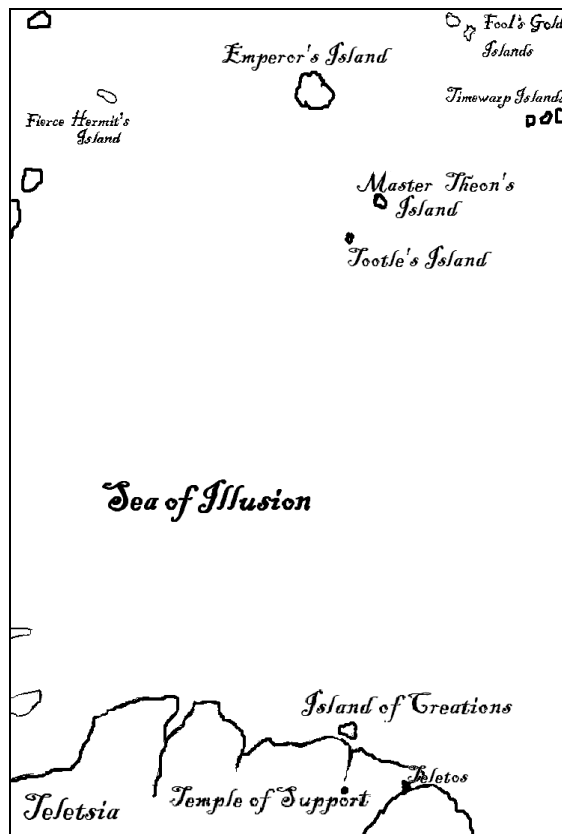


The Awakening of Navi Septa
Book One
The Keys of Wisdom
A Fantasy of Reality
by Linda Williams

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Teletsia and the Sea of Illusion



The First Key -The Root

This key expresses the power of the first subtle centre, at the root of the Tree of Life. Within us this is at the base of the backbone. Its qualities are innocence and childlike wisdom. On our world its country is Teletsia and its seat is the Temple of Support.

Ancient Teletsian manuscript (banned by the Sorcerers)

Prologue

I was clearing out a trunk the other day and found some of my old diaries. I opened one and began to read.

'My name is Asha Herbhealer. I am a girl of fourteen and I live in Teletos, the capital of our beautiful but wounded land of Teletsia. Like all true Teletsian families - you can pick us out by our honey-brown skins, blue-black hair, green eyes and aquiline noses - we have our pride, even if our freedom and wealth have long gone, stolen by the power hungry Sorcerers, as we call the 'High Priests' who rule our land these days. Nevertheless, we firmly believe that better days will come. We have been waiting for many, many years, but we do not give up hope.'

I turned over a few pages. They were blank, and I remembered what a terrible place Teletsia was then. I went to the medicine cupboard and took out a bottle of rubbing alcohol, dabbed some on one of the pages and within moments this appeared.

'Today was so important that I must put it in my journal, even though it is dangerous. I'm writing in invisible ink. I'll only put the solvent on to make it visible if it is ever safe to do so.'

That was the day it all started and this is what I wrote.

'Last week my cousin Lee and I were walking back from school and we saw something which made me feel faint and nauseous with horror, and to want to run away from this land - to escape - anywhere. In the street near our home was a Sorcerer, wearing his black cloak and a flat brimmed hat, talking angrily with a man who was desperately holding on to a boy of about eight years old. Then the Sorcerer waved his staff around, said a few words, the man burst into flames and within moments was reduced to a pile of ashes on the ground. The Sorcerer grabbed the child, who was in complete shock, picked him up and disappeared into a nearby building, which is one of the state run nurseries. I was shattered, and Lee - he's always so strong and sensible, calmed me, cheered me up and took me home, but I had nightmares for three nights after that.'

'Why, oh why, do we have to live like this?'

This took me back to my childhood, when Teletos was a noble city as long as you didn't look too closely. It stood on a number of islands at the mouth of a great river. Canals ringed the town and it would have looked like half an onion to a high-flying bird. Many other waterways crisscrossed these canals and on the islands were broad, tree lined avenues and narrow winding alleys. Each side of the avenues were residential buildings, old beyond the memories of the inhabitants, but built in a grand and solid style. Usually gardens stretched behind them down to the waterways.

Much of the city was in a deplorable state of decay and in need of repair. On the facades of many of the buildings were fearsome beasts carved in stone, especially atop the columns, drainpipes and doorjambs. Whether they had originally been put there to frighten away intruders, or whether they expressed the natures of the people who lived in the buildings, nobody dare openly ask. Certainly within the innermost ring of the city, the forbidden area - forbidden to anybody but the rulers of the land, the gruesome stone beasts with their quasi-human heads writhed in their thousands over the administrative buildings. The people who worked in them did look uncannily like the statues on their outsides.

The Sorcerers were supposed to look after the country for everybody to enjoy, but instead they dominated and controlled the rest of us, so they could get on with abusing the laws of nature and becoming ever more powerful. They encouraged everyone to indulge in anything which weakened them from the inside, like drugs and other addictions such as gambling: anything which did not threaten their authority. Many people lost the ability to know right from wrong and then could more easily be manipulated. The Sorcerers were masters of feats of illusion, black magic and hypnotism, and were backed up by the Specials - the Special Secret Police, who were vicious and sinister, and knew that physical torture was also very effective when tracking down dissidents and keeping the population cowed.

Chapter 1 An Innocent Picnic

A few days after we had seen the poor man reduced to ashes, Raynor Antiquarian, our friend, wanted to go out to an island near the city for a picnic, and knowing Raynor as I did, I suspected there was more to it than that. We sailed out of town in a small boat belonging to Lee, who is a couple of months younger than me and short and stocky. Like most Teletsians, his hair is black, but his sticks out like a brush. His manner is bright, his eyes are bright and he is very intelligent. I, on the other hand, am thought to be a hopeless

dreamer, but that is a cultivated image, a protective outer shell. Lee's bright-as-brass outer self is something similar and there is a deeper Lee hiding within. He is always very protective of me, for which I am very grateful, because my father's work as a dealer in medicinal herbs often takes him away from home for long periods.

Raynor Antiquarian's father owns a bookshop where my mother works and I have known him for ever. Raynor, older than Lee and me, is tall and thin, has blue-black hair like us, but his skin is paler than Lee's or mine, perhaps because his grandmother came from a clan of mountain dwellers. Raynor has recently gone to the dreaded Sorcerers' Academy. Its official name is the Teletsian Academy for Advanced Spiritual Study. Raynor's father knows why he has gone there, but many of his friends and relations have ceased to have anything to do with him. His slimy younger brother Mardhang is eternally curious as to why he has made such an unexpected career move. Mardhang is exactly the sort to become a Sorcerer, a real cockroach of a youth. Nevertheless it is Raynor: sunny, scholarly and shy, a kindly soul who would not harm any living thing, who is learning the dark arts and other cruel methods of keeping the rest of us under control. He lacks the smouldering, controlled defiance of Lee, but he has an inner determination, which is mainly directed towards his book learning, and he is brilliant at that.

On this day, as usual, Lee sailed the boat. He has tried to teach Raynor and me the basics of sailing but we aren't much good, so he usually takes charge. Whereas Raynor makes it his business to understand virtually anything written down Lee manages just as well with anything of a practical nature. They are full of admiration for each other and very tolerant of me, who fails in both categories, most of the time. But we complement each other, and share a lot that even our parents do not know about. We have a deep mutual love and respect, and in this insecure city, where you don't quite know who to trust, it is great to have two close friends like this.

We left the large river and went up a smaller one that came out through the forest, and here we did help Lee row. There was an island in the middle of this river and from the water it appeared to be completely covered in trees and undergrowth. We hid the boat under some overhanging branches and walked up a narrow path to an open space we had discovered in its centre. The sunlight flickered through the tall trees above and flowers dotted the ground with pink sparkles of colour. We sat down and had some food and drinks I had brought along – curried fish, homemade flatbread, salad, a fruit tart and a delicious fruit cordial made by my mother. The boys loved my cooking and I knew it would always make them both very happy.

Nog, Raynor's large dog, had come too. He had brown hair, a long tail and a rather serious expression. One ear turned down, the other up. Nog would be sure to bark if anyone had followed us onto the island. He liked having his stomach tickled and knew he could generally persuade me to do this. I made a fuss of him and fed him some leftovers, and thought enviously how simple his life was. Meanwhile Lee told Raynor about what we had seen the week before.

'Did I tell you about that man I saw in the street who had a set-to with one of the Sorcerers?'

'No, what happened?' replied Raynor.

'Asha was devastated, so I decided to find out more. I learnt yesterday that he was only standing up for the right to look after his children himself, and he refused to send them to the state nurseries.'

'You don't absolutely have to give your children to the state nurseries. What happened?'

'The Sorcerer reduced him to a heap of ashes.'

'That's appalling, but it happens all the time.'

'You know what else I heard they do to people who speak out against the Sorcerers? They take away their powers of speech so these poor folk can only grunt or bark like some animal.'

'That's an old trick.'

'I heard something even worse the other day. There's a village out in the country where the people were fed up with so many of them finishing up grunting like pigs and so on, and they organised a rebellion. When the chief Sorcerers heard about this, one went to sort it out with a whole lot of Specials - he did his chanting routine, there was a blinding flash and every villager in sight dropped dead.'

'Oh Mother Earth, when will it end?' I cried. Our family, like many in Teletsia, secretly worshipped the Mother Earth. To pray to her was forbidden, because the Sorcerers maintained that either everything in creation was an accident, or, if there was a creator, it would have to be fearsome and male.

'If I could devote my whole life to trying to solve the nightmares of this country,' said Lee, in a slow, deliberate manner, 'I swear, before our great Mother Earth, that I'd do just that.' Raynor and I agreed, and there in the beautiful woodland clearing, we each put one hand on the ground and the other on our foreheads to pay our respects to her as we repeated the oath. It was a sombre moment. Something in my closed, scared heart opened a crack.

‘It’s time we trusted each other more deeply,’ added Raynor. ‘I wanted Lee to bring us here today, because we have to talk alone.’

‘So, what are you really doing at the Sorcerer’s Academy?’ Lee challenged him.

‘I’m a spy.’ Was this the end for Lee and myself? I couldn’t believe Raynor was about to betray us, he was almost a part of our family. He noticed the fear on my face, ‘I didn’t mean to frighten you – let me explain. The Sorcerers are always on the lookout for young people with exceptional powers. This is no news, but now that I’m at the Sorcerers’ Academy I know the real reason for the state run nurseries. They watch the kids closely and if they show any qualities near to the powers of the Sorcerers they are hypnotised and brainwashed. That’s something advanced students learn.’

‘Have you learnt that yet?’

‘No.’ Raynor’s reply was short, obviously not the right question to have asked. ‘Let me go on. What I’m telling you is incredibly important.’

‘Sorry,’ Lee apologised; he was rather in awe of Raynor.

‘Really stubborn boys and girls are killed, and the parents are told their little one caught a fever and died. But because people have often given in to the hypnosis of the Sorcerers many of them do send their children to these nurseries. We three have escaped because our parents managed to get permission to raise us themselves. You know how delicate the situation is and how careful our parents are not to disturb them.

‘My family is lucky to have the bookshop. The Sorcerers don’t trouble us much, because they’re interested in our ancient manuscripts and old books. They use us when they want to get hold of historical documents. It’s an old book that I have to tell you about, but once I’ve told you about what we’ve found out, if anyone betrays us, we’re all lost.’

‘We live in Teletos and we know what happens,’ said Lee.

‘Raynor is at the Academy, Lee, and he probably knows far more than he’s letting on.’ Raynor looked pointedly at me and went on speaking.

‘I’ve been helping my father at the shop this past year. When trade is slack on hot afternoons, dad sends out for iced sherbets and we disappear into the back room where nobody can hear us. Recently he let me in on some of our family secrets……’

‘You sure it’s all right to tell us?’ interrupted Lee.

‘Yes, he asked me to, because if anything happens to me, someone of our generation will have to take over my researches.’

‘Researches?’ I queried. Lee and I were in muddy waters here, because neither of us were the researching type.

‘We secretly read our stock,’ Raynor continued, ignoring my question, ‘to try and find out anything that may one day help to free our country from these cursed Sorcerers. No one in Teletsia is taught the ancient language today, because ignorance is the easiest way to stop us thinking for ourselves.’

‘We all know that,’ said Lee ruefully. ‘Well, anyone with any sense does.’

‘Most of us in this country haven’t a clue of what really happened in the past. The history we learn at school is utter fantasy, made up by the Sorcerers.’

‘No wonder I find it so boring.’

‘Now I’m going to tell you some of the real stuff.’

‘From what your dad has found out?’

‘Right. Plus he’s been teaching me the ancient language for years and I can also read it pretty well.’

‘So?’

‘Grandfather Zack, and later on dad, have been working on this for ages now. As grandpa is now dead dad has decided to bring me into the secret. A lot of the ancient scrolls mention the writings of a great prophet who lived some centuries ago. He foretold what’s going on today, or anyway at a time when there are all the same problems we’ve got right now. Years ago grandpa found a copy of this prophecy, but it was confiscated by the Sorcerers. He made some notes, which tell of a time when some young people will somehow expose them.’

‘They’ll be lucky! But I’d give a lot to be able to see your grandfather’s notes.’

‘I’ve got them here. I wish we could find these people the prophet talks about. If they’re alive at the moment I’m sure we’d have a lot in common with them.’

‘Maybe we’re them,’ I said hopefully.

‘Oh, come on! You can’t be serious,’ replied Lee.

‘They have to be somewhere,’ I continued.

‘You really think help is at hand? At long last?’ said Lee.

‘Could be,’ Raynor agreed.

‘Is that why you wanted to come here today?’

‘Yes, of course!’ Raynor smiled broadly, because this mattered so much to him. ‘You’ll have to listen carefully.’

‘Go on, we will.’

‘This prophet described a land ruled by black magicians who pretend to be priests, and who use all sorts of psychic forces to dominate and destroy people. It describes Teletsia exactly as it is today.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘It feels so right. The only way the Sorcerers can be overcome is if people become at one with their spirit and then gain subtle powers. They must become consciously connected with the world-soul, the greatest force for good. A person’s mind, feelings and body are a reflection of this. This is called the inner ‘Tree of Life’ and in a strange way it says it has shining, flower-like jewels on the trunk, which is like a golden thread. These jewels are always at certain specific places in people’s bodies. For instance, there’s one like a diamond in the forehead. All the different powers of creation are reflected within us through this. This Tree of Life must be awakened within people, and for that to happen, a group of young people, who are prepared to risk their lives for their country, will have to go on a long journey to find this wisdom and learn how to make use of the power it gives, and how to give it to others.’

‘I don’t understand much of this.’

‘Don’t worry, I didn’t either to start with, but it’s very important...’

While they were talking, the answer came to me. I had an ability about which I kept very quiet. It was exactly what the Sorcerers were seeking to discover, because it enabled me to see them for what they were – totally evil. When I put my attention on a person, I could see what looked like jewels on a golden thread within them, stretching from the bottom of the backbone up to the top of the head, like a celestial tree. This had to be the Tree of Life. If anyone knew my secret it could be the end for me, but hadn’t Raynor already shown us he trusted us completely?

‘The Tree of Life is easy to understand!’ I blurted out.

‘What do you mean?’ exclaimed Raynor.

‘The jewels and the golden thread: the Tree of Life. We’ve all got one.’ This was the first time in my life I had spoken about this. Fear gripped me - what if the boys decided to denounce me? There were large rewards offered by the Sorcerers for information such as this. The rumours about what happened to people like me were awful. Lee picked up the flicker of terror on my face, but then I came to my senses – they of all people would never harm me.

‘Try not to be afraid,’ he implored me. ‘Raynor’s family has been struggling to understand this prophecy for generations. I swear to you that we won’t hand you over to the Sorcerers or anything horrible.’

‘Please tell us more. It could be vital,’ begged Raynor.

‘All right, if you promise not to tell anyone, not even my brother Derwin,’ I began cautiously.

‘Of course not! After all, he’s only ten. He couldn’t keep a secret to save his life,’ Raynor was closer to the truth than he realised.

‘It’s like this, when I put my attention on the inner nature of a person, I see inside them what looks like a string of shining jewels on a golden thread. If a person is evil then these jewels are dull. Sometimes, in really bad people, like Sorcerers, they are like balls of writhing worms. The root of the tree, the bottom of the thread, starts at the base of the spine and goes up through the jewels. These jewels are always at certain specific places in people’s bodies. For instance, there really is one like a diamond in the forehead. At the top of the head, in you two and a few other people, there’s a light like a flower.’ I was committed now, so there was no point in holding back.

‘Go on. At last we may be getting somewhere.’

‘What I see is the same as the prophet’s description of the Tree of Life. People who are kind, loving characters with some wisdom tend to have shining jewels within them - usually.’

‘You’re not very sure.’

‘Sometimes even the best people’s inner jewels look dull, when they’ve got some bad problem.’

‘What about people who aren’t like this: the vast mass who dance to the tune of the Sorcerers?’

‘Oh, them? They vary. The ones who are greedy, cruel, insincere and so on have dark, dirty wheels of fire within them. There’s another thing too. The way the jewels look at any one time and the way people are at that moment fit together perfectly. Like, if a person gets angry, the light in the forehead goes dim, and if a person says something hurtful, then the jewel in the throat doesn’t shine for a time.’

‘Are you saying people’s characters are reflected in these jewels?’

‘More than that. I reckon they’re right at the source of a person’s whole makeup, and it’s amazingly useful. I can always make accurate judgments about people, but I have to keep it an absolute secret or I’d be taken off somewhere dreadful by the Sorcerers.’

‘You’re right there!’ Lee stared at me and I knew he was seeing me in a very new way.

‘Oh, and another thing,’ I went on, ‘you two nearly always have shining inner jewels and glowing flowers on the top of your heads.’ Lee and Raynor looked very dubious. I couldn’t blame them; I’d just come out with something very weird.

‘You said *nearly* always?’ Lee went on.

‘Now and again, when you’re in a gloomy mood, or angry, your jewels get dull, but it doesn’t last, and your murkiest moments are much brighter than the Sorcerers’ good days.’

‘This is astounding! Why didn’t you tell us before? No, actually, you’d have been crazy to tell us until you were sure we’d keep it secret. I’ve also got an unusual power, although it’s not as dramatic as yours,’ admitted Raynor. ‘You may not be the only one the Sorcerers would like to get hold of. If I put my attention on the top of my head, it’s called the fontanel - I feel complete inner peace and at that time I’m never distracted by any unwanted thoughts. When the Sorcerer who’s trained to read minds at the Academy comes around to see if I have any subversive thoughts, he can’t probe when I’m in this state.’

‘How do you know?’ I wondered.

‘Because I loathe the place and all that goes on there, but when I go into this state, he passes me by and says, “You’re doing fine,” so I know for sure the Truthsayer, as he’s called, isn’t reading my mind. When he gets to friends of mine who are also critical of the Sorcerers, he often looks serious. One of my friends was taken off and never seen again after one of these sessions.’

‘I can do this too!’ Lee was excited. ‘I never dared say so, but I can be totally alert and inwardly still at the same time.’

‘Like when?’ asked Raynor

‘I’ve realised that many of the classes at school are sessions in mass hypnosis, in that we’re being conned into accepting the Sorcerers as our perfect lords and masters, but when I go into my secret pool of calm, no bent teacher can make me fall for those lies. Also, our teachers often try to get into our minds and make us admit to wrong things we haven’t even done.’

‘I’ve also stumbled on this pool of calm,’ I added, ‘but I pretend to be in a constant dream. You’ve got to play a few games to survive in Teletsia.’

‘You had me completely fooled,’ admitted Lee.

‘Me too,’ laughed Raynor, ‘but this is all the more reason why we have to look after you and protect you.’

Soon after this we went home, but the seeds had been sown. We fully intended to be an instrument for the Sorcerers’ destruction, even if we had no idea how.

Chapter 2 **The Prophecy**

Nothing much happened for some time after the visit to the island. Lee and I went back to school and Raynor returned to the Sorcerers’ Academy. Now that we knew we had powers which made us ‘subversive,’ it was even more important for us learn more about the prophecy, to see if it could help us in any way. If we had been a few years older and a few years more crushed by the Sorcerers we would not have attempted the virtually impossible, but we were young and idealistic. Then, quite unexpectedly, there was another memorable day.

Lee and I were waiting for Raynor in the large hall of his house. It was a warm afternoon. It usually is in Teletsia, but this day was almost like summer, not the end of winter, and I was glad to be in the cool, flagstoned hall with its high, beamed ceiling and small stained-glass windows. Mardhang, Raynor’s brother, was there. I never trusted him, not only because his Tree of Life was dark, rotten and worm-eaten, but also because he was a sneak. On that day he offered us some cooling juice, and until I put my attention on his inner side I thought for one fleeting moment he might be improving. But no, the inner, subtle worms were still writhing. Ugh! I had to look away.

Finally, the door opened with its usual squeak. Raynor came in and smiled knowingly when he saw us. He was wearing the common dress for young men in Teletos: loose cotton trousers, a flowing shirt and a sleeveless overtunic. Nevertheless, his red and black clothes were the uniform of the elitist Academy, where future oppressors were trained. I noticed that whenever he came from there, his Tree of Life looked dull, but

after some time with us the inner jewels would start to glow again. Outwardly it was Lee and I who looked drab in our earth coloured cottons, because bright colours were frowned upon in the clothes of ordinary young people such as us. We, even more than others, would never try to attract attention to ourselves.

On his back Raynor carried an old leather schoolbag. The way he smiled at us was a dead giveaway. Something was up. He put down his bag and gave Lee a slap on the back, and me a broad grin and an enthusiastic 'Hi Asha!' He'd always been like a brother to me and I was touched by his warm affection. We were usually so reserved in Teletsia.

Mardhang was lounging on the cushions in the corner, reading. Raynor said 'Hello' somewhat coolly; Mardhang gazed vacantly at him and returned to his book in frosty silence. Raynor went to his room and changed out of his hated uniform, then rejoined us with his schoolbag over his shoulder. Together we went out into the garden at the back of his house to get away from Mardhang, who reminded me of some fungus that rarely saw light as he lay among the purple and brown cushions.

The sunlight hit us like a trumpet blast as we went out through the garden door. I loved Raynor's garden. It was colourful, aromatic and escapist. His folk needed somewhere like that, in contrast to all those musty old books and manuscripts they worked with. Some way from the house were a lot of evergreen hedges and a fishpond. We walked down the scrunching gravel path and sat on a stone bench near the pond. Flowerbeds on each side spilled out gaily-coloured blooms, red, orange, yellow, and fragrant herbs. Bees always buzzed around and today some brilliant blue butterflies flitted languidly from flower to flower. The heat made us, as well as the butterflies, lazy and a little careless. Behind and around us were the tall hedges, concealing us from view and anyone from us.

While Raynor looked into his bag Lee and I stood up and had a quick look around to make sure no one was listening who shouldn't. We didn't see anyone, but as we sat down a tornado in the form of Nog threw himself at Raynor. Nog was supposed to be the family watchdog, but he had been asleep and only woke up when he heard Raynor's voice. After greeting Raynor enthusiastically, with wet nose and wagging tail, he went to sleep again in a shady patch.

'So, what's it this time?' Lee asked Raynor eagerly.

'I've got it!'

'Got what?'

'The prophecy!'

'Isn't that incredibly risky?' I said nervously. I could see his fear in the inner jewel of his heart, which suddenly went dull.

'Yes, and I've only got it for the afternoon. I smuggled it out but I must take it back tonight.'

'I wish we could go somewhere safer,' Lee immediately made sense of the situation.

'We simply don't have the time,' Raynor took an old book out of his schoolbag. 'I went into a room in the library that is usually closed and noticed a book with the seal we put on all our stock. I realised this was the prophecy. 'This represents the true flowering of knowledge.' He pointed to a small embossed impression on the spine of the book, an open book with a flower growing out of it.

'We must be careful,' I had a strong feeling this was not the place to talk about this, 'I hope Nog will watch out for us.'

'I'm sure he will,' said Raynor absently, scanning the book. He turned the pages, fascinated. 'From what I can gather, the young people who are to be the catalysts for change have to go on a long journey to a country in some mountains in the far north.'

'Any names given?' asked Lee.

'No. It says, "Beyond the Great Sea." "In that land they will come to understand" - it's not easy to translate - "their true potential, that inner power which exists within every individual".'

'Mysterious gobbledygook. Any revelations today, Asha?' Lee looked hopefully at me. I shook my head.

'Listen, do you want to hear this or not?' Raynor was very much on edge and not his usual even-tempered self. Neither he nor Lee were being as cautious as they generally were.

'Yes of course, take it easy,' said Lee.

'"There, in that land, they will come to be at one with the force of creation. This powerful awareness will flow through them and help them to be instruments of change."'

'Do you really think the prophet believed this?' Lee was beginning to prickle against all the obscure language.

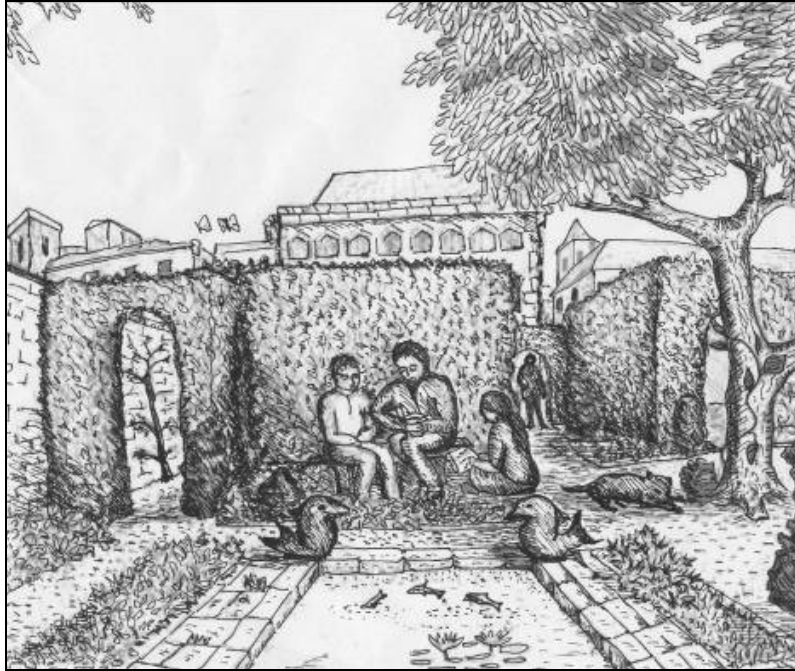
'He wouldn't have written it if he didn't,' I commented. 'It's telling us what to seek.'

'What do you mean?'

'Us? Seek what?' said Raynor. 'We're not these people the prophecy is talking about.'

‘Even if we’re only ordinary people, we must try to make this journey,’ I was about to explain further.

‘Great, so we just up and off across the world,’ interrupted Lee, ‘forget our families, forget the Sorcerers and their Secret Police, and on the way we just happen to come across a group of people who are putting the world to rights, who know exactly where they are going and why.’



‘What I mean is,’ I persisted, ‘maybe it’s an inner spiritual journey each one of us has to take.’

‘It does tell you how to start,’ went on Raynor. “‘The journey must start from the Temple of Support. The temple has four great stones..”’

‘I’ve heard of that place!’ cried Lee, completely forgetting to keep his voice down. ‘It’s out in the country, past Clatan. Have you?’

‘Can’t say I have,’ replied Raynor.

‘The local people say it’s sacred to the Mother Earth.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I was staying out that way on holiday last year.’

‘According to the prophecy, there are four large rocks in a square in the centre and a lot of smaller ones twisting around in a spiral.’

‘That’s it!’

‘Listen to this,’ Raynor continued translating, “‘There are seven jewelled keys to match the seven jewels of the soul. The subtle centres of the inner Tree of Life match these actual jewelled keys”.’

‘Where on earth are we to come by them?’

‘No idea.’

‘Go on.’

“‘The jewelled keys are effective in certain areas of the world. The seekers can open the inner doors of the spirit with them and can also use these magical jewels to help them get to the northern country.’” At that moment we heard the crunch of footsteps on the gravel behind us. Nog was awakened by someone standing on his tail, which had been lying across the path. Mardhang appeared, running round the corner of the hedge, pursued by a snarling Nog. I jumped up to shield Raynor as he pushed the book back into the bag. Lee lurched towards Mardhang to protect him from Nog, because Nog hated Mardhang as much as he loved Raynor.

‘That wretched dog of yours nearly bit me!’ complained Mardhang. ‘Father should have the brute destroyed! It never attacks intruders, only me!’ I looked away so Mardhang couldn’t see me smiling and Lee also hid his amusement in a fake sneezing fit. We forgot that our freedom hung by a thread.

‘By the way, I happened to overhear that you’re going to the old stone circle beyond Clatan to look for some buried treasure. I’m your brother. You’d better not leave me behind.’ We all knew that wheedling, threatening voice. While Mardhang was speaking, the inner jewels of his soul were horrible.

Our meeting broke up immediately. We arranged to get together again the following weekend at Lee’s house, which was safer. Raynor’s garden backed onto a canal and we left in Lee’s boat that we had come in. Raynor managed to get the book back to the library without any problems, or so he thought.

Journal of Herzog, Scribe to the Most High Priests of Teletsia

I, Herzog, scribe to the most illustrious Lords of Teletsia, do hereby record the latest report of our trusted servant Mardhang Antiquarian.

Raynor Antiquarian assumed he had returned the prophecy without being seen. Mardhang Antiquarian made his way to the Administrative Quarter, disguised as a fishwife in a veil and carrying a basket of fish on his head. We always insist he comes in disguise. He came in by a servant's entrance and was given clean clothes, for their Supreme Holinesses the Priests cannot stand the smell of fish. They were waiting for him, wearing their black cloaks and red robes of office and sitting round a heavy wooden table in the Interrogation Chamber. This room has bare grey stone walls, a high, vaulted ceiling and small windows, so no one can try to escape by jumping out of them. Armed guards stand by the doors and many people have been condemned to death or torture in this room. Mardhang felt hemmed in and afraid, standing alone at the hub of the power of Teletsia.

'Speak, wretch,' said His Supreme Lordship, who has a thin, refined face like a death mask and wears his grey hair long.

'Raynor has deciphered the prophet's book,' began Mardhang in a quavering voice.

'Speak up, idiot!' ordered the Master of the Dead Souls, who is somewhat deaf due to his great age. He has a carved wooden ear trumpet, but it does not help him much.

'This Raynor must be a genius indeed, would that he was on our side,' said His Supreme Lordship.

'He will be, when we have captured and broken him, but first let him lead us to the jewels of power. Those we must have in order to prevent the prophecy from being fulfilled,' this was the Master of Mind Control. Few people can return his gaze, and when his deep dark eyes bore into anyone being questioned, they find it hard not to tell him the truth.

'He must also lead us to this prophesied group of young traitors,' continued the Head of the Special Secret Police Force.

'None of them must survive or Teletsia as we know it is finished,' insisted His Supreme Lordship.

'They will meet again soon, probably in the house of Lee Restorer's family,' said Mardhang.

'Thank you for that information. Go and claim your usual reward. But remember, if you cease serving us, unending terror will fill your brain.'

Mardhang grovelled on the floor. 'Oh, and another thing,' the Master of the Dead Souls spoke once more, 'we will send a bat to spy for us next time Raynor meets his friends. You needn't try to follow them.'

'A bat, my Lord?' Mardhang picked himself up from his grovel.

'Yes, we force a human spirit which is under our control into the body of a bat. It spies on whoever we command it to. When the bat returns, we put the spirit back into its own human body and then it tells us whatever it has heard while it was in the body of the bat. We might transfer you into a bat, permanently, if you displease us.'

Some days later, in the early evening, we met in the rambling old palace which belonged to Lee's father. It had several floors, was built round a central courtyard, and behind was a larger yard with more buildings that had been converted into flats, as had the central building. There were gardens around it, including a walled rose garden at the back, and behind this was one of the larger canals. We went to the garret at the top of the tower in one corner of the courtyard. From here we could see the whole city built on many interconnected islands, with its canals, roads, houses and gardens. Teletos was near the shore and connected to it by bridges, and beyond was the broad river estuary, where ships from many countries always lay out in the deeper water. No one could hear us because Lee had locked the door from the inside and it was at the bottom of the long spiral staircase that led up to the little room. We sat on cushions we had brought up with us, because it was empty and not used.

'We didn't think of going to have a look at the Temple of Support, did we?' said Raynor.

'No, that was the one good idea we got from that horrendous brother of yours,' replied Lee. 'He's a real pain. I'm sure you don't like to hear that, but it's the truth.'

'At least you don't have to live with him; that can be too much sometimes. It says in the prophecy that if a person is not humbly seeking wisdom on this journey, he won't get very far. Let's not worry about Mardhang too much at the moment.'

'I agree with you,' I added. 'Let's hope nothing, especially Mardhang, is going to stop us from all this seeking of wisdom and jewelled keys and temples.'

'By the way,' said Raynor, 'did you notice that my father has taken to growing large clumps of scented tulsi in our garden?'

‘Yes, I did!’ I laughed. ‘What’s it for?’

‘I read in the prophecy that we can use the dried leaves, which as you know give off a wonderful sharp smell, to protect us from evil people.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Lee.

‘It said, “Tulsi will nullify the destructive energies of negative beings, or even harmful spirits”.’

‘Sounds odd. Does it work?’

‘Yes, it does. It saved me the other day. Here, Asha, take these leaves and sew them into little sachets and we’ll wear them around our waists or something. We can’t be too careful, because we’d be prime targets for the Sorcerers if they knew more about us.’ Before I could tell Raynor I wasn’t much good at sewing, he gave me a bag full of scented tulsi. Its strong smell filled the garret. I was just wondering whether I could persuade my mother to do the sewing job for me when a bat, which had been hiding in the rafters, suddenly flew terrified towards the glassless window, hitting itself in its haste. It was completely disoriented. We looked at it and each other, then went on talking.

‘Funny about that bat,’ continued Raynor, ‘the other day a similar thing happened.’

‘You mean your teacher flew out of the window?’ joked Lee.

‘Not far off. When I smuggled the prophecy out of the library at the Sorcerers’ Academy, the old Sorcerer, who sometimes searches you when you leave, saw my bag. I thought for one terrible moment the game was up. However, I had by chance put some scented tulsi in the top of it. He demanded to see what was inside and made me open it. As I did, he smelled it, had a violent coughing fit, then ran back into the librarian’s office shrieking and retching, as if he’d been poisoned.’

‘You didn’t tell us that. How did you get out?’

‘I quietly left the library before the hullabaloo died down.’

‘But scented tulsi has a lovely smell!’ I said, and buried my nose in the bag full of it.

‘Not if you’re a Sorcerer,’ observed Raynor.

‘Or a bat,’ concluded Lee.

We made plans to visit the Temple of Support near Clatan and the next day Raynor returned to the Sorcerers’ Academy, armed as usual with scented tulsi.

Journal of Herzog, Scribe to the Most High Priests of Teletsia

The priests found no trace of the bat or the spirit possessing it. We assume a bird of prey caught the bat. We will have to go back to using Mardhang Antiquarian, who is doing well in this matter so far.

Chapter 3

The Start of the Journey

Lee, Raynor and I had a short holiday from our places of education and wanted to visit the Temple of Support. My mother had a friend called Mrs Starwise, an elderly lady with white hair and a wrinkled, kindly face. She was one of Lee’s father’s tenants and was a professional astrologer, and the week before we left I happened to see her. She warned me that there was something important in my stars, and also Derwin’s: ‘It’s a very good time to start a project that could have far-reaching repercussions, but you’ll have to be careful about dangerous negative influences which will try to come your way. It’s a very rare line-up of stars and heralds great change.’

‘It bears out what’s in the prophecy,’ Raynor said when I told him. ‘It says, “The hopes of the very stars in the heavens are reflected in the minds and hearts of people on earth.” I’d never thought of stars as having hopes, but that’s what it said.’

Before we planned to go into the countryside, Lee mentioned that we’d come up with a problem. We needed to borrow Lee’s neighbours’ pony trap. The neighbour was another of the tenants in Lee’s family palace, and his family could borrow it whenever they needed it. However, Conwenna, the neighbour’s daughter, wanted to come too and we couldn’t refuse her. Conwenna was a courageous little girl, with a shining Tree of Life, but she was even younger than my brother Derwin, so we weren’t keen on taking her. She had a reticence about her, even more than us. We thought this was because her mother had died when she was very young. Her father was often away for his work and she had been brought up by her maiden aunt, a bitter and cold-hearted woman. Lee’s mother spoke to him about Conwenna one evening.

‘If you want to go camping on the plain near Clatan,’ she said, ‘I can’t see why you don’t want to take Conwenna.’

‘It might be dangerous,’ he objected. ‘There are lots of snakes there, especially during this season, when it sometimes rains.’ It was important that his mother didn’t know why we were going. If she were ever questioned about this trip, the less she knew the better. The Sorcerers had many tortures to wring secrets out of people, and Lee would naturally never have wanted his mother to suffer on his account.

‘I would have thought that Conwenna would know better than any of you about poisonous snakes. After all her father is a prospector and she sometimes goes on trips with him to the jungles and mountains for weeks at a time.’

‘Yeah, I s’pose you are right, ma.’

Lee was concerned that this outwardly innocent camping trip might turn out much more serious, especially after I had told him what Mrs Starwise had said. If anything unexpected happened none of the parents would see any of us again, because the authorities were ruthless, but on the other hand it would not do to be too secretive about the whole thing and thus attract attention in that way. We were going to have to take Conwenna, because we really did need to borrow the pony trap.

My brother Derwin also wanted to tag along. He was a few months older than Conwenna and an acquaintance of hers, when it suited him. It suited him then and nobody could think of any good reason to stop him coming too. He and Conwenna were undoubtedly out of the ordinary, but because they were so young we had not let them into our secrets.

Something happened at my home too. My mother dreamed of a girl riding a white horse and wearing a blue cloak. She told my mother that we were going on an important journey where older people would be afraid to travel, but our innocence would carry us through and we would be guided by many wise people. I had some trouble persuading my mother not to worry, but eventually managed to calm her down. I told Raynor and Lee and they took the omen very seriously, because we knew my family members had prophetic dreams.

Some days later we set out for the Temple of Support. At sunrise we were loading up the pony trap in the yard of Lee’s large home. My mother was there and she took Raynor aside.

‘Look after them, Raynor. This may be the start of what we’ve been waiting for, for so long,’ she said, and he understood that she was referring to her dream. Raynor was riding his father’s horse; Derwin had borrowed a pony and Conwenna, Lee and I were in the pony trap with the camping gear and food. Conwenna was quiet and strong-minded – there was no way anyone was going to leave her behind. She was thin and wiry, like me, but had a shock of curly shoulder-length hair, whereas mine was longer, straight and tied back. Her expression gave away little of what was going on inside her, and her mouth was set and pursed. She didn’t say much. Derwin was his usual enthusiastic self. He looked like Lee, short for his age and stocky, with straight hair. He had the strong nose of most of our people, and a cheeky dimple in his chin. Neither Derwin nor Conwenna had any idea why we were really going to the country. It was better they did not know, in case things went wrong.

We set out early and everything went well until we came to the great stone gatehouse at the bridge onto the mainland which carried the western road. All land traffic had to leave the city via one of the bridges and we used this one when we took Nog for a walk. Although a few of the Sorcerers and Special Secret Police had carriages powered by coal, the horse was the main means of transport, apart from donkeys, mules, oxen and a type of camel in the mountain districts.

This was Teletos, the capital of Teletsia and you didn’t just come and go as you pleased. We had the necessary passes to go to for the Clatan district, but it was only when Raynor produced his badge which showed that he was at the Sorcerers’ Academy that we were allowed out without being searched and questioned. Even so we had to wait a long time under the arches of the old gate. As was the custom, the gatehouse was covered with carvings of beasts with horrible expressions on their faces. Most of my friends thought these ones looked like Sorcerers but we were told they were there to frighten away unwanted intruders. As I was waiting, I noticed one that reminded me of Mardhang.

After satisfying the gatekeepers we crossed the bridge among the crowds of people on foot, on horses, in coal powered carriages and carts. We were taking a look over the side of the parapet to see the boats and barges sliding along the smooth, dirty surface of the canal, and there, horror of horrors, on the further side of the bridge, we saw Mardhang.

He looked ridiculous and stood out even in this crowd. He rode a horse that he had hired for the occasion, wore the gaudy clothes of a town dandy and his hat had a great feather in it. Passers by laughed at him as he stood waiting for us. Mardhang insisted on coming too and told us he was wearing smart clothes because he intended to stay at an inn rather than camp in the open. I didn’t believe him - he wanted to be noticed for some reason, and it wasn’t one that would help us in any way.

While we were all arguing at the further end of the bridge, who should come bounding across it, weaving in and out of the people, vehicles and animals with the slithery skill of an eel in a hurry, but Nog. He panted to a stop and howled with delight at the prospect of a run. It was too late to take him back and he just wagged his tail stupidly when Raynor told him to go home on his own. He jumped in the back of the pony trap and promptly fell asleep, triumphantly. So our trip had begun, but not without problems.

We left the built up area on the mainland near the island city and began our journey through the farmland. It was one of those marvellous days when all nature was basking in the return of the warm and balmy weather we have for ten months of the year. I forgot the mixed feelings I had when saying goodbye to my parents as I watched, heard and even smelled the countryside around me, but nevertheless felt we might be away much longer than a few days.

Things became lively again when we reached the second village. We rounded the corner into the village street, rutted and muddy due to recent rain. Coming towards us was a farmer in a cart pulled by a team of at least six donkeys. It was piled high with wooden crates full of hissing geese and quacking ducks on their way to Teletos market.

Mardhang's horse couldn't take this at all. It reared up and bounded sideways into the village duck pond. The water was shallow and coated with green slime. Mardhang went in head first, after he and the horse parted company. He was soaked by his fall and the horse careered around the pond in its fright, trying to escape from the dreadful hissing monster, which had by now disappeared in the direction of the city.



At the side of the pond some yokels were commenting on the scene as Mardhang was helped back on his horse by Lee and Derwin. I couldn't help it, but my heart sang when I saw Mardhang, stinking like a rotten fish, coming out of that pond. I overheard the yokels' comments.

'I reckon the parrot's fallen into a puddle!' cackled one antique chap, with a hoot of laughter as he leant on his walking stick.

'Right place for 'im too, and all his kind as well, says I,' put in another, not quite so ancient.

'If he's going to ride a handsome horse, he should at least know how to stay aboard it,' said a third.

'Ain't so handsome now; looks right bedraggled,' went on the very old man who had spoken first, chewing on his wispy moustache. 'Good horse though, to tip one of them Sorcerers' men into the slime. Wish we could put them all in there, eh?' he poked his elbow into the side of the old man sitting next to him.

'Be careful, Grandpa,' said the third one, 'that blighter could have you put away before your time, just for saying that. You know them Sorcerers and their mates.'

'I don't care; I'll be going soon enough. It's a rum world when an old boy like me can't even enjoy a good joke,' finished the very old one who then went stumping off, chuckling and pointing his stick at Mardhang.

Mardhang was furious. He rode off up the street ahead of us and told us to go on, saying that he would catch us up. We saw his horse tethered outside the office of the Specials. I was beginning to fear the worst about him

After the incident of the duck pond, Mardhang sank into a silent, damp and rather smelly gloom and his horse was not quite so skittish. He threatened to go home but unfortunately didn't, so the journey continued. That night we camped by the roadside and Mardhang went to stay at a nearby inn. We thought nothing of it, only that he didn't enjoy camping or our company. It became very cloudy and rained hard in the night, so despite our tents we got quite wet. He rejoined us on the road the following morning and no longer smelled of stagnant pond as he had for most of the previous day.

Records of the Special Police, Noldi Village, Teletos Province

I, Constable Rasp, do hereby report the following:

Yesterday morning, Mardhang Antiquarian of Teletos complained that he had been mentally abused by three men, (named below) when his horse threw him into the village pond. Mr Mardhang showed me his badge, proving him to be a Grade IV Informer for the High Priests. This type of abuse is treason when the plaintiff is so important. Offenders have no trial when reported by such a one, whose evidence alone is considered damning.

In the night I took my two assistants and we dragged the old men from their homes and drowned them in the same pond. It was a routine killing. Their families found them the following morning and no complaints were lodged.

We went on and by mid-afternoon were nearing the part of the country where Lee's friends had their farm. He had written to tell them that we were coming and they had replied that they were looking forward to seeing us. Sure enough, where the lane from the farm joined the country road, there they were. The three of them had seen us on the far hill, from their farmhouse, and had come to meet us. There were a lot of 'hellos,' and Tandi Riverside embraced everyone. She was taller than me and I was immediately struck by her almost picture perfect face, her perfectly proportioned body and her long, thick hair – black like most people's in Teletsia. She had a warm, infectious laugh and smiled a lot – much more than me, who was always wary in those days. Her twin brothers Gwant and Mabron led the way up the hill, to their farmhouse. The lane went through fields where fat, contented cows grazed the lush grass, and fruit groves, heavy with scented yellow, white and pink blossom at this time of year.

These young farm people were healthy and sturdy and had something that was missing from us sons and daughters of Teletos. In the city, which was held in a gridlock by black-hearted Sorcerers, we were always on our guard. Out here the creeping, ever-searching tendrils of the evil rulers, always seeking to trap, entwine and suffocate our freedom, didn't seem so threatening. Mother Nature was the stronger. We could see this all around us in the shining green of the earth's spring clothing and the explosion of flowers decorating the gardens, meadows and riversides. Even the rich red of the soil, where the ploughs had turned the fields, was brighter and more alive than our muted world of grey city streets.

We followed Tandi and her brothers up the lane and Lee noticed that Mardhang was no longer with us. Raynor said he had gone to see some friends in the nearby town of Clatan. We were relieved that he had left us, even if only temporarily.

Tandi's mother prepared a meal and we ate and ate the home grown food. After we had finished our dessert of yellow springberries, delicious pale yellow berries found in the hedgerows, which tasted slightly sharp and were best with lashings of cream and sugar, Tandi took us to find someone Lee had met the previous year.

'Ahren is as wild as a hawk, but he's got a heart of gold,' Tandi had said when describing him to Conwenna and myself.

By a small river, in a thicket of tall bushes we met Ahren, who, Tandi insisted, knew the country around the Temple of Support well. At first we could not see anyone, but then, in the shadows under the overhanging bank of the stream, we noticed a boy slightly younger than Lee lying on his stomach, leaning over the water's edge with his arms in the water. He was oblivious of us and was trying to tickle a fish, that is, trying to catch a fish by gently tickling its sides, so it mistook a person's fingers for the flowing waters of the stream. Then it was thrown out onto the bank before it realised its fatal mistake. It needed much patience and very quick reactions and Ahren was a bit short on the patience.

The half tickled fish heard the human footsteps even if Ahren didn't, and it swam away as we approached. Ahren stood up and turned around to reveal a front covered in reddish dirt from lying at the water's edge. He saw Tandi, who was in the lead. Ahren was taller than Lee, although he was younger, and

thin, as if all his growing had gone into his height. He had a small turned up nose, smiling eyes, a mop of curly, almost frizzy hair, and when one looked at him the words rebellious mischief came to mind.

‘That’s the end of that fish for today. Honestly Tandi, you’ll never learn,’ cried Ahren with a resigned grin. Nothing bothered him for long, however. ‘Oh, hello! I didn’t see the rest of you,’ he called to us as we came out of the thick bushes. ‘I didn’t know you were coming today. When are we going to the temple? That’s why you’ve come, isn’t it?’

‘You must be careful what you say,’ Tandi cautioned him. ‘Most people don’t even know it is a temple.’ We had previously decided that we would probably tell her more about why we had come, once I had checked on her inner Tree of Life. As soon as I saw her I realised she was another of the people who walked around with shining jewels inside them, even though they didn’t know it.

‘Hello, Ahren,’ cried Lee from the back, ‘good to see you again.’

‘And you! I hope we are going to get into some real living soon!’

‘So do I,’ added Lee, ‘but we’ve got to watch out for Raynor’s ghastly brother. He’s coming along too if we can’t shake him off, so you must be very careful of him. We don’t know whose side he’s on, but I’m pretty sure it’s not ours. Although what we’re doing isn’t exactly wrong, he could twist the truth and make things very difficult for us. So you’ve *got* to keep your mouth shut when he’s around - right?’ Raynor and I had also previously arranged that if, when I looked into Ahren’s Tree of Life, the inner jewels were shining, I would give Raynor a nod and then Raynor would let him into at least some of our reason for being here. I took one look at Ahren and gave Raynor the prearranged nod. Fate was at work, because of the thousands of people in Teletos and the few I had seen on our way here, none of them had such vibrant Trees of Life as those of us standing together in the bushes of Tandi’s farm.

‘We want to go and see if we can find some clues as to whether it really is a temple,’ Raynor took over. ‘I’ve been doing a lot of research and we’ve come up with some awesome stuff. There might be some golden keys or jewelled charms hidden there, near the springs or those big stones in the centre. We’re doubtful, because we got our information from an old book, and after so many years someone has probably already found them. Plus if they are still there we don’t stand much chance of finding them just by doing the odd bit of digging. We think maybe the mention of the jewels may mean something else. It may be symbolic.’

Raynor had been sizing up Ahren as he was speaking and saw in him precisely the sort of person needed for a trip of this kind. Although Raynor could be quietly courageous and very determined, he sometimes lacked fire, and needed someone to push him into action. These qualities Ahren had in abundance, even if he could be hot-headed and utterly tactless.

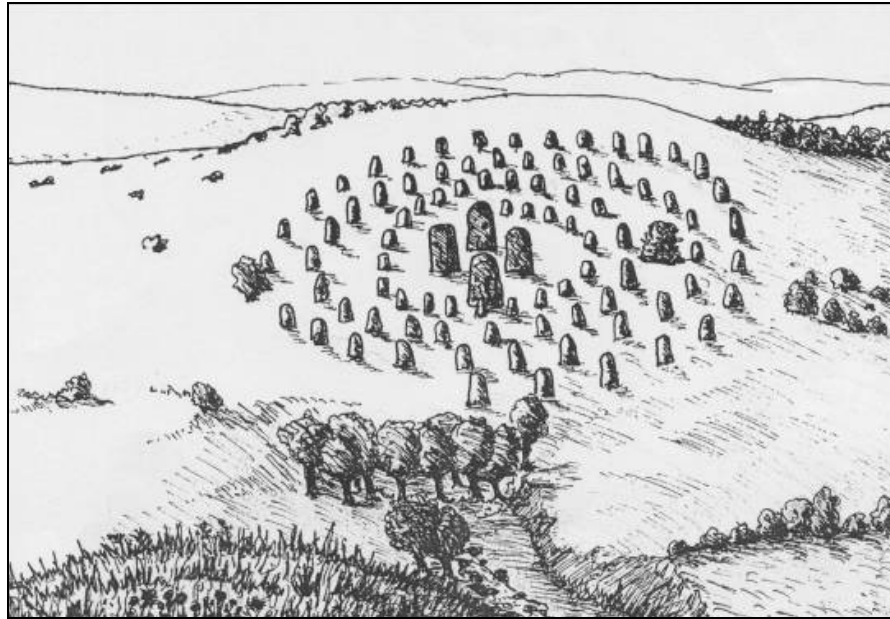
‘We’ll leave early tomorrow morning, because it’s a full day’s journey,’ said Tandi to Ahren. ‘Meet us at the bottom of the lane after breakfast. Can you get hold of a horse?’

‘Yeah, no problem. I’ll borrow one of the milk-round horses from dad.’ Ahren’s father owned the dairy in nearby Clatan, a small and sleepy town. I must admit that when I first spoke to Ahren, as opposed to looking at his inner Tree of Life, I found him very immature, considering he was almost as old as Lee and me. But then I realised that these country people were much more spontaneous and less suspicious than us from the city, and I shouldn’t have felt so critical.

Tandi’s brothers were not able to come, as it was their turn to look after the poultry. Their father was very strict about these duties being carried out properly. The milk-round horses were all in use, but Ahren managed to borrow an ancient racing pony. He found it at his uncle’s abattoir, where it was about to be slaughtered for dog meat. As it had no other failings except old age and a mournful expression, he persuaded his uncle to give it a few days’ reprieve.

Chapter 4

The Temple of Support



The seven of us set off through the winding country lanes the next morning and all day we slowly climbed to higher ground. It was getting towards sunset when we reached the plain and saw the great stones of the temple. It was still hot, even though breezy, as we approached them, standing like sentinels among the flowering bushes and long grass of this singing, rattling, sighing wildland. The sun was setting exactly in line with the two large stones which were aligned east and west. Lee noticed that the following day it would rise exactly in line with the western one. As we got closer the warm breeze died down and the noise of the plants being blown around stopped. Even the birds ceased their singing.

We paused and looked at the temple, and I sensed a great power emanating from it, as if something wanted to grow out of the three and a half circles of rocks dotted at intervals on the plain. These spirals of rocks surrounded the four vast megaliths in the centre. I experienced a feeling that was somewhere between power, joy and energy, and when I put my hands in the direction of the standing stones there was a cool and subtle wind blowing on my face and the palms of my hands. This was strange because otherwise the evening was still and warm.

The light was fading and we decided to spend the night in the little valley to the north of the temple where seven springs gushed out of the rock, in a clearing surrounded by some trees. We unhitched the pony from the trap and tied up the animals, after giving them food and water. Ahren made a fire and Tandi started to cook supper on it: chicken roast on skewers and baked roots, wild yams, similar to sweet potatoes. They were large and brownish and very tasty when baked in the embers. Just as we settled ourselves around the fire and began to eat, into the circle of firelight came Mardhang leading his horse.

‘I thought I’d find you here,’ he muttered. There was a chilly silence and then someone ventured a hello.

‘Been here long?’ he asked.

‘Not very,’ replied Lee curtly.

‘Was it dark when you got here?’ No one bothered to reply because our mouths were full of food. ‘I asked, was it dark when you got here?’ he repeated, this time looking directly and rather nastily at Conwenna. She didn’t flinch but gave him a vacant smile. She appeared to be looking right through him. Could she see what I saw, or feel what I felt: the slimy, smouldering, sneaky essence of Mardhang?

‘Sunset,’ she said, and returned to her chicken. Mardhang didn’t say ‘useless brat’, but you could almost hear him thinking it. He turned his attention to Tandi.

‘Found anything interesting?’ Mardhang tried a more direct approach.

‘Such as?’ asked Tandi and went on turning some wild yams in the fire as if unaware of the undertones of the question. She was expert at appearing to be a naive country bumpkin, when in fact she was highly intelligent and intuitive. With her sparkling eyes and pretty heart shaped face many people failed to appreciate her inner depth. They took her for a beautiful, unsophisticated farmer’s daughter who longed for the finery and excitement of the big city. This was one side of her nature, but only a part of it. I noticed

Mardhang looking at her and heard him murmur, 'Idiot female, I wonder if she can really be as stupid as she looks.'

'I've heard what you lot are up to these past months and what you're doing is deadly dangerous. This stuff is only for Priests.' He almost shouted, losing his temper. None of us said a word. Then he went on more quietly, assuming he had scared us. 'If you're going treasure hunting though, I could help to protect you from - from them. You know who I mean.'

'Mardhang, I'll soon be a Priest myself,' said Raynor. It was a bluff, because Raynor had no intention of becoming a Sorcerer. Mardhang scowled and Tandi innocently handed him a leg of hot chicken and a charred wild yam she had taken out of the embers. He promptly burnt his mouth and fingers.

After we had finished, Tandi brewed a syrupy drink and we sipped it while sitting round the fire. Lee took out his flute and we asked Raynor for a song. It was his own composition, unpractised and clumsy in parts, but it came straight from the heart, a reaction to the stupidity of the Sorcerers' Academy, where the Sorcerers taught students to manipulate the almost perfect Teletsian climate for their own selfish ends. The poem was dedicated to the Mother Earth, so this wild countryside was the right place to sing it.

*'Wreathed in an endless garment of white clouds, you hide your vast equanimity,
With your changing moods and seasons, you reveal your tender fragility.*

*You know to perfection your part, in the dance of the planets and stars,
When we learn how we travel with you, then perhaps we'll come to know ours.
How carefully, how delicately, you slowly form your great creation,
With man as the crest-jewel, mirror of all evolution.
But humans abuse your gift of free will and deny what they might become,
At a moment in time when mankind could in spirit be one.*

*While arrogant people disturb the living surface of your being,
Will you one day rise, throw off compassion and show us that in truth, you are all seeing?
One little shudder, some subtle rippling of your shimmering skin,
And there'd just be blue rolling ocean where our ancient country once had been.
So let us worship and respect you, and accept all your variety,
Not try to mould you and control you with our human notoriety.'*

Mardhang found the song very offensive. He was clutching at the buttons on his jacket and shaking his head in disapproval. I heard him muttering under his breath, 'Subversive songs. Enough of this. There're better things going on over the hill.' Then he spoke out loud and announced that he was going for a walk in the moons' light.

I was concerned for a moment, but in the beauty of the night forgot his words and their possible meaning. I love our moons and tonight they were even more spectacular than usual. As we had been having supper, and later when Raynor and Lee were singing and playing, all three had risen and shone over the towering megaliths behind us on the hilltop.

The first moon to rise had been the small white, fastest moving Moon of Wisdom. Next had come the largest, the golden Moon of Good Fortune and the last to appear above the rocks of the temple had been the medium sized and slowest moving Moon of Compassion, fainter than the other two. I was sure the moons were connected with the qualities that their names suggested, but most people, cut off from anything of value in their culture, ridiculed the idea. The Sorcerers did not like to see correlations between the outer forces of nature and our inner selves. They liked everything split up into separate compartments so they could control everyone and everything more easily. The concept of a vast and sentient Mother Earth, and moons that could affect people's natures, terrified the Sorcerers, so Raynor said. He knew. He knew them all too well.

We looked in wonder at the majesty of the moons and something deep stirred within us. In contrast to the silent procession of the moons, we could hear the seven little springs, gurgling down the hillside with the spontaneous happiness of a newborn baby. Nog, who had been off hunting for some extra dinner, now came and kept guard, growling periodically. He understood things like moons, and he probably also saw the Tree of Life in people, because he always judged a person's character so accurately.

We slept under the stars and moons. I had a dream. I was in infinite space and there was complete silence. Then there was a sound, a vibration that solidified into an enormous golden egg. From the egg came the wailing of a baby, and it cracked open. There was a blinding light and out came a young boy, sweet and

innocent. He modelled a baby elephant out of the bare earth nearby and then breathed life into it. Next the boy and the elephant walked up the hill and when they were nearly at the top the boy crouched down and made signs in the earth, in the shape of a square.

A little golden key had appeared in the ground where he had made the signs. The key had a four-petalled flower on the end of it, set with orange-red gems. He picked it up and gave it to the elephant. The elephant held it carefully in its trunk and gave it to me.

In the next part of the dream the three of us stood back from the place on the ground where the signs had been made and I noticed that there was a definite impression in the earth where the jewelled key had been. The impression became a roaring vortex and out of it arose the great stones of the Temple of Support. Then everything became still and I saw a stream, the stream with the seven springs. The small boy pointed to it flowing north and said to me in a clear voice, 'That's your way, seeker. Follow it!'

The dream faded and I woke up. It was still dark, although I knew from the position of the stars that night was nearly over. For some reason I felt by my side, and there in the earth next to me, I could see, by the faint light of the Moon of Compassion, a key, with a jewelled flower-shaped end, hung on a golden chain. Half asleep, I picked it up and put it round my neck, under my clothes. Then I dozed off again.

When I next woke up it was that time of grey light shortly before dawn, the coldest part of the night. Raynor was bending over Lee, who was sleeping on the ground beyond Conwenna, next to me. Lee was snoring and I whispered to Raynor, 'What's going on?'

'We've been followed by a group of Specials,' he replied, desperately anxious.

'Huh? What? You must have had a bad dream,' I mumbled.

'No, wake up Asha, or this might be the last time you do.' I looked at Raynor and with my inner awareness felt his fear, a hollow pain in the subtle centre at the level of his heart. Raynor, and indeed all of us, had plenty to be utterly terrified about. My heart began pounding and I felt as if someone was crushing me with a great rock. My worst fears were being realised. I looked in horror at him.

'What on earth are we going to do?'

'I don't know. I'm asking you,' he was almost shaking with fear.

'Why me?'

'Why not? You're the psychic one.'

'How do you know we've been followed?'

'In the night, I thought I heard voices and went to have a look. I went up to the temple and over the hill to the other side to where there're a few trees - scrubby ones, but trees. I kept low and crept from the cover of one tree to the next. I could hear the noise of men talking and laughing, and they sounded as if they were high on some drug. Eventually I saw them, some men drinking what I think was that new one, imported stuff - fermented juice. They were sitting around a campfire and soon they bedded down and went to sleep. I went closer and saw their red and black uniforms: Specials, for sure, and you know what they're like. At first I thought I'd come and wake you all up. It was too much of a coincidence to find them here tonight, way off the beaten track, the very same evening that we're here. Then I realised that if we let them know we're frightened we'd be playing into their hands.'

'So what did you do?' I was sitting up now and wide awake.

'Nothing. After the horror of the first minute or so, I remembered that there's no reason why we shouldn't be here. Our passes are good for all this area. Plus we have Mardhang with us. We don't know whether he's just being his usual tricky self, or whether he's in league with this crew. To begin with I was stunned. I sat there alone, hiding, terrified. I couldn't think of anything, let alone do anything, but then I calmed down and came back here and tried to get some sleep.'

'Did you?'

'No way, I just tossed and turned and decided to wake you up.'

'What if they do find us digging for gold?' wondered Lee, who had now woken up.

'Hush, quietly,' I urged.

'Pretend we're digging for wild yams!' Ahren chortled loudly. He had woken up too.

'Do whisper!' urged Raynor. 'Or you'll wake the others. Don't you know these Specials are no joke? Murder and torture are their middle names.'

'Listen,' I suggested, 'let's go and have a quick look at the temple right now, before it gets light.'

As is often the case when I wake up in the night and then go back to sleep, waking reality and dream awareness got mixed up. I had forgotten I had the jewelled key around my neck. It had merged into being part of my dream, which had also slipped my mind at that moment.

‘That makes sense,’ whispered Lee. ‘Let’s go to that side of the temple,’ he pointed to where the sun was rising over it, ‘and we may see something useful. This morning the sun is going to come up exactly in line with the two big stones that point due east and west, of the central four. I have a feeling that we might get some clues if we watch carefully.’

The four of us silently left the camp. We managed not to disturb the others, who were still sleeping. We made our way up the hill and by the time we had reached the eastern side of the temple the sun was about to appear over the distant horizon of the plain. Out of the mists on the horizon came a vast orb, vague and golden coloured at first and then clearer as it shone free of the morning haze. We all turned to look at the Temple of Support before us on the hillside.

The first rays of the fully risen sun pierced the shadows, shone over the outer spiral of stones and struck the foot of the nearest of the four great megaliths. Something at the foot of the rock glittered gold and then all the stones also sparkled and shone with a warm orange glow - the glittering evidently came from some quartz or mica in the rock. In the morning light the next object to catch the sun’s rays was the stream, dancing down the hill in its first moments of life as the water flowed from the seven springs beneath the northern side of the temple.

‘Look! See how the sunlight shows up those, sort of like, elephant heads carved in the stones?’ Lee pointed to some weathered outlines on the rocks. ‘We didn’t notice those before, did we?’

‘I was going to tell you,’ I began, ‘I had this dream...’ but stopped short because we heard the snort of a horse and a man’s voice. We sank down in the long grass and crept behind a bush.

‘If we want to catch these vermin red-handed the best plan would be to wait until they start digging for treasure, near the stones. He said they’d be there.’

‘Oh no, Specials!’ whispered Lee.

‘I don’t see why we have to go to all this trouble,’ another voice answered. ‘What with everything that informer boy told us and the stuff his brother took from that library: top-secret it was, and all those other things we know about them. These children have got to be the ones the Priests are looking high and low for. They may be young, but they’re bound to be very dangerous.’

‘The mindbenders at the High Priests’ Clinic for Traitors will deal with them. This lot will be as bright as boiled cabbages this time next week. They’ll make good labourers and be fine for simple work. I might try and buy them when they’ve been treated. We’d get them quite cheap, because I’m sure a discount could be arranged if we took them all - we might do a little business together.’

‘All right, steady on,’ interrupted the other voice. ‘Let’s get today’s job done first. We’ll wait until they find some treasure, or something else of interest, and you can be sure they will, what with all their unnatural powers. Then they’ll actually be committing a crime. They’ll be - um? How does it go? “Molesting ancient monuments which are state property and stealing antiquities found thereon, which rightfully belong to the state.” Then we can pick ‘em up and the parents won’t have a leg to stand on. And, what’s more, they won’t have grounds for complaint or public outcry.’

‘Let’s sit tight and wait for them to fall into the trap. Plus, if they do find any treasure, we boys can cream off some nice pieces for ourselves. What do you say to that, eh? My head is agony from that new drug the lads brought last night. I’m going back to sleep for a couple of hours.’

‘Me too,’ said the other voice.

We crept away to a safe distance, horrified by what we had heard. For some moments we stared at each other, wide-eyed and speechless.

‘Our only hope is, is to do what the prophecy says,’ Raynor stuttered.

‘What’s that?’ asked Ahren.

‘There’s this group of people and they’ve got to make a long journey to the north,’ Raynor’s voice shook in fear. ‘We’ll have to try and do the same. Unless anyone has any better ideas?’ We were silent. ‘We haven’t got a snowflake’s chance in a volcano if we stay here. Ahren, I can’t forgive myself for getting you into all this.’

‘Forget it. I’ve been expecting trouble. I’ve been told off seriously, twice, by the Sorcerers’ Inspector at our school now. Once more and I’m for the Clinic anyway. I can see our teacher is lying when he tries to bend our minds to make us think the Sorcerers are good, when I know they’re as rotten as can be.’

Again it hit me that maybe we were the prophesied group. I fingered the key around my neck. Another coincidence? While we had been listening to the Specials I’d remembered it. As I felt the key I became unexpectedly confident, and recalled the words of the powerful boy in my dream. ‘Look!’ I said to the others. They were amazed when I showed it to them, and it still had specks of reddish earth in the cracks of the finely wrought leaves and petals.

‘I’ve never seen such a beautiful jewel! Wherever did you get it?’ asked Lee in astonishment.

‘I had a dream about it. Then I found it in the earth by my side. In my dream a little boy gave it to me and told me what we all have to do.’

‘Oh yes, and what’s that?’ Raynor sounded doubtful and desperate. I felt that way too, but went on speaking regardless.

‘We have to follow the stream north, like it said in the prophecy.’

‘Sometimes,’ admitted Lee with a smile, ‘I almost think of you as a boy. You’re so in tune with what’s going on.’

‘That’s because I’m a girl. Girls have more intuition.’ My joke fell flat, like a stone in mud. ‘What I’m telling you just might be the way out.’ Somehow finding the jewel at this time, which fitted so exactly the descriptions we had read in the prophecy, made us all a bit less despondent about our slim chances of slipping out of the clutches of the dreaded Specials. The boys looked at it and as they touched it I could feel that same cool wind coming from it that I had felt the night before, coming from the temple itself. It gave them courage and a calm confidence. Ahren came up with a plan of action. He was a complete optimist and therefore our only hope.

‘We’re going to need horses and ponies. We’ve got to go fast, and this is rough country,’ he began. ‘We won’t get far with the Specials on their large horses chasing us. We’d better take their horses with us, or at least send them packing. Then we might get away. The country is very empty north of here, until we get much closer to the sea, at any rate.’

‘How far’s that?’ I asked.

‘Not too far. People from home go to the port at the river’s mouth on business and so on. I think it takes a day or two.’

We crept back to where we had heard the two men talking. They were both sleeping in a drunken coma with empty bottles by their sides - they didn’t know the strength of the drug called alcohol yet. It was new to Teletsia then, although there were masses of other drugs on the market to knock you out, if that was what you wanted.

Six horses were standing sleepily nearby, hitched to trees with their saddles nearby on the ground. We carefully untied the horses, picked up some of their harness and led the animals stealthily to our side of the hill. The animals sensed we were friendly and were quite happy to be stolen. They didn’t resist or make any problems at all. Ahren told us to hide them some way away from our own animals, ‘we don’t want them neighing at each other and waking everyone up,’ he explained.

‘Now is the tricky part,’ Raynor whispered, as we came closer to our own camp. ‘Mardhang came back late last night, smelling of that drink. Leave him to Ahren and me if he wakes up too soon.’ Raynor and Ahren made various alternative plans for dealing with Mardhang, but were none too sure any of them would work. At this moment the whole project seemed a complete pipe dream to me, and although Ahren appeared to be brave, was he merely foolhardy?

Mardhang was snoring under a tree some distance away. He rarely got up until midday at the best of times, so we hoped he wouldn’t bother us for a while. Lee gently roused Tandi, Conwenna and Derwin and managed to explain to them in as few words as possible what was to be done. Our horses and ponies were to be led out of sight of the camp, so Mardhang wouldn’t see them packed up and ready to leave. The pony trap was to have its wheels broken. As Lee did this job, I thought wistfully to myself, ‘Conwenna’s father is losing more than a pony trap; he’s losing the very centre of his life, his only daughter.’ It came to me that whether our plan worked or not, none of our parents would ever see us again, in all probability. This weighed heavily on my mind but I couldn’t see any way out. We had to try and save our lives.

The Specials’ horses, even those we did not need to ride, were going to come along with us for some distance and the same applied to Mardhang’s animal. Only the bare necessities were to be packed, and camping gear and cooking pots were left around in a disorganised fashion, so that when Mardhang woke up he would think we had gone for a walk or something. Everything was nearly ready. It looked as if it was going to be an easy getaway when someone accidentally tripped over Mardhang and woke him up. Ahren went into action with one of the contingent plans.

‘Mardhang, we’ve got great news!’ he cried breathlessly, pretending he thought Mardhang was ‘with’ us. He continued in a bragging, boyish tone of voice, ‘We’ve found the place to dig for gold! We went up on the hillside to look at the dawn and saw some gold glinting at the bottom of one of the four large stones.’ Mardhang stood up, as quick as lightning.

‘Really? Tell me more!’ he demanded, wide awake and looking around anxiously.

‘If you go up there now, very fast, the sun will still be shining on the gold. I’ll be with you in a few minutes and we’ll do some digging before breakfast. Take this spade, it’s a good one, I borrowed it from my dad. But don’t lose it or he’ll flay me!’ After Mardhang had run off with the precious spade, Ahren continued, ‘I’m not joking, he would flay me. But I guess that’ll be the least of his troubles. He’s tough, but he loves me. What will happen to him now? He’s never been popular with the Sorcerers. He can’t abide their corruption and they know it. Now he’ll be in trouble because he’s my dad.’ A few moments later Derwin came down from where he had been hiding behind some rocks, keeping watch over our comings and goings.

‘This is it, folks!’ he shouted excitedly. ‘Mardhang has gone to the temple. I saw him start digging at the base of one of the big stones!’ At the same time Conwenna and Raynor ran up and said the horses were ready.

‘You’re incredibly quick at this,’ Raynor complimented Conwenna.

‘I’ve had to be. Not everybody likes prospectors and my dad and I sometimes have to make a quick getaway to save our skins.’

‘Let’s go!’ urged Ahren.

At this moment Derwin nearly ruined everything. Up to now he had thought it a great game, but suddenly the tension and terror in all of us engulfed him and he became so frightened that all he could do was to sit down and refuse to go anywhere. I knelt down by his side, took him in my arms and hugged him, telling him that I would do my best to look after him and I loved him very much, and didn’t want to leave him behind. It didn’t do any good, so I told him, as gently but firmly as I could, that I was going to try my best to escape and he had two choices: either he’d be captured by the Specials when they realised we’d pinched their horses and came looking for them, or he could come with us, and we might possibly escape. I felt awful being so hard on him, but it was a ghastly moment. His attachment to me was very strong, and finally he agreed to get on a pony and come, as long as I rode beside him.

‘Hurry, you lot. My dad would have been way out of here by now. We’re not in Teletos waiting for a donkey-bus. I’m leaving right now, even if you aren’t.’ Conwenna vaulted neatly onto her pony, showing her to be best prepared of any of us. She later admitted she was almost paralysed with fear, but she wasn’t going to let anyone, least of all Derwin, know this. She felt dreadfully alone and vulnerable that morning, as she often did. Nevertheless, we were all mightily impressed at the smallest member of our escape posse, and quickly followed her as she headed her pony down the track to the north.