

THE GARDEN of the STONE

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One

Cariad flattened herself against the rough wall of the tenement building beside her.

The tenement was a haphazard structure of baked-clay brick, leprous where the outer shell of stucco had peeled away. Each of its four floors was a little wider than the one below, so that it leaned above the street, its top gables only an arm's reach from those of the building opposite. The whole of this sector of the city was crammed with such buildings, like a mouth with too many teeth, all of them constructed in a similar style and overlaid by a larger uniformity of dirt, poverty, and decay. The streets too were similar, snaking and uneven and only two manlengths wide, as were the small squares that broke the streets' mazelike pattern, the fountains where the residents lined up to get water, the communal privies and public pillories and licensed drinking houses. Ashan-istar was a planned city: every part of it had been made to be exactly what it was. These mean streets at its base were a deliberate slum, a holding area for the poorest of the poor.

Silently Cariad edged forward, enough to get a clear view down the narrow alleyway that ran between the tenement building and the one beyond it. The alley was not lit, as the main streets were, but the man she was following carried a globe of mindlight, held before him on his outstretched palm, and its spectral glow picked him out against the surrounding darkness. He was moving more slowly now, his confident progress hampered by the uneven footing and the need to avoid the garbage strewn everywhere about. She and her companions had been

shadowing him for nearly an hour, the time it had taken him to walk from the Guardian Orderhouse to the shabby building from which he had just emerged. The route he had used earlier had not included this alley. It was a stroke of luck that he had ducked down it now, for there could not be a more ideal location for an ambush.

Behind her, Laran and Shabishara waited. She sensed their readiness; from Shabishara there was also a pulse of fear, like a hidden current beneath a smooth expanse of water, and from Laran, an edgy exhilaration that matched her own. Cariad loved these risky missions: their immediacy, their urgent swiftness, the way they reduced the cloudy complexities of life to a single clear imperative. She relished the changes they worked in her: the catlike sharpness of her senses, the icy clarity of her focus, the certain knowledge of her own power and control. She was aware of the physical signals of danger, like light running underneath her skin, but unlike Shabishara, she was not afraid. She knew, as she had always known, that she could not be harmed.

<I'm going to do it now,> she thought to Laran. <Stay where you are till I tell you.>

She paused for a moment to balance herself. Then, in one fluid movement, she stepped into the mouth of the alley, aimed her quarter-sized crossbow at the man's shadowed back, and fired. The effect was immediate. The man crumpled bonelessly to the ground. His mindlight winked out, plunging the alley into darkness.

<He's down,> Cariad thought.

They started forward, cautiously, Gifts alert. The dart Cariad had fired was treated with a power-deadening drug, developed by the illegal apothecary network she and the others were employed to protect. An earlier version of the drug had proved effective on ordinary members of the Order of Guardians, but this was a new formula, and the man they had brought down was Arm of the Stone. There was a possibility, small but real, that it might not work.

The alley held the day's heat like a furnace. The stench of rot and sewage, which laid a dense miasma over the whole of this portion of the city, was so intense that Cariad could taste it at the back of her throat. Because they did not wish to risk being seen, the companions used no illumination; they were almost blind as they

picked their way forward, ankle-deep in mud and garbage. The Roundhead lay on his side amid the filth, his black robe invisible against the ground, his face and hands pale blotches on the shadows. He was conscious. Through the guard she habitually maintained to mute the intensity of her heartsensing Gift, Cariad felt his rage, his frantic effort to comprehend what had befallen him.

<I sense no Gift.> She reached out to Laran. <Do you?>

<Nothing.> She felt his fierce exultation—the joy of the chase, the thrill of capture. <We did it, Cariad. We took a Roundhead.>

Understanding passed between them. Over the course of their careers the two of them had done and dared a great deal; there were few frontiers they had not crossed. This Roundhead had been one.

Stooping, Cariad ran her gloved hand up the Roundhead's back, searching for the dart. She found it at the base of his neck, exactly as she had aimed it. Not bothering to be gentle, she yanked it out. The Roundhead could not restrain a hiss of pain. It was the only reaction he was able to make. The drug was a paralytic as well as a deadening agent: he could breathe and speak, but no more.

Cariad disarmed her quarterbow, which for safety's sake she had primed with a second dart before entering the alley. She replaced both darts in her belt-pouch, slipped the bow into the leather wallet that hung at her side, and rose to her feet.

<Let's go.>

Laran and Shabishara hauled the Roundhead up between them like a sack of grain. They waited while Cariad summoned, through her making Gift, a binding of invisibility. Moving back to the mouth of the alley, they turned left onto the avenue along which they had come. Around them the city slept, the riot of its daytime activity briefly suspended by the hours of darkness and the need for rest; only drunks and criminals were abroad. Cariad and the others slipped by unseen. Yet though a corporeal object could be hidden from the eye, it still displaced air, still set weight against the ground. A breath of wind followed in the companions' wake, a trail of shadow, a whisper of sound as faint as falling leaves. Those they passed registered presence even as their eyes denied it, a sensation as indefinite and uneasy as a dream.

The street sloped steeply downward, leading toward the docks, broad structures built across the marshes on wooden pilings to give access to the river. The marshes

were flooded for most of the year, but the heat of summer transformed them into a vast expanse of sticky mud, rank with the sewage that flowed down from the heights and strewn with an endless variety of garbage—broken barrels, shattered furniture, rusted tools, discarded clothing, wrecked boats, spoiled food, dead animals. There were human corpses too, targets of thievery or victims of feuds or inconvenient family members dumped to save funeral costs. Disease bred here, and vermin, rats and blackflies and fat water-snakes. The thick stands of reeds and rushes disguised treacherous mudholes, capable of swallowing a man more quickly than he could draw breath to cry for help. Still, noisome as it was, it was one of the few places in Ashan-istar where the companions could be certain of being neither witnessed nor interrupted in what they were about to do. More important, it would swallow the consequences.

As they neared the docks, the stench of the marshes overtook that of the city, a sulfurous odor of vegetable putrefaction. The slum gave way to the warehouses and merchants' offices and Guildhalls of the commercial district, shuttered and barred for the night. Ahead, the cobbles of the street ran up against the wooden planks of the dock. Cariad ducked beneath the railing, dropping onto the mud. Laran followed. Shabishara gripped the Roundhead under the arms and lowered him over the edge of the dock. When he was safely delivered Shabishara leaped down, and he and Laran took their burden up again.

Cariad had already scouted their route, tying scraps of white cloth to the reeds to mark the way. Away from the overhanging tenements, the moon- and starlight seemed luminously bright; the markers glimmered against the stalks like night-blooming flowers. It was a little cooler here than in the city, and profoundly silent, a heavy hush unbroken even by the sound of insects.

At last, deep within the marsh, they reached the place Cariad had chosen for the Roundhead's interrogation: a small area where some animal or human conflict had shattered the reeds and pressed them down into a kind of mat.

<It's about time.> Shabishara let the Roundhead's legs fall, and wiped his streaming forehead with his sleeve. <The man's as heavy as a bullock.>

<Roundhead living,> Laran responded sourly, lowering the Roundhead's shoulders to the ground.

On her palm Cariad kindled a ball of mindlight. Its pallid radiance washed

across the tangled wall of reeds, the mucky ground, and the Roundhead, helpless on his back. Cariad had been observing him for many days; she was already familiar with the wide proud face, the close-cropped fair hair, the fleshy features, the small light-colored eyes. Close up, he seemed older than he had at a distance, though the Roundhead custom of holding off the processes of physical aging made it difficult to tell how old he really was. Like all Roundheads he wore not Guardian gray but a fine robe of black brocade, with belt and boots of Roundhead red, and gemstone jewelry about his neck and fingers and wrists. With typical arrogance, he had not bothered to remove it for his journey into a place where people would kill for a pair of leather boots, let alone a golden neck-chain.

Cariad set the mindlight on the air above his chest. The companions took their places: Laran kneeling on the Roundhead's left, Cariad on his right, Shabishara standing at his feet. Laran, an experienced interrogator, would ask the questions. Cariad, with her heartsensing ability, would monitor the Roundhead's reactions. Shabishara would stand watch.

"Do you know who we are?" Laran asked the Roundhead, using voicespeech because of the man's deadened power.

A series of expressions passed across the Roundhead's face. With his Gift in stasis, the protections with which Guardians customarily bounded their minds were gone, and his feelings were as clear as an unGifted man's. He was in pain from the dart wound, outraged and humiliated and, beneath it all, profoundly shocked. He was Arm of the Stone: most privileged and powerful of all Guardians, defenders of orthodoxy and enforcers of the Limits, their word law and their judgment final. Before this moment the prospect of finding himself in such a plight would have seemed as likely as the moon falling from the sky. Yet through this inner turmoil his Roundhead training, his Roundhead experience, his Roundhead pride cut like a knife. The Arm of the Stone encountered no situation it could not control. Even paralyzed and helpless, he did not doubt his ability to turn the tables on his attackers.

"I can guess," he replied, in a rasping whisper. "What have you done to me?"

"The dart my colleague shot you with carried a power-deadening drug."

Cariad could feel the man's surprise—not that such a thing existed, but that people like herself had access to it. "You will die for this," he rasped. "And you

will suffer before you do. No one lays hands upon the Reddened. No one.”

From Shabishara came a sharp intake of breath. Laran leaned forward, pulling the cloak away from the Roundhead’s left shoulder. Fastened to his robe was a circular brooch, its red enamel surface divided by a jagged black lightning bolt.

<Well.> Laran looked at Cariad. In the wan mindlight his blue eyes were washed to a watery gray. <It seems our friend is more important than we thought.>

<You were in charge of intelligence for this mission, Cariad.> Above his mask Shabishara’s eyes were stretched, the whites visible all around the dark irises.

<How could you not know this man was Red?>

<The Reddened don’t normally travel in secrecy,> Cariad replied. <Nothing my Orderhouse contact told me indicated he was anything but a traditional Roundhead.>

<He’s right about one thing.> Shabishara was projecting too hard; Cariad winced a little with the force of it. <We’re as good as dead. They won’t rest until they’ve avenged him.>

<How can they avenge what they don’t know?> Laran’s mindvoice was reasonable. <His body will probably never be found.>

<But if it is—>

<If it is, there’ll be nothing to show how he died or at whose hand. That’s why we agreed to kill him Cariad’s way.>

<Kill him now, then,> Shabishara thought. <Kill him and let’s get out of here.>

<I’m not going to waste all this effort on a simple assassination, Shara. We brought him here to question him, and that’s what I’m going to do.>

<But, Laran, he’s Red!> Shabishara took a step toward Laran. What Cariad sensed from him went beyond simple fear. <Reds know things other Roundheads don’t. They do things other Roundheads don’t. What if he breaks the power of the drug while you’re questioning him? What if the three of us can’t hold him?>

<Enough, Shara.> Laran’s thoughts cut cleanly through the other man’s. <The Reddened may be worse than other Roundheads, but they’re not superhuman. Right now he’s no threat to us. Go back to your place, and let me get on with it.>

There was a pause. With visible effort Shabishara stepped back. But Cariad could still feel the press of his fear, too large, somehow, to fit the situation.

The Roundhead had been following this interchange, his small, attentive eyes

flashing from face to face. Even if his Gift had been unbound he would not have been able to perceive what was being conveyed, for the kind of mindspeech Cariad and the others used was Guardian-proof. But Roundheads, because of the mastery they must have of mindprobing, were uniquely skilled and powerful nearspeakers, and he could recognize mind-communication even from outside.

“Your companion seems distressed,” he said, directing his words toward Laran but focusing his gaze on Shabishara. “Perhaps he’s thinking about how the Reddened deal with those who try to oppose them.”

Shabishara stared back, transfixed. “Be quiet, Roundhead,” said Laran sharply. “My colleague’s thoughts are none of your business.”

“Whatever you’ve planned, you cannot succeed. It would be better for you if you gave up now. Surrender into my hands, and I give you my word I’ll request a quick death for you, no torture before or after the probe. That’s no idle promise. I am vowed to Jolyon, Second to the Staff-Holder of the Arm of the Stone.”

The name rocked Cariad back on her heels. Laran’s eyes flicked toward her. He was a sensitive, a diviner capable of sensing not just the properties of objects, but the forces that connected them. But this was more than just his Gift at work. He knew her, knew her story and the place Jolyon held in it.

“No more talk,” he said to the Roundhead. He was a skilled projectionist—there was only a fraction of his power in the words, but it was enough to silence the man. Cariad sensed his rage as he struggled to strike back, forgetting for a moment that the channels of his Gift were closed to him. The screen of his Roundhead confidence slipped aside; for an instant she glimpsed the true depth of the ugliness in him, heaped across his soul like the garbage in the alley where he had fallen.

“I’m going to place a compulsion on you now,” Laran said. “It’ll be easier for you if you don’t resist.”

The Roundhead’s anger surged again, and behind it something more: contempt.

<He thinks you aren’t strong enough to go inside his mind,> Cariad thought to Laran. <Or that you fear him too much.>

Laran smiled, just a little. It was true he did not want to enter this man’s mind. It was he who had decided, over the objections of both Cariad and Shabishara, that the interrogation would be conducted orally. But Cariad knew that it was not fear, or weakness, that lay behind his aversion. He had been an interrogator for a long

time, and had grown weary of exposing the inside of himself to the foulness of others' minds. With the drug and the compulsion, he could extract as much as a scan could—more slowly, but more cleanly, and at a distance.

Cariad sensed the focusing of his Gift, as he gathered and shaped the net of coercion in which the Roundhead would be bound. He released it, using his full strength. The air trembled with the force of it. The Roundhead's eyes flew wide, and then fell closed.

<You hit him too hard.> Cariad leaned over him, her fingers searching for his pulse. The signs of life were there: he was only unconscious.

<I warned him not to resist.>

The Roundhead's eyes opened again. The quality of his regard had changed. He recognized now the strength that held him.

"What's your name?" Laran asked.

The man struggled not to answer. But even a Roundhead's will could not stand against Laran's compulsion. "Balak," he said at last, through his teeth.

"Why were you in the slums tonight?"

Again he clenched his teeth, but the words came anyway. "Visiting...a business...associate."

"A business associate?" The man from whose house Balak had come was a maker and seller of poisons. The city guard, an ubiquitous presence in other neighborhoods, paid little attention to the slums; criminal enterprises thrived there, little pockets of prosperity amid the squalor. "What sort of business?"

"I am...an executor."

"Ah." Cariad felt Laran's disgust. Executors were Reds who specialized in the dealing of death, from the accomplishment of individual executions and assassinations to the organization of mass purifications. Every group of Reddened orthodoxers included at least one. "The Roundheads you're traveling with. They're Reddened also?"

"We are all...Red."

The Roundheads had arrived in Ashan-istar a little over a week ago, twelve of them, including Balak. To all appearances they were a pair of traditional Investigation Teams, called in to pursue a charge of Limit-Violation. They brought with them their own clerical staff and servants; within the Orderhouse, they never

left the suite of rooms and offices they had been given, and communicated with no one except the Orderhouse's Abbot. Each day at dawn, half of them left the Orderhouse, passing out of Ashan-istar into the arid regions to the east and often not returning until after dark. The rest stayed in the Orderhouse, pursuing their business behind closed doors. So perfect was their secrecy that Cariad's Orderhouse contact was unable to discover anything at all about what they were doing.

The leaders of the apothecary network Cariad and the others were employed to protect feared they had somehow been betrayed, and the Roundheads had been called in as part of an effort to unmask them. The network was guardian not only of its own discoveries but of the work of a dozen other networks that had been destroyed or absorbed into it; if it were lost, the painfully gained knowledge of centuries would vanish, perhaps never to come again. All activity was suspended. Cariad and Laran, experienced in tracking, undertook to discover where the Roundheads went each day; but they cloaked themselves in bindings of invisibility, and employed disattention wardings so powerful that even Laran could not follow their power-signatures for more than a short way beyond the city. Balak, who sometimes broke from the others to go about his own business, took no such precautions. But his movements shed no light on the purpose the Roundheads followed in such extreme secrecy.

A week passed. The six operatives who formed the network's guard met to discuss the situation. It was decided that Laran and Cariad and Shabishara would follow, trap, and question Balak, whose penchant for lone nighttime ventures made him a good target.

It was a risky plan. Laran and Cariad had captured Guardians in the past, but neither had ever set themselves against the Arm of the Stone. Once taken, Balak could not be left alive: a memory-kill could not be trusted to hold against a Roundhead's powerful, interrogation-trained Gift. But in the operatives' collective judgment, the risk was outweighed by the need to know. And they were not without advantages. Laran and Cariad, and to a lesser extent Shabishara, were themselves highly Gifted. The marshes would provide protection during the interrogation, and absorb the evidence after it. And they had the newly perfected drug—which, coincidentally, needed to be field-tested.

“Why are you travelling in secret?” Laran said to Balak.

“We have been...charged...with a secret...mission.”

“What kind of mission?”

“There are...difficulties,” Balak grated. “With the world’s...bindings. We have been ordered...to document them.”

“Difficulties,” Laran repeated. The resistance movement of which he and Cariat and Shabishara were a part boasted an extensive intelligence network; the problems Balak referred to were well known to the companions. “Describe them.”

“On the Guardian Roads...the stones...crumble.” Cariat could feel, through the pain of the compulsion, Balak’s revulsion at being made to speak of such things to those who were not Arm of the Stone. “Along the Fortress Passage...the weather guarantees...no longer exclude...the snow. In the Orderhouses...the mindlight...is dimming...and the warmth-bindings...have grown unreliable.”

“Can’t these problems be repaired?”

“We do...repair them. But of late...the pace of failure...has accelerated. It is feared...that if we do not take permanent action...we may...become unable...to address them at all.”

“And so you’ve been told to document them.”

“To build...a precise...catalogue. It has never...been done before.”

“Who gave you this charge?”

“The charge...of documentation...came from the Prior.”

“From the Prior?” All Laran’s professionalism could not keep the amazement from his voice. “The Prior charged the *Reddened* with a mission?”

“He charged...the Arm of the Stone.” Balak’s teeth snapped as he spoke, as if he were trying to bite each word in half. “The Arm’s Staff-Holder...charged the Second. The Second...charged the Reddened.”

“I see. And was it also Jolyon who ordered you to keep your study secret?”

“That order...is the Prior’s. He does not wish to allow...the Journeyers outside the Fortress...to know the extent...of the difficulties. Only he...and the Councils of Six...know what we are doing.”

“What bindings have you come to study in Ashan-istar?”

“The bindings...of the Orderhouse.”

“And outside it?”

“There is...a Guardian Road.”

“Ah, but you don’t go to the Road. You go out the east gate, into the desert. What bindings lie there?”

“We have been charged...to survey everything...even the lands...where there are no bindings...to see if perhaps...the difficulties lie...in some natural force...beyond the bindings...themselves.”

Drugged and helpless as he was, Balak’s will was still prodigious. <He’s dodging,> Cariad thought to Laran. <Telling one truth to avoid another.>

Laran nodded slightly to show he had understood. Cariad felt the shifting as he focused his concentration, tightening the web of coercion he had woven around Balak’s mind.

“I’ll ask you again,” he said. “Why do you go into the desert?”

Balak’s eyes bulged. The muscles in his neck stood out like ropes. “We...have business...in the desert.”

“Obviously. What kind of business?”

Balak opened his mouth and shouted, a long cry of pain and rage, shocking in the quiet of the night. He could not stop himself from turning it into words. “The business...of our charge!”

“Describe it,” Laran said relentlessly. “Describe to me, exactly and precisely, what you go to the desert to do.”

Again Balak shouted, trying to blur the words the compulsion urged him to speak. It was a dreadful sound, like a man being tortured in some unspeakable way; it went on and on as if it would never end.

<Curse it, Laran.> Shabishara shifted from foot to foot. <Can’t you shut him up?>

<Let him yell. No one will hear. And if they do, who will care?>

The shout became a groan, then a sigh, as Balak ran out of breath. Panting, he stared up at Laran. All his arrogance, all his calculation, had vanished. His face was the face of a man who sees, in full and dreadful detail, the shape of his own defeat.

“There is a Gate.” He had ceased to fight. The words came without resistance now. “That’s where we go.”

“A Gate?” Cariad felt Laran’s sudden excitement. The twelve Gates that opened

from this world onto the world beyond were among the Guardians' most closely-held secrets. Only the Prior, the Councils of Six, the Gates' Roundhead keepers, and the Roundhead world-crossers knew their exact locations. "Where? Describe it precisely."

"It's in a cave in the cliffs due east of the city. Halfway down there is an overhang shaped like the head of a bird. The cave of the Gate is just below it."

<Shara?> thought Laran.

<I know where he means.> Shabishara had spent many years in Ashan-istar and knew its environs like a native. <I had no idea there was a cave there, though. It must be illusion-bound.>

"So." Laran turned back to Balak. "You're here to document the power difficulties. Those of you who go outside the city document the difficulties with the Gate. Those of you who remain in the city document the difficulties with the bindings of the Orderhouse. Is that an accurate summary?"

Balak closed his eyes. Cariad could feel his exhaustion. He looked, now, much closer to what she suspected was his true age. "Yes."

"Is there anything else? Any other problem you've come to investigate? Any Violators you're seeking? Any handpower networks you've heard rumors of?"

"Nothing...like that."

Balak's face did not change, but Cariad felt the struggle behind the words. <He's trying to dodge again,> she thought to Laran.

"Like what, then?" Laran leaned over Balak. "What else, besides your task of documentation, have you been sent here to do?"

Balak's teeth clenched. But his will was weaker now, and he gave in almost at once. "We have a second charge."

"Describe it."

"To devise solutions to the power difficulties." Balak's eyes opened. The bleakness in them was indescribable. Even in defeat, he had contrived to hold something back—a tiny victory, now gone. "Not just better repairs—solutions. We are not to return until we have done so."

"Does this charge come from the Prior also?"

"No. From the Second."

"By way of the Council? Or from the Second alone?"

“From the Second alone. Not even the Staff-Holder knows.”

“And what does Jolyon intend to do with these solutions, if you discover them?”

Balak’s eyes fell closed again. “The Second does not share his purposes with those who follow him.”

<He’s telling the truth, Laran,> Cariad thought.

Laran nodded. “All right, then. Is there anything else you’ve been told, or any other charges, that are relevant to your presence here? Is there anything you’ve held back from me? If so, I order you to reveal it now.”

“No.” Balak’s voice was a whisper. “I have told you everything. There’s nothing else.”

<It’s the truth,> Cariad thought again.

<Cariad, is there anything you want me to ask him?> Cariad shook her head.

<Shara?>

<No. Let’s kill him and get out of here.>

<Yes. Hold him, Shara, just in case.>

Shabishara’s Gift flashed out like a fist. Balak gasped with the impact of it. Cariad felt the loosening as Laran unwove the net of compulsion he had created.

<He’s ready, Cariad.>

Cariad breathed deeply. She flexed her fingers, and placed her hands flat on Balak’s chest. She felt his heartbeat, a rapid faint percussion. She was aware of a heat in her palms, as if she had lowered them too close to flame.

She closed her eyes and narrowed her mind to a pinpoint of concentration, banishing the world around her until there was nothing in it but herself and Balak, her outstretched arms and the steady rhythm of his blood. Gathering her Gift, she sent it downward like a lancet, piercing the barrier of cloth and skin, slipping past the network of bone, probing deep into flesh and muscle until she touched his heart. It was like laying a hand against the edge of a turning wheel. His body resisted, even as it yielded to the pressure she brought to bear. His heart slowed, and his blood with it. His breathing deepened. He could not struggle: the power of the drug and of his kidnappers bound him fully. But he could rage, and despair. He could grasp at his life as it drifted from him, like a light receding across dark water. Heartsenser that she was, Cariad felt these things—but dimly, muffled by her thick guard and by the skill of long experience, which had taught her how to set aside the

messages her Gift tried to bring her.

In the instant before his heart stopped, she opened her eyes. She had learned not to look at those she killed, just as she had learned not to listen to the supplication of their feelings. But this man belonged to Jolyon. She wanted to see his face as he died, to watch as the spark of his life went out. His eyes locked to hers. With the last of his strength he sent his hatred out against her. It was the most concentrated emotion she had ever felt, stripped and purified by the imminence of death. It struck her like a blow, piercing to the heart of her guarded Gift. Her careful disconnection vanished. Fire seemed to ignite across her body, to erupt inside her mind. Fire, borne on the tide of her killing will, passed through the medium of her hands and into Balak's flesh. Pain burst within him, illuminating the pathway of every nerve, turning his bones to flame. In that instant, Cariad and the fire were the same. Her body sang with the power of it. She held it, allowing it to peak, an impossible pitch of light and agony. Then, deliberately, she released her grip and let it fall away. His life went with it, like the last drops of water slipping down a drain.

For a moment she sat motionless. Her hands still rested on Balak's chest—cool now, no fire in them. His sightless gaze was still fixed to hers.

<Cariad?> It was Laran, his mindvoice hesitant.

<It's done.> Cariad was exhausted, a fatigue so deep the very air seemed heavy. Laran helped her to her feet. He held on to her, trying to turn her so that he could look into her face, but she pulled away.

They stripped Balak of his heavy robe, his jewels, his Reddened insignia, his shirt and breeches and boots and fine linen undergarments, and piled these things beside him on the reeds. With the making portion of her Gift, Cariad reached through the solidity of outward form toward the smallest components of matter's construction, and broke the internal bonds that existed on that level. An instant, and Balak's possessions were gone. It would have been convenient to do the same with Balak; but flesh-and-blood creatures resisted disincorporation. Cariad knew from experience that the result would be a messy heap of everted flesh, which, in the unlikely event that it was found, would provoke much more question than an unclothed and anonymous corpse.

Shabishara cloaked himself in invisibility and departed. Cariad and Laran waited

a little, then followed. Cariad looked back as she went, for she wanted to fix forever in her memory the sight of Balak, sprawled and naked on the reeds. Within a few days, birds and other carrion creatures would render him unrecognizable. Within a month, he would be a heap of bones. Once the rains of autumn brought the river back across the marshes, even those would vanish.

She was aware, through her fatigue, of a sense of fitness: that Jolyon's henchman should be brought so low, and by her hand.