

THE  
THREE  
LANDS

I: PALINDOR  
II: SHADOW  
III: PHENDRIC

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## *I The Accident*

Katrin Taylor was a week past her fifteenth birthday when her world changed forever.

Katrin was tall, with long dark hair that flowed around her shoulders. She had dark eyes and a habit of letting a mischievous smile play around her face. She was also opinionated and more than a little rebellious.

It was the summer vacation, but the newfound freedom of the days in late May at the beginning of vacation had long ago become the long, torpid weeks of hot midsummer lingering boredom.

To make matters worse, Katrin's best friend, Jane Newman, had moved away at the beginning of the vacation and now lived fifteen miles from Dayville on a sprawling ten-acre piece of land in the country.

For several weeks, Jane and Katrin had been needling their parents to let them go away together to backpack and camp in the Springfield Hills near Jane's new home for a few days. Katrin and Jane were keen to explore the area.

Jane's parents had expressed reservations but eventually had given their permission "providing it's all right with Katrin's parents."

But it was *not* all right with Katrin's parents. At least twice a day for the past week she had asked them, but always the same answer had come back: a firm, unyielding No.

As the days had passed, Katrin had become more and more sullen, until, eventually, her father had proposed a compromise.

"Look, we can't have you and Jane going out camping by yourselves in the hills. But if Jane will put up with you, how about if you go and stay with her for a week? You can go exploring during the day, and camp out on the Newmans' property at night."

At first, Katrin had been reluctant to accept the compromise, but at last she realized that it was the most she was likely to be offered. The girls agreed to the plan.

And so the day for the start of the trip had arrived. The sun shone in a clear blue sky and the thermometer rose steadily from its early morning 70°F to stand at 85°F by mid morning. By ten thirty Katrin's

backpack was filled with food and clothes and flung carelessly into the back of the Taylors' station wagon.

They arrived at the Newmans' sprawling property shortly after eleven. Jane was out in the meadow riding her horse; Mrs. Taylor embraced Katrin and gave her an embarrassing peck on the cheek. "Take care of yourself, dear," she reminded her daughter for the hundredth time.

Katrin's gaze went heavenward in exasperation. "Yes, Mom."

She left her mother to have coffee with Mrs. Newman while she went to greet Jane.

When the girls came in an hour later, flushed and breathless, Katrin's mother had left.

Jane's mother prepared a salad as the girls discussed their plans over the kitchen table. As Mrs. Newman handed over the heaped plates, she noticed that Katrin was looking rather pale.

"Are you all right, Katrin?" she asked.

The reply was several seconds in coming. Katrin looked up at Jane's mother, then at the salad piled high on her plate. "I don't know...."

Then, in a single hurried motion, she covered her mouth with her hand and raced for the bathroom.

She returned three minutes later, her pale face dotted with sweat and her steps unsteady. Reaching the table, she leant against a chair for support.

"Sorry about that," she said weakly.

Then her legs folded under her.

Katrin felt herself being moved and then lowered on to a couch.

"What do you think, Mom?" she heard Jane ask.

"I don't know. But you two certainly aren't going anywhere with Katrin like this. Give Katrin's mother a call while I take her temperature."

Katrin opened her eyes, and found herself in the living room, bright sunlight streaming into the room through French windows. The light hurt her eyes, so she closed them again. Then she shivered.

A thermometer was inserted between her lips. After an age there was beeping sound and the thermometer was removed.

"A hundred and two," Jane's mother said. Then, after a few seconds, she asked, "Katrin, are you awake?"

Katrin opened her eyes painfully and nodded.

"How were you feeling earlier? All right?" Mrs. Newman asked.

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Katrin nodded once more. She spoke weakly: "Do you think you could close the drapes?"

"Oh, of course."

Jane's mother stepped across the room and heavy drapes swished almost noiselessly across the windows and darkened the room. Katrin sighed with relief.

Jane entered the room. "I told her mother. She wants to talk to you." Together, mother and daughter returned to the kitchen.

Katrin lay back, suddenly exhausted, the distant sound of conversation passing meaninglessly over her head. By the time that they returned, she was asleep.

She slept fitfully all afternoon, finally awaking at nearly five o'clock.

Mrs. Newman took her temperature again. "Ninety nine; much better," she said. "How are you feeling?"

Katrin took stock. Eventually, she said: "Weak, but much better."

"Would you like a glass of juice?"

"Yes, please."

"OK. I'll get one for you."

Mrs. Newman was gone for several minutes. Katrin sat and then stood up. She was on the point of making for the kitchen when Jane and her mother returned.

"Oh, you're up. Good," said Mrs. Newman. "Here's your juice. I was just talking with your mother. She's coming over to fetch you. You can come back tomorrow if you're feeling up to it, but we both thought that it was best for you to go home this evening."

Normally, Katrin would have protested, but she had no energy for an argument. She began to drink the juice gratefully.

Jane began to talk once more about the hills and the exploring they would do as soon as Katrin felt better, but it was impossible for Katrin to concentrate on her friend's torrent of words. All she really wanted to do was to lie down and go to sleep again.

The doorbell rang, there was a clatter of footsteps and, in a few moments, Katrin's mother entered the room.

Her mother looked sympathetically at her daughter. "Hello, darling. I'm awfully sorry you're feeling this way. Do you think you can make it to the car all right?"

"I'll try," replied Katrin. Her mother came to her side and helped her to stand. The room swung unsteadily for a moment, then stabilized.

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Katrin nodded. "Yes," she said, "I think I'll be OK."

"Good. Just hold my hand and we'll get you to the car."

Katrin and her mother made their way to the car in the driveway, followed by Jane and her mother.

"Would you rather sit in the front or lie down in the back?" Mrs. Taylor asked.

"I'm very tired, Mom," said Katrin. "Maybe I'd better lie down on the back seat."

"OK. We won't be able to strap you in, but I'll drive carefully and I'm sure we'll be all right."

With some help from her mother and Mrs. Newman, Katrin maneuvered herself so that she was lying on the back seat.

She felt so tired.

Vaguely, she heard the sounds of goodbyes being said and then felt the comforting throb as the engine started. The car was not a hundred yards down the road before she was asleep.

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The man responsible for the accident was drunk, even at this early hour of a summer Saturday evening.

The journey between the two houses was nearly half over when Mrs. Taylor approached the narrow bridge over the river. Over the bridge came a car travelling towards her, moving slowly, on the opposite side of the road. Suddenly, out of nowhere, another car appeared from behind the approaching car, moving out on to Mrs. Taylor's side of the road, trying to overtake the slower-moving vehicle.

There was no time to think. Instinctively, Katrin's mother swung the wheel to one side, jamming her foot on the brake. The car spun off the road, bumping down the steep bank towards the river.

The car hit a tree, and then a boulder; the car's two occupants were thrown first this way and then that. The car reached the very edge of the bank, the river running three feet below. The car hesitated for a fraction of a second as the wheels on the left side hung over the edge of the bank.

The car hung, half suspended; then it toppled over on one side and fell into the river.

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No one knew how long Katrin was without air, but the best guess was about eight minutes. One thing the doctors were certain of was that her head struck the metal of the side of the car as the car rammed into the boulder before slipping into the murky waters of the rapidly moving river. She was unconscious before the water closed over the car.

Katrin's head was thrust deep into the crack between the seat and its back, and air was unable to filter its way through the plastic of the rear seat as she lay, helpless and unconscious, with the water rising around her. Mrs. Taylor lay unconscious in the front seat.

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The first rescuer was the driver of a passing car. He dived into the stream and, after two unsuccessful attempts, forced Mrs. Taylor's door open, pulled her free of her seat belt, and brought her to the surface. But he couldn't see far in the dirty water, and didn't realize that there was a second occupant in the car. Precious minutes passed before Mrs. Taylor regained consciousness and spoke her first words: "Where's Katrin? Is she OK?"

Her rescuer realized that someone else must be in the car. He dived back into the swirling waters.

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The doctors were not hopeful. They explained to Mr. and Mrs. Taylor that their daughter had sustained a serious head injury. That in itself might not have greatly affected their child. But she had also been deprived of life-giving oxygen for at least several minutes. When she arrived at the hospital, her body functions were apparently intact and she had no broken bones apart from a fractured skull; but the electrical activity in her brain was depressingly low.

After two weeks in a coma, a recording of the electrical activity in Katrin's brain was sent to a specialist in a nearby city. He was not sanguine: it was his professional opinion that Katrin's brain activity was impaired to such an extent that she would never regain consciousness. Even if she did, there was no chance that she would ever be more than a vegetable, responding to only the most basic stimuli. Her centers of high-level thought displayed no activity whatsoever; she would never recognize friends or relatives, never speak, never walk again.

From a purely physical point of view, he informed the parents, Katrin was still alive and her body was fully functional; as long as they provided food through a hospital feeding tube and removed the wastes from her body, she would stay alive until some organ failed, probably many decades hence. But for all practical purposes their daughter was dead, and they must not permit themselves to hope that that prognosis would ever change, because it would not.

At first, Katrin's parents could not accept what they were told. Every day they prayed and hoped desperately for a change in Katrin's condition. But the days went by, and then the weeks, and nothing changed.

Eventually, three months had passed, and Katrin was in exactly the same state as she had been when she was first wheeled into the hospital, except that the bone in her skull which had been fractured in the accident was now almost completely healed. Mr. and Mrs. Taylor began to lose hope.

Then came the day when the doctor in charge of Katrin's care called them into his office and presented a shocking proposal.

"You must understand that the decision is yours. I would not exert any pressure over you even if I could. But I feel that in order to fulfil my professional duty, I must point out the option. It is the opinion of all the specialists who have examined Katrin's case that it's impossible that there will ever be a change in her mental condition. As such, I think that you must consider the possibility of authorizing the hospital to remove the feeding tube."

Katrin's parents looked at one another, shock covering their faces.

Mr. Taylor spoke. "You mean, let her die?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes. As I say, the decision is entirely yours. But I do think you ought to consider it. I certainly wouldn't advocate a hasty decision. It's only been three months so far. But I just want to mention it as a possibility so that after a few more months, if there is no change, then you might want to think about it some more."

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Three floors above, a strange thing was happening in Katrin's room. A ripple passed through the room; a ripple as if one was observing, not the hospital room itself but, rather, a reflection of the room in a pool, and

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it was as if someone had dropped a pebble into the pool some distance away; a single ripple crossed the room, from window to door.

As the ripple passed out of the room, the room was different in two ways. The second hand of the clock on the wall opposite Katrin's bed had ceased to move; and Katrin was no longer the only occupant of the room. Near the door, as if he had entered by that way (although, in fact, the door had remained closed) an old man stood, looking at Katrin.

The man carried a stick that looked old, even older than the man himself. With the aid of the stick, he walked slowly towards the bed.

It was hard to say just how old the man might be. Everything about him seemed indeterminately ancient. Even his clothes, which might once have been a cheery green, now appeared faded and not a little dirty, as if he had spent a hundred years working in full sun in a garden. His hair was gray-white and covered the top of his head; much of the man's face was hidden behind a full gray beard: the beard was unkempt, as if he could not be bothered to take good care of it. The man's eyes, though, looked startlingly bright and alive for one so old.

The man's gait as he moved towards the bed was not so much infirm as slow and measured. Indeed, if one watched only the way in which he walked, one might easily conclude that this was a man of such supreme confidence and power that he knew that nothing of importance could ever happen at a place until he arrived there — and therefore there was never any need to hurry to arrive anywhere.

He moved nearer the bed, the clock on the wall betraying that each step, apparently so slow, took no time at all. He reached Katrin's side, where he could easily have stretched out his hand and touched her; but he did not do so.

Instead, he simply stared into her face. For what seemed like minutes, although the clock maintained its steadfast stillness, he looked at the face of the young woman, behind which there was a mind that no longer functioned. His eyes betrayed no expression, although their twinkle seemed subdued.

At length, he stretched out his hand towards Katrin. Her hands were above the bedclothes and, as his hand touched hers, the man spoke, in a voice that seemed older than the earth itself, and yet which seemed to have seeds of new life sprinkled in the words.

“Come, my child,” the man said. “It is time.”



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Another ripple passed through the room, as silently and as unnoticed as the first. As it passed, the second hand on the clock on the wall began to move once more. And the old man was gone. Katrin was once again alone.

And for the first time in three months, Katrin's head moved slightly and a noise — a quiet, almost inaudible moan — came from her throat.

## PROLEGOMENON THE FIRST

The garden, normally full of the sounds of life, is ominously quiet. The colors, usually vivid, are tinged with gray. Even the clear, warm light of the golden sun seems watery and lacking heat. The animals, instead of conversing, brood silently. Along a wide, grassy path through the trees walks the gardener, his steps heavy and slow as he converses with the tall, dark, menacing figure of Malthazzar. They pass a young doe, who, from her place in the trees, watches and strains to hear their words even though she feels an oppressive maelstrom of emotions engendered by the presence of the Lord of Evil.

The gardener shakes his head. "No. I know my people. They will not war."

Malthazzar speaks, his cold tones cutting through the air like a sharp winter breeze. "Ha! Only because you protect them. If you withdrew your presence they would soon fall into my ways. You give them no freedom of choice, that is why they follow you: because they can choose no other way."

They take several more steps before the gardener halts abruptly and looks his enemy in the eye. "That is not true. I have faith in my creatures. If I were to leave them, still they would not come under your dominion."

Malthazzar's mouth opens in a hideous, yellow smile. "Then I have a proposition for you. Let neither of us be present in the Three Lands. Let us each send only a few emissaries to do our bidding. Let us make a pact, you and I, that our chosen instruments shall be given free reign,

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and then let us see which of us the creatures of Palindor choose for their master.”

“You would challenge me, Malthazzar? What right have you?”

“No right, Lord Olvensar, save that you know that your creatures are weak, and that without you they would quickly become my servants instead of your own. It nearly happened once before, if you remember.”

The gardener nods slowly. “I remember, but then you and I were both abroad in the land. This time we will be absent?”

Malthazzar nods his assent.

“Then I agree. You are wrong. My people are strong. You can fool them for a time, but ultimately their love will win through. This is what I’ll do: I will send two creatures from the world of humans. No harm is to come to them, or I will seek you to the very ends of the worlds, and you will wish that you had never been created.”

“There is no need to threaten me. It is their weakness that will undo them, not my strength. For my part, I will instruct carefully the one whom I choose. No harm will come to your... humans” — he sneered as he said this word — “unless they cause harm first. And you will not permit any harm to come to the one I send?”

“Agreed. You have your pact. Now, go!”

The ground trembles and the air fills with loud, sneering laughter. “I leave, Olvensar. But when I return it will be as victor.” And with a thunderclap and a burning stench in the air, Malthazzar is gone.

Slowly, the colors return, the air feels clean again, the garden reverts to normality. But the nearby doe sees the gardener shake his head and say under his breath: “And so the test begins....”

## PROLEGOMENON THE SECOND

It is night in Sheol.

The burning, blood-red sun has set, its place taken by the black of utter voidance. There are neither moon nor stars; the sky is black with the nothingness of death. Yet there is light of a sort: an evil, burning light cast by the pools of smoldering brimstone that pockmark the dark land and exude their acrid stench over the landscape.

It is night in Sheol.

We stand, formless, shallowly breathing the rasping air, and peer into the depths of a valley. Here, at the very heart of Sheol, is the castle of its lord and master. Here, but a short distance from where we stand, is the castle of one whose name is rarely spoken in this, his kingdom. Here, its dark rock reflecting the burning sheen from its moat of molten sulphur, stands the castle of Malthazzar.

It is night in Sheol.

Trembling, we enter the castle, our senses barely surviving the assault. Worse than the aching black redness that greets our eyes, worse than the foul odor of living, rotting meat, worse by far than the hideous cacophony of the beasts that serve the master of this place, is the sense of loss, of despair, of hatred, of unalloyed evil. For here, this night, Lord Malthazzar has called together in one place his most trusted generals, his most powerful soldiers, his most deceptive spies.

Together, they have eaten and drunk until sated, gorged with the black, nameless, undead meat and drunk with the dark, oily liquid contained in their goblets. If these were mortals, they would now be

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sleeping off their excesses, but for these minions of darkness there is no rest, merely a dragging, loathsome tiredness, a fatigue from which there is no relief. For it is true that there is no rest for the wicked, and here, gathered together in one place, are the most wicked of creatures ever to serve the Lord of Evil.

But there are two here tonight who stand apart even from this loathsome crowd. The first is obvious: Malthazzar himself, the Lord of Sheol, seated at the head of the immense table at which the meal just concluded took place. Tonight he appears in all his diabolical glory, the red light from the torches in the sconces on the walls of the Great Hall seemingly swallowed by his black form. Slowly, he looks around the table, his eyes reflecting the red light. Creature by creature, he weighs what he sees before passing on to the next of his minions.

His soldiers, his generals, his spies do not observe their master. They are too busy talking and arguing amongst themselves, some still drinking of the fruit of the bitter dark vines that grow in the parched, baked soil of Sheol. Here and there, arguments have broken out: who is the greatest of Malthazzar's army? for what reason have they been summoned? Contemptuously, Malthazzar's eyes pass over these creatures, searching for the one who will do his bidding, the one on whom he must depend to bring his plan to fruition.

It is night in Sheol.

His eyes settle on a single creature unlike the others gathered before him. This is the second one who stands out from this gathering: a small creature, shorter than a man, taller than dwarf.

Yet, even as we look at him — if, indeed, the creature is male — we find that we cannot be sure even of his height. His shape seems indeterminate: one moment he appears as a short, dark mouselike creature, the next a tall, well-built human. But even as he undergoes these metamorphoses, one thing remains constant: black as his companions around the table are, this creature has an altogether different quality of blackness. His blackness seems, surprisingly, less complete — perhaps, we may hope, less evil — a dark grayness rather than a complete blackness, a mere absence of light rather than a destructive swallowing of it.

But there is something else about this creature, some other quality that causes Malthazzar's eyes to cease searching. Alone of his subjects, this creature is not engaged in conversation; alone of his subjects, this creature has not touched the goblet before him; alone of his subjects,

this creature is looking fixedly towards the head of the table, meeting the eyes of his lord.

Malthazzar stands hugely to his feet. He bellows a command: "Cease! Be quiet!" Silence descends on the chamber as all eyes now turn toward him. "Begone, all of you, back to your dominions. I have no further need of you." The stones of the castle reverberate with the power of his voice.

For a few moments, there is confusion as the creatures make for the room's exit. Soon only two creatures remain in the hall. For a long moment, they lock eyes, then one lowers his head in submission.

Quietly now, Malthazzar speaks to the remaining creature. "You! Shadow! Why did you not leave when I bid everyone depart?"

The creature's head rises again. For a moment, Malthazzar seems unsure whether there might not be a touch of haughty arrogance in this creature's bearing, but even as he watches, the gray shadow flickers and becomes smaller, the eyes that momentarily locked with his own dropping submissively to gaze at the dark, slimy flagstones.

"Did you not desire that I remain behind, my lord? For so I thought I saw in your eyes."

"Indeed, it is so. You may raise your eyes and look on me, for I have chosen you for a task. You will be the instrument through which I gain my greatest victory. You, Shadow, have been chosen from all my generals to be the one whose name shall be revered throughout the ages as the greatest of all those who serve me. Because of you, the minions of the hated High Lord will be destroyed and deliver Palindor to me. Come closer, and I will explain your task."

The gray body lifts itself from the crude bench on which it has been seated. Without hesitation, the creature walks towards his lord, ignoring the movement and the muffled sounds coming from the remains of the half-alive, half-dead meat that formed their meal. Shadow bows his head in supplication and drops to one knee before Malthazzar. "I am honored above all others this night, my lord. Tell me thy will and it shall be done."

Malthazzar smiles to himself. He has chosen well; he has chosen well indeed. This time, Palindor will be his.

Truly, it is night in Sheol.

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## *I Reverie*

Katrin Fowler was dying, the inoperable tumor in her head robbing her ineluctably of her life-force. Her time would soon be at an end.

If it were not for her son Michael, she would not mind so much. After all, even though thirty six seemed far too young to die, death held few fears for her. Ever since her husband, Ben, had been cruelly taken from her in a car accident three years ago, there had been little except Michael to live for.

Her thoughts wandered to Michael, and she found herself dwelling on the past. Michael had been such a beautiful, well-behaved child when he was little. His teachers had commented on how intelligent he was, what a pleasant child he was to be around, and what great potential he held. But all that had changed after the accident.

Looking out the window at the drizzle that lay heavy on the sea, Katrin's thoughts returned, as they did several times a day, to that moment when the telephone had rung.

It was a Tuesday; for some reason that fact remained burned in her mind, as if it were somehow important. Michael had just arrived home from school and was eating a snack. It was her tenth wedding anniversary, not that Michael was aware of the fact. Ten years since she had ceased being Katrin Taylor, unemployed college graduate, and started a new life as Katrin Fowler, wife of a promising young doctor who had just become a junior partner in an established practice in town.

For neither Ben nor herself had there ever been anyone else. Within seconds of their first meeting, they had both known that they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together. What neither of them had foreseen was that that time would be so short.

They had married, and within the year Michael had been born. There had been no other children, much though Ben and she had desired them. Perhaps they had spoiled Michael when he was little; but who, Katrin wondered in self defense, could have blamed them? Michael was everything that anyone could want in a child. Indeed, she remembered thinking not long before the accident that she did not deserve such



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a happy life: a loving, caring, successful husband, and an intelligent, thoughtful, hardworking son. She could not help wondering sometimes if her illogical guilt at her own happiness had somehow been the cause of the accident that had destroyed that happiness. But no, that was impossible....

Still the drizzle hung like a cloud just beyond the glass. Her mood matched the grayness of the drizzle as her thoughts continued inexorably onward, replaying the events of three years before.

The telephone rang. She glanced at the clock on the kitchen microwave: nearly four o'clock. Ben had told her that he hoped to be home before now — his shift at the hospital was over at three. But she was not worried. Long ago she had come to accept the fact that talented surgeons like Ben could not keep regular office hours, and it would not be the first time that an emergency at the hospital had caused him to change their dinner plans at short notice.

She picked up the telephone at the first ring. "Hello?"

A woman said, "Hello, Mrs. Fowler?"

"Yes."

"This is the hospital." So Ben was going to be late. It must be a real emergency, she thought; Katrin could not remember the last time Ben had not called personally to apologize that he wouldn't be home on time.

There was a pause before the voice at the other end of the line continued. "I'm afraid I have some bad news, Mrs. Fowler." Even then, Katrin had not suspected what was coming, although the tone of the other's voice should have warned her. "Dr. Fowler was in a traffic accident on his way home this afternoon, not a hundred yards from the hospital. He was rushed here and Dr. Wentworth operated immediately. But I'm afraid there was nothing he could do, the internal damage was too great. Your husband is dead, Mrs. Fowler. I'm so sorry."

She could remember little of what happened next. She had tried, many times, to reconstruct the exact sequence of events, but she could never quite fit her memories together in a pattern that made sense. The next thing she remembered clearly was sitting on Michael's bed, trying to comfort the child whose face was buried in his pillow, screaming "No! No! No!" at the top of his lungs.

For a while, Katrin and Michael had seemed to adjust well to their loss. The first warning sign hadn't come until about six months later,

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when the principal of Michael's school called to tell her that Michael had been caught beating a boy with a tree branch. The boy had had to go to the hospital to receive stitches, and Michael was suspended from school for the rest of the week. The parents of the injured boy decided not to press charges, but that was of little comfort to Katrin, who had been unable to discover from Michael why he had set on the boy. The injured boy also refused to talk about it, and the school officials confessed to having no clues as to what might have precipitated the fight.

Katrin never did discover what the fight had been about; but it was only the first of many scrapes that Michael got into. Three years later and now in middle school, Michael had become part of what Katrin thought of as "a bad crowd": he often played truant, and was suspected, although he had never actually been caught, of bullying any student who crossed him.

Katrin began to think about moving away, perhaps to the country, where Michael would be removed from the growing influence of street gangs. While she was pondering this possibility, she noticed that more and more often she was feeling tired, and sometimes her limbs stiffened inexplicably. She began to experience episodes when her left side went numb. For several weeks she ignored these symptoms, putting them down variously to a virus, then simple fatigue, then worry over Michael. Eventually, after an entire day when she was so tired that she was barely able to get out of bed, she at last went to her doctor.

A barrage of tests carried out over the next month had brought her the news: there was an inoperable tumor in her brain. Although medication could be prescribed, there was nothing that science could do to save her. She should get her affairs in order; if there was ever anything she wanted to do, she should do it now, because she would be lucky to survive more than a few months.

Katrin had no living blood relatives except Michael, but Ben's brother, Kenn, was married and had a son a year older than Michael; Kenn and his wife agreed that they would gladly accept Michael into their family when Katrin could no longer cope. Her son's future settled, Katrin and Michael sat down and had a very grown-up conversation about how to spend the time that remained.

"I'm open to any ideas," said Katrin, "except sitting at home waiting for the inevitable."

Michael shrugged. "I don't care."

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“I have some money saved. If ever there was a time to spend it, I guess that time is now.”

Michael seemed suddenly interested.

“You mean we could do something really cool, like travel around the world?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want.”

“Anything to get away from here.”

So she sold the house, placing most of the proceeds in a trust fund for Michael, took Michael out of school, and then used the remainder of the funds from the house for their journey around the world.

Travelling from east to west, they had started with visits to several states, crossed the Pacific to Japan, then worked their way through Singapore, several stops in Australia, then on to India, Israel, through eastern Europe and were now at their last stop: the tiny duchy of Cornwall, in the southwest of England.

At first, Michael had been a perfect travelling companion. His sullenness and rebellion had disappeared, and he had taken as much interest as she in the sights and sounds (and sometimes smells) that had greeted each stop.

But since they had arrived in Europe Michael had become more withdrawn and morose; now he spent much of his time alone, walking the streets of the towns in which they stayed. As far as she could tell, he was causing no trouble, and she decided that the change was simply because their journey was nearly over, and the reality of what would happen once they left Cornwall for home had begun to weigh heavily on the boy’s mind.

The trip had done Katrin good. She felt much better — until, without warning, two days ago, she had suddenly blacked out. It was late, and Michael was already asleep. She was walking across her room in the cozy bed and breakfast, when the next thing she knew she was flat on her back, the clock on the wall showing that several minutes had passed. Scared, she said nothing to anyone. The incident had not repeated itself, but for the last couple of days she felt more tired than at any time since leaving home.

But along with the tiredness was something else. For the first time in nearly two decades, Katrin found her mind dwelling on the extraordinary events that had occurred when she was a teenager.

## REVERIE

There had been a car accident involved that time as well, although she had no memory of it. In fact, more than one of the doctors whom she had consulted in the past six months had expressed the opinion that her tumor might have been caused by the long-ago accident. Her brain had been starved of oxygen for several minutes, and it was possible that she had received a blow to the head that had gone unnoticed at the time. Afterwards, her parents had told her that she had lain for months in a coma, unmoving, never conscious, barely alive. And yet, to the astonishment of the doctors, who had been unanimous that she would never again open her eyes (much less live any kind of a normal life) she had eventually recovered from the near-fatal accident.

She never told the doctors what had happened to her during those months in which she had lain in a coma.

She had tried to tell her parents, though. They, loving her, had never contradicted her story, but her father had sown the seeds of doubt by explaining: “Katrin, you know that dreams sometimes seem very real; well, when your brain has received a trauma like yours did, it is very possible to have especially vivid dreams. They might easily seem real at the time, but really they only happened inside your head. If I were you, I wouldn’t tell anyone about your dreams. Just be thankful that you’re back here with us.”

Even though she had wanted to argue with her parents, she knew that she had no proof that there really was a place inhabited by dwarves and gnomes and goblins and trolls. Besides, it would have sounded childish for her, a young woman of nearly sixteen, to have insisted that such a place existed. She never again tried to tell anyone about Palindor. Even Ben had died not knowing. It was only after the doctors’ diagnosis of her tumor that something had happened that had made her begin to wonder about Palindor....

It was a small, almost inconsequential, incident.

One day, hurrying to put some clean clothes in a drawer, the drawer had somehow closed heavily on her left thumb. In pain, she examined her thumb to see if she had broken it. Unbidden, her thoughts crossed two decades. Into her head flashed an image of her left thumb extending toward the edge of a dark blade. She felt the sword cutting into her flesh, and then the terrifying darkness that followed as the power of the sword entered her body.

## SHADOW

The flashback had lasted only a moment, but its results stayed with her to this day. When she examined her thumb after trapping it in the drawer, in exactly the place where the sword had cut her, there was now a small scar of raised tissue, lighter than the surrounding skin: a healed wound from long ago that had not been there moments earlier.

She hadn't thought much about Palindor for many years. But now she found herself wondering, over and over again: did Palindor really exist, or was it, as her father had insisted, just a trick played by her brain?

Could such creatures as elves and wizards really exist? It seemed impossible. It *was* impossible. Yet the mark on her thumb testified that, even though it made no sense, there *was* such a place, and she once, long ago, had been its High Queen.

She found herself thinking of Olvensar, the strange High Lord of Palindor. Was there really such a person? An old man in dirty gardening overalls whose eyes seemed to hold a power strong enough to create worlds? Several times recently, she had caught herself thinking out loud: "Olvensar, please show yourself. If you are real, please come and do something about this lump inside my head." But of course nothing had happened.

Until yesterday.

Cornwall was a wild, rural, remote part of England. During the summer, this part of the country was inundated with tourists, but now the holiday season was over and there were few visitors. Lying three hundred miles west-south-west of London, Katrin and Michael were in the extreme western part of Cornwall, where once Celts had lived and traded with the Romans who later came to occupy the rest of the country that would one day be known as England. But here the wild Celts, surviving in the harsh environment where the land confronts the Atlantic Ocean, had continued their strange, mystical existence for many hundreds of years before finally succumbing to occupation.

Katrin had known little of this when they had arrived. To her and to Michael, this was merely their last stop, the westernmost part of England, with only the Atlantic Ocean separating them from America. Yesterday they had arrived at the bed and breakfast, planning to stay for a few days before returning home. Feeling strong enough for a walk, she had accompanied Michael into the nearby small town: a tourist trap in the summer, a fishing village in the winter, and now resting uneasily

## REVERIE

between seasons. As had become her custom on their round-the-world trip, Katrin had gone to a bookshop to buy a guidebook to the area.

Her heart had nearly stopped beating. There was a book: *Guide to West Cornwall* it was called. But on the cover, underneath the title, was a photograph: a picture of a large slab of granite held aloft by three tall, crudely-shaped granite pillars. Her hands shook as she picked up the book. "I know what that is," she heard herself saying. "It's a quoit."

"Indeed 'tis, ma'am," said the shopkeeper in a Cornish burr. "That's Lanyon Quoit. It's easy to find. Just take the back road to Penzance. It's near a village called Morvah. Can't miss it."

But Katrin was not listening. She repeated the words over and over again. "A quoit, a quoit...." She had seen a quoit but once before, more than twenty years ago. But that quoit wasn't near a village in Cornwall. It stood alone on the highest point of Machrenmoor, south of Carn Toldwyn.

In Palindor.

## 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.

## THE VISIT

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.

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.

## THE VISIT

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?"



## THE VISIT

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.

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

## THE VISIT

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."

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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.

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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. 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

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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.