, not until she drew close to me and I heard her voice distinctly as she whispered: "Cousin, this is what the gods eat."

I awoke to glare and silence. And then, beyond the silence, sound—the sounds from the street which I realized had awakened me, sounds of talk and footsteps, a burst of laughter, the whine of a door, the scrape of a wooden table across the pavement. My mouth was dry but I felt no pain until I tried to move, and then I began to ache in every limb, the agony concentrated in my skull which throbbed rhythmically as if in time to the ringing of my ears. With the pain came the realization that I was in a strange room, and that the silence of the room was the first thing I had heard, a blankness that made me uneasy because it was not like other silences: it was the dead sound of abandonment and squalor. I opened my eyes. I lay on a narrow pallet that smelled of ammonia and mice, wearing only my shirt, on a floor of wooden slats that had long ago been green, in a very small room dazzlingly lit by the sun. There was no sign of the girl, and no sign that the room belonged to anyone. I sat up, groping weakly for the trousers lying over my feet. I saw my boots against the wall, but my waistcoat had disappeared, and I soon realized that my purse was gone as well. The single pearl button that had once closed the throat of my shirt had been removed, plucked away with a surgeon's skill.

Trembling, my body clammy with a poisonous film of sweat, I opened the door and limped into the hall, a twilit region down which there echoed a shriek of coarse laughter. A door opened to my right and a girl stumbled out. She slipped and fell, naked but for a green shawl clutched about her, turning her back to the wall, screaming with laughter, facing the open door at which she yelled: "Don't you do it!"—and a pair of slippers was flung at her from inside. I stood, swaying, sick with rage,

wondering if it was she, and about to demand the return of my belongings, when she looked up at me and shouted in a flatly insulting tone: "*Vai!* If it's not the camel of Emun Deis." Her own witticism sent her into transports of braying laughter. I turned away, walking unsteadily down the hall, refusing to believe that, even if my night's love was a thief, she could be as revolting a woman as that one.

As I turned a corner I nearly walked into one of the Kestenyi dancers, who stood urinating calmly against the wall. He wore the long split skirt but was missing the trousers underneath, and the front of his skirt was looped up over his arm. He was very tall and he turned to stare at me with his hot black eyes, a stare of vivid and terrible attentiveness, which made me stop short, looking back at him, my heart racing. He looked like one whose thoughts are not those of others. There was something in his eyes, a look both vacant and profound, which made me certain he was no mere lunatic; his gaze of inspired singleness of purpose, combined with his handsome, bestial face, gave him a look of precise evil. I opened my mouth, but could not find anything to say to his stare. At last he shook himself and released his skirt, which swirled below his knees, a voluptuous and dusky purple, and turned away, swaggering down the hall.

"Horrible!" I whispered, unable to help myself. I was now shivering violently with fever, and the ringing in my ears had grown into a persistent whine. I moved on down the empty passage. This hall seemed narrower, more constricted than the others, and it was quiet, as though at the center of the building. I was shaken by my encounter with the dancer and glanced back often, making sure that I was not being followed. Soon you will be outside, I told myself, but I did not believe it, no longer believed anything that I told myself, no longer believed that there had been sunlight, festivals, screens of poplars beside a canal. The air was dancing before my eyes. A stairway opened in front of me and I shuffled down, trying to cling to the wall, which was smooth and cold and offered me no support; and at last, overcome by exhaustion, I sank to my knees and leaned back against the stairs, my mind reeling in the stillness.

And then, suddenly, she was there. She did not appear, as a person would, but at once the world became aware of her presence. With a violence, a blinding rupture, she was there at the foot of the stairs, and the air opened, trembling, to receive her. The city wept. I cried out from the intense pain in my head, throwing up my arms to protect my face… But she was there, I could still see her, just as she had been on the ship, with her childlike shape, her long red hair, and her face, unclear in the brilliance. The air shuddered, flashing with the strain of having to hold her,

humming like sheets of steel, like sheets of lightning. There was the chaos in the hall of a disturbed geography, of a world constrained to rearrange itself.

She raised her small hand. There was the shock of opening vistas, of landscapes over which I hurtled, helpless; and she said, in a voice as intimate as if she were pressing her fingers on my brain: "Rise! Rise, Jevick of Tyom!"

About the Author

Sofia Samatar wrote *A Stranger in Olondria* in Yambio, South Sudan, where she taught high school English. She has also worked in Egypt, and currently lives in Madison, Wisconsin with novelist Keith Miller and their two children. She is pursuing a PhD in African languages and literature at the University of Madison-Wisconsin.

Learn more at www.sofiasamatar.com.

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