

THE TOWER AND THE ROSE

by Nan Dibble

(from Phoenix One)

A story of the other

Editor's note: This story would follow "Threshold" in Acquainted with the Night 3. In the Acquainted with the Night series, the Other is assumed to be a separate and independent self who, whenever he isn't surfacing to do violence in the "real world", lives in his own subjective country he orders as he chooses. That country is also inhabited by the wraiths of all he's killed, as well as those of people he'd held as they were dying - namely Catherine.

Things were not as he'd left them. He didn't like that.

Nameless, inhuman, and well satisfied to be so, of some age between seventeen and eternity, he stood at the edge of an immeasurable cliff that shouldn't have been there, looking down on the desolation far below. A cold wind whipped his cloak about him and slapped red-gold hair across his muzzle, so that his eyes stung, obscuring his view. He willed the wind still and was startled and indignant when it took no heed, but puffed grit in his face, as though he were a powerless wraith, not master of this place.

"Whose wind are you?" he demanded, whereupon the wind turned slyly and blew from behind him as if to force him over the rocky edge.

There should be no cliff. Everything should be level, alike. Maintaining a varied terrain he'd always considered a weary nuisance not worth bothering with. Yet the stone was solid under his boots and the wind still blew, tugging impertinently at his hair and the edges of his cape. He was becoming severely displeased.

He stretched his will and energy into what was immediately his, himself, and the cape became wings to him, separating and stretching wide, with broad golden feathers. When they felt right to him he stepped out into the air.

It was a tricky, insubordinate wind. Instead of maintaining a steady, dignified glide, he had to trim and balance and even work at cupping enough air to control his headlong fall, leaning this way and that. Sometimes he dropped and tumbled as though the air itself had vanished; sometimes he had to stroke as heavily, as though moving through gelid water that resisted his passage.

As he spiraled lower, details of the plain became clearer. What should have been a pleasant savannah was a ragged scrubland cut with crooked ravines. Fire had passed across this land, and flood; and not recently. Uneasily he wondered how long he'd been away and what else might have changed in his absence. His chatelaine, whom he'd left in charge by default, had much to answer for.

Mistrustful of the wind, he chose his landing place with care - a clear platform of bare rock. Swooping toward it, he slowed with powerful beats, wingtips meeting before him, until he'd nearly come to a halt

in mid-air. So he was ready when the treacherous wind vanished without warning. Falling the last few yards, he landed lightly, withdrawing energy from the wings, so that they reverted to wool, leather, and laces, hem again brushing his heels.

Except for his wariness, the wind would have dumped him into a ditch or a thorn thicket, he was sure. He cocked an eye at a nearby twirling column of dust, willing to be forbearing if the wind admitted itself beaten and apologized. Instead, the dust tilted. He had just enough time to shut his eyes before the column blasted into his face.

Sneezing and slapping at his clothes, he felt dusty and imposed upon, fur-deep. Revenging himself on the wind, and on whoever had empowered it, became an urgent priority. Whatever could Catherine have been thinking of, to allow his country to fall into such chaos? He'd have to have serious words with her about such neglect.

He could feel that his tower, the hub of this land, was a considerable distance off. With an absent gesture, he intended to magick himself a mount but none materialized. And he found he could no longer clearly visualize what a horse should look like. Large, of course, big enough to bear him; but what was the fur like? And the legs: he somehow couldn't get his mind around where the joints should be or in which direction they should bend. Two, wasn't it? or should there be more? And how did they attack? How and where were the eyes set? Ahead, like a predator? Or to the sides, like prey?

Troubled and annoyed, he settled cross-legged on the rock and thought hard, but the image wouldn't come whole in his mind. And what he couldn't imagine, he couldn't bring into being.

It was a long time since he'd had to take notice of simple things like mounts. They simply were whenever he wanted them. Use them, forget them. Was it possible that he'd so taken them for granted that he'd lost the image-seed of them in his imagination?

Finding no alternative, he uncoiled in an abrupt, fluid motion and started walking, grudging every step. He was all the more angry because his indignation had no target. The rebellious wind was one matter, and he'd see to that in due course. But it was remotely possible that his failure to conjure a mount might be his own fault, for having been away so long. He didn't like to consider that possibility but there it was, grinning mockingly about him every way he looked across the crooked scrublands, like a tangible presence.

That sense of presence solidified into a sly shadow that slipped from cover to cover, then disappeared completely for awhile into a convenient gully - paralleling his course. Stalking him? He stood and stared, for that would be the final indignity - to be hunted on his own ground by something he hadn't chosen, hadn't made.

"Show yourself!" he demanded, and was faintly surprised when the stalker obligingly stepped out of concealment for his inspection. Definitely laughing at him, tongue lolling over sharp teeth, head cocked impertinently and ears pricked confidently forward.

"Come here," he directed.

Instead, the creature sat, tail curling tidily across forepaws.

He had no name for what kind of creature it was. Sharp-eared like a dog, yet blunt-muzzled like a cat; luxuriant russet fur, fox-like, and yet a sinuous tail tufted at the end. It certainly was nothing he'd ever imagined.

"Whose creature are you?"

"My own," replied the creature, with composure. "Whose are you?"

Refusing to dignify that with an answer, he walked on. The creature trotted easily alongside, some

fifteen yards away - well beyond a sudden spring. He attempted to ignore it.

The ground ridged up on either side, cupping a thorn thicket between. Already annoyed by the broken ground, he set his will against the terrain, demanding it be level and richly grassed. The thorn thicket wavered, grew smoky and indistinct. For an instant he thought it was going to resist him. Then the land before him subsided, almost with a sigh, into more comfortable contours murmurous with stirring grasses.

Bent and crushed by his boots, the grass released a rich mix of scents. His step grew lighter, swifter, and he was running for the delight of the motion and the clean smell and heavy seed-heads bobbing to his passage. So he was utterly unprepared when the land roused itself and snapped back to its former configuration. He went headlong into a thornbush, lost his footing, and sprawled face-forward.

Feeling presence, he rolled over quickly in spite of a hundred sharp points clawing at him. The strange creature planted forepaws on his chest, laughing at him - heavy enough that his attempt to rise only drove the clutching thorns in more deeply, momentarily anchoring him in place.

The creature didn't lunge for his throat. So though he bared fangs at it, he didn't strike out. It smelled, confusingly, of grass, with an undertone completely unfamiliar that he nevertheless somehow knew as female.

Though she stood solidly on his chest, the contact conveyed to him only an impersonal regard - the fact of her attention.

Categorizing her as nuisance, not a present threat, he set about disengaging himself from the thorns. She dropped lightly aside and composedly groomed a shoulder as he pulled free and stood. Belatedly, a possibility occurred to him.

"Have you done this?" His scowling glance indicated the warped, spoiled landscape.

"Don't you think it's more interesting? Grass gets pretty boring."

"Grass is pleasant," he declared.

"It's easy," she commented, unimpressed. "Lazy. Or it used to be. Now, it takes work, doesn't it? More attention and energy than you have to spare."

"What are you?"

"I might ask you the same thing ... if I thought you knew."

He definitely didn't like being laughed at, but it seemed to him petty to dignify her mockery with punishment. Besides, she was plainly lithe and fast; she would take a lot of catching. A lot of effort and time he had better uses for.

"We'd better get going," added the creature, "or we won't get to the tower before dark."

He glanced at her sharply. "It never gets dark here."

"Sure. Right."

He stood considering the steep-sided valley, admitting he couldn't hold all of it flat. Press down one place and another would begin to bulge and curl. But perhaps if he tried a narrower, less ambitious control ...

The brush immediately before him collapsed into dust. A way opened. A path. He began jogging along it, resolutely not looking back to determine if anything was following ... or if the path behind lasted any longer than it took for him to pass. His attention was locked forward, seeing the first glimpse of his tower above the fading horizon.

Soon, there would be no denying it, even to himself: night was falling.

Of his tower, nothing remained but a stump like an immense broken tooth. He ranged around the wreckage with an incredulous fury, patting the stones, willing them whole and higher, tier by tier, and the clinging ivy upon them. But the structure refused to rise higher than he could see; and when he swung away and cast himself down in frustration, all he'd made faded to formless darkness.

Rising suddenly, he circled clockwise and found his misgivings more than confirmed: his garden wasn't merely gone, but ruined. Dead brittle bushes half choked by weeds, plants uprooted and lying in heaps, vines sprawled flat, and upon it all a smell of rot and ashes. He scooped up a palmful of powdery soil, his gestures slow and tentative from unaccustomed grief: the tower had been strong and solid, a fortress; but the garden had been without defense. Harmless, helpless, existing only to be delicate and beautiful. He let the dust fall and stooped to try to straighten a bush that toppled over the instant he touched it.

An uncomprehending anger grew within him, as though the garden were a child senselessly attacked, broken, and cast aside.

Before he could straighten, the wraiths were upon him. Grasping at him with foggy, soft fingers he couldn't dislodge, they swirled around him in a smothering, half-material cloud. Blind within their clinging arms, he spun and struck randomly at bodies that faded and reformed behind each blow.

They hated him. And were terrified of him, with a strong, mindless loathing. The hatred and dread pierced him like wounds at which the wraiths eagerly drank, draining him of strength and certainty. He stumbled and went to one knee. The wraiths clutching his back grew heavier, trying to bear him to the ground. He felt their hot, wet mouths all over him. And wherever they clung, and bit, and drank, a numbness spread. Dizzy with their venom, bowed with their weight, he staggered to his feet again, roaring and slashing at them in a reddening, breathless, thoughtless haze. They drank his rage and ferocity too. And their own agony, as his claws tore out great chunks of their substance. Bones and skulls cracked. Yet still they surrounded him, hobbling and strangling him with the strength of their stolen vitality, some going solid to bludgeon him with material weapons and fists, though that rendered them vulnerable to his claws. Others twirled around him in an avid vortex, drinking.

A voice shouted, but he was beyond words - almost beyond sense. As the voice kept shouting, some of the wraiths' fear and hatred focused elsewhere. A few of the solid, torn ones lurched away. The voice began a shrill screaming. Then it shouted, and a single word came clear to him though the haze: Light. Then more screaming.

At first he couldn't take it in, confused to realize the voice had partially deflected the attack - drawn it upon itself. There existed pain and fierceness that wasn't his own, yet wasn't the wraith's greasy sensations, either. He wasn't alone. That made no sense to him.

Light. He's never needed it, but he knew it. Candle flames and glowing braziers and torches wound tightly with rags and flaming. He knew them well.

Without realizing it, he'd fallen again. As the wraiths clung and twisted, his hand closed around a stick. He put his imagination into the wood, the vivid memories, and it grew long and heavy. The rags burst into flame. As he lifted the torch, the wraiths winced away from it - some from the heat, some from the brightness. For an instant he could see them, twisted shadows that streamed away into the surrounding dark. Then his vision was affected by the blaze. All he could see was the foxlike creature scuffling together a pile of dead shrubs.

Glancing up at him, she directed, "Hurry up. Before you lose it."

He stared at her, appalled to realize that she meant him to burn the remains of his garden.

At the end of the torch, the flame was beginning to gutter out in thick smoke.

"So you love your garden," the fox remarked impatiently. "So that's why it'll burn for you - it's almost real. Hurry, or they'll be all over us again."

Feeling he was doing something dreadful, he touched the torch to the pile, transferring the flame. The bushes caught at once, blazing so high he thought they'd be consumed in a moment. Then the tongues of flame steadied, outlining every branch in flickering gold. A circle of brightness spread from the fire, pushing back the dark.

The torch had gone out. But the campfire continued to burn even when he wasn't looking at it. Even when he settled exhaustedly beside it, listening and scanning for any sign of renewed attack. He didn't have to think about the fire. It burned of itself, just as if it wasn't his.

He was burning his garden. It was night. Wraiths of past prey, his own dead, had attacked him, not singly, but in a concerted, purposeful group. And a strange fox was licking wounds on the far side of the campfire. None of it made any sense at all.

"Come here," he said. The fox only glanced at him warily. "You are not my creature. But this is still my place. And you have been hurt on my account. Come here so I can heal you."

Uneasy, mistrustful, the fox limped slowly around the fire and stood shivering, ready to spring away, as he passed his hands slowly down her shoulders, chest, and forelegs, along her ribs, then to her flanks and hindquarters. Wherever he touched became whole. But her russet fur was streaked where the wounds had been, as if in memory. The streaks refused to disappear when he willed them to. Perhaps because she wasn't his creature. He didn't understand it but he accepted it.

His own wounds had closed of themselves. But for that, and the fighting, and the outpouring of energy to heal his companion, there was a cost - a draining of his resources. A loss of coherence: a lethargy of the imagination as immediate in its effect as any bodily weariness. He felt stupid, sullen, slow. He'd need time to recover his strength and alertness before he'd be fit to meet another such attack.

When the healing was done, the fox had a final, long shiver all the length of her body. Then she settled comfortably. They looked into the fire together for a long time.

He'd thought the flames might be bitter, reproachful, given what they were devouring. Instead, there was something gay about the leaping yellow tongues - as though the branches were glad to be beautiful again, even in their burning. As though the flames were the last flowers they could offer him.

That disconcerted and humbled him: it had never occurred to him that the garden might love him in return.

Out of the unaccustomed humility, he asked, "Do you understand what's happening?"

The fox gave him one of her quick, sidewise glances.

"In a way. In a way, it's my fault."

When he didn't strike at her for that declaration, only waited for her to explain, she laid her chin on her crossed forepaws and continued to gaze into the fire.

"You let something real into your world. So it's no longer completely yours. Real things can resist you. Even turn against you. That's the risk you take, when you allow something real to come in."

"Are you real?"

"I'm your friend. That gives me a place here. That gives me power and a shape in your mind. It's dangerous to have a friend - it makes you vulnerable."

"You have ideas different from mine. You know things I don't. You know the wraiths could not abide brightness or flame."

The fox flicked her tail-tip: a shrug. "I guessed."

"You gave to me something I didn't have, alone. That's a strength."

The fox looked around again, steadily meeting his eyes. "It can be. But it also requires things of you, having a friend. It's not easy, like grass. There are distances, complications. Ups and downs. I won't always be what you want or do what you want. You may not like that. May not be willing to pay the price."

"Did I let you in? I don't remember ever seeing or imagining you before."

"You never had a friend before. So I'm a strange creature, in your eyes. You don't know what to make of me. I'll never be precisely what you expect. So you won't be able to forget about me, take me for granted."

"As I did the grass," he finished for her, looking around at the looming, broken shell of the tower, more imagined and remembered than seen, because of how the firelight had contracted his vision. "And my tower. And all of this, my place ..."

What she said was true. He could feel it. "If you make it all change ... If I were to destroy you, would everything be again as it was?"

"Maybe. Only one way to find out." Her tone was casual but her ears were flat to her skull.

After a long, teetering moment, he folded his hands on his knee. "That wouldn't be a friendly thing to do."

"No," the fox admitted, grinning.

"And I don't think you'd make yourself easy to catch or destroy."

"I'd lead you the chase of your lifetime," the fox agreed, grinning even more broadly, ears pricked confidently forward again. Then her large eyes sobered. "And while you were busy hunting me, less and less of this place will be yours. More and more would collapse or vanish or turn against you. and at the last, you'd turn against yourself. And lose yourself. And fall under another's power. So, no - I don't think ..."

She broke off as he leaped up and whirled, staring at the empty shards of tower, crying out, "Catherine!"

"I was wondering," the fox murmured, "when that would occur to you!"

He barely heard her. This realization was worse than finding the tower shattered; worse than wandering through the ruins of his garden. It was as though he'd received a mortal wound and been numb with it, so that the first pang, the first flow of life's blood, came as an utter surprise.

"Catherine," he blurted, "my chatelaine. She's gone. Do you know her?"

"In a way."

He still wasn't listening, starting to pace the margin of the firelight.

"She's gone! The wraiths ... The wraiths must have taken her. When the tower was destroyed. She's not dead," he declared challengingly, as though the fox might dispute it. "No one has the power to release her except me. And I never will. She's mine!"

"She's somebody's," rejoined the fox enigmatically.

Wheeling about, he stared at her. "What do you mean?"

Out of the darkness, a voice called cheerfully, "Hello, the fire. You mind company?"

The fox came at once to her feet, and they both tried to spot the intruder.

After waiting a moment, the voice said amiably, "I guess that means No. So if you don't mind ..."

Even when the speaker moved, he was hard to see: dressed all in black that blended with the darkness. All that was visible was his lined, gaunt face topped by a shock of incongruously bone-white hair.

He, that was master of this place, recognized the wraith as a tricky hunter he'd killed ... once: and never since. As the wraith settled on his heels before the fire, rubbing his hands together.

His bright, amused eyes lifted for a moment as he remarked, "You, I know, of course. But I don't believe I've had the pleasure ...? What's your name?"

"You first," said the fox."

"Well ... all right. One of the things I've been called is 'Snow.' Your turn. Who knows: I might want to kill you sometime. It's bad manners to kill somebody you haven't been properly introduced to."

The wraith's expression invited her to regard the comment as a joke.

He, that was master of this place, declared, "She is called 'Fox'."

The wraith shrugged. "It'll do, I guess. Names are what you make them ... Pleased to meet you, Fox. Haven't seen you around much. Hasn't been anybody new here in quite a while, as a matter of fact."

The wraith's eyes lifted again. "What's the matter: life Outside getting dull? Nobody left to kill out there? You were gone a long while, Vincent."

"That's not my name."

"But you answer to it," countered Snow mildly. "Right?"

"What do you want?" demanded he who was master of this place and who sometimes answered to the name of his outer twin, Vincent, even though he was nameless by preference. Catherine called him 'Vincent', and he accepted the designation for courtesy's sake. And because she was Catherine.

"I've been watching how things were shaping up, or falling down - depending on how you want to look at it," Snow remarked, again stroking the fire's pleasant warmth across his hands. "And it's started to look interesting. Do you know how long it's been since anything interesting happened here? You run a real boring place, Vincent."

"It's my place. It wasn't made for your entertainment."

"And do you like it, now that it's becoming interesting?" asked the wraith brightly, and grinned and turned his head aside at the response he read in the other's face. "No use to kill me. I'd just be back in the morning. Isn't that how things work?"

The comment indirectly emphasized what they both knew - that though the wraith had been pursued and hunted, he'd never been successfully caught or killed. Except the once, the first time. Outside.

The Other demanded again. "What do you want?"

"First, to deliver a message. That Paracelsus guy welcomes you home and invites you to visit. He says he's got something of yours he thinks you'll be interested in. Wraith name of Catherine?"

Ducking, Snow leaned away from the reflexive, angry swat the Other threw at him.

"Now, don't blame me for the news, it wasn't me that took a vacation and let him consolidate his power, let the place go all to hell." Hastily backing farther, lifting a shielding arm, Snow exclaimed, "Hey, if you kill me you're going to miss the good part here!"

"Listen," advised Fox. "You can always swat him afterward."

Poised to strike again, the Other glowered at the wraith. "What?"

"Like I said, this is turning interesting. And I like your side of the fight better. For now, anyway. Let me tag along. As a sort of technical advisor, maybe. I know the way. I've been around the place this Paracelsus guy set up while you were gone. I can be a handy sort of guy to have around." Snow spread his hand ingratiatingly. "Like the lady says, you can always kill me later. If you want to. If you can ..."

Snow's skeptical implication stung. "I don't need you. I don't need anyone."

Fox made a sound somewhere between a growl and a throat-clearing noise. The Other looked at her. "You may come," he conceded. "If you wish. But as for you, wraith ..." When he glanced at where Snow had been, the place beside the fire was empty.

From a distance, from the dark, Snow's voice commented, "One thing I learned is always keep your options open. My offer still stands. You think about it. I'm a whole lot better ally than enemy. If you change your mind, I'll be around. After all, this is the only game in town. And anything is better than dying of boredom - or wishing you could."

The Other strode a few paces away from the fire but halted there, wary of the crowd of wraiths he suspected were still lurking nearby, waiting for a moment's carelessness to renew their attack. Snow said nothing more. And presently, the Other concluded the wraith had gone.

He began pacing the edge of the firelight, suddenly anxious to be gone, to revenge this affront and recover what was his. His boots crunched on dead branches. Stooping, he gathered the branches up with gentle, remorseful hands and carried them to the fire, feeding them in a few at a time, watching them bloom into brilliance.

The garden had been Catherine's gift to him. He wouldn't have thought of making such a thing for himself. Just as he'd had no need of words before her - there'd been no one to talk to. No use in talking to wraiths, who were only prey, after all. Words, too, had been her gift to him.

All at once he missed her profoundly - her laughter and her teasing, the times she'd read to him and he'd listen, entranced, his impatience somehow all forgotten: the courtesies and ceremonies between them that created a distance it became so satisfying to break with demanding approach and his claiming of her body, always sweet to him and welcoming, her passion rising to answer his ...

Without Catherine, nothing that he made could hold. Somehow his heart wasn't in it. She was his heart. And without it, without her, nothing made sense. She was his. And he meant to have her back.

"If night comes," he asked abruptly, "is there also dawn?"

"Can't you smell it?" rejoined Fox, lifting her head.

When he tried, he did notice a difference in the air - what he thought of as a green quickening, a lifting anticipation. And just as he was considering gathering more branches to feed the fire, he realized his vision had extended again. There were hills, a horizon beyond which brightness was growing. As he stood and looked around, he found no sign or sense of any wraiths - they had retreated, knowing that the time of their power was ending.

Unwilling to repeat his embarrassing failure to conjure a mount, he set out toward the increasing brightness. He turned, surprised, at Fox's voice calling him to wait.

Nodding at something on the ground, she added, "I think maybe you want to take this."

Returning to the fire's fading coals, he found she'd planted her forefeet to either side of a stick that, from its position, was the same one that had been a torch to him. But it had reverted to a mere branch as soon as he'd withdrawn his attention and his energy from it. Nothing lasted anymore.

Then Fox stood aside and he saw the branch was still tipped by flame. No: a blossom, tight furled and vividly red - a rosebud. He hadn't made it or expected it. A gift - magical, marvelous, incomprehensible. Taking up the branch carefully, he found it no longer dry and brittle but resilient as metal, flexing slightly with the weight of its bloom. The curved petals were moist; from them breathed the least, vague trace of sweetness, like a whispered promise. He threaded the stem through his belt. Then he set out again. Fox trotting alongside, their shadows lengthening behind, to confront the alchemist and reclaim all that was his.

He went steadily, straight ahead, maintaining only enough path to let them pass. Though he had no sense of Catherine, no reason to choose one direction over another, that didn't matter: the decision to search, and then moving out on that search, was the important thing.

There were no real distances here, no true directions. Everything was relative to his own perspective. Only will and purpose, intent and opposition, imposed dimensions and duration on the journey.

When he'd met and conquered all opposition, when he'd fulfilled whatever conditions were necessary to reach her and regain command of his country, she would simply be there, restored to him as the inevitable prize of his victory.

"Tell me," said Fox, as they went along, "about Catherine."

"She's mine."

Fox gave him a slantwise look. "That's real helpful. From that, I could pick her out at any party; just look for the one that's yours."

"That's sarcasm," he observed.

"I guess," Fox switched the tufted tip of her tail in a careless shrug.

"I don't like sarcasm. And you talk too much."

"Women are like that - according to men. Does Catherine talk too much?"

"Sometimes," he admitted.

"And what do you do - tell her to shut up?"

"Of course not. I leave."

"Does that work?"

"She knows I am displeased. And I no longer have to listen to her." While Fox had babbled on, he'd been considering her original question. Now he said, "She's small: about this high." He raised a level hand to his chin. "She's soft and smells like flowers. She reads to me."

"Well, that's a start, I guess. What else?"

Stiffly, with warning dignity, he admitted, "She teases me. Sometimes when I don't wish to be teased."

"Imagine that."

"I still don't like sarcasm," he mentioned.

"Friends are allowed sarcasm. Even teasing."

"Oh." Never having had a friend before, he supposed he had to take Fox's word for that.

"Is Catherine your friend?" asked Fox.

"Of course not. She's my chatelaine. I allow her a certain power, to take care of what's mine. That includes herself."

"Do you love her?"

"Of course. Or I would not have made her my chatelaine."

"Ever tell her that?"

"The thing speaks for itself."

"Sure, I guess." Fox trotted faster to keep pace with his lengthened stride. "So tell me some more ..."

She leaped, crying out, then collapsed, transfixed by an arrow. As he whirled, seeing scent or sight of the assailant, he was hurled to his knees as the ground underfoot heaved itself up, then sickeningly down in rolling convulsions.

Bushes were uprooted. Trees cracked and fell. Each time he tried to rise, a new wave would undercut his balance and send him sprawling. A rushing crack became a gulf as a great wedge of earth disappeared in front of him, falling away mere inches from his spread and gripping fingers.

Either his side heaved up or the opposite side dropped away - with nothing stable, it was impossible to tell which. When the ground finished its dancing and he staggered to his feet, some twenty yards separated the uneven lips of the opening. The mouth breathed: upsurging dust and a sulfurous odor that both choked him and obscured the depths of the subsidence.

Fox lay unmoving on the other side.

She wasn't his creature and moreover claimed to be real - taking her existence from some source other than him: she might even truly die.

The chasm extended to either side as far as he could see - and, he was virtually certain, as far as it needed to, to prevent his simply going around. Why would the ground rebel so violently, except to provide an effective barrier?

Too far to jump ... barely. Perhaps to tempt him to try.

A short flight ... but the air's waiting stillness made him suspect a strong downdraft lurked above, ready to pounce. Then the fissure would close on him like the clap of hands.

Eventually, of course, he'd work his way free. But it would take too long.

It was his ground. It should answer only to him. And should still answer if he concentrated hard enough, threw the whole of his will against it.

He seized the fault with his mind and imagined it drawing together, seamlessly rejoining. The ground hiccuped, grumbled, but began to respond; and Fox's sprawled form tumbled a foot nearer the edge.

Alarmed, he immediately released the pressure. The ground sullenly jounced in recoil and Fox rolled another foot, her tail dangling over the edge. Any further motion would surely dump her into the gulf. And the recoil upon him was severe, as well; controlling the earth required immense force - which

was among the reasons he preferred to keep his land a plain, all level alike.

He wavered, dizzy from the outflow of energy and the foul breath from the chasm. And suddenly his sense of Catherine flared strong and immediate - she was frightened. The awareness was directional - located diagonally behind him; a direction which would not require him to cross the abyss.

Galvanized by any threat to Catherine, he whirled and took one step. Then halted and slowly faced around again, irresolute.

The rising dust now obscured the opposite rim. He could no longer see Fox. Perhaps she'd already fallen in. Perhaps the arrow had killed her instantly and there'd be nothing he could do, even were he to reach her. Or perhaps she'd merely vanished back to her own place, wherever that might be, since she was no creature of his.

His sense of Catherine's fear became acute, piercing like a red-hot needle, urgently pulling him to answer it, reddening his vision with rage and the impulse to strike out. His hands closed into fists at his sides.

He couldn't control all the ground. But if he limited his focus, as he'd done in creating a path ...

Dropping onto all fours, he set his hands flat on a stone slab that had become an outcropping poised over the drop. Soothing and stroking it into attending, he sent its substance flowing forward in a sudden arch. Solidifying, it settled obediently into a stable bridge hardly a hand's span wide.

Before it or he could change their minds, he ran onto it - into the blinding dust.

The downdraft hit like a falling wall. That same instant, the fragile bridge cracked at midpoint. Unsupported, both ends tore free and began to fall. But he'd gained three running paces against the distance. Without winging himself, he flung himself forward, using the momentum of motion and weight rather than any support the air might offer ... or spitefully withdraw. It was enough.

The land went into renewed convulsions as he struck the ground, rolling, on the other side. The downdraft's attempted ambush had dispersed the dust: he spotted and seized a russet form, tumbling with it away from the edge. Except, when the land quieted, there was no edge: the fissure, disappointed, had closed.

Sitting up, he held Fox lolling across his legs. He broke the arrow where it projected from her body on one side, then drew the shaft through on the other. Blood flowed feebly: she was still alive. He set his hands on the wounds and sealed the flesh, preventing more blood loss. Then he forced energy into her, imagining her whole and impertinent as wind, trotting light-footed on a path of her own choosing. Which now seemed to be his path, despite its danger. She deserved well of him.

He didn't stop until he felt her ribs lift with an independent breath. Then he let himself topple back, exhausted. Black spots swam in his dimmed vision. He felt emptied, brittle, as though he'd sent, not merely energy, but his own substance flowing into her, for her healing.

Only life could make life.

Giving to living things, he was discovering, was far more demanding than forcing stone to his will. He hoped he wouldn't have to do much more of it.

He never slept; so it couldn't have been sleep that claimed him. But when he blinked and shoved up on an elbow, the sun had passed zenith and hung about midway in its descent. Time should not pass without his noticing. Rather than admit a gap in consciousness, he decided the sun had taken advantage of his inattention by making a sly swoop toward a far line of indigo hills. If one could not rely on the ground to remain stable, how could one assume the sun to be trustworthy?

Chin on forepaws, watching him, Fox tilted her head toward the carcass of a rabbit lying on the

ground between them.

She commented, "If we had a fire, we could cook it."

Shakily sitting, he growled, "Eat it if you wish. I have no need of such things." He didn't choose to admit he wasn't sure he could have summoned a flame. And the gnarled, spiky brush round-about had a decidedly unfriendly aspect: he didn't think it would stay alight to please him, as the remnants of the garden had done.

"I think," he said, "that you should go back to your own place."

Glancing up from her meal, Fox responded coolly. "That's what you've decided, is it?"

"Yes. It's too contrary here for visitors. And soon ..." He didn't like admitting it, but he did. "... it will be dark again: the wraiths may return. I cannot protect both of us."

"Who asked you to?"

Even she was being contrary. But when, he reflected glumly, had she been anything else? He might be able to chase her off, but knew it would be futile: she wouldn't stay away unless she chose to. And she'd make it clear she wasn't likely to do that. And as for outdistancing her, leaving her behind, at the moment he didn't think he could have outrun a moderately-motivated rabbit, as she'd plainly done.

Real things, lives other than his own, were a great nuisance. He abandoned the discussion, resting silently while Fox finished the rabbit. He guessed a few hours of daylight still remained - time to get nearer his goal before nightfall.

He now knew in which direction that goal lay.

His sense of Catherine was still strong but no longer charged with fear. Whatever endangered her had withdrawn, or been somehow turned aside. The connection had become a steady, passive awareness ... one he could use as a beacon.

Defeating the abyss had won him a proportional prize, defeated that much of the mystery. When he knew all and had fully digested it into his imagination, he'd have all. Then he'd have the power to force things back to normal.

Power he now found himself all but drained of. His limbs still felt heavy, inert. It was an effort to push to his feet. Glancing toward Fox, he considered a moment, then asked abruptly.

"Do you know what a horse looks like?"

She paused in her post-meal grooming. "Sure."

"Describe one."

"I'll do better than that - I'll show you."

Her contours altered, her outline wavering like an image on struck water. What stood before him was a long-legged, shaggy-maned mare. Sorrel, sparsely patched with white. Her tail, now incongruously plumed, whisked her flanks.

"How's this?" she inquired, smiling at him with large, square teeth.

He stared. "Why didn't you do this before?"

Her shoulder hide rippled as if dislodging a fly. "You didn't ask. And maybe I couldn't have done it before: takes a lot of energy. Favor for favor," said the mount Fox had become. "Come on; it will be better than walking."

Checking that his rose was still secure under his belt, he grasped a handful of mane and swung

astride. Fox moved out at an easy lope.

The sun was setting through clouds suddenly arisen behind the hills. Fox needed no more guidance than a conjured mount - not because she did his will, but because they were agreed. So he watched the horizon, grudgingly fascinated, for the reported beauties of sunsets, having never seen the sun complete its arc and aware that it was an intruder. If it were beautiful, he might tolerate it sometimes or invite it back if it might please Catherine to have such a reminder of Outside, the world of seasons and of day and night.

No lovely streaks of colors came to paint the sky. Instead, he smelled smoke.

Catching the wall too, Fox broke stride, blowing and tossing her head uneasily. A margin of hectic brightness rolled over the hilltops. It wasn't the sunset - the scrublands ahead were ablaze.

The smell of smoke grew stronger. Looking back, he found his abrupt suspicions confirmed by a dark, rolling wall that cut off retreat: the fire was behind them too ... and coming fast.

Sliding from Fox's back, he dismissed her with an absent flick of a hand ... which of course had no effect. Realizing that, he looked at her. Her ears were flat back and her eyes were rimmed with frightened white. She stepped and sidled uneasily.

"Be winged," he directed.

"I can't. Air's not my element. Not that I like fire a whole lot, either."

"Be small, then. Some digging thing that can burrow and wait out the flames until they pass."

"What makes you think they'll pass?" she countered, and he had to admit she had a point. This was an intended fire, seeking its prey. It might well be prepared to crouch outside any lair indefinitely - until it had cooked the ground brittle - together with whatever had tried to hide there.

Whereas Fox feared the fire, he himself was filled with indignation at the presence of another powerful predator on his own ground.

"Be small," he commanded again, watching the flames roll toward them down the hillsides. "So that I may carry you."

An instant later, something almost weightless scurried up his clothing and stopped between his cloak's shoulder-roll and his neck. When he felt tiny hands clutch his hair, he strode forward to meet the wildfire's challenge.

Its growing heat roused his own. His anger blazed forth, becoming tangible. Dry grass and brush flamed, charring the ground bare for thirty paces around, all in an instant. Not content to wait within the circle, he advanced again until he made contact with the wildfire's leading margin. It roared. He roared back at it. It swung in an advancing arc around the ground he'd burned, claspings arms with the flames behind. Wholly encircled, he became even more enraged, heedlessly blazing energy in all directions. It was as if he himself were becoming flame, with no purpose but to destroy whatever opposed him. No choice except to burn.

A column of fire bowed, acknowledging him as a worthy adversary. Untrammelled by courtesies, he struck out in a wash of glittering heat ... and the different flames twined around and among one another, without differentiation. It became one conflagration whose sole intent was the annihilation of everything other than itself.

Something chattered close by his ear. He brushed at the annoyance - and flinched as teeth met in his

earlobe.

A tiny, shrill, muffled voice said, "Catherine."

The word aroused him from his absorption in the fire. But the instant he tried to disengage from it, it surged into whatever space he left open and he was again ablaze, barely able to will his own flames far enough to surround himself and his companion.

For a moment, a hundred rippling fire-serpents wrestled with one another in twirling, upright spirals incandescent with sparks. Then they melded again. He could not keep them separate. Their fury fed his own and there was no difference.

In a final effort, his imagination seized all the acres and miles of fire and shook it like a rug. The vast fire paused; startled, momentarily detached from its fuel. And in that instant, he admitted that the fire was a more fierce and single-minded predator than he. The elemental forces were similar, having only one aspect and no choices. They merely were. There could be no winning against the fire. If he continued to try, he'd only lose himself and become one substance with it, endlessly raging.

Without will of its own, fire was therefore subject to whatever colder will could kindle and direct it. The fire didn't care what it burned, so long as it burned. Fire had no friends. Acknowledging no master, it was therefore indifferently everyone's servant, cheaply made and cheaply used.

He felt the small creature that was Fox nestling tightly against his neck, within the diminishing protection of his streaming hair. The next firetide would take her. And consume him, as well, in a different embrace.

Earth, most sullen and inert of elements, wouldn't reshape itself to his requirements: he'd barely been able to clear a small path, cast a small bridge. Fire, fully roused, wouldn't answer to his control. The malice of air, though, he'd twice defeated and won limited victories against. He might have regained some power over air. Yet air was now allied with fire - the volatile elements.

Which left water, skymirror - of every shape and no shape, hard or flowing or gaseous, in constant flux. Of all the elements, the one he'd had least to do with and mistrusted most.

Lifting his arms, he reached out to the whole of the sky - not to control it but to seek within it what was already there. Air tolerated water; fire could not. He summoned all the moisture he felt and called upon it to do its own inclination - to change, condense, and fall.

An instant later, as the fire regathered itself to descend upon him, its fuel was struck by the first hissing drops. Innumerable drops followed, sweeping motes of smoke from the air, steaming on all the seared ground. Offered a different combat, the fire wavered and flared, but its opponent was indifferent to the transformation the heat worked upon it. Steams merely rose, regathered, and fell again. Denied its fuel, the fire retreated to become a landscape of sullenly-winking starlike coals that surrendered, one by one, to the inundation.

He'd summoned storms before, but never in such circumstances. Never when he was himself on the point of kindling, so that each raindrop numbed and dulled him. Never when his reserves of energy were already all but exhausted, so that the fire's touch had at first been welcome to him, feeding a deep lack and a deeper hunger.

Calling the rain left him with nothing.

He dropped to his knees on the ash-coated ground.

Touching with a shaking forefinger the small life perched on his shoulder, he directed, "Run."

"Run yourself," Fox responded impertinently, anxiously.

"I cannot. Nor could I heal you a third time. I have no more healing within me. This once, obey me, run."

The barely-felt weight left his shoulder, plopped wetly, then scuttled away. He was dimly glad to be free of that responsibility, that certain failure.

Night had fallen: the wraiths were coming.

Having drained him to the edge of insensibility, the wraiths bound and bore him away. Every now and again, as he was carried along, he felt the suction of formless lips drinking of his vitality and simultaneously injecting numbing venom. After awhile, he didn't feel anything at all.

Something poked at him. The momentary pressure, and the rocking and subsiding of his body, dimly registered. When the second poke came, he knew that the contact was with something unliving - a weapon or tool - and that he was lying on his side on cold, level stone. When the third poke touched him, he uncoiled and struck out. Something went clattering. But he was yanked up shortly by some restraint at the top of his spine. He staggered and fell.

"Looks like nap time's over," Snow's irreverent, retreating voice commented.

He'd fallen against something upright - a stone post. Holding to it, he rose to his knees and then, slowly, wavering, to his feet.

Before his eyes would focus, smells and hollow, reverberant sounds told him he was in a large place below ground. He was collared and chained to the post.

"Welcome," said a grave, modulated voice. "Vincent."

"That's not my name," he responded automatically as the speaker advanced from a shadowed dais raised above the rest of the hall.

Dark clothing; pouched, lugubrious eyes; mouth enclosed by greying goatee. And then, as the man came forward, the hideously scarred cheek and temple. Paracelsus.

"You're what's truest in him, and strongest. You have more right to the name of 'Conqueror' than he. I should know - it was I who named you. And it was you I named, not he. But I can be accommodating." Paracelsus remarked with a ghastly smile. "If you'd prefer, I'll call you 'son'."

Hands primly folded before him, Paracelsus halted just beyond what he plainly considered the Other's reach. The Other made no move and did not answer. They regarded each other.

"How do you like my presence hall?" Paracelsus inquired, lifting a hand to direct the Other's attention. The Other didn't blink or glance aside. "I've constructed it on a Minoan model. Beyond, I've prepared a labyrinth worthy of such a beast. It connects to the remains of your tower. I gather you never suspected, all this while, I've been quite literally undermining you ..."

"Where is Catherine?"

Paracelsus smiled. "All in good time. I ..."

Holding the chain, the Other flung himself at his captor, feet-first, the chain's range extended by the length of his body. His legs connected and locked. Falling, he was already doubling to reach Paracelsus' throat; death here was all death, and the first death, as well. Dying, Paracelsus' wraith would lose all the usurped and accumulated power.

But the subordinate wraiths were too quick - descending on the Other in a congealing cloud, greedy

mouths fastening, drinking. He felt Paracelsus wrench himself away but had no strength to prevent him. Or, presently, even to move.

"That's enough," commented Paracelsus' voice. from what seemed a great distance. Reluctantly, the wraiths withdrew from their feast.

The Other vaguely wondered what would happen to this land, were he to die. However delegated or usurped, all the energies, its very being, derived from him ...

Finally, he was able to raise his head, seeing only vague shapes. Verticals that were lines of pillars to either side, converging on the dais, their tops lost in an upward abyss of darkness. Horizontals that were dwarfed by the hall's bleaky monumental proportions.

Paracelsus was standing as before, except at a revised distance. "I wish you no harm, my son - quite the contrary. I have always admired your power and your adamant intractability. But without purpose, it is all wasted, dissipated in random ferocity. I wish it directed more intelligently."

With effort, the Other formed words: "I serve no one."

"No need to waste your energy in conversation. Merely listening with suffice. As I say, it's a shame to see energy wasted. And to spend the majority of my power on merely restraining you, and yours on resisting me, would be doubly a waste."

Meditatively Paracelsus looked aside to the wall where the wraiths flowed and whispered. "They have their uses. But I hesitate to use them too much. Their feeding is power wasted merely to render you tractable; and there is also the possibility that one might drink from you sufficient force to challenge me ...

"To end all this unproductive squabbling, I propose a simple wager. You have come for Catherine. Very well: you may have her. Because you delegated certain powers to her, I found her useful in consolidating my position against your eventual return. Holding her has also brought you to hear my proposal. I have no further need of her. I admit I cannot hold you indefinitely. But having taken her powers into myself, I can and will hold her. Here is my wager."

In response to Paracelsus' lifted hand, the man called Snow herded three women from the deepest darkness at the back of the dais and arranged them in a line on the bottom step, still deep in shadow. Snow looked lightly amused, as if considering the proceedings ridiculous but a sufficient alternative to boredom. A crossbow was slung on a strap over his shoulder.

"As you know," Paracelsus continued, "I have developed a certain skill with illusion. To avoid even the perception of trickery. I have used it only to present a valid challenge. Catherine's appearance has not been altered in any respect whatsoever. The others have merely been modified to present a superficial resemblance. If you choose rightly, you may have her; if you do not, you thereby concede that both she and you become my irrevocable property.

"I am by no means a malignant man," Paracelsus declared sanctimoniously. "At least, either way, you would not be parted. So you really risk nothing. Do you agree?"

The Other's breathing had become less labored, his thoughts more coherent. But his vision still blurred. Leaning against the post, he canted his head, trying to see the women on the dais more clearly. Or, more precisely, looking eagerly for Catherine.

"Come on," said Paracelsus. "Surely you can distinguish your true love from a pair of imposters."

Paying no attention, the Other reflected, "They must come closer."

"Certainly. All fair and above-board. This far." Paracelsus pointed to a point on the floor level with his judicious distance.

Snow herded the women to the indicated spot and lined them up.

Glancing at the Other, he remarked chattily, "You should have taken me up on my offer when you had the chance. But you got to admit, it was pretty lively there for awhile."

"So," said Paracelsus. "Are we agreed?"

The Other ignored them both. They were nothing but wraiths: bargaining with them would have been beneath him. But he made the effort to pull himself erect before the women, supporting himself against the post, since one of them was Catherine. But which?"

He hadn't expected them to look so much alike. All three small and honey-blonde - as Catherine was blonde, he recalled, now that he saw them, all three with full lips, wide foreheads, grey-green eyes. Dressed alike, in blue gowns that hung to the heel. Each with a pendant crystal.

Although all three were beautiful, none had the special shimmer that, more than any detail of appearance, characterized his impression of Catherine. And as they regarded him in turn, no quick smile greeted him or welcomed the fact that he'd come to reclaim her. There was no small gesture or covert wink to draw his attention to one rather than the others; nothing that called to him like Catherine's warm and bouyant spirit.

He declared flatly. "None of these is Catherine."

"You lose," said Paracelsus, his eyes glittering with satisfaction.

At the alchemist's gesture, the women on the ends reverted to gleeful, capering wraiths of drifting aspect. The middle one buried her face in her hands.

"Love," said Paracelsus, "is the greatest and final illusion. Strip away that disguise and we are all strangers."

Grinning, Snow gave the remaining woman a push toward the post, commenting, "They're all alike in the dark."

They thought him at a disadvantage. They were wrong. Setting his hands against the post, he leaned to judge what force might be required to break it.

"Stop that," Paracelsus commanded, annoyed. "You've lost! You're mine now!"

The Other spared him a glance. "I do not accept your limits. I made no bargain. And this is not Catherine."

The woman beside him said, "You left me," with a desolate calm leeches even of reproach. "When they attacked through the cellars, you didn't come. When they bound me and I couldn't stop them, you didn't come. When they destroyed my garden before my eyes, you weren't there."

The Other turned slowly. Bracing his shoulders against the post, he reached out uneasily, unwillingly, to touch fingertips to the the woman's cheek. As she raised her face, a shock of recognition flashed from hand and eye to sear his heart: It was Catherine. And he hadn't known her. Because, in some terrible way he had no words for, she was no longer his.

"Be Catherine," he commanded, appealed. "Be my Catherine."

Paracelsus said, "Your Catherine no longer exists. You lost her to me. She's mine now. As are you."

The Other continued to search her face, search his heart for any vivid correspondences, for anything but the memory of connection. There was nothing. As with the land, as with mounts, the neglected seed of her unique self had vanished from his imagination.

He'd failed her as he'd failed his garden. And all the living land. He'd grown accustomed to his

mastery and carelessly expected everything to continue unregarded, flourish obediently with no infusions of imagination or devotion from him. And so he'd lost them all. And, in so doing, lost himself. For if he was not master of this place, the one whom Catherine loved, he was nothing. Truly nameless.

Wraiths could drain only vitality. This awareness drained the soul. Dropping to his knees, he bowed his head.

Catherine looked on with vacant indifference.

Paracelsus directed Snow triumphantly, "Take him to the labyrinth."

Instead of obeying, Snow was uneasily scanning the hall. "I think somebody forgot to pay the power bill."

Everything was fading. The pillars raveled away like wind-torn smoke. The dais sagged into an undifferentiated level. Losing crispness and definition, all the shadowed spaces began fading into foggy indeterminacy. The surrounding wraiths started shrieking in alarm, but the sound was muted and without urgency.

The Other had no concern for such things. It all was only the mirror of what was happening within.

Paracelsus strode an anxious, unheeded pace nearer as his victory lapsed toward dissolution. "Stop that!"

When the Other paid no heed, Paracelsus sent the subordinate wraiths swarming over him again ... to no effect. The energy they drained passed through them and was lost.

"Shoot him," Paracelsus commanded. Then, as Snow flipped the crossbow level, Paracelsus changed the command. "No: shoot her!"

The bolt was loosed, and the Other moved, simultaneously. Breaking free of the wraiths, he surged to his feet to protect the one who'd not joined in their frantic thirst for substance, as though indifferent to her own fading. The arrow pierced his heart. He fell, by graceless stages, to lie at her feet.

There was no pain. Very soon, there would be nothing.

Against the wraiths' wailing and Paracelsus' incoherent shouting, a clear, sharp voice said in his ear, "Give it to her!"

As from a great distance, he recognized Fox's voice. She alone remained definite, solid: a cold nose nudged impatiently under his chin. Probably it was true, then, that her existence wasn't dependent on him. She was real. if that mattered now.

"All right," said Fox. "I'll do it."

He felt a tugging at his waist. Then his vague eyes saw Fox, again an anomalous animal, sit on her haunches before Catherine. In her jaws, Fox proffered the tight-furled rose on its stem. A slender hand descended to take it. And the hall went ... not to nothing, but to a hilltop richly feathered with tall grasses under a vast and twilight sky that showed the first glimmerings of stars.

As Paracelsus and his subject wraiths scattered, Snow stood looking around him. "Now, that's interesting," he commented appreciatively.

Catherine pointed the rose at him: not like a weapon but like a wand or sceptre of regency. "Go away."

"I guess that's my cue to leave. Be seeing you around, everybody." Amiably smiling, Snow vanished.

"It's so hard," Catherine murmured, "to hold it all together ..."

"Quick," said Fox. "While you still can."

Catherine knelt, and as she touched the Other's chest with the rose, he felt enter him a surge of concern, gratitude, pride, annoyance. A splendor of healing. A glory of amused tenderness. Joy. And so much love ...

And as Catherine clasped him in her arms, he felt himself flowing out in all directions and embracing the place that was his, that she'd returned to him; he felt it cease all its rebellion and settle into comfortable plain again ... except for this one hill, where they lay.

Brushing his hair aside, then kissing his brow, Catherine said, "You won't leave me like that again." It was not a question.

"No," he agreed. He still served no one; but he'd learned to consider suggestions.

Fox, who'd been looking on with a laughing, lolling tongue, silently turned and began trotting away.

"Please stay," Catherine called after her. "Half the time, he's out hunting wraiths, and there's nobody to talk to. No company, nobody to argue with. Nobody else who's real. Please stay,"

Fox looked over her shoulder, then turned and sat, tufted tail curled neatly around her forepaws.

"Maybe for a little while."

On the far horizon, a fat yellow moon was rising. He didn't recall wishing for the moon. But he supposed he didn't mind. The moon could stay.

"I'll make another tower," he promised Catherine. "Here, on this hill, And this time. I'll make you a garden."

She held before him the fragment and bleeding rose. "You already have." And then she kissed him.

END