

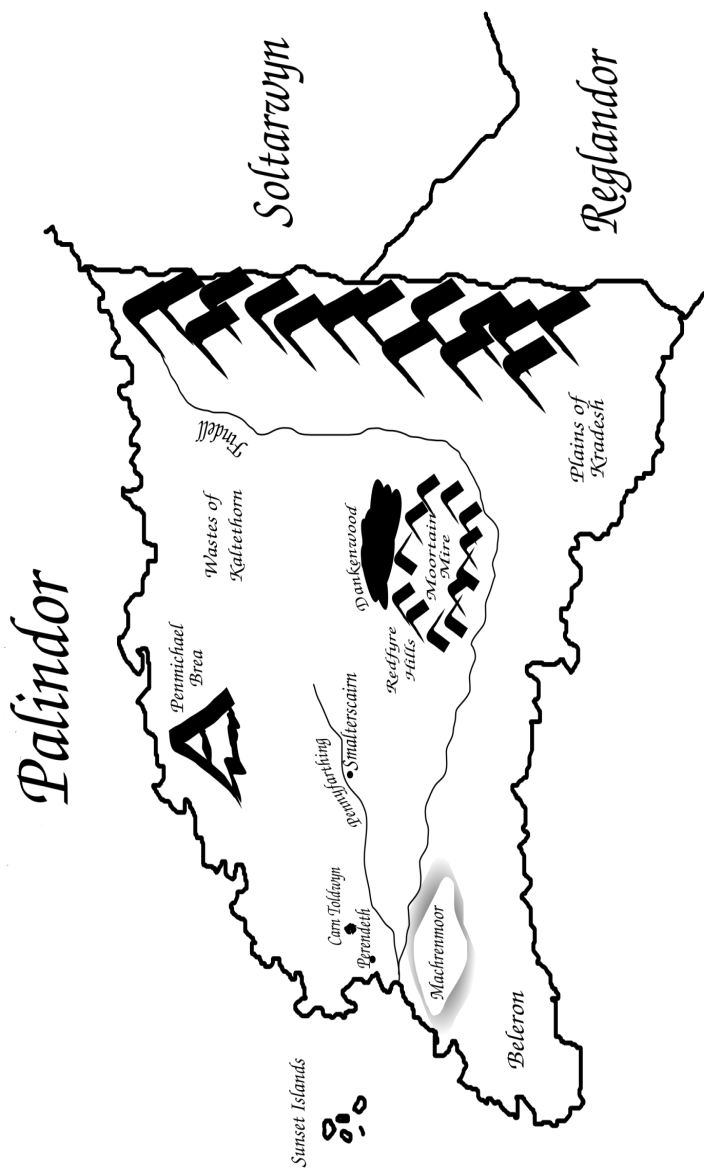
PHENDRIC

THE THREE LANDS

BOOK 3

A fantasy novel by

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PROLEGOMENON

High in the dark sky hangs a sun whose harsh red brightness somehow fails to light the barren landscape below. From our vantage point on a hill high above the plain, we can see little except dark, friable, volcanic ground, riven by cracks and small canyons. Here and there are orange pools, but around them no bushes grow. The only visible vegetation is a scatter of trees — dark, stunted and gnarled — growing at random across the landscape below. The trees have adopted strange, grotesque and slightly frightening contortions. As we look out over this bleak landscape, we see no other signs of life.

At last, high above, a large bird comes into sight, its wings undulating only occasionally, as the bird glides long distances between beats. It comes closer and circles once overhead before continuing on to some unknown destination. Eventually, it disappears into the distant darkness.

Then something catches our eye. There *is* life on the plain below, and we descend the hill to investigate.

Approaching the place where we saw movement, we become aware of a foul reek that fills the air.

Hesitantly, we press onwards, until we are standing close to the object that moved. It is a large, dark, winged creature, standing vast and almost motionless, peering over a ledge into the depths of a vast Pit.

From the Pit emanates an almost tangible odor of brimstone. The very air surrounding us shimmers in small waves, carrying the odor burningly into our lungs. There is something else in the air here: everywhere in this land we expect to feel a desperation and a hopelessness; but here, standing at the very edge of the Pit, in the air that the creature breathes so deeply and, apparently, so welcomingly, those feelings are at their greatest and most terrifying. We watch and we wait, but we know that we cannot do so for long before we will succumb to the despair and, with a terrifying leap, jump forward to join the lost souls in the Pit.

There is another movement: a smaller creature approaches. The creature is dark, as is so much here, and it covers the ground in bounds, flapping small, black wings to propel itself forward between jumps. The large creature turns from its contemplation of the Pit, and observes the approaching newcomer. It blinks once, slowly, black eyelids briefly covering its red eyes. The small creature lands unsteadily and bows. It has arrived.

“Master,” the small creature says.

There is a long pause, while the creature’s master appears to be contemplating whether to lift the creature in its vast claws and toss it screaming into the Pit. Evidently it decides against this course of action, for eventually Malthazzar — for it is none other than he — speaks.

“You have disturbed my meditation on the souls of the lost, creature. What do you want?”

“Master, forgive me. I am only an unworthy messenger. Master, you have been absent from the castle for many days now, and the one in the dungeon has been calling for you. He says he has an idea that will please you.”

Malthazzar opens his mouth and roars. We, as well as the unfortunate messenger, take an involuntary step backwards, away from the anger and bitterness and loathing that fill Malthazzar’s cry.

“That vile and contemptible creature? What could he possibly have to say to me? I should have simply thrown him into the Pit, for if I had not heeded his words, I would not have been defeated.”

He lapses into silence, and the messenger wonders if he has been dismissed; but then Malthazzar moves away from the lip of the Pit, unfurls enormous wings and, without another word, takes to the air.

Following as quickly as we can, we are glad to leave the terrors of the Pit behind us, at least for the moment, and before long we find ourselves entering the castle that we have had the misfortune to visit on other occasions.

We descend the narrow steps, down and yet down, until we are deep below the fortress, and there, in the deepest, darkest and most stifling dungeon, we see a gray, rat-like creature chained

firmly to the slime-covered wall. The creature is difficult to see, for its shape seems constantly to change if we try to view it directly. Yet always one leg remains held fast to the wall by a fetter and a heavy chain. The creature tries to move around the cell, but it can take no more than two steps before the chain becomes taut. There is desperation in the creature's eyes.

The cell door opens, and Malthazzar steps into the dungeon. Immediately, the creature falls to the ground in homage to the lord of this place.

"Don't grovel, Shadow, it ill becomes you," admonishes Malthazzar.

"Yes, yes, whatever you say, master," says the creature as it regains its feet. It begins to hop miserably on the fettered leg.

"Why have you summoned me from my contemplation of the Pit? Do you wish to join those lost souls?"

"Master, if you desire it, send me there. But I have been chained here now for many, many suns, and while my body has been confined, I have been thinking, and I believe I have conceived a plan that will please my master."

"A plan!" Malthazzar spits out the words. "What use have I for your plans? Was it not you who suggested that I bring the High Monarchs here, thereby intervening directly in the affairs of Palindor even though Olvensar and I had agreed that neither of us would do so? If I had not listened to you, there might have been some way that I could have turned his creatures against him. But no, you advised me, and I listened to you, and here we are."

He looks forlornly around the wretched and dismal place, as if thinking about what might have been. "A plan...." He draws himself up as he speaks so that he towers over Shadow, who likewise seems to have shrunk under the weight of his master's words. And now, when Shadow speaks, it is in a very small voice indeed.

"My master, if my plan displeases you, then I beg you to throw me into the Pit, for I desire only to serve you, and if I cannot do so then my days might as well be ended."

Shadow casts his eyes to the ground, unable — or unwilling — to look at his master directly.

Malthazzar breathes deeply of the hot, still, stale air and takes a step forward. He stretches out a hand and caresses Shadow's head.

"Oh, Shadow, my Shadow," he says. "Once you were the mightiest of my generals, and now it has come to this. Come, tell me your idea. You have been chained long enough. I will listen to your plan. Perhaps this time we can defeat Olvensar."

Shadow nods skittishly. "Yes, yes, I think we can. You see, my master" — he adds the last two words quickly, for already he is beginning to forget the subservient rôle he has decided to adopt — "always before we have tried to fight the one who calls himself the High Lord directly, and he has proved himself too cunning for us. This time, I have a plan that will make it impossible for him to win."

"Go on; I like the sound of this."

"We will strike at him through those whom he loves. We will entrap the High Queen and bring her here."

"We have done that before," interrupts Malthazzar. "Do you forget that she once was in this very castle? Yet even so she escaped from Sheol."

"Yes, yes, master; I know. But this time I suggest that things will be different. Instead of keeping her here to toy with, you could simply throw her into the Pit. There is no way out of the Pit, no way at all. And by throwing one of those whom he loves into the Pit, you will hurt him in the only way he can be hurt: he will know that he has lost the very soul of one who has fought for him and trusted him. He will be beaten."

There is a long, drawn-out silence. Malthazzar weighs the words of his general carefully and, at last, he extends a claw and grasps the fetter around the creature's leg. In a single motion, he snaps the annulus, which breaks into a thousand pieces. Then he lifts his head and lets out a roar of laughter.

"General Shadow, you have earned your freedom. Now, come with me, and we will plot how to bring this about...."

I The Visit

“Aw, Dad, do I really have to go?”

Michael Fowler compressed his lips to a thin line. His fifteen-year-old daughter, Diana, was seated in front of the television playing a computer game that appeared to involve the noisy destruction of a neverending stream of aliens of various shapes and sizes. His daughter had asked the question in the especially whiny voice that she knew grated on her father’s ears; her eyes had not moved from the television as she had spoken.

Now she jerked the joystick to one side and pressed its red button. With a “Phizzt” that Michael thought odious and his daughter found intensely satisfying, a large brown alien was transformed into a trail of steam that slowly meandered up the screen.

“Yes, you do have to go.”

Michael stepped forward and, too late, Diana realized what he was about to do. He bent down, and with a stab of his thumb turned off the power to the set. Diana sat on the floor, her back against the sofa, momentarily shocked and disbelieving that her father could be so selfish as to spoil her game. Another four aliens and she would have broken her record.

She scowled at her father, opened her mouth to speak, then looked at the expression on his face and thought better of it. She slowly closed her mouth.

“I’ve been telling you all weekend that we have to go see Gran this afternoon. It’s her birthday and she’s expecting us. Especially, she’s expecting you. You’re her only grandchild, Diana. She loves you, and she needs to see you.” Her father’s voice pleaded with Diana. “Now, please go and put your coat on.”

Several retorts came to mind, but Diana knew from experience that it was pointless arguing with her father when he was in such an unreasonable mood. Well, he could force her to go with him,

but he couldn't force her to be cheerful about it. Glaring, she sullenly got up and headed in the direction of the coat closet.

Michael watched the retreating figure and for the millionth time wondered where he and Megan had gone wrong.

It would have been easier if Megan had been at home this afternoon. But this weekend was their church's annual women's retreat, and as a member of the organizing committee his wife could not have escaped going even if she had wanted to. This was the third year in a row that Megan had tried to persuade Diana to join her on the retreat, and the third year in a row that Diana had steadfastly refused to have anything to do with "all your old friends," as she had indelicately put it when her mother had broached the subject.

Michael glanced out the window. The sky was overcast and threatened a cold autumnal rain before the afternoon was through. He hoped that, despite the weather, Megan was enjoying both the weekend away from home and the respite from the ongoing daily stresses of living with their rebellious fifteen year old. Michael tried to console himself with the thought that perhaps Diana would grow out of it soon. The thought came but did not stay, for it had visited him many times in the past five years. Diana gave no sign of growing out of it yet.

Diana stood in the doorway of the living room, wearing her coat now, but leaving it unbuttoned, as if to say: "You can make me wear it, but you can't make me do it up."

He nearly told her to fasten the coat, but thought better of it. Why get into another battle so soon after the last one?

"All ready?" he asked, in as cheerful a voice as he could muster. Without giving time for a reply he continued, "Let's be off then," and strode toward the front door.

Gran Fowler lived about forty five minutes' drive away in a small house in the country. Until a few years ago, she had prized her independence and the joy she found in maintaining the old house and its three quarters of an acre of lovingly tended garden. Living reasonably close to her only son and his family had meant that it was convenient for them all to get together for special family occasions while still permitting them all a healthy independence. Several times a year Michael and his family

visited her comfortable, tidy home to share news face-to-face, and for Katrin Fowler to see how quickly her only grandchild was growing. In between times, she spoke with them on the telephone every week or so. It was all a very satisfactory arrangement.

But over the course of the past few years, the family gatherings had become gradually less frequent, and were less-happy affairs when they did occur.

Grandmother Fowler was not particularly elderly — today in fact was her seventy-second birthday — but her body seemed to have decided that its days were drawing to a close. Now she rarely rose from her bed, and when she did so, she merely hobbled around her cottage. It was almost six months since she had taken a step outdoors, and nearly a year since she had been anywhere farther than the garden in which she had once so delighted. There was a gardener now, an old man who came three times each week to keep the grass mown and the shrubs trimmed and the fruit picked; but, slowly and unmistakably, the once-tidy garden and trim house were beginning to fall into a state of decay.

Even in the best of circumstances, Diana hated visiting Grandmother Fowler, for she was an old woman who drank weak tea and served fruitcake and spoke to Diana as if she were still a child.

As if these embarrassments were not enough, the last couple of times Diana had been to the cottage, the old woman had made a point of taking her to one side and trying to talk to her about a strange, imaginary world that existed only inside her head just as if it were a real place. Talk of dwarves and dark knights with blooded lances, and — this always with a wistful and faraway look in her eyes — a gnome called Drefynt. A gnome! As if Diana still believed in such things. Diana wondered if her grandmother was really quite right in the head. She *was* old, and perhaps she was beginning to live in some kind of childish fantasy world.

Fantasy or not, and even if her grandmother was more than seventy years old and had probably never harmed so much as a fly in her entire life, Diana, if she was honest with herself, was more than a little frightened of the old woman when she began to talk about her imaginary world. Diana had already

determined not to let herself be trapped alone with her this afternoon. Even so, she wished with all her heart that she did not have to accompany her father to the old woman's cottage.

Father and daughter pulled into the gravelled driveway of Grandmother Fowler's cottage at a quarter to three. As he stopped the engine, Michael could not help surveying the house. It certainly needed a coat of paint; but, somehow, he knew that even that would not erase the rundown, ramshackle air that seemed to hang over the old cottage.

His mind, just for a moment, went back to the time years before, when he had been twelve and his mother in her mid thirties, when the two of them had fought one another in a cavernous hall in another land under the watchful and lusting eye of Malthazzar, Lord of Evil. He remembered how he had been on the point of thrusting his sword forward and killing his own mother, and how, at the last moment, it was only her steadfast look of love that had caused him to halt and to realize what he was about to do.

How was it that such a woman, a true High Queen, could be brought down to this: a lonely, weary old woman who no longer had the strength even to step outdoors and enjoy her garden?

"You all right, Dad?"

It was an uncharacteristic question from his daughter, and he shook himself from his memories as he replied, "Yes, yes, Diana. I'm fine. Just thinking, that's all. Come on, let's go inside."

He neither knocked nor rang the doorbell. Even if his mother was out of bed, it would be draining and unnecessary work for her to come to the front door. Instead, he simply pushed open the wooden door — it needed a new coat of varnish — and as soon as he was inside, called out: "Yoo-hoo. It's only us."

There was no answer. He closed the door behind them. In his hand he held a bunch of roses, purchased at a florist's on the way over. The flowers were light pink, chosen not so much for their color as for their fragrance, which was heady and strong and had filled the car for the last half of their journey and now began to pervade the hallway as they removed their coats.

He poked his head into the sitting room, saw no one, and, with Diana trailing a couple of steps behind, began to climb the stairs towards his mother's bedroom.

THE VISIT

When he saw her, he was, for a moment, too shocked to speak. It was only two months seen he had last seen her, and in that short time she seemed to have aged several years. She was seated in bed, her back against the headboard. The curtains were only half open, and the room seemed unnecessarily gloomy. There was a stale aroma of old pot-pourri in the air, but it lasted for only a moment under the battering of the scent of the roses, which quickly filled the room with their heady bouquet. After a moment's hesitation, he moved towards his mother's bed.

Katrin smiled at her son. It was a tired, weary smile, but it was filled with all the love a mother has for her child, whether that child is one day old or middle aged and with a family of his own. She stretched out her hands and embraced him as best she could as he leaned towards her. Her grip was weak, and she quickly released him. She kissed him on the cheek. He offered the flowers.

"For you, mother. Happy birthday."

"Thank you, dear. Do they smell? I'm afraid I can't smell things very well these days."

He smiled. "Yes, mother; here, see if you can smell them." He held the flowers close to his mother's nose and she inhaled.

She nodded and gave him a wide smile that was almost a grin. "Yes. They smell marvellous. And they look beautiful."

She peered around the room. "There's a vase in the kitchen. Why don't you go put them in water and bring them back here? They'll cheer up the room. And while you're doing that, I can look at my only granddaughter. My, Diana, how you've grown. And how pretty you are. I bet you have to fight the boys off."

Diana glanced at her father as he left the room, silently beseeching him to find some way to take her with him, but either he did not understand her expression or he ignored it, and she found herself alone at the mercy of this strange old relative.

"Come here, Diana, I have something I want to ask you." The old woman had lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, and was urgently beckoning Diana to come closer.

Hesitantly, afraid of what was to come, Diana stepped closer to the bed, until she was within touching distance. She hoped fervently that this was not a prelude to another one of the strange

one-sided conversations about fantastic creatures that existed only inside her grandmother's head.

"Tell me, Diana, how well have you been sleeping lately?"

Crazy, thought Diana. *And Dad's left me in here with her.* "All right," she said, preparing to run out the room if things became any stranger.

Her grandmother looked disappointed. "Tell me the truth now. No strange dreams? Nothing about a boat and an island and gnomes and dwarves?"

There it was again, this ridiculous talk about gnomes and suchlike. Diana shook her head and took a step away from the bed. "No, nothing like that. I really ought to be going to help Dad. Back in a minute." And she turned and almost fled from the room.

The old lady sank back against her pillow. She looked puzzled. "Haven't you told her yet?" she said to the empty room. She pondered in silence for several seconds and then spoke again, a heavy sigh of understanding in her voice. "Or is it perhaps that she's too deaf to hear? What about Michael, I wonder? Has he been too preoccupied, or does he know?" She lapsed into silence until the others returned.

When Michael came back, he was carrying a tray of tea things. Two paces behind him, Diana entered with the vase of roses. After casting around for a moment, Diana moved forward, keeping her eye on her strange grandmother, and placed the flowers on the bedside table. She immediately retreated to safety behind her father, who placed the tray on the table next to the flowers. There was a teapot and two cups. He poured the tea, saying, "Diana didn't want any, but I assume you'd like a cup?"

"Yes, dear. That's very thoughtful of you."

He handed her her tea. Her hands drooped slightly as they took the weight of the half-filled cup of weak tea. He smiled at his mother. She returned the smile, then looked suddenly at Diana.

"Diana, dear, I had Mrs. Fotheringay buy a cake and some cookies so we could celebrate my birthday in style. They should be in the cupboard to the right of the stove. Would it be too much trouble to ask you to cut a few slices of cake and put them

on a plate with some cookies and bring them up here? I would be most grateful if you could do that for us.”

Michael opened his mouth to offer to perform the task, but his mother glared at him and shook her head slightly.

Diana mumbled “OK. I’ll do it,” and left the room.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The old woman put the cup to her lips and sipped the tea.

“Good tea,” she said, nodding.

“I had a good teacher,” Michael replied. “You wanted us to be alone, didn’t you?”

“Just for a minute,” his mother admitted. “Is there anything you want to tell me?”

Michael looked at the face of the old woman that his mother had become. He wondered what she was getting at. Obviously there was something she was expecting him to say. About Diana? How uncontrollable she was becoming and how worried he was that soon she might get into serious trouble? Or was it something else? He looked into his mother’s eyes, which were in turn searching his own.

It was the sparkle that appeared in them that gave it away.

“You too?” he asked, almost unable to believe it.

“For the past two weeks.”

The sparkle was bright. Her eyes shone so brightly that it was almost as if she was trying to hold back tears. But these, Michael knew, were tears of joy, not sadness. He discovered that his own eyes were moist, and he was grinning crazily at his mother.

“Me too,” he said. “Every night, more or less the same dream. I haven’t thought about that place for years now, but suddenly every night it’s there. It means something, doesn’t it? That I keep dreaming about it, I mean.”

“Oh yes, Michael, it means something. Tell me, have you ever told anyone? Your wife? Diana?”

Michael shook his head. “No. I mean, it seemed so farfetched. I thought about telling Diana when she was a child, but it seemed so silly and pointless. What would she have thought of me if I had insisted that such a place actually exists?” A momentary

doubt seemed to grab hold of him. "It does exist, doesn't it? I mean, it wasn't all just a dream that time in Cornwall, was it?"

"No, Michael, it wasn't just a dream." There was the sound of a footstep climbing the stair. "And in just a few minutes, I think you'll have proof of it. Now, be quiet, and let me handle this."

"Diana?" Michael asked in an urgent whisper. "Is she coming too?"

His mother's eyes opened wide in surprise. "But of course," she said. "I thought you would understand that. She's the whole point of the thing. She needs to be saved from herself while there's still time."

There was no time for Michael to respond before his daughter entered the room carrying a large plate on which was a small pile of sugar cookies and a couple of slices of cake. Wordlessly, Diana placed the plate on the bedside table, filling the remaining space.

"Diana, dear, there's one more thing you could do for me," said her grandmother. "There's a tree in the garden with, I think, one piece of fruit on it. Would you be so good as to go and pick the fruit and bring it up here for us all to share? It's down at the very end, in the little arbor. It looks like a peach. Would you do that for me, dear?" The grandmother smiled at her granddaughter, entreating her with her eyes.

Sullenly, Diana nodded. "OK. Sure, I'll get it. Down at the end of the garden?"

"Yes, that's right, dear. And thank you."

Diana left again. If she was honest with herself, she was glad of the excuse to get away from the bedroom and out the house. She did not like old people; they were so..., well, *old*. And sometimes they were so strange, just like Grandmother Fowler had been a few minutes ago. All that ridiculous talk about sleeping well and dreams about islands and fairies. It was about time that something was done about Grandmother Fowler, it really was.

She had reached the back door of the house and now she stood for a moment looking through the glass.

THE VISIT

At the rear of the house was a large lawn, bordered by beds of shrubs and flowers that, during the spring and summer months, made a glorious splash of color and, in the evenings especially, produced a heady scent that invaded even the inside of the house. But at this time of year the garden looked forlorn and not a little wild. Winter was still a little way off, but the garden was already bare, with the leaves off the trees in the arbor at the far end, many of the flowers already dead, and the small plants retreating back to the ground until next spring.

As she pushed open the back door, she wondered how there could possibly be any fruit still on any of the trees, for the last fruit from their own yard had been picked more than two weeks earlier. The possibility crossed her mind that perhaps her grandmother was imagining things. Perhaps there was no fruit at all? She walked slowly across the grass, which was long and still damp from the morning's heavy dew, even though it was now late afternoon. She did not think much of the gardener if he was supposed to keep the lawn trimmed.

At the far end of the lawn was a small separated area that was almost completely cut off from the rest of the yard. A beech hedge ran across nearly the entire width of the grass, with only a single narrow gap at its center to serve as an entrance into the arbor beyond. The hedge had been recently pruned, and as she passed through the gap Diana noticed that there were piles of trimmings near the shrubs at this end of the yard.

Beyond the line of beech was an area almost completely enclosed by the hedge. There was a patch of lawn in the center, and around the edge of the lawn several dwarf fruit trees. Behind the trees to her left was the garden shed, one of its windows cracked and the whole structure looking dangerously unsafe. By the side of the shed was a compost heap, against which leaned an ancient wheelbarrow, upside down so that it would not collect the rain and turn to rust.

She cast her eyes around the damp arbor. In one corner, partly underneath the shade of a large, bare apple tree, was an old swing chair, its paint flaking and hanging slightly askew. Over everything hung an air of neglect, yet she could see that here at least the grass had been cut and the trees pruned, as if

someone cared for the plants but was uninterested in the human accoutrements.

At first she thought that all the leaves had dropped, just as they had done at home, and she was about to turn away to return to the house and tell her grandmother that she had been mistaken about the fruit, when she saw a movement near the ground in the farthest corner of the arbor. She was startled to discover that she was not alone.

She watched as an elderly man slowly drew himself up from the ground where he had been working, tending a tree no taller than herself, which, she now saw, was the only tree in the arbor still bearing its summer mantle of leaves. Diana stepped forward as the man slowly gained his full height, which was about the same as her own.

She studied the man, obviously the part-time gardener, even as he studied her. He seemed even older than her grandmother, although not as frail. His face was lined and he sported a long whitish and unkempt beard. His clothes looked, if not exactly disreputable, at least slightly shabby, and there were large patches of brown where soil had ingrained itself into the fibers of his jacket and trousers. There were damp patches on the knees of his trousers where he had been kneeling on the damp grass to tend the tree, or whatever it was that he had been doing when he had been disturbed.

The gardener looked at her with a slight frown, which annoyed Diana. He looked almost as if he were weighing her up, that he had decided that she did not measure up to his expectations, and that the lack was entirely *her* fault. If he had said something, she would have spoken crossly to him, found some fault, told him off even. But all he did was to stand there for a long moment, his ancient eyes twinkling with a not-entirely-friendly glint, looking into her face, frowning at what he seemed to see there.

The moment seemed to stretch into a long, long time. Suddenly, Diana was desperate to break the silence; anything to distract the gardener's gaze.

"You must be the gardener," she said, thinking even as she said it that it was a remarkably stupid comment.

The old man looked around the small arbor. A hint of a smile came to his lips.

"Not a bad little place, is it?" he said.

"I've come looking for a piece of fruit; my grandmother Fowler sent me," Diana said, ignoring the old man's question.

The man slowly turned to look at her again. Diana found herself becoming infuriated at the slowness of the man's movements. He seemed almost to live at a different speed from normal, as if everything had to be viewed, weighed, savored and judged before moving on to the next item of business. After what seemed an age, he said, "A fruit? At this time of year?"

"It's my grandmother, Mrs. Fowler. She said there was a tree here that still had a piece of fruit on it. What about that tree behind you?"

The old man turned slowly and regarded the tree at which Diana was pointing. Diana was certain that it was the very tree that he had been working on when she had first spotted him, yet now he seemed surprised to see it there.

"Oh, aye. There's a fruit, right enough. Just the one."

Diana drew closer.

The old man was right. There was a single large fruit with the appearance of a peach, or perhaps a nectarine, hanging at shoulder height. It was strange that there was just the one fruit, but so it seemed to be; there was no trace even of any smaller, unripe fruit hanging from the narrow branches of the young tree.

The old man was still talking. He was standing directly between Diana and the fruit, making it impossible to do what she wanted, which was to pick it and leave the old gardener to his work.

"It's only a young tree. Mrs. Fowler planted it this spring. She grew it from seed, you know."

Diana did not believe it for a moment. The tree, admittedly young, had obviously been planted at least several years ago. She wondered why the old man was telling her something that was so obviously untrue.

"She's a very special lady, that grandmother of yours," the gardener added gratuitously.

Diana sighed inwardly. He was just as bad as her grandmother. Obviously he was about to begin a long monologue on what a wonderful person her grandmother was. Well, she'd soon put a stop to that. She brushed past the gardener and grasped the fruit with one hand, gave a quick twist of her wrist, and felt the weight of the peach or whatever it was come away from the tree.

The fruit now safely in hand, she said shortly, "Thank you. I've got it now," then turned and walked away towards the arbor's entrance.

She did not know what it was that caused her to stop at the gap in the beech hedge but something prompted her to do so, just before she left the arbor. She halted and turned to look back at the corner from which she had just come, and it was several seconds before she could believe her eyes. The old man had vanished. Without a sound and with no way of leaving the arbor other than the gap in the beech hedge where she was now standing, he seemed to have completely disappeared. And the tree in the corner, which moments before had been leafy and green, now stood brown and lifeless.

Obviously, she had made some sort of a silly mistake: the gardener and the tree must be hidden behind some larger tree. She began to retrace her steps.

As she approached where she had spoken with the old man, she found her heart inexplicably racing. She had not been mistaken, she was certain of it, even though what she was now seeing could not possibly be true. The tree from which she had plucked the fruit not a minute before was now bare and desiccated. She lifted a hand to it and bent a twig. It snapped drily. The tree was dead.

She looked around, then called out, "Gardener? Where are you?"

The only reply was the sudden motion of a squirrel darting across the grass.

She walked slowly across to the shed at the far side of the arbor, which was the only place where the old man might have hidden. But the door was locked on the outside with a big, heavy padlock. She peered through the cracked window, but inside there were only a few garden tools. A moist, stale, slightly

moldy odor hung over the little hut: it had not been used for many months. She looked down at the fruit, large and firm in her hand, then one last time at the empty arbor.

Michael and his mother heard the sound of Diana's footsteps taking the stairs two at a time as she raced upstairs. They paused in their conversation and Diana burst into the room, breathing deeply, as if she had run all the way from the bottom of the garden.

She thrust the fruit at them. "Here. Take it," she said. There was a challenge in her voice, as if she were daring them to accept the offering.

Her father gently took the fruit from her hand. Suddenly oblivious to both his mother and his daughter, he turned the fruit around, inspecting it. He looked at his mother with an enquiring expression. He caught the faintest hint of a nod in return.

His mother smiled, then began to talk to Diana.

"My dear, you are all out of breath. It's all right. You didn't need to hurry. We could have waited."

"It... it...."

Diana stopped, suddenly unsure what to say. How could she tell them that the gardener had completely disappeared almost while she watched, and that a tree went from life to death in only a few moments? She couldn't. If she said anything, she would sound as crazy as her grandmother did when she began to go on about her dreams.

Diana shook her head. "It doesn't matter," she mumbled.

Her grandmother gazed at Diana for several seconds. Diana tried to hold her gaze, but found that she couldn't.

Diana thought: *She knows. I don't know how she knows, or how much she knows, but she knows something about what went on out there.*

For a moment, just for the barest flicker of a moment, she wondered if perhaps her grandmother was not crazy after all. But she quickly quashed that thought. Obviously, the whole thing had been a big mistake. There must have been some other way out of the arbor, and the old gardener had decided that he had done enough work for one day and had chosen that moment

to depart. And the tree? Well, she must have just made a mistake, that's all. She must have been confused. The tree from which she had picked the peach was still there, it had to be; it was just that she had looked in the wrong place and seen that old dead tree instead. That's all, nothing to it.

She lifted her gaze from the floor. Her grandmother was still looking at her. Moving no more than the tiniest fraction of an inch, the old woman shook her head, as if telling Diana that what she was thinking was wrong.

"Cut the fruit, dear. You can use the cake knife," Grandmother Fowler said to Michael. "If you cut it into thirds, we can all have a piece."

"I don't want any," Diana said.

Michael picked up the knife and began to cut through the soft flesh of the fruit.

"My dear, just to please an old woman, just this once. That tree is unique, and I think you'll find that its fruit is unlike any you've ever tasted. Please do try it, just for me."

Diana's father had finished cutting the fruit and now it lay exposed in three parts on the tray next to the tea things. It still looked like a peach, except that there was no stone in the center of the orange-yellow flesh.

"No stone," her father said, obviously surprised.

"No, Michael. I didn't expect one, did you? After all, no more fruit will be needed after this one."

Diana looked in puzzlement at the others. She could not escape the feeling that there was something going on here about which she knew nothing, but her grandmother knew everything, or at least most of it, and her father was dimly groping his way toward understanding. She felt as if she were a character in a play but, having begun the scene well enough, all the other characters seemed to be reading lines from a different script. It was an eerie and thoroughly unpleasant feeling. Or maybe the others were simply crazy.

"Here, dear. Do have a slice." Grandmother Fowler pointed at one of the slices, then took one for herself. Diana's father did the same. Diana decided that there was no point in arguing.

THE VISIT

She lifted the last piece, looked at it briefly, then popped it into her mouth.

She opened her eyes wide in surprise, for the flavor caught her completely off guard. It was not that it was not pretty much what she had expected, for the fruit definitely had a flavor reminiscent of a peach or a nectarine; it was the unexpected intensity of the flavor that was so astonishing. The fruit tasted so strongly that it seemed almost to explode in her mouth. She felt as if for the very first time she was tasting fruit the way it was *supposed* to taste.

She chewed on the fleshy slice, closing her eyes so as not to be distracted from her enjoyment of the flavor. She savored every morsel, every tiny swallow. She ran her tongue around her lips to catch every last drop of juice.

Suddenly, the room was cold. She shivered as a breath of wind touched her cheek. The quality of the light through her closed eyelids changed. The air smelled strangely of salt, as if she were close to the sea. She opened her eyes, and for a long, long moment, she did not move. She closed her eyes tightly, then opened them once more. But it was still the same.

Her mouth fell slack as she surveyed the island on which she was standing.