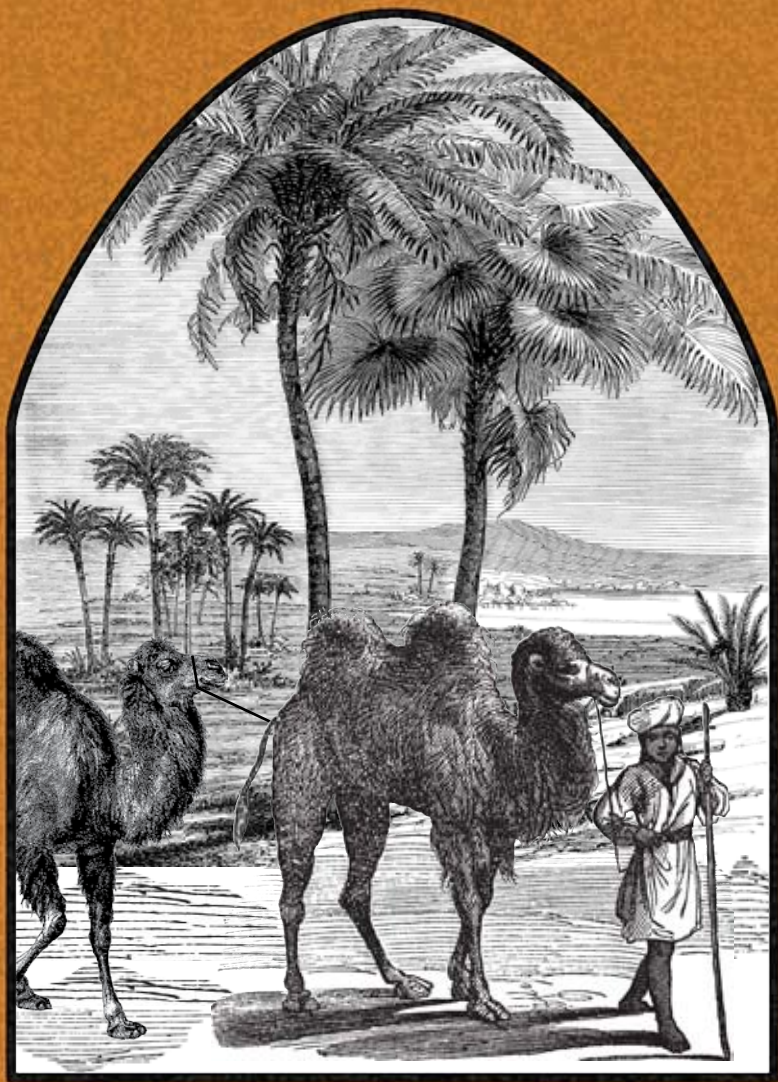


Once Upon a Journey ♦ VI

# The Pelican's Gift



**SMSMITH**

When I examine myself and my methods of thought,  
I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy  
has meant more to me than any talent  
for abstract, positive thinking.

~ Albert Einstein ~

The journey is the treasure.

~ Lloyd Alexander ~

**Once Upon a Journey ♦ VI**

# **The Pelican's Gift**

**SMSMITH**



**ZANTHYM HOUSE**  
Mountain View♦AB♦CA



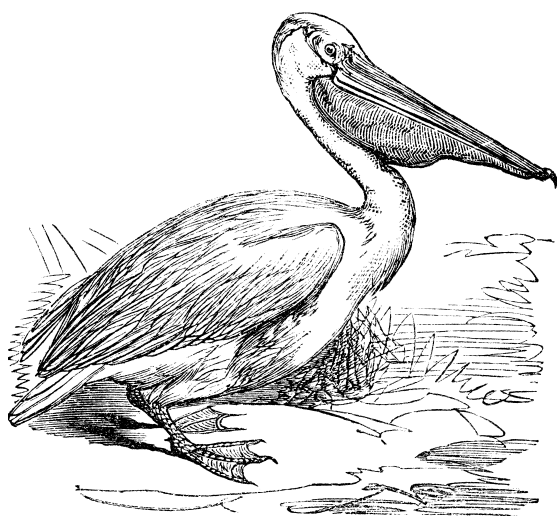
## **Journey ♦ VI ~ The Pelican's Gift**

*In a desert kingdom by the sea, a young girl discovers she must undertake a journey across the barren sands in search of the answer to a mystery.*



### **Once Upon a Journey** series:

- I    The Wren & the Raven*
- II   A Prince to Crown*
- III  The Day the Rains Came*
- IV   Journey to Welkindorn*
- V    Belle of the Ballroom*
- VI   The Pelican's Gift**
- VII  The Princess, the Frog, & the Stranger*



## The Pelican's Gift

**A**s Dufazza scrambled onto the saddle of her dear Jukka, her heart thudded with excitement. "Kudda, kudda," she cried and in response Jukka lurched upwards. Briluba and Greergon followed, but with loud, protesting squalls for they were heavily laden.

"We hear you. We hear you," Dufazza said and laughed, for the squallings echoed off the valley hills till it seemed a hundred camels were joining in lament. Briluba and Greergon, inspired by the echoing attention, multiplied their shrill complaints as Dufazza's father tied the last of the lead ropes.

"Well, you needn't worry my getting lost in the silence," Dufazza said and laughed again.

She was too full of anticipation to notice the flicker of fear in her mother's eyes. Perched high above the valley green, Dufazza could not see the smallness of herself against the enormity of the desolate desert that lay before. She saw only the horizon promising a journey of unimagined discovery. In her mind, there was nothing to fear, not with her magical compass, and certainly not with Briluba and Greergon laden to overflowing. Dufazza felt she was prepared for anything—and was now unbearably anxious to begin.

She had given and received a myriad hugs and kisses before climbing aboard Jukka, so there was nothing more to keep her. She raised her hand in final farewell and pressed her heels into Jukka's furry sides.

"Kabba, kabba," she cried and the modest caravan of three camels and one small figure set trot while the rising sun cast gigantic, dancing shadows to the west. A sense of deep camaraderie swept over her.

"I love you," Dufazza exclaimed, patting



Jukka's hump, but Jukka, taking it as sign for greater speed, lengthened her stride. At the protesting snorts from behind, Dufazza smiled and turned to shrug, "I'm sorry," but the sight of Briluba and Greergon in haughty, sashaying stride filled her once again with laughter. Most comic of all was the contrast between their curled, disdainful lips and their long-lashed, chocolate eyes. Her father's words were indeed true—there would never be a creature, living or imagined, with such a blend of beast and beauty as that of the desert's camel.

Looking beyond her beloved camels, Dufazza saw her family still waving their farewells. Suddenly tears welled up. She would miss them dreadfully. She blinked against the threatening flood and waved till she could wave no more. At last, she turned forward and let the memories of that strange, unexpected past day flow in place of her tears.

How could so much have happened in one day?

Was it only yesterday she had turned seventeen? Was it only yesterday her family had gathered for the Ceremony-of-Fitting to try her precious slippers? It was to have been such a grand day. It was still almost unthinkable that yesterday had come to this. Unthinkable because her heart had been tuned, all the years of her life, toward the fitting of those precious, gifted slippers. Unthinkable that it had not happened!

Dufazza knew the slipper legends by heart. She knew that throughout the entire Valley-of-Rivers, a Great White Pelican gifted slippers at the birth of every child, whether rich or poor. She knew how the slippers were to be treasured till the Ceremony-of-Fitting on a seventeenth birthday; and she knew how the gifted slippers were to assist in one's journey through life.

But sadly, Dufazza also knew other stories: how gradually a scoffing had arisen against the fitting of slippers seventeen years past their gift; how the Ceremony-of-Fitting was no longer a cherished event; how many never gave thought

now to the day of fitting till it was upon them, only to find in their thoughtlessness that gifted slippers proved too big or sometimes too small.

Dufazza had heard tragic stories, too—how some had come to wear their ill-fitting slippers in the mud, or had tossed them in a corner, or even traded them away for things they desired more than slippers. She had even heard how some slippers remained in family vaults never to be tried during a person's whole life.

And though many now swore with great oaths that accounts of miraculous slippers were just silly myths meaning nothing, Dufazza knew otherwise. She knew that when slippers proved a perfect fit, they also proved miraculous. Her mother had witnessed countless times that with her own slippers, she had arrived in moments to help a needy or grieving citizen when by camel or cart it would have taken days. She did not know how it was, except that it had happened. She also knew that at other times it did not happen, but the times her heart was right, the

longest road was only moments long, and the farthest house was never far at all.

Dufazza's father had given his own witness—that with the Pelican's gift, he knew the right words to say, the suitable things to offer, the appropriate judgments to pronounce in the Councils-of-Peace.

Thus, in the trust of such witness, Dufazza had prepared for the ceremony of her fitting. That grand morning—only yesterday—family, a few invited friends, and the treasure-keeper of the Valley kingdom had gathered in the vestibule of the family's home. There, after simple speeches, the treasure-keeper, then Dufazza's father, and then her mother had produced their separate keys, unlocked their separate locks, and proceeded into the family vault while the rest stood without.

The little crowd in the vestibule had waited with great anticipation. But they had waited, and waited, and waited. At last, when their anxiety was almost beyond bearing, Dufazza's father,

mother, and the treasure-keeper had returned. Her mother carried the silk cushion as expected, but shockingly, there was but one slipper upon the cushion. It was a beautiful slipper, but it was only one.

"Something terrible has happened," Dufazza's father finally said, "for there is no companion to this slipper anywhere to be found. We have searched everywhere."

Seeing the alarm in the eyes of his children, he hurried on. "No, no, no, we assure, all other slippers are as they should be, excepting this one pair—" he stopped, choking back tears and shaking his head in dismay.

"It should be impossible," Dufazza's mother said with tears in her eyes, "for there are none but these three keys and only we three can enter together or not at all."

"But mother!" Dufazza cried. "Are you sure you looked everywhere? How can this be?"

"This has never before happened that we ever heard," her mother said, "for the slippers of one

give no advantage to others; thus, we do not know what to say or do. It is a mystery and we have no answer."

"No, Mama," Dufazza cried. "I have an answer. I know what to do. I must go to the birthing land of the Pelicans. If necessary, I shall spend the rest of my life in search of the Pelican's gift."

"But you can't," her mother cried. "Pelican Land is guarded by the great Sultanz at the edge of the world. No one can go beyond them. We must think of some other way."

"Yes," agreed her father. "We must think of some other way."

"But Mother, Father, there is no other way," Dufazza cried. "Only the Great Pelican can restore my gift—and as much, I must do this for my brothers and sisters. This stealing of our gifts must never again happen—to anyone."

"But the way is dangerous without slippers," her father had said. "How could we let you go alone without them?"

"Because I must; that is why," Dufazza said.

Her father had closed his eyes and given a deep sigh.

"Do you have any words of counsel?" the mother said, turning to the old treasure-keeper.

"This must be your decision," the treasure-keeper said, "for she is your daughter. But this I will say. She is of age to freely choose her path. Her slippers would have led her true. Now she must choose by another sense. And so must you."

"Come then," said the father, "our family must counsel together."

All in line, the parents and seven children had trooped back to the family's council chamber where each was given turn to speak. After great discussion, it was decided by unanimous vote, that however much they feared the course, it was right that Dufazza do as she felt she must. And she knew she must go, for this was her journey and no one else's.

"Well, remember this," her father said, "even if you must begin your journey alone, it does

not mean you must end it alone, for in the way there may be helpers. Just be wise and wisely cautious."

"She must take Briluba," the youngest sister said, "for she and Jukka are the best companions. I think it would break their hearts to be separated."

"She can take Greergon for the heavy things," chimed in the eldest brother, "for Greergon is the best packer of the Valley kingdoms and he loves and knows the desert more than any other."

Other siblings had offered of their treasures, too—a hand-carved and padded saddle; four sturdy, light-weight packs; and four water-skins of perfect tightness.

"You could not have given better things," their mother said with tears in her eyes.

Dufazza knew how precious the offerings were, for these sweet siblings had given her the things they cherished beyond words, not knowing when, or if, they would ever see her or their treasured possessions again.



"Thank you," Dufazza said through her own tears. "I thank you with all my heart and I will take the best care of them I possibly can."

"Come then," their father said. "If we are to be ready, we have much to do."

Immediately they had begun their scurried preparations. Her mother had spent precious time wrapping Dufazza's reedwinds with utmost care. Some might have thought reedwinds an odd and bulky thing to take on a desert journey, but those who knew Dufazza knew her ornate reedwinds were part of her soul, for there was none other in all the Valley kingdom who played the singing reedwinds as exquisitely as Dufazza.

She had played often before the noble and great of the Valley, and when they had given gifts or coin, Dufazza had turned it all to the poor and wished she had more of such wealth to give.

The people had often said, "Dufazza has a heart of gold." They all loved her dearly, so when word spread that their Dufazza was about

to embark on a long journey, many had come that evening of preparation to wish her well.

When the moon was high and the guests all departed, the family had tumbled exhausted into their beds, believing they would never sleep for the worry, but they did—deeply and peacefully for their decision had been right. Yet the cock’s crow had found them gathered already in the courtyard making their farewells. But just as Dufazza thought she had given her last hug, her mother had spoken in a trembling voice.

“Dufazza, there is a special gift I have for you. Come, my child, hold out your right arm.”

Puzzled, Dufazza had obeyed. She could not imagine what her mother was about, for it was custom that solo travellers on spiritual quests took only necessities. The white pennant, bounded with blue and scarlet, that hung upon Greergon’s neck gave notice to all who might encounter her that she carried no valuables; that she was not a trader of goods; and that she was to journey undisturbed, except at her invitation.

Thus, the children had watched, fascinated, as their mother fastened a brass band upon their sister's wrist. Though fasten was hardly the word, for as soon as the ends touched together, they melded into one solid piece. If one were to seek the clasp, it would not be found.

"What is it?" the children had exclaimed.

"I had a dream in the night," their mother said, "and when I awoke this was lying in my hand and I knew it was for Dufazza's journey. I can explain nothing, but that it will teach her in time of its use and purpose."

As they gazed upon it, a tiny triangle of green light appeared in the brass pointing toward the second knuckle of Dufazza's hand. Soon a floating needle appeared within a circle.

"Turn slowly. See what happens," her father said.

Dufazza did and when at last the needle aligned with the tiny green triangle, the whole of it began blinking.

Her father exclaimed, "How very ingenious.

It points the way. Between it, the sun, the moon, and the stars, you should never get lost. What a wonderful gift."

"You may call it a compass," her mother said, "for it shall comfort you in your passage through this great unknown that lies ahead."

Indeed, it was great comfort to them all as they gazed upon the pulsing green and the floating needle.

"Now for our last gift," said the father, "if you will come and stand before your mother and me, we shall bestow it."

Dufazza took her place as directed, and resting their right hands upon their daughter's shoulders, the father and mother said in unison, "Dufazza, eldest in our house, we send you forth to follow the path of your journey with grace and courage under the ever watchful care of the Great Ones. May you go and come in peace and honour."

Then the treasure-keeper, who had returned to bid goodbye, said. "You will understand the

journey, my child, when you reach the river lands of the great Sultanz. There is a grand one there who will help you. That is all I know.”

A jubilant bleat from Jukka startled Dufazza out of her reverie. She laughed and wiped away her lingering tears. Yes, she thought, so much had happened in that one day—only yesterday. Now she was astride her faithful Jukka in search of the Pelican’s gift. From her lofty perch, she turned for one final farewell, but all she could see were motionless specks in the distance.

For five long days, Dufazza travelled toward the sun’s rising without meeting a soul. In the quiet evenings, to stave off loneliness, she would carefully unwrap her reedwinds from their layered, protective pouches. Then she would play to the stars and the night breezes till sleep crept down upon her.

Dufazza was feeling content that her journey was proceeding so well, without distractions or

problems, when early on day six, the needle of her compass turned a quarter circle to the south. At first, she was reluctant to follow for the way seemed wrong. She had plotted her course from her father's best maps—but after turning and turning, shaking, jiggling, and stroking the compass, she gave in to its persistence.

For two days she travelled away from the direction she would have preferred. Then upon rising in the cool of a new morning, she was directed once more to face the way of the sun's rising. In that way, she travelled for nine days, again never meeting a soul.

Always, just when she felt she could not endure without shade, the compass would guide her to a small oasis of sweet water. Many times there were dates and figs in abundance.

On the sixteenth day of her journey, with the sun almost through its downward path, Dufazza heard a tiny, pulsing sound. The strangeness of it so startled her, she nearly fell from Jukka's hump.

Grasping her saddle horn, she saw her wristband glowing red like an iron kettle forgotten upon a roaring fire. Thinking the sun's slanting rays were confusing her, Dufazza hitched her hooded cloak to form a shadow and in the shadow, she saw the band was, indeed, red and flashing.

"What does this mean?" she whispered in fright. As if in answer, a word wrote itself within the pulsing red: "D-A-N-G-E-R."

Danger! Peering wildly about, she could see nothing but sand and dunes, yet the bright green arrow of her compass directed her onward, toward a massive dune that blocked the horizon. As she proceeded, the band glowed brighter and brighter red—the pulsations flashing enough to make her dizzy.

Her heart thumped crazily. "The arrow says go, but where is the danger?" she whispered again. Suddenly, she heard faint sounds of shouting. They were coming from beyond the dune. Or had the sounds come out of her wristband!? Was that possible! She could not tell.

At the foot of the dune, Dufazza leapt to the sand and with trembling hands, hobbled her camels. Then scrambling up the dune like a frantic desert spider, she peered over its edge and down into a small oasis crowded round with men and milling camels. Several men were waving their arms and shouting.

Listening intently, she could hear snatches of words and then, every sound as clearly as if she were standing in their midst. It was her wristband! It was picking up their words! It was an eerie, spine-tingling sensation.

A little man was speaking while thrusting his finger into the shimmering air. "He lied. There is nothing here," he shouted.

"He should die for this," another man cried, gesturing wildly with a drawn scimitar.

"No, no," said the biggest of them all. "We will make him talk. He is the only one who knows."

"He will never tell us," the little man shouted again. "You've seen how foolhardy he is. He doesn't give a fig's belch."



"We will *not* dispose of him till he tells all he knows," the big man said in a deep, firm voice.

"And if he never does?" the little man cried.

"There are greater persuasions of the kind he has already tasted," the big man said. "We will let him consider those for the night, and then, if he is not convinced, we shall apply them in the morning light."

Dufazza watched as several men hauled a tall, black-haired boy from behind a clustering of camels. They jerked him roughly to stand before his angry captors. His hands were bound but he held his head high.

Why, he looks to be not much older than me! Dufazza thought as she squinted hard at the strange, unfolding scene.

"Will you talk?" the little man growled as he shook a small whip in the boy's face.

"I have nothing more to say," the boy said and hardly had he spoken when the whip cut him across the face.

"Will you talk?" the man demanded again.

"I have nothing to say," the boy repeated and this time the whip handle caught him full in the stomach so that he doubled over in a grunt of pain. When at last he straightened, the little man repeated for a third time, "Will you talk?"

The boy replied as before. But this time, as the little man raised his whip, the big man caught his arm saying, "That's enough, Azi." And then speaking to the boy, the big man said, "My lad, I trust you will consider the morrow for this man shall do as he pleases unless you tell us what you know. I shall not stop him tomorrow, and he can be very angry when his questions are not answered. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," the boy said, "but you might as well know, the night will not change what I know and what I don't know."

"I told you," cried the little man named Azi as he let his whip fly once more, leaving a terrible dark streak upon the boy's neck.

"Nonetheless," the big man said, "we shall wait—so put your whip away."

Azi complied, ramming his whip angrily into his sash.

"Tie the lad to a tree," the big man said, "and on the morrow, we shall hear his answers."

The boy was shoved toward a towering palm where they unbound his hands. Then they tied him round and round at the chest and feet to the leaning tree. The boy sagged wearily into the ropes and closed his eyes.

Dufazza watched as the men fed and watered their camels and settled in for the coming night. Several times she inspected her wristband and each time she saw the green arrow flashing in the direction of the motionless, captive boy, while at the same time, the band glowed red.

It must mean I am to rescue him, Dufazza thought, and with that thought came the trembling fear. She had never imagined nor desired an adventure such as this. But she knew—if it had to be, terrified or not—she would do it. She couldn't imagine how, but she knew she would need at least three indispensable things—her

guiding compass, her sharpest knife, and a depth of silent courage she was almost certain she did not possess.

Skidding back down the dune, she returned to where her camels shuffled, happily munching on abundant clumps of soft green shrub. At least she needn't worry concerning them. They would be quietly content for some time.

Her own stomach was churning too much to desire food, but she needed strength, so with frenzied haste, she gulped dates, dry bread, and sweet water. Then strapping the sheath containing her sharpest knife about her waist, Dufazza scrambled back to lie near the dune crest as night settled in. But the darker it became, the more violently her heart thudded against the sand.

She winced. When they put their ears down to sleep, they will surely think a band of robbers is thundering towards them, she thought.

Suddenly her stomach growled in rumbling protest at its gulped offerings. Dufazza groaned in dismay. The hide-and-sneak of her childhood

had always been pure fun, but she had never played in quite this way, with quite this risk. Still the triangle was blinking and insistent. Yet, what was she to do, for in the full brightness of the risen moon, it would be impossible to move without casting a huge, betraying shadow?

Looking up she could see neither cloud nor shadow in the star- and moonlit sky. At last, in despairing watchfulness, she lay her head upon her arms and willed her heart to steadiness.

She had not imagined she could fall asleep, but the next thing she knew, was waking to that tiny beeping sound. She felt weighted down and realized a wind had passed sifting her over with sand. It was gone now, but in passing it seemed to have blown the moon and the stars entirely out of the sky. She could see nothing. Even the bright fire the men had sat around below had been swallowed up. The flicker of light upon her wrist was gone, too. She could not even see her wrist, let alone her hand pressed right against her nose. But she knew from persistent tiny

beeps that her wristband remained. Where had this intense darkness come from? And what was her noisy compass trying to say?

Then she heard the voice of the big man right beside her. She almost cried out in shock, but then realized her wristband was picking up sounds again.

"Yes, it is remarkably strange," the big man was quietly saying in answer to some question she had not heard. "It must be a kind of fog. I've never known it to ever penetrate so far inland. But not to worry. Nothing will be moving in this, I can assure you. It will probably drift on and be gone as quick as it has come. We'll just wait it out."

Dufazza heard a brief mumble she could not discern and then all was again quite.

Not knowing what else to do, she pulled herself out of the sands and crouched in the shelter of her cloak. There, she was able to see the green triangle flashing wildly while the band glowed dimly red.

This must be it. I am to rescue the boy in this fog, she thought. She stood up and instantly felt the oddest pulsing begin in the middle toe of her right foot. Somehow she knew: it was the compass' way—withholding its light and sound, yet guiding nonetheless.

Sensing a great urgency, Dufazza stumbled down the dune, following the strange pulses in her foot. If the pulse was in any other toe, she knew to correct till it pulsed once more in her middle one. And so, the strange, compass led her on.

She fully trusted it to guide her past every obstacle, so when she suddenly bumped into a camel's nose, she couldn't help herself. She shrieked in fright. She didn't even realize her choked cry had been swallowed in the camel's wheezing grunt. She knew only that her heart was thudding so violently, it filled up the whole black night. She stood clutching her hand to her mouth and trembling violently as the strange camel nuzzled her shoulder.

In truth, there wasn't much Dufazza feared more than strange camels because many were horrible biters and some were deadly kickers. To wander through a strange herd of such creatures in this dark was the most frightful thing Dufazza could imagine. She couldn't fathom what had gone wrong.

Calming herself, she felt her way around the friendly creature and discovered at its side what should not have been. She felt a rush of anger replacing her fear. The poor creature's girth cinches were still in place. Other straps dangling free must mean some of its pack was gone, but why would someone leave a camel still partly burdened? To Dufazza, such neglect was unforgivable. How could these men care so little for a creature on whom one of them depended for survival every desert day? In her indignation, she determined to set the poor creature free of its burden. Its owner could ponder the mystery as he trudged his morning away looking for his wandering, unburdened, unshackled beast.



She had scarcely removed the hobbles when a sharp tingling on her wrist drew her within the shelter of her cloak. The word "BOY" appeared in bright red on the compass face. Her hesitation was painful but necessarily fleeting. The camel's comfort would have to give way to this boy's rescue. There would not be time for both.

The pulsing in her foot led her on and she tried not to think of its strange failing with the burdened camel, though she had an odd feeling that the unhobbled beast was following.

When her whole foot suddenly tingled, she stopped, and reaching out touched a tree, scarcely a hand-breadth from her face. She knew it would be the right one.

Though she had not touched the boy, she could sense him come alert. Moving round the narrow trunk, she touched his shoulder, patting it, hoping to signal assurance and the need for silent cooperation. Feeling along the rope, she followed the coils till she found the knot, just beyond his shoulder, and cut it through with one

slice of her knife. In the instant the coils tumbled in twisted strands toward the boy's feet, Dufazza realized her unbelievably foolish mistake. With his feet bound to the leaning tree and his body suddenly free, the boy had become instantly and wildly unbalanced. Flailing to save himself from a wrenching, perhaps, bone-snapping fall, he grabbed, unseeing into the dark, and found Dufazza's hair. Once more, she choked off a shriek as she sprang to brace him and to escape the dazzling pain. This time there was no camel snort to swallow the sound.

"Is that you, boy?!" a man's voice growled suspiciously through the darkness.

In near overlay of the man's voice, the boy screeched almost in Dufazza's ear, "Get away! Ow—, ouch! You rotten-toothed—"

And before Dufazza realized he was covering for her shriek, he hissed. "Would someone get this camel out of my face?"

The man laughed softly in the darkness. "Get it out yourself, you son of a dead dreamer."

In a daze, Dufazza felt the boy's hands press her downward toward his feet as he said in a hard voice, "Just like your hopes, aye, Azi?"

Gathering her scattered wits and closing her dropped jaw, Dufazza fixed one of the boy's hands against the rough trunk for his stability as she crouched and tore away the loose coils. It seemed forever, but within moments she had found and sliced through the knot at his feet. She pulled the ropes loose as the bitter words continued, except now, the man's voice sounded frightfully near.

"You'll be dyin', worse'n your father, save you open that lyin' mouth of yours and tell us where the—ugh—ouch—you miserable split-lip of a— Ouch, ouch, oouuch!" the man cried to the sounds of stumbling and then a heavy thud, followed by scuttling sounds across the sand as if hands and knees and elbows were in motion all at once. Dufazza could have sworn the snorting sniggers in the darkness came from a camel, but of course, that couldn't be.

The boy laughed softly. "Is that you, Azi?" he said as he grasped Dufazza by the shoulder.

"You miserable scum—when I get my hands—" the voice began, only to be interrupted by the voice of the big man. "You touch him, Azi, and you'll answer to me. You hear. We'll take care of things in the morning. You hear."

"Some SOB left his camel loose," Azi grumbled. "That's what someone should hear."

"Then he can track it while we deal with the boy," the big man said. "So don't let me hear another sound."

Dufazza gritted her teeth firmly against more surprises and felt grateful for the snoring men and rustling camels. Whatever miniscule sounds she and this boy might make, would raise no alarm. She grasped the boy's hand and pulled him in the direction of her pulsing toe.

That poor, unhobbled camel had saved them, Dufazza thought. She wished she could have done more for it, but her hands were tingling now too, as if the urgency were great.

By the sound of things, they were barely past the crowd of camels when the boy stumbled and fell to the sand. Dufazza had sensed his fatigue from the first and suspected it was compounded by intense hunger and thirst, but she also knew, he had to hold out.

At least to my camels! Dufazza had pled in her head, but now, the boy was collapsed and unresponsive to her silent ministrations.

She tried hoisting him onto her back, but he was more solid and tall than she. It was impossible. She was now collapsed too, with his weight smothering her in the sand. She felt like sobbing aloud, or beating on the sand, or on him. How could he do this to her—after all she had risked for him?

Heaving and shoving, she freed herself at last. Hunching under her cloak for guidance, she saw nothing but the brilliant red flashing and the green floating arrow pointing the way.

Dufazza knew the only solution was a camel and it would have to be Jukka, for Greergon and

Briluba did far too much snorting and bleating at four-footed strangers. She prayed there would be no Greergons and Brilubas on this side of the dune—and please, please, if the darkness would just hold.

Not once, did it cross Dufazza's mind to steal a stranger's camel—and not just from the fear of strange camels—but she had scarcely gone four steps with the compass guiding when, for the second time, she bumped into a camel's nose. Again her smothered gasp was masked by the camel's wheezing grunt. At the tingling in her wrist, she looked within the shelter of her cloak and saw the word "YES" flash as if in answer to her unspoken, instant thought.

Tugging on the camel's lead, she managed in silence to manoeuvre the beast beside the fallen boy. With barely a tug on its halter it dropped to the sand. Reaching along its side, she could feel the same loose straps she had felt before. They were attached to some form of padding secured by the girth straps. Her previous anger at

the insensitive, ungrateful owner vanished in an instant. His neglect had proved her blessing.

Reaching along the camel's back, she discovered a single horn at the front of the padding. She had never seen a single horn saddle before, but it was going to have to do; and she was not going to feel one twinge of guilt in rescuing the poor creature.

Somehow—she did not know how—she got the boy hung and tied upon the saddle like a sack of precious salt. As she prodded the camel to rise she hoped the boy would be too far gone to care about his undignified carriage. Having witnessed his proud bearing, she thought he might care a great deal. But feeling the intense tingling in her hands, she knew her wristband would be flashing red. There was no time to worry about the boy's feelings.

Up, up, up they went zigzagging, following the guide in her foot, till down they plunged over the ridge of the dune. They zigzagged against the steep face till at last she stumbled

into Jukka, lying curled against a now rising wind. Hurriedly she tied the camel's lead to Jukka's saddle. Then rummaging in Jukka's side pack, she withdrew a spare cloak, three crusts of bread which she stashed in the large pocket of her cloak, and a flask of water which she hung on Jukka's saddle.

"Tahma, Tahma," she whispered as she yanked on the stolen camel's lead. She felt it lumber to its knees and sink down. Groping, she found with immense relief that the boy was still secured. Then once again she choked off a shriek, nearly jumping out of her skin as the boy grasped her arm and spoke.

"I can ride, if you please," he said in a harsh, quiet, humiliated voice.

Dufazza felt hard pressed not to laugh at them both. She had certainly pegged him right. As for herself, this would be her fourth involuntary shriek. So much for silent courage! She held her giggles as she loosened the knots that bound him upside down across the camel.



The wind was getting stronger. It was both a concern and a relief. Wind—sufficient wind—might obscure the tracks of their flight. But it might also make travel impossible. And almost certainly, it would blow the dense fog away, leaving the moon to cast gigantic shadows one again. I'll just have to trust in the Great Ones and this divine compass, Dufazza thought. She loosened the last knot and waited as she heard the boy scramble about to right himself.

"We'll need to ride as far as we can," Dufazza said. "It will all depend on the wind, so cover your face and body with this." She pushed the cloak into his hands and felt him tuck it about his head and shoulders.

Taking one of his hands, she cupped it around the water flask and followed his motion part way as he raise it up. She could feel the tremblings of his body as he disciplined himself to sip slowly of its life-giving sweetness.

She knew he must take only a few sips in his deprived condition. Just as she was about to

force the flask away, she felt him push it back of his own accord. In that motion, she knew she could trust him. Twisting on the cap, she put the flask back into his hands. She could feel him hang it about his neck. Then finding his hand again, she thrust the bread into it.

"If you feel in the least faint, you are going to have to swallow your pride and call to me," she said in her sternest voice, "because if you fall off this camel in this darkness, I'll never know it."

"I do not fall off camels," the boy said with choked indignation.

Dufazza wanted to laugh and say, "I suppose you don't faint either," but instead she said, "If we're lucky, we'll be able to ride above the wind, but you'd better hang on for your life. You've got but a single horn."

As she turned away, and untied the lead from Jukka, some imp in her spoke without warning.

"Kudda, kudda," she commanded in a low tone, tugging on the camel's lead. In prompt response, the camel lurched to its feet. The boy

made only one sound—a startled, strangled “aughh-hhh.”

Feeling instantly ashamed for testing the boy’s skill when he was so short on strength, she whispered, “Are you still there?”

“Not thanks to you,” the boy said wearily from above her.

This time Dufazza did laugh. “Well, at least we both know you can hang on,” she said.

Following the pulse in her foot, Dufazza quickly found and tied the camels together with the stolen one in the rear. She knew there could be no resting for her hands continued to tingle; and with the rising wind, a blinding sandstorm was entirely possible. Already the dense fog was beginning to break up into patches with the moon glinting through here and there.

Dufazza hoped the compass would take them to the stone cliffs she had seen from her dune perch. The winds would be easier to endure there, assuming of course, she was not counting on a mirage.

In the wafting fog, most everything was by sound and feel. It seemed they were travelling in a low storm where the biting sands swirled, choking and blinding, almost camel hump high.

She remembered the enchantment of the first low storm she had seen. She had been ten or perhaps eleven—standing with her father on a valley ridge, watching the heads of men and camels float disembodied above swirling sands. She had watched fascinated till the floating heads gradually embodied themselves as the caravan had climbed above the storm and onto the ridge at the edge of the sands. Her father had said, "Now you see another beauty of the lofty camel." It was a beauty, indeed.

It seemed forever to get to the sheltering cliffs. Just as they did, fresh winds swept over into a high storm that would churn everything into pristine smoothness, but with the compass still glowing dimly red, Dufazza kept the pace, travelling in a narrow channel of relative calm against the cliffs.

She wondered often how the boy was faring, but she had told herself countless times, if he needed help—and didn't or couldn't tell her himself—then the compass would warn her. It would not fail now. Thus, she had kept the pace, distancing as far as possible from the oasis of those dreaded captors.

At last the winds ceased and the compass lost its red glow.

When the first amazing shades of morning came, Dufazza turned with suppressed anxiety, and almost burst into laughter. The boy had somehow reversed himself and was sprawled, impossibly, upon his camel—face down upon the hump with his knees bent back; his ankles hooked upon the camel's neck; the soles of his leathery, bare feet staring at the sky. He had somehow secured several straps onto the single horn and then fashioned them into knee stirrups to support his body. His hands were resting on the hump, cushioning his face, his elbows serving as ballast. He appeared wholly exhausted—

almost dead—moving only in synchronicity with his camel, which was perhaps the only reason he was still atop its back.

When Dufazza stopped her little caravan, he showed no signs of life. Dismounting, she ran to untie his camel, and reaching up, she shook his bent knee. There was no response.

"Tahma, tahma," Dufazza cried, yanking on the camel's lead; then watched in frantic dismay as the camel dropped down, lopsided onto its leathery knees. The boy, off-balanced away from her, fell in an ignominious heap upon the sand and came instantly alive—his arms and legs flailing against Dufazza's loaned cloak and his ungainly fall. The scene unfolded swiftly and in near perfect repetition of a jesting acrobatic that Dufazza had once seen as a child. As then, she convulsed into crying laughter. When she saw the boy's face burst from a tangle of cloak, she fell to the sands clutching her aching sides, for he stood in disbelieving shock—stunned at the unexpected form of his rescuer!

It hadn't occurred to Dufazza that he might not know she was a girl. Admittedly from voice alone, even her own parents had confused her and her brothers more often than not, though what this boy had made of her several shrieks, she couldn't say, save that his dismayed confusion was utterly unexpected by them both.

The boy gaped around as if frantic for more fitting company, but finding none, he stood in fighting form—uncertain against whom or what to defend himself.

At last, Dufazza's laughter came to a hiccupped end and they stood, staring at each other.

Then Dufazza, sweeping her hand over their small caravan, said, "Well, this is the sum of us—so I hope you feel at least a little grateful. If I don't say so myself, we risk a thing or two for you."

Before she could say more, the boy was bumped into the sand by his camel's nose. Scrambling up, he turned with angry words on his lips. They turned to a joyful cry.

"Kakin!" the boy cried. "Kakin!?" And being assured in the camel's nuzzle that the impossible was true, the boy fell upon his camel's neck and sobbed.

When he remembered his audience, he checked his tears and turning stoically, he bowed to Dufazza and said, "I do not know how you knew, but this is *my* camel, and he is the best that ever was."

Dufazza frowned, remembering the poor camel's condition. "Someone should be severely punished for—"

The boy interrupted. "That someone is Azi. He stole Kakin and then gave my meagre things to his friends when they captured me at—"

He broke off, staring. Then he blinked as if to prove her existence. "Did you—just YOU—do all that?" he finally asked, thrusting his thumb in the direction they had come.

Dufazza nodded.

"What are you?—some desert sprite, or what?!" he asked.



"I am not a desert sprite," Dufazza said, trying not to laugh. "I am an ordinary girl in search of—"

She too abruptly stopped—uncertain how much to tell—for in that moment she saw that the pennant upon Greergon's neck was gone.

What did this mean? Had the blasting sands torn it away? Had her purpose suddenly changed? Did it mean she was to say nothing of her quest—of the Pelican's gift? And how would she now avoid unwanted interactions?

She didn't know what to think, but decided against telling her tale of a missing slipper. This boy might be one who scoffed at such things; and besides, it really was none of his business what her business was. Surely, this rescue was just a small interruption that had nothing to do with anything but saving a boy's life. Perhaps the missing pennant was just an accident, or maybe it was a way to keep the boy from asking too many prying questions; so she shrugged and said, "I'm just an ordinary girl on a journey."

"My name is Husid," the boy said, "and if you are just ordinary, you had to be guided by something for what you did is impossible."

"Oh, I agree, I was guided," Dufazza said, "but what I don't know is why. What is it they wanted of you? What are you hiding from them?"

At her words, Husid grew instantly suspicious. He squinted at her long and hard; then he said, "Just because you saved me—or did you just pretend to save me?—which would explain this whole—" he paused, glaring at her.

Good stars! Dufazza thought. If he thinks this was some trick—some scheme *just* to get him talking! Dufazza rolled her eyes.

"It's not going to work," the boy declared. "I refuse to talk and you can be sure I can do without you."

"I doubt that," Dufazza said, "because you don't have the first notion where you are, which means you haven't the first idea where you want to go."

"I'm not a dunce," Husid said. "I know which

way is east—" and then as if he had revealed too much, he hurriedly added, "or west, or north, or south. I know them all."

But Dufazza was not for pretending she was fooled. "East sits on a very long horizon," she said, "so, is it due east, or southeast, or northeast, or what? You have a particular eastern place in mind, I suppose?"

Instead of answering, Husid said, "Believe me, I'm not ungrateful—if this is real—but you could prove it by giving me bread and this flask full of water. Then I could be on my way and you could be on yours."

"I would send you off gladly," Dufazza said, "but one flask is nothing between you and your Kakin. And you don't have one notion where the next oasis is, do you?"

"I know what I need to," Husid said, "except, who you are. You haven't told me one thing."

"All right," Dufazza said. "I'll tell you as much as you have told me. My name is Dufazza. And this is Jukka."

For a time, they stared with defiance into each others eyes.

"All right," Husid finally said. "I'll agree if you will. We'll stay together till I get supplies—then we go our separate ways—though you had best not be trying some trickery."

"Me!" Dufazza exclaimed rolling her eyes again. "I'm the one with three camels and ALL the supplies—if you haven't noticed. So it's you who had better not try any tricks."

The boy ignored her protest and said, "Also, in the meantime, we shall not ask each other about our business—agreed?"

"Let us rather agree," Dufazza said, "that we will always answer a question before we ask one. And that we will tell the truth." After a small hesitation, Husid nodded.

"And I shall lead the way," Dufazza added.

"B-but—, I know where I need to go," Husid protested. "And besides, you can be sure I know the desert a good part better than some whiff of a girl."

Dufazza couldn't believe his arrogance. She almost stuttered in indignation. "This girl has a full seventeen years, plus the considerable wit and pluck to rescue you," Dufazza said in her most withering tone. "And you! Well, you have a camel that I helped save and nothing more, so this whiff of a girl will lead—thank you very much."

Her tone must have worked for Husid kept his tongue, though his lips seemed to be twitching, so she added for extra measure, "And since we have good riding time yet before the real heat of day, I say we go on—tired or not."

With that, Dufazza spilled water into Husid's borrowed flask, thrust him a crust of bread and clump of dates, and mounted Jukka. She trotted off, leaving to Husid how quickly he followed.

He wasted no time for within moments he and Kakin were trotting along beside. Dufazza had assumed he would trail her little caravan so being side by side complicated things because Dufazza had no intention of explaining her

wristband. With casual subtlety, she periodically checked their course, adjusting as necessary with Husid silently complying.

For the longest time they did not speak until, at last, Husid broke the silence. "I have no sisters or brothers," he said. "How about you?"

"In our family, there are three of each, plus me," Dufazza said coolly. "I am the eldest."

"Me, too," Husid said and grinned.

Dufazza groaned at his humour but said nothing more as they rode on because her mind was churning. Why did she suddenly feel she was not to reveal her journey's purpose or her birthland? What was this all about? How was she to evade his questions? How was she then to learn about him? In trying to sort out the confusion, Dufazza forgot to check their course. When her compass beeped twice, it startled them both.

"WHAT was that?" Husid exclaimed loudly.

Dufazza understood perfectly. It was not a sound of the desert—nor even of any place that she knew. If only Husid had travelled in the rear

he might not have heard. She would just ignore his hearing and trust he wouldn't ask again.

Dufazza was a little annoyed too. Why couldn't the band have tingled her wrist as it had in the darkness? Why did it have to beep—and twice at that? There was a lot she didn't understand about this compass of hers.

As she subtly checked their course, she saw how far the arrow had swung from the green triangulated light. For some reason they were being directed south. Why south, again?! That wasn't the direction *she* needed to go. But the way was clear, so with a hard correction, they turned south despite Dufazza's disappointment.

When they were again settled in their course, Husid spoke. "WHAT WAS that?"

Dufazza pondered for a moment and decided bluntness would be best. "Not your business," she said, as pleasantly as she could—but now she could see that her subtle checks of the wristband would not be subtle enough because Husid now watched her every move.

The sun had just passed its peak when Dufazza noticed the red tinge in the wristband. It would mean caution ahead, she thought, but almost immediately another thought forced in.

What if the danger were Husid himself—or rather *his* thoughts. Ever since they had made that sharp turn to the south, she had sensed a mounting tension in his demeanour. He was not happy to be travelling south. What if he were planning something in his mind?

As if to counter her thought, she saw the words, "AVOID CARAVAN" form within the circle of her wristband.

As they approached the shade of a massive dune that would give them a new horizon, the redness brightened ever so slightly, but it did not flash as before.

Dufazza stopped at the foot of the dune. "We'll eat here and rest awhile," she said. She half expected Husid to object to the early hour, but he did not, so in silence they ate their bread and figs.



They had just finished when Dufazza noticed the flickering on her wristband. Putting fingers to her lips and motioning for Husid to follow, she scrambled up the dune, just in time to see a caravan of heavily laden camels saunter silently beneath. Dufazza knew this small caravan could very well encounter Husid's captors within the day, or just as likely, some other caravan carrying news of an escaped boy and camel. So, thanks again to her marvellous compass, these traders would not be carrying their own news of two youthful travellers.

When the caravan was passed, Husid said with great puzzlement, "How did you know?"

Dufazza did not answer, except to say, it was time to sleep and they should both do so because they would be travelling for most of the night. She did not explain that she had read upon her wristband the words—"NIGHT TRAVEL."

They scuttled down the dune to sit beside the camels now resting in the advancing shade. Within moments, Husid was deeply asleep

though Dufazza knew that was against his best intention. But the stresses of the past days had betrayed him. Smiling, Dufazza fell to her own deep sleep with the wristband tucked at her ear so the slightest warning would waken her.

It felt much too soon when the beep awoke her, but the daylight was almost gone. Husid, still fast asleep, was snuggled against his camel. For a brief moment, Dufazza watched, wondering what this whole adventure was about—wondering if it would be so bad if Husid stayed for the most, or maybe even the whole, of it.

After a hasty meal, they were on their way again crossing the caravan's route and going deeply south.

Dufazza tried to conceal her disappointment because the maps had placed Pelican Land east and north beyond the sea winds. But she obeyed, for her compass was proving far more than a compass, warning her with its little beeps if she took too long noticing. She didn't know

how it knew when she needed to be reminded to look, but however it knew, it only beeped when she was not paying attention or needed sudden warning.

The desert was so beautiful and peaceful in the pale moonlight that Dufazza found herself wishing morning would never come. On and on they travelled with steady speed, never saying a word. Every so often Dufazza would adjust their course to the compass and Husid would follow.

When the first pink of day pushed up in the sky the compass directed a full easterly turn. As they did so, Husid spoke, his voice tight and strained. "Why are we going this way?" he asked.

"I don't know," Dufazza said, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice. Why didn't she have any answers to his pesky questions? And not just his—but hers! Why was this compass so free with direction, but so sparse with detail?

"Have you ever been in this part before?" Husid persisted, urging his camel slightly ahead, so he could look directly in her eyes.

"No," Dufazza said, and then remembering that Husid was not to ask a question unless he answered it first, she asked. "Have you?"

"Yes," Husid said. "I passed this way not long before they captured me—so if you have never been here before, why are we coming here?"

Straightway, Dufazza looked at her wristband. There was no hint of redness; they were on course; so what was this all about? Why did she have to be involved? Her heartbeat slowed and she answered as best she could.

"The purpose will manifest itself," she said.

"What purpose?" Husid asked.

"We shall see, I suppose," Dufazza said.

"Who are you?" Husid asked, and there was a shade of fright in his voice.

"Who are you?" Dufazza asked, insisting that he answer his own question first.

Husid was silent for a time. At last he spoke. "My father was killed by those raiders, nine days ago, not far from here. He and my mother lived in this land, captive to the Bahqun since the year

of my birth—though my mother died when I was five. But those raiders you saw wanted my father as *their* captive, so for years they tried to steal him from the Bahqun; and finally in a fierce battle nine days ago, they mistakenly killed him. I was taken captive a few days later.”

Husid stopped and in the drawn-out silence, Dufazza knew it was her turn to share, but wanting more than the sketchy details Husid had given, she asked, “Why should your parents be wanted as captives? I don’t understand?”

Husid seemed to forget their agreement for he answered. “When my father lived in his homeland, he had a dream and on account of his dream he and my mother were eventually taken captive by the Bahqun.”

“But why? How would they know his dream?” Dufazza asked.

Again Husid answered. “My father spoke of his dream to many people. He thought the dream was to teach them, but the Bahqun thought it meant something more—so they took him—

and when they realized he didn't know what they wanted, they kept him—thinking he might dream again of the place. He never did."

"That must have been dreadful," Dufazza exclaimed in sympathy.

"I don't remember it as dreadful," Husid said. "The Bahqun weren't bad people. They only wanted to know where the—" but at that Husid broke off.

Dufazza waited, but he kept silent.

"Is that what the raiders wanted, too?" she asked. "To know where something or someone was?" She hoped she could entice him on.

"It is your turn," Husid said. "You must not ask me any more questions." He seemed agitated.

"I have nothing like that to tell," Dufazza said. "My journey is simply to find answers about my ... work. It has to do with my reedwinds."

Dufazza paused—wishing she could explain everything. Why couldn't she tell about her missing slipper? Why couldn't she explain how her Pelican's gift was supposed to have carried

her to the bedside of an old woman for a special purpose? or how everything was now confused because of a missing slipper?

Dufazza shut herself against these things she felt constrained to hold back. Besides, it was too painful even thinking of it, especially since she carried a niggling of blame within herself for her slipper's disappearance. In the many days of her desert travel, she had pondered why she should feel so. Was it something she had failed to do? Something she had failed to understand? She didn't know, except that speaking of it with Husid was apparently not yet advisable.

Suddenly, she heard a tiny beep and read upon the band in brilliant green light, the single word, "STOP."

"We are to stop here," Dufazza said. "Here by this ancient tree, I suppose."

"I don't want to stop here," Husid said and his voice was angry.

The beep sounded again, and looking down, she read, "LEAVE HUSID ALONE."

"Listen," she said, "I'll leave you here while I go to that rock escarpment—if there are fresh pools of water, I'll signal."

Husid continued, still angry. "What does that thing say that speaks to you?"

"All right—I will tell you this much," she said. "It guides me. It tells me I am to leave you alone. I don't understand how or why it works, but when I began this journey, my mother gave it to me from out of her dream. That is all I know." She turned away. "I will signal if I find water."

Husid seemed a little less angry, but still afraid. "If you mean to trick me—" he began and then stopped.

"Husid, I know almost nothing concerning you," Dufazza exclaimed. "And I am not out to trick you. I was guided to save you. And if anyone should be angry it is me, for I am far, far from the place I want to be. I have travelled this way because of this thing that guides me. I don't want to be here. But we're here, so let's do what is to be done and get on our way."



"You must promise me," Husid said, "that you will not look and you will not ask me about ... about the thing I shall have with me."

"I shall not ask," Dufazza said.

"All right," he said, "but do not signal. I will come. No one must see a signal."

"All right," she agreed. She turned, resisting the urge to look back, unsure whether Husid would join her or vanish into the distant dunes.

At the escarpment, Dufazza found refreshing pools and the camels drank deeply. They were still slurping greedily when Husid arrived. From a higher pool, Dufazza replenished their supply while Kakin pushed and shoved demanding his share from the pools below.

Dufazza noticed that Husid now carried a leathern bundle tied closely to his waist with a smaller one beside. They swung and bumped him as he moved, though she could see he tried to keep them hidden as best he could. Is this what the raiders were after? she wondered. She suspected so, but she had agreed not to ask.

After a brief meal, they slept for once again the compass was directing night travel. When it woke them, the night had already settled in, but to Dufazza's joy, the compass arrow was flashing brightly green in a northeasterly direction. At last, she could be on her way. When she asked Husid about the direction he wished to go, he said, "Northeast will do for now."

Soon they were swinging at a fast trot through the cool desert night. They travelled without speaking, comfortable in the silence and the exquisite beauty of the moonlit sands.

For three peaceful nights and mornings, they travelled, sleeping through the heat of the day in the caverns of towering clumps of rock. At first sighting, the strange up-croppings had looked like an archipelago caught in rippling sands. It seemed the caves had once been places of dwelling, now abandoned but serving their needs perfectly.

The sun was nearing its peak on the fourth morning of their northeasterly travel when the

winds began. Looking behind, Dufazza saw how their tracks were already sifting in. Consulting her wristband, she saw the pointer direct them due east into the face of the wind, toward a rock shape she had been studying with puzzlement.

At first, she had thought the shape a strange mirage, so different from the jagged clumps through which they had so recently traversed. But on closer approach, she saw a huge, almost sculpted mass of rock, lying on the sand, like a clenched fist resting on its fingers. The finger crevices ran deep upon its face, with the bumps and valleys of the knuckles high above.

As they reached the fingered-face of the strange rock, the winds intensified—winds straight from the east—the most dreaded kind. The rising sand swirled round the thumb end and piled in against the bent finger joint, choking and blinding the weary travellers.

Seeking refuge in the guide of her pulsing foot, Dufazza led her little caravan as they hugged the fingered edge. Creeping north along the bent

fingers, they rounded the smallest finger where mercifully, the angle of the huge rock provided improved shelter from the fiercest winds. There, up a slight incline, they came to a hollow, even more protected space within the finger's curl. Crouching and crowding together, they rested, listening to the raging winds till sleep overtook them.

Dufazza's next awareness was the sharp beeping of her wristband. Husid too, came instantly alert. They had slept through the fury of the wind and the silence now seemed eerie.

"Where do we go from here?" Husid asked. Dufazza didn't know how to answer, for the word flashing on the compass made no sense.

"What is it telling you?" Husid asked again.

Dufazza had nothing to say but the truth. "Up," she said. "Somewhere up."

"Up?" Husid exclaimed. "Up where?! Is that possible?"

"It must be," Dufazza said. "We have to find where."

Tugging their camels from rest, they retraced their vanished steps toward the fingered edge. Dufazza wondered if Husid saw the rock shape as she did, but as he said nothing, she did not mention it. When she rounded the little finger, she knew instantly where they must go, for the sand was packed against the end of the jutting thumb like an enormous ramp.

"Str-range!" Husid said, and jumped when the compass gave two beeps.

Dufazza looked and it glowed red with its green arrow pointing the way. "This is the way," Dufazza said, and giving Jukka a tug she began ascending the steep ramp.

"Dufazza, wait!" Husid cried. "If the winds blew this in, they can also blow this out and then we'd be high and dry. Our camels would never get off. Ever."

Dufazza couldn't believe his words. "Husid, would you let go of your doubts and get up here. How much witness do you need?!" She had no patience in her urgency to get "up" as the band

directed in its flashing red. Impatience was so unlike her, but why did he always question?

Husid looked stubbornly at her and argued his point. "Besides, it's not stable. It could shift at any moment and bury us. We could get halfway and have it collapse; and not just the sand; the rock. It's full of cracks. Can't you see that?"

"Well, suit yourself," Dufazza said, "but if I were you, with your precious cargo, I would stick as close to this beeping compass as a tick in a tail." And so saying, she struggled forward, tugging at her camels. Soon she was up on the rough outcropping of the thumb and trudging along its ledge beneath the towering bent knuckle. When she reached the creviced overhang she could no longer endure not knowing what Husid had decided. She turned and her heart almost stopped.

All too close, a large caravan was passing at full trot to the south, travelling east. If someone looked in her direction, perhaps the shimmering heat would blind them, though perhaps not.

But her heart sank, mostly because Husid was nowhere in sight. She glanced at the compass and saw it flash brightly red. As she looked up, she almost cried aloud with relief for Husid was urging his camel onto the rocky thumb.

"I'm coming," he called in a disgruntled voice.

Dufazza signaled him frantically to silence. He looked confused till she pointed. When he turned back his eyes were round. With renewed vigour, he urged Kakin forward.

Dufazza turned and tugged her camels into the shallow hollow of the fist clench and waited for Husid. It had taken insistent urging to get Briluba to step across the small floor crevice of the thumb, but Jukka and Greergon had done it with ease.

Soon Husid came crouching into the hollow with Kakin pushing from behind. They'd had no trouble with the floor crevice.

Husid handed Dufazza his camel's lead and said, "I'm just going to look."

Dufazza did not like the idea, but she held her retort, for if anyone should want to avoid capture, it should be Husid.

He came back breathing hard. "Three are coming this way," he gasped, "and they won't miss our tracks. We are stuck up here like strung geese. I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

Dufazza didn't know what to think till she looked at her compass. It now glowed peacefully green with just a hint of red.

"They didn't see us and they won't, if we're careful," Dufazza said.

"How can you say that? Our tracks up to this place are not invisible!" Husid said, and his tone was stressed for the lead camel of the caravan was all too familiar.

"I say it because of this," Dufazza said, thrusting her wrist out so Husid could, at last, see the soft pulsing green of her wristband. "The narrow fringe of red means there isn't much danger. We are safe for the moment," Dufazza said.



Husid reached out and touched the compass. "It's beautiful," he whispered in great awe. He was silent for a time and then he said, "I am grateful, Dufazza. I'm sorry I've been such a doubter." That seemed all he could say.

They stood in silence till neither could stand the suspense of not knowing. Almost in unison they said to each other, "I'm going to look."

The camels seemed content to rest, so they crept out on the rocky thumb and down its ledge, pressing against the rock. Then they heard the voices.

"It's only about a man's height, maybe three times over, I would guess," a man said. Husid blanched and Dufazza nearly choked, for it was unmistakably the voice of Azi.

"All the same, I think it best we be moving on," another voice said. "This rock gives me the shivers. It's not safe. Besides, this sand could slide again—even worse than we saw."

"Too sceered?" Azi mocked.

"Scared?!" the other exclaimed in a nasty tone.

"No, Azi, afraid. Afraid you are wasting our time chasing ghosts. Twice we find tracks that vanish into nothing and—"

"Everything is explainable," Azi interrupted, sounding disgusted. "It's that cursed wind and now this slippage. So I tell you, he's somewhere here. I can feel it. If I had my guess, he's up there—stranded now. Just waiting for us."

"Why not forget him?" the other voice said. "He has to be dead—without water, food—nothing. We've just lost out. We'll never find the treasure without him, so why not just forget it."

"Because the boy is not dead," Azi said. "That rope I pulled from the sand was not chewed by some bone-headed camel of his. It was cut with a knife, which he did not have. What he had was help and that means he's alive; and I have a feeling he's here. How do you think we found him in the first place if it wasn't for me? What do you think they hired me for?"

"I guess I wouldn't know," the other man grumbled.

"Well, I can sense things, real good," Azi said. "That's my skill and it was going to bring me a tidy reward. Best I was ever offered, so Azi is not going to quit this trail till he is one dead sniffer, you hear—help or no help from you."

Dufazza and Husid looked at each other with shock-filled eyes. Then Husid put his mouth to Dufazza's ear and said. "If they try to climb this thing, I'll give myself up."

Before Dufazza could protest, they heard Azi shout from below. "Akyn, bring the rope from your pack. We're going to search here."

Dufazza and Husid heard more shouting but could not make it out. But the others had.

"He's none too happy," Azi's companion said. "He finds this place creepy."

"So you have some authority!" Azi said. "Show him a little tooth."

"I'll go," the man said. "You wait here."

Husid motioned Dufazza to retreat. They did not speak till they were sheltered back in the crevice, and then only in whispers.

"What does the compass say?" Husid asked.

Dufazza looked and saw something she had never seen before. Half the compass was red, the other half was green. She showed Husid.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"I don't know," Dufazza replied. "It's never done this before."

"Then, there is no choice," he said. "It must mean one of us is safe and the other not. I will descend the cliff on this side. They're on the far south so they shouldn't see me. We'll wedge the rope and as soon as I'm down, pull it back. If I give myself up they'll have no cause to come here and find you. I'll make up some story. Then you and the camels must find a way down. Except, I have something to ask. You must take this." He untied the largest bundle from his waist. "You must take this to the Valley of—"

Dufazza laid her hand on his lips and harshly whispered. "No, Husid. If you give yourself up, it will give Azi all the time he wants to turn every rock in this place while the others torture you.

And why not? Why shouldn't they think some treasure might be here because *you* are here. This compass is split because your thoughts are to do this thing. It is you who is in danger if you give yourself to them. Think now of staying together and see what the compass speaks."

"We have no time—" Husid began.

"You will take the time," Dufazza hissed, "and if you refuse, I shall personally throw that fine treasure of yours at their very feet."

Husid was shocked.

Dufazza continued. "Do you value this more than your life?"

"Yes," he said. "There are some things one must value more than life."

They seemed at an impasse. Husid turned away and while Dufazza watched in dismay, he placed his treasured bundle in the saddle pack Dufazza had loaned him. The smaller bundle he left about his waist. Then he wedged the knotted end of his rope into a deep crack and tested his weight against it. Dufazza felt in despair.

At the second beep, she realized she had not been listening. On the compass she saw the words, "GO INTO THE ROCK".

Straight way she felt along the wall, when suddenly the horizon vanished. She had walked into a fissure she had not seen in the shadows of the hollow. In the sudden glow of the compass face, she scurried down the crevice to suddenly find herself at the upper edge of a high cavern. It was stunning.

The floor and one wall had finger ridges running up toward the ceiling. The top of two ridges were gapped, with light flooding through. In the ceiling, there were great creases like the lines in a clenched palm.

Whirling, Dufazza rushed to the entrance and found Husid guiding the rope over the rounded edge of the thumb ledge. Grabbing the twisting coils, Dufazza cried, "Come!" and realized too late how the sound might have carried.

Husid responded almost without thought to Dufazza's frenzied excitement. He hauled the

rope behind as he followed her at a trot into the cavern. He was struck dumb at the sight before them.

"Now Husid," Dufazza pled in a whisper. "Please, please, just pretend for a moment you are going to take refuge here."

But sceptic Husid found his tongue. "Dufazza, if they explore, they will find this place, and there isn't a hope of hiding us, let alone our camels, anywhere in here. And look at all the boulders. This place is crumbling."

"Please, please, just do as I ask," she pled again, keeping her voice as low as his.

Husid closed his eyes and stood, breathing deeply. Dufazza watched the compass and saw the red fade to pulsing green.

"Husid, look," she whispered. As he looked she continued, "Sometimes, we don't have to give our lives; sometimes we just have to give our trust."

"My father trusted and he is dead," Husid said.

"Maybe it was—" Dufazza broke off, not sure how to finish. She reached out to touch Husid's arm in a gesture of sympathy. He turned away.

"Maybe it was as you said—some things are worth giving your life for. And he gave his. So please. The compass has not failed us yet. Maybe there is someway we can conceal the opening or defend it. Let's at least try."

Husid closed his eyes and nodded.

"Quick then, let's get the camels in," she said.

They sped to the entrance where with much silent tugging and shoving they squeezed the camels through and guided them down a finger ramp to the cavern's ridged floor.

When they reached the entrance to devise some way of defending it, they heard a voice call out. Inching outwards, they saw the one named Azi crouching on the thumb ledge. They watched as he took a metal peg from a pouch hanging at his hip and untied a rope end from his waist.



His head was turned away from them as he spoke to his companion. "No, I swear I heard something. Just because I can't see him, doesn't mean he's not here. There's a small hollow up a ways. It might have possibilities."

There was an unintelligible mumble and then Azi spoke again in a mocking voice. "What!—you don't trust Azi? I tell you, when I'm done, ten could hang off this end."

Azi left off speaking as he worked. After a few unseen manoeuvres, Dufazza and Husid watched as Azi turned and forced the peg into the crevice between the thumb and first finger. Then he grasped a rock he had pulled from his pouch.

Just before the ring of rock on metal, they heard the tiny beep. The compass was pulsing red. As Dufazza held her wrist out to Husid, they heard the second ring of stone on metal. Husid nodded his understanding and together they crept backward. At the instant of the third ringing sound, they felt the tremor, and heard Azi cry, "What was that?" When the second tremor

came, Azi screamed, "I'm coming down. Get out of the way! GET OUT OF THE WAY!"

By the third tremor, Dufazza and Husid had leapt the floor crevice that seemed to widen in the midst of their leap. Stumbling, they rushed into the wall fissure and down its incline where the rumbling and shaking threw them to the ground. They could hear the camels snorting and blowing. And under that, staccato sounds, like a cascading of stones.

When the shaking subsided and they could stand, they gave their energies to soothing the camels. Dufazza was stroking Briluba's neck when Husid spoke. "The thumb fell away," he said.

"I know," was all Dufazza could reply. There would be no way now to get the camels out. It would be a sheer drop to the desert floor.

Dufazza tried to block the fears that were pounding within her. Even if she and Husid could scale down, what good would it do them? They would never survive in the sands without their faithful friends. Besides, abandoning the camels

in this hollow tomb upon the sands wasn't even a choice she could consider.

Dufazza felt stunned by it all. She had trusted in the compass, assuming that trust embraced her camels as much as herself. Perhaps the awful purpose in this was to bury Husid's treasure—whatever it was—deep in this rock so it would never be found; so it would never cause deaths or tortures again. Were their beloved camels the expendable sacrifices to accomplish this? Was this the purpose of her journey? There were too many questions rushing in upon her; and if she had questions, then what of Husid?

"I'm sorry," was all she could manage.

She didn't know Husid had risen till she saw him retracing their steps up toward the entrance. Rising she followed and shrank back from the sheer drop. The thumb had broken from its joint and crumbled into a thousand jagged pieces upon the sand.

In silence they returned to the cavern, and knelt beside the now resting, blissful camels.

"What does the compass say?" Husid asked, breaking the silence.

In the fading light, Dufazza looked and again saw what she had never seen before. Where once there had been an arrow and a place for words, all she saw now was white light. She shook her wrist but nothing changed. She knew it had worked once within the rock, so it wasn't being entombed that caused its strangeness.

"I don't know what's wrong," she finally said.

Husid bent to look. "It's just light," he said. "Like fading sunlight!"

"But it doesn't tell me anything," Dufazza cried. "It doesn't say go, or do, or danger or anything."

"Maybe you knocked it when we fell during the tremor," Husid said.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know."

They ate in silence as night came down through the ceiling crevice. They didn't seem able yet to voice the inevitable.

When Dufazza began playing her reedwinds in the near darkness, Husid said nothing. She had only played them once or twice since his rescue because most of the time she was too exhausted after long days and nights of travel. The first time Husid had seen them, he had exclaimed over their beauty and asked if he could inspect them. He had studied the reedwinds with a craftsman's eye and then handed them back with a wistful sigh. "I would give so much to meet the maker of these, even for a moment," he had said, and then added, "But it can never happen for me."

Dufazza hadn't known what to reply for Husid's wish seemed such a surprising thing—especially when Dufazza had never mentioned the reedmaker or her own plans to find the reedmaker once her gift was restored. Besides, was it her place to invite another on a journey that would be hers after Pelican Land? Husid had his own journey, whatever it was, and however his own traditions led him. So she said nothing.

Now, it seemed, for whatever reason, their separate journeys had brought them together to this tomb. There would be nothing after Pelican Land because this was the end. A simple glance around the cavern had been enough to prove there was no way out. The rock-strewn floor, the gaps in the ceiling, the myriad fissures and cracks, all bore witness to a crumbling monument that would, at some future tremor, collapse into a heap of rubble; and no one would remember that an ancient hand had once towered above these sands, or know what lay buried beneath.

The plaintive sounds of the singing reedwinds filled the cavern for a long time.

At last, Dufazza lay down beside Jukka and in the heavy darkness, she took her slipper from its protective covering and stroked the patterned satin against her cheek. If only she had both—her touch alone could take them all beyond the confines of their rock tomb. One slipper alone had no such power.

She wanted to ask Husid about the powers of

his treasure, but she had promised not to; and surely if his treasure had powers, he would have told her.

At length she heard Husid's deep and steady breathing where he lay beside Kakin. Listening to the rhythm of it, she tucked her slipper away and willed herself into forgetfulness.

It was Briluba's snorting cry that woke them. At the fringes of morning light pouring in from the ceiling crevices, they could see Briluba's head sawing up and down while the rest of her body seemed swallowed in the rock face of the far edge, near the inner ridge of the little finger. Dufazza was the first to reach her—to discover the slopping fissure between the two fingers. She could smell the scent of moisture and it was heavenly. Then she noticed the water dripping from Briluba's lips.

"Where have you been girl? What have you found?" she cried, pulling Briluba's head down and kissing her on the forehead.

By then Husid was beside her.

"Can you believe us?!" he said. "We spend all night, thinking there is no way out, when we hadn't even looked. I mean—we should know better. We need a compass to say, 'Seek a way.' No wonder your compass has quit working. It is disgusted with us. Or maybe just me. I doubted it every step of the way. So now it says in its polite way, 'Do it yourself.' And it takes a dumb beast to show us."

Dufazza stood amazed for Husid had never said so many animated words in one stretch. And she knew he did not mean *dumb beast* in an offending way. He was just disgusted with himself for assuming too much—for giving up without even looking around.

"Husid, this doesn't lead out into the desert," she said. "The moisture on this updraft is too heavy."

"I know," he said, "but it's a way—possibly the only way. We'll take a thorough look, and then I'm for going wherever this leads."



They ate their morning figs as they explored every inch of the cavern, but it was as unyielding as it had seemed at first glance—except for that one obscure place.

As they finished packing up, Dufazza felt a sudden heaviness in her sleeve. In a fright, she shook against the strangeness only to see her compass fall to the floor with its invisible clasp now open. Snatching it up, she tried to put it back, but the clasp would not take. It now seemed but an ordinary, broken bracelet. Even the light was gone.

"We must have damaged it," Husid said, trying to phrase it politely.

"I didn't," Dufazza cried. "I know I didn't. I just don't know what is wrong."

"Well, maybe it has served its purpose," Husid said, but that was little comfort because Dufazza knew more than Husid how the compass had been her unfailing guide. How was she ever to know her course without it? Why would it not refasten upon her wrist?

Finally, she wrapped it carefully and placed it in a snug corner of Jukka's pack. She felt frightfully alone in trusting her own instincts. She wondered if she knew enough for the rest of the journey.

The camels had no hesitation in moving down the rocky incline that Briluba had discovered. When Dufazza and Husid rounded the switch-back and saw the broad flowing river below them it took their breath away, but the camels trod on unconcerned by the strange light that lit the channel walls.

They could see only a short distance up the river before the towering channel wall curved to cut off their view. The only path offered was the wide, sandy one that commenced at the foot of their descent and followed the river's flow.

Dufazza felt intensely relieved, for without her compass how could they have chosen between two ways. Now they could travel in certainty, so they settled into a steady pace.

As time passed the light seemed to cycle through a flow and ebb till a sort of dusk settled in. It was in the channel's dusk that they stopped for the night, though it never grew totally dark. Yet on waking, they found themselves in a light-rise, pinks and oranges colouring the walls. It was almost beyond imagination.

It was during the third day of their steady travels along the banks of the broad river that Dufazza began to notice the changing hue of the pebbles that lay scattered beside the path. Many gave off a yellow glint in the muted light.

When they stopped to rest, Dufazza picked one up and knew from its weight that it was as she had suspected. Showing Husid, she said, "This is gold, isn't it? This whole river bank is strewn with these gold pebbles. Can you imagine what we could do with all this gold—how much we could help people?"

Husid was quiet and then he said, "I think we shouldn't be concerned with the pebbles."

Dufazza couldn't believe her ears, because ever since she first suspected gold, she had been imagining all that could be done with the wealth that lay so idle and useless in this hidden, underground channel.

"Why have we come this way if not for this very thing?" Dufazza exclaimed. "There are so many poor. This would be the end of so much suffering."

"Or the beginning," Husid said.

Dufazza cried, "What makes you so sour?"

"Because of what I know," he said.

"Well, what I know is that I am taking as much of this as I can. I could give it to whoever needed it."

"It is far too heavy," Husid said. "When we reach the desert again, we have to carry water and we can't leave provisions behind. And even more, it would not be fair to the camels."

"Well, it's not like I'm going to take it all," she said. "I'll just take enough as proof and then we can come back for more."

"Dufazza, look around you!" Husid said. "Do you want this place filled with the kind who will swarm to lay hands on this? Have you not heard what happened at the Olphus Mountains?"

Dufazza looked around and knew what he meant. That sad story of what had been done at Olphus was legend in nigh every land. Where once there had been beauty and grandeur in ancient Olphi, there were now ugly scars and a jumble of broken refuse.

"We could keep this a secret," she said.

Husid became more insistent. "Dufazza, we must not be sidetracked from our journey. You journey with a purpose, and though I have not told you, I also have a purpose. And if I take any of these pebbles with me, I will have lost my purpose."

"I'm not asking you to take anything, Husid. I'm just saying that maybe part of *my* purpose is to find this place," Dufazza protested. "So you do what you think best, and I shall do what I think best."

Husid rose without saying more and calling Kakin from his grazing, he took the lead position. Dufazza scooped up a handful of the pebbles to deposit in her pockets and followed.

As they travelled, it occurred to Dufazza that she might never have another chance to pass this way again. Indeed, how often was one ever able to return to take up missed opportunities? In that thought, she began to scoop up pebbles to deposit in every spot she could find on her person and in the camels' packs.

It was harder going with the weight, but she knew the good that could come from her troubles, so she continued collecting. She hoped Husid did not notice when she removed some of the grasses she had collected for camel feed. There was no need of it—not with the lushness that thrived all around in the strange luminescence of the over-arching walls.

It was on the sixth day of their journey along the river that Dufazza allowed the thought that had

been tapping at her mind. The reedwinds were bulky on Jukka's back. There would be more space if she did not carry them. Besides, if she ever did meet the reedwinds maker, there would be newer and perhaps finer instruments—and anyway, finding the reedmaker seemed a long way off without the Pelican's gift to take her.

Perhaps Husid would agree to carry her reedwinds on his riding camel. She would wait for the right moment to ask. And if not, then she could hide them somewhere along the river. Surely, there would be a way to return for them or send for them. She could use the Pelican's gift for that very thing, could she not?

The morning of the next day, Dufazza sensed a change in the river. It seemed to be flowing faster and higher than before. There were fewer and fewer pebbles for the river seemed to be swallowing them up in its rising. She gathered all she could and was mustering courage to ask Husid about her reedwinds, when she bumped into Kakin who had stopped without warning.

"Husid!" she cried with a touch of impatience in her voice, "why did you—" but she stopped, for Husid stood transfixed, staring across the swiftly flowing river toward a glow of light.

Staring too, Dufazza was able to discern a tree. The light came from enormous pear-shaped crystals that hung from its branches. It was the most exquisite thing Dufazza had ever seen.

"It is real!" Husid said, his voice barely above a whisper. "My father never knew, but it *is* real!"

"What is real?" Dufazza asked.

"The tree," Husid said, as if in a daze. "This is all in the dream-papers and—" Husid stopped.

"And what?" Dufazza asked, but Husid did not reply.

"Is that the bundle you retrieved from that tree? The thing you wanted me to take?" Dufazza asked. But before Husid could reply, she heard an agonized groaning, and turning toward the sound, she saw Jukka collapse sideways from the weight of her pack. It all seemed in slow-motion, yet compressed into the briefest of moments, as



if the churning river had reared up to swallow her beloved camel.

Dufazza cried out and sprang to Briluba's side, urging her to pull against the lead that tied her to the fallen Jukka, but Briluba was already partially down from the combined weight of her own packs and Jukka's frantic struggles against the swirling river. With her front footing lost on the slippery bank Briluba too, was being pulled slowly, but surely, into the frothing waters.

In a flash, Husid ran to Greergon urging him backward against the lead that tied him to the frantic Briluba. Greergon fought the forward drag and his own slippage till the lead snapped. It all happened so swiftly there was nothing they could do but react. And there was nothing now to hold Briluba.

Sobbing, Dufazza did the only thing she could. With one slice of her dagger, she cut Jukka free and watched in horror as the river swept Jukka down and out of sight. Dufazza sank to her knees, sobbing and sobbing, as Briluba

regained her footing and stood trembling and moaning upon the bank.

The tentative touch of Husid's hand only added to Dufazza's grief. She sobbed till she had nothing left. But even when her cries were spent, Briluba's grief went on and on as she stood moaning upon the river's torn edge.

Husid finally spoke. "Dufazza, this is all my fault," he said. "I should have told you about the writings and the tree. I should have told you the gold was not to be taken—only by those in fitted possession of a certain gift and only after receiving the crystal. There is so much I should have told you."

In the shock of his words, her numbness deepened. She knew that nothing was his fault. She realized in that moment that she had lost nearly everything she treasured, for Jukka had carried her most precious possessions—her slipper, her reedwinds, and the strangely quiet compass. Now, she had only Greergon, Briluba, and the company of Husid.

Slowly Dufazza arose and reaching into her pockets and pouches, she cast handful upon handful of the golden pebbles into the river, shaking them out to remove every trace. Husid watched, but he did not help, as if this were something Dufazza had to do alone. She scraped even the gold dust from the camels' packs.

She could not understand why this tragedy had happened, just as she could not understand the why of her missing slipper. Her desires had never been for herself. She had always sought to do good. And she could have. If only she'd had the Pelican's gift from the start. If only the compass had instructed her along the river. If only she had not become so enamoured with the promise of the pebbles.

She felt deeply discouraged—hardly able to stand—unable to set herself in forward motion.

She watched as Husid repaired her camels' leads. Then, as he soothed and coaxed Briluba into place behind Greergon, she blinked back another threatening flood of tears. That Husid

would comprehend Briluba's need to follow almost overwhelmed her. Gentle Briluba who would not know how to go on without Jukka in lead would find sufficient strength in following Greergon.

Wiping away her escaping tears, Dufazza looked once more across the river at the nearly forgotten tree, and there, near the water's edge, in the crystal light, she thought she saw a great white pelican standing upon a great reed raft. Hardly did she register the pelican's presence when lifting off on pure white wings, it vanished into the rock sky.

Astounded by her fleeting vision, Dufazza turned for affirmation, only to see that Husid's focus was still upon a trembling Briluba.

In that moment, all the events of her life seemed utterly incomprehensible.

Putting Greergon's lead into her hand, Husid signalled Dufazza forward, ahead of him. "It helps to be in motion," he said, and letting her pass, he fell in behind. Looking back, Dufazza

saw how Husid kept his gaze upon the tree until it could no longer be seen as the channel turned and twisted in its passage.

When finally they stopped in the waning light, the river seemed unusually quiet. Husid reached within Kakin's borrowed pack and took out the bundle that was his treasure. He did not unwrap it, but held it so Dufazza could see the shape.

"This contains the dream of my father," he said. "It is the thing the raiders were after. They'd heard how my father had written of a place filled with jewels. He always thought it was not a real place. He said its true meaning was as symbol. But no one believed him. He never knew it was more than a dream, but the raiders and the Bahqun were right. The dream-papers tell of this place. My father saw that out of a great hand, a river flowed to a tree and beyond. My father did not speak openly of the gold in his dream—only of the jewelled light and the word that one was to touch nothing before the light."

Husid continued. "You know, when I saw that enormous stone fist lying there on the sand, I didn't even connect it to my father's dream. How could I? The dream wasn't real. I just thought, How odd! But when Briluba discovered the river, I began to wonder—yet I couldn't conceive of it. But when the gold pebbles began appearing, I was astonished enough to begin looking for the tree. It all came, fragment upon fragment, and I couldn't see till most of the dream was already before me.

Dufazza listened, stunned that she had been walking the path of a prophetic vision given in another time and place. Yet all the while Husid was speaking, she kept remembering what he had said when blaming himself for Jukka's loss.

"Back there, when—" Dufazza paused, trying to control the tremor in her voice. "Back there, when you said, only those in fitted possession of a certain gift could touch the gold—what did you mean?" she asked, knowing, in small part, what his words might reveal.

"It was custom among my mother's people," Husid said, "for a white pelican to deliver a gift at the birth of every child. That is the gift I spoke of which I do not have, though I received it.

Dufazza could scarcely credit what he said, and though she now knew the answer, still she asked, "Who are your mother's people?"

"My father came from the city kingdom of Zhonah, but they met and settled in my mother's place called the Valley-of-Rivers," Husid said. "I was born in the Bahqun the same year of their capture, yet the Pelican's gift came. My mother was amazed—she did not think it could be."

"Can you say what the gift was?" Dufazza asked, again knowing the answer, yet feeling compelled to ask. She was now certain that Husid carried but one slipper in the small pouch that hung about his waist.

As he secured the treasure bundle next to it upon his waist, he said, "Dufazza, I don't see purpose in revealing the Pelican's gift. We just need to go on—to find our way out of this."

Dufazza closed her eyes in grief. They were on parallel quests from a common place! Except her entire gift was now lost because she had been so foolish in burdening Jukka? Even had she felt free to reveal her story, how could she confess. She could hardly think of it without breaking into unending sobs. Her only control for now was not to think of anything, but just to listen. Perhaps Husid's story would give some clue to the mystery of their common loss.

She spoke with a trembling voice. "Husid, I understand if you don't want to speak of what the gift was, but can I ask what you meant: that you do not have it, though you received it?"

Husid sighed before he spoke. "This may sound strange, but when I was of age to receive my gift from the Pelican, part of it was missing; so for two years, my father sought permission from the Bahqun for me to take a journey to find answers. But for two years they refused—they didn't believe in such fantasies, they said. They seemed to think my father was using me to



secure some escape or some treasure.”

He smiled. “I guess in the end, it was true.” He patted the bundle and continued. “But then, suddenly—just a few days ago—and without explanation, they gave their consent. This was only days before you rescued me. It seems like forever ago.”

He paused again before continuing. “I think they meant to secretly follow me, but in the very moments I was bidding farewell to my father, we heard the raiders attack. And then everyone was in our compound—in furious battle.”

He broke off, closing his eyes. Dufazza could see he was trying to hold out against the pain of remembering.

He continued. “The Bahqun tried to save my father. The raiders too wanted him alive, but somehow, in the chaos—”

He swallowed hard. “I saw the spear. It was like time slowed down. I saw it enter his chest. I heard his last words, as if spoken again—words he had said only moments before the raiders

came. He had said he had a feeling to tell me things he had not told anyone but my mother. He told me about this bundle that contained the full account. Where it was. What he wanted. How to find it. That these dream-papers were more precious than his life. And I saw in his last gaze, the plea and hope for my escape."

Husid swallowed again. "So I left his body there. It is the hardest thing I have ever done. I'm not sure anyone knew they had killed him. They just fought on and on, ... and I escaped."

He picked up a jagged pebble and scratched a rough map into the sand as he finished his story. "This was where I escaped. Within two days, I made it here to where the papers were, but just as I was about to take the bundle, I heard my father's voice, so real, it startled me. 'Not yet,' he said. I couldn't believe it. What had I come for? I was so shocked, I blurted out, 'What?!' And I heard it again, commanding me: 'Not yet.'"

"I almost didn't listen. But I listened enough to leave the Pelican's gift there. Maybe because I

had no idea what I was supposed to do—where I was supposed to go. I had heard my father's stories so many times growing up. I believed my purpose was to help him fulfil his purpose—to help him escape to a land where people would listen to him. The Bahqun called my father a prophet, and I believe he was, but what he taught, they didn't want to hear. They just wanted to exploit his gifts."

Husid shook his head. "This is embarrassing to admit, but I rode off in a blind rage. It was so unlike me, but I have never been so angry—so utterly confused. Suddenly, I didn't care about anything. About dream-papers. About raiders. About quests. About anything." He winced and added, "Till the thought of revenge."

He scratched a squiggly line in the sandy soil and stopped. "Here is where they captured me. I saw them coming and I rode, like a crazed fool, straight into them. I would mock them with lies. Let them do what they would. I did not care." He winced again, and added, "Or so I thought."

He scratched another line and mushed the pebble into the soil, "Here is where you rescued me," he said. "That is pretty much my story."

Dufazza saw him look at her as if he hoped she would honor their agreement—information for information—without his asking. She felt the permission come; that when she was ready, it would be right, but the loss of Jukka was still to raw. She tried to speak—to let the whole story tumble out—but the tears welled up; not just for herself, but also for the greater tragedy Husid had suffered and carried alone for so many days. She turned away, to rummage in Briluba's pack, as she tried to choke down her emotions.

Husid understood. Now was not the time. He had observed how every word she had spoken, in the hours since Jukka's loss, had been a strain. So he said, "The river seems different, doesn't it? Maybe it means we're nearing the end of this strange passage. And to think, how many will never believe us. Crazy, isn't it. My father dreams and many think it's more than a dream.

We walk the real river and many others will think it's just a dream."

Those thoughts stayed with Dufazza as they ate their simple meal and lay down to sleep. Her last waking thought was a prayer: If only this day could be a dream and I should wake to find my Jukka lying beside me.

Early the next morning—their eighth day along the broad river—they found their way hampered by a thin rising of water upon the path. Husid must be right, Dufazza thought. A change is coming. A distant roaring that seemed to shake the ground added to her conviction.

Rounding a bend, they saw how the path rose up, away from the river into a corridor of stone while the river channel bent away between sheer towering walls. There would be no choice but for the upward path away from the river. The mists and the incredible roaring meant but one thing—beyond the sheer walls, the river would plunge into an unsearchable chasm.

Husid's curiosity could not be contained. Even Dufazza, despite the intense grief at her failings, felt a spark of interest. Together, they crept along a narrow ledge above the churning waters till they could see the river burst over its edge. The mists soaked them through, but with studied caution they hugged the wet wall while they gazed into an immense crystal cavern that was over-arched with a perpetual rainbow.

There are no words for this, Dufazza thought. And we shall never see it again. This was my only voyage in this place and I had to be so blind as to leave my gifts in a place to which I shall never return.

At last they crept back to the grazing camels to fill the water skins. It was while filling the last skin that Dufazza saw something bobbing within the curve of an exposed root. Creeping along the water's edge, she recognized the bundle before she reached it, but saved her tears till she had it safe upon the sandy bank. The layered wrappings contained her reedwinds safe and

dry in their wooden cradle. And caught in their drawstrings were the drawstrings of her slipper's outer case—its oiled surface shedding all moisture. Her joy was intense, and more so when she saw the cause of Briluba's sudden wheezing.

"Look," Husid cried, and pointing across the river, they saw Jukka, nodding and prancing in frenzied greeting.

Dufazza was knee deep in the river before she realized the danger and the dilemma.

Husid had already cried out, "No Dufazza! This is only a gift of sight. There is only one crossing of the river and Jukka has crossed. You must be happy with this alone—as Briluba is. She is satisfied now, as you must be."

Backing from the river, Dufazza continued waving and weeping till she saw her beloved Jukka turn and trot toward the rock face. It was then she noticed the herd of camels. When Jukka reached them, they followed her, vanishing into mist till there was nothing to see but the distant trees and towering walls.

When Dufazza turned, she saw that Husid had already secured her precious bundles to Greer-gon's pack. In a daze, she followed him into the upper channel, too immersed in the wonder and emotion of what she had witnessed to speak.

They proceeded thus, in silence, absorbed in their own thoughts, leading their camels as they had done the entire way along the river.

They had been travelling less than an hour when Dufazza noticed that the muted tones of the corridor seemed to be fading as if in twilight. She couldn't understand, for in the cycle of the river channel, it would still be midmorning. Yet here!—why this early descent into darkness?

She was just ready to break the silence when Husid exclaimed, "There's light ahead! It looks like sunlight!"

Dufazza could hear the relief in his voice and knew, he too must have been wondering if this stone corridor would end in total darkness. Sunlight was the best end Dufazza could have wished for.



When they emerged from the cool corridor, their eyes clapped instantly shut—not just for the sudden brilliance, but also from the intense heat that engulfed them. They knew instantly that nothing could survive in such heat for long.

Through squinting, shaded lids, they studied their surroundings. At first, it appeared they had stepped into an enclosed oasis of granite palms—jagged, glistening pinnacles burnt black by the sun. Already, that burning sun was creeping across the shaded floor.

Then, at the same moment, they saw the narrow opening ahead. In perfect unison, they raised their arms to point, and laughed at the synchronicity of it. Clearly, to exit this caldron was their first priority. Even the camels seemed anxious to escape the suffocating heat.

Almost at a run, they entered the passageway and into deep shade. It was just wide enough for two—side by side, but between the narrow walls, the heat seemed more intense, despite the shade.

Thankfully, we shall be gone from here when the sun reaches its peak, Dufazza thought, for she knew that when the sun penetrated to the bottom, the passageway would be unbearable.

She was just rounding the second switchback and looking back toward Greergon when she heard Husid gasp. He was several steps ahead of her, so his out-thrust arm saved her from smashing into the massive granite wall that brought their path to an abrupt end.

They stared in confused and stunned silence.

"We'll have to go back," Husid finally said. "In short order, this place will turn into something worse than a bed of coals."

"There just has to be a way," Dufazza cried. "Remember the opening in the hand that led us to the river. We can't give up. We can shelter in the cool of the corridor and take turns examining the walls. We can wrap our feet against the heat and explore till—" she stopped, suddenly confused at the memories and whispers flooding through her mind.

Husid was already turning Kakin about and motioning for her to follow.

"No Husid, wait," she said. "Exploring is *not* the answer." She hesitated, knowing that what was in her thoughts did not really make sense. Maybe it was the heat, or maybe not, but she felt she should say what she was thinking—let it lead where it may.

"In the beginning of my journey, I was guided by my compass. I trusted it completely. Then when it quit working, I just followed the path along the river because there was no other way; but even there, I still had choice and I made some wrong ones because I didn't remember. We just have to remember. That's what I have to say. We just have to remember."

"Remember what?" Husid said, and Dufazza could hear the bewilderment in his voice.

Before she could answer, Greergon bellowed as if he had waited long enough and jerking the lead from Dufazza's hand, he pushed past them with Briluba following. With another bellow, he

pressed his nose high up against the fissured surface and the impenetrable stone wall turned without sound upon an invisible hinge. Through the opening they felt the sudden rush of a cooling breeze as Greergon and Briluba trotted out onto a grassy slope and turned, waiting.

Again, Husid and Dufazza stood in shocked silence till Dufazza laughed with spontaneous joy. Pointing to the opening and to Greergon, she said, "That is the precise answer to your question, Husid. That's what we forgot. That's what we have to remember. The things we have witnessed. The evidence of what *can* be—if only we would remember what *has* been!"

As he tugged on Kakin's lead, Husid gave a deep sigh and said, "But what if the things you remember—the things that *have* been—are the things you *want* to forget?"

As she led out onto the grassy slope, Dufazza wasn't sure what to answer, but at the sight that lay before them, Husid's question was entirely forgotten.

Far below, down a steep, verdant slope, they saw a vista of incomparable green with towering trees encircling a vast, lush meadow. They could see quaint stone houses dotting the edge of a broad river that seemed to flow out of the base of the mountain slope upon which they stood. There were other distant rivers branching and flowing toward the emerald edge of a shimmering sea. And beyond the sea, a fiery, blazing horizon, though the sun was high above.

At the sound of Greergon's snort, they looked back, just in time to see the stone slab close upon its hinge till there was nothing but jagged cliff face. They were beyond amazement.

"Look," Husid said. "Look at the grass. There is not a hint of pathway to this opening. Even to our eyes, knowing it is there, it is still invisible."

"So is the way down," Dufazza said, pointing to the steep, unmarked descent before them.

"We'll do it in switchbacks," Husid said, "and we'll hang onto the camels. Their four feet will likely prove far more secure than our two."

Zigzagging against the steepness of the pitch, they skidded in a chaotic mix of skips and hops toward the valley floor. Somehow the camels kept their footing—Dufazza and Husid, not so much. Their laughter, half in fear of a nasty tumble, seemed to break past the constrictions that Dufazza had carried in her heart and throat since losing Jukka. She knew then—she would, in time, be able to let go of some of the pain.

They were still wiping laughing tears from their eyes when they reached the pathway that meandered along the foot of the steep pitch. It disappeared into the grove of massive trees they had seen from above.

As they stepped into the well-worn pathway, Dufazza's heart began to thump. Who were the people of these cottages? Could this possibly be the land of the Sultanz? Somehow she sensed it was.

They did not see the large man leaning against an immense pine until a rumbling voice said, "Hello there."

Even Husid shrieked in fright. The man's laugh echoed in the distance as Dufazza and Husid sought to contain their embarrassed mirth.

"So what have you two come for?" the man asked when they'd regained their composure.

Husid stood silent for he didn't know where he was. He didn't know many Pelican stories because his mother had not lived to tell him. She had said his Pelican gift had come from a land eastward and had pointed toward the rising sun. But he didn't know how far east or that the Land of the Sultanz was the gateway. But Dufazza knew. She was the first to gain speech.

"How can we find the Great White Pelican?" she asked. Husid gaped at her in surprise.

"For what purpose?" the man asked.

"We'd rather not say," Dufazza replied, as politely as she could. She wished the Treasure-keeper had been able to tell her more precisely whom she should ask for, but he hadn't so she continued: "We are here to seek audience—to make a request of one of the grand Sultanz."

"Well, then," said the man, "I have someone for you to meet."

"What's this all about?!" Husid whispered in Dufazza's ear.

"I suspect it's about your missing slippers," the man boomed in reply.

"Slippers?!" Husid cried, staring in greater amazement at Dufazza. "What is he saying—?!"

Dufazza spoke with a trembling voice. "Yes, Husid, he is saying we are alike in this quest of ours. I will explain, but it feels so complicated."

"Not so very, if you will come," the man spoke again with his deep voice. "And bring your camels. It's been a long while since we've had such in these parts. And just so you know, this is the Land of the Sultanz. We do have names, but with guests, such as you, we always use our titles, which makes it easy. I am Sultan; the same as every man you shall meet, and every woman is Sultana. You see how simple this is. Here in the Sultanz, our guests never forget a name."

He smiled and glanced at the three camels.



"It's not far where we are going," he said, "but to keep up, it seems you will have to ride double."

Dufazza felt a stab of pain at the reminder of her loss. There was no condemnation in his tone, but she wondered if somehow he knew.

As Dufazza and Husid scrambled onto Kakin's saddle, they could not imagine what other strange wonders lay ahead.

They rode at a brisk pace behind the striding Sultan. Even Greergon kept pace, for the Sultan had poured the heavy water skins out amongst the tree roots. "You will not be needing these in this place," he had said.

As they rode, Dufazza explained her story to Husid as best she could through bouts of weeping, but all in all she managed well and felt a great release as she shared her story, so unlike Husid's.

She felt full of confusion about herself, her fears and failings, her hopes and dreams. Did those childhood dreams mean nothing? She had been certain her first journey after the Ceremony-

of-Fitting was to play her singing reedwinds for someone's final comfort. What if she were too late with all this delay? How much further and longer before she could meet the Great White Pelican and seek the restoration of her gift?

When at last, they stopped at a stone house so similar to the others they had passed, Dufazza felt a shiver of doubt creep down her spine. She had expected that a great castle would house the one grand enough to allow them beyond this place into Pelican Land.

When the Sultan called out, "They are here, Mother," Dufazza considered politely protesting this unnecessary delay, until she saw the reeds that hung curing from the eaves of the stone cottage. She could not understand it.

A trembling voice invited them in. Dufazza and Husid looked at each other with trepidation, but once again there seemed little choice in the path that lay before. Together they stepped through the great doorway, and to her astonishment, Dufazza saw the exact couch of fine woven

reeds and the same cheery, old woman of her childhood visions. Except, under the cheer, she could now see furrows of pain upon the wrinkled brow and involuntary flinches that the woman sought to conceal in the repeated smoothing of her coverlet—a coverlet on which lay a partially completed reedwind.

The young Sultan said, “This is my mother, known to everyone here as the grand Sultana.”

Dufazza stared in surprise. How could this be! This, the grand Sultana—a reedwinds maker! This ordinary, frail woman—the grand Sultana!

“We’re just plain folk,” the grand Sultana said, as though she could read Dufazza’s mind. “Everyone calls me the grand Sultana, but I am really neither more nor less than they. But enough of me, my dears. We’ve been expecting you. Your coming fulfils the word of it. And so, my dear Dufazza—yes, we know your names—if you would do what you have come for.”

Collecting her wits, Dufazza turned to fetch her reedwinds, only to see that the Sultana’s son

was already holding the wrapped treasure in his hands. Carefully unwrapping it, Dufazza was grateful beyond words that this grand Sultana—unbelievably the maker of her very reedwinds—would never know how they had almost been abandoned for pebbles; or how they had drifted in a river for nigh on four days.

"It was thoughtful of your mother to wrap against the dampness, was it not?" the grand Sultana said, and smiled kindly.

Dufazza gulped. She did not know if this was gentle teasing, but her failings were still too fresh to talk of them without another flood of tears, so she turned to her task as the grand Sultana resumed stroking her coverlet with a trembling hand.

When Dufazza tugged the reedwinds from their case, the bag that held her slipper fell from the place where Husid had tucked it. The grand Sultana motioned to her son and held out her hand. He retrieved the slipper case for her and she lay it next to the unfinished reedwind.

"Now," the Sultana said, "let us hear."

So Dufazza played and played; and in the giving of her gift, the Sultana drifted off into peaceful sleep with her hand still resting upon Dufazza's hidden slipper.

When Dufazza ended her playing the grand Sultana's son said, "It is good you came today, for she will be crossing the river tonight. And she wanted very much for you to come."

"How did you know?" Dufazza asked. "You seemed to be waiting for us."

"We know the important things," the Sultan said. "And if you will come, there is an important thing now required of Husid."

Dufazza did not want to lose sight of her only slipper again, even if it was under the hand of the sleeping Sultana. The young Sultan seemed to understand. "We shall be back for it," he said. "It will be all right. Come."

In his assurance, Dufazza followed, but with the young Sultan already striding away, there was no time for questions or delays.

As they hurriedly mounted, Husid whispered, "What can he possibly mean? Some important thing required of me? Do *you* have any idea?"

"Maybe it has something to do with getting to Pelican Land—about retrieving our slippers," Dufazza said. "But I don't know. None of this is what I expected."

Though the journey was not long, it was late afternoon when they arrived at a similar stone house. The whole way, Husid's mind had been in a quandary. What was going to be required?

The young Sultan gave them no time to ask questions but ushered them to an inner room. It was an awesome, almost overwhelming, sight to be suddenly confronted by a council of twelve seated around a long stone table—Sultans on one side and Sultanas on the other. Dufazza had just registered that the end chairs were empty when the young Sultan motioned for her and Husid to take those seats at opposite ends.

As soon as they had done so, a Sultana spoke. "Husid," she said, "what is your decision about

the dream-papers?" Husid's jaw dropped and he remained speechless.

"We shall abide by your decision," another said, "but we need to know."

"I don't know," Husid finally said in a daze. "I was going to take them to my mother's homeland—to the Valley-of-Rivers. That is where my father meant to bestow them, but he died."

"Is that where you believe they are to go?" another asked. "Will they be safe there?"

"I don't know what you mean," Husid said, for indeed, since he had walked the strange dream his father had only dreamt, he did not know anymore what the purpose of the dream-papers was, or where they were meant to go. And why, if only symbol, had he walked the reality?

After a silence that they all seemed reluctant to break, a Sultan spoke, "There is only one way into Pelican Land." He paused as if considering his words, then continued, "It is both as you saw and as your father saw. The two together—but it can only be done with the Pelican's gift."

Husid did not understand. "My father said the papers must be returned to the Valley-of- Rivers, so I don't see what else I can do," he said.

"You speak of the Valley-of-Rivers," the Sultan said, "and you have your heart set on that place of your mother's homeland, but would it help to know that this is the first Valley-of-Rivers, and homeland to all who migrated ages past to that valley they named after this place?"

"Am I to leave the dream-papers here?" Husid asked. "Is that what you are saying?"

"What we are saying," the man said, "is that the decision must be yours."

Husid was silent. At last a Sultana spoke. "Husid, is your gift to carry the dream-papers in place of your father?"

"Someone must," Husid said.

"If a thing is important, there is always one with a gift," she said. "Are you the one?"

"I don't know," Husid said.

"I think you do," the woman said.

It seemed a long time before Husid loosened



the string from about his waist to set the covered dream-papers upon the stone table.

"Will you let the dream go?" a Sultan asked.

"I will try," Husid said, so low they could hardly hear.

"The dream-papers will not be forgotten, Husid," the oldest Sultan said. "The dream your father saw will one day be known through the gifts of another to come. You have chosen rightly for it was not intended that you carry the dreams intended for another."

A white-haired Sultana was just drawing breath to speak when the grand Sultana's son whispered in her ear. The woman arose and spoke. "The grand Sultana has but precious time, and there is yet something she has to say to our two friends. You must go quickly."

Dufazza saw that Husid hesitated as did the woman who was standing. "I propose we show them the wall of dreams," the woman said. "I think there may be time if we hurry. Is it agreed?"

Eleven hands rose to join hers in consent.

"Come," she said, and picking up the covered dream-papers, she led Husid and Dufazza to a door and ushered them through. It was another astonishing sight—a vast circular room with towering walls of slotted shelves. One portion of the wall contained row on row of scrolls and papers in varying sizes and shapes. Other sections were empty, but in the section of records, the woman filled a spot with Husid's father's record.

"We have been waiting for this record," she said. "And as you see, there are yet many dreams to come to us. When they are all gathered, then the unending river you saw will be opened to all who have sought and found the Pelican's gift. That is why you must go to the grand Sultana now. She has something to say to you both. And you must hurry."

When they reached the grand Sultana, she was dressed in alabaster finery and lying upon sheets of ivory lace. Her cheeks were flushed, but the pain that had furrowed her brow was mostly

gone. When she saw Dufazza, she smiled and said, "Thank you, my child. You have prepared me for the crossing, but before I go, you must take these and try the fit."

She pulled the interior velvet bag from its leather casing and held it out. Dufazza hesitated for she did not know how to explain that there was but one slipper and that it was not sufficient because she had failed to understand the way of the Pelican—in giving to all alike, rich and poor.

It was not that Dufazza had thought the poor undeserving of her singing reedwinds—rather, she had thought the reedwinds insufficient. There was so much they needed before singing reedwinds.

But the grand Sultana was patiently waiting, so Dufazza reached into the velvet case, and in drawing out her one slipper, two came together. Dufazza stood speechless in surprise.

"You carried them both the entire way," the grand Sultana said with a smile. "And why

shouldn't you see them now, for now you see." The grand Sultana laughed. "Oh my child, the poor don't need pebbles from you. That is the work of others, but not your work. For too long you spent your time in the houses of the rich for the benefit of the poor. But your true work is *with* the poor. Do you see the difference?"

"Yes," Dufazza said in a whisper.

"The wealth they need is in your soul and lips and in these singing reedwinds. It will bring them to the river and they will see, in the end, that pebbles are nothing in comparison. Is this not what your soul speaks, my child?"

"Yes," Dufazza whispered again.

"So you see, there is no need to travel on to Pelican Land. You received the word in time," the Sultana said, patting Dufazza's hand. Then turning to Husid, she said, "And you, my son, what do you see?"

Hesitantly, Husid reached into his own pouch and pulled out his one slipper and like Dufazza, two came together.

"I didn't know what else to do," Husid said. "I thought I had no choice. There was so much my father meant to do."

The grand Sultana smiled. "There always is, Husid."

He closed his eyes and sighed while the grand Sultana continued. "Your path, Husid, is neither more nor less than others. It may seem simple to you—perhaps insignificant when you compare paths with others—with your father's perhaps. But this I say, there is never comparison. There is purpose and infinite meaning in every gift of the Pelican, and you have your own."

"I know so little," Husid said. "I could never do as well as you."

The grand Sultana smiled. "Remember, we do not compare—each gift is sufficient to its use and to its increase."

As Dufazza and Husid fit their gifts, the grand Sultana turned back to a puzzled Dufazza and said, "I have a few more things to say to Husid, and while I do, you may partake of the simple

meal my daughter has prepared. Husid will eat later, when I am finished."

As Dufazza rose to leave, the Sultana raised her hand. "Wait," she said, "I almost forgot. I should like to answer Husid's question."

"Question?!" Husid said, glancing sideways at Dufazza, but in her slight shrug and widened eyes, he saw she was as puzzled as he.

"Yes," the Sultana said. "The one you asked at the precise moment you entered into our land."

Husid squinted in thought, but at last had to admit. "I don't remember a question."

The Sultana said, "Dufazza was talking about remembering things and you said: 'But what if the things you remember—the things that *have* been—are the things you *want* to forget?' Do you remember saying that?"

Husid closed his eyes and nodded.

Well, this is the answer for now," the Sultana said. "There are some terrible things that *have* been, like the captivity and death of your father and of your mother, but what the Great Ones

were whispering to Dufazza in those moments of your confusion is that we are to remember this: 'There is always a way through and beyond.'

Dufazza quietly added, "Yes, even if it's not the way we want or expect or can see."

"Precisely," the Sultana said and turned again to Husid. "So, my son, this is what you are to remember: the many years of your father's life, not his sudden death; the precious years you had with your mother, not the ones you didn't; your rescue, not your capture; the assurance of great things; the proof of things like Briluba's sense and Greergon's seeing beyond seeing. Things that are before they are. Things that don't make sense, until they do."

She smiled, seeing the puzzlement upon their faces. "It comes, as you said Husid, fragment upon fragment. And you're just at the beginning. It's all in the journey. And yes, too deep and too much for an old woman to have said all at once, but they say that crossing the river makes one nostalgic, which I confess I am. You

have much yet to learn and to ponder about this journey in the days and years to come. So, now my good Dufazza, you may go, while I speak to Husid. We should not be long."

As promised, it was not long before a pale Husid entered the quaint kitchen to tell Dufazza of the grand Sultana's request for her. When Dufazza opened her mouth to ask a flood of questions, Husid raised his hand against her speech and said, "It must wait. For now, she needs you. She doesn't have long."

When Dufazza entered the room, family and friends of the grand Sultana were already gathered round. When she spied Dufazza, her eyes softened. "My child, you must finish your dream now," she said in a voice hardly more than a whisper. She lay back, and as more friends gathered upon the grass verges of the house, lighting the night with their torches, Dufazza began to play. The exquisite sounds wafted out and across the meadow, wave upon wave of pure sound.



At last, the sound of wings came and went and everything became still, except for the singing reedwinds and the hiss of burning torches in the night.

Slowly the grand Sultana's son and daughter together, drew the heavy lace cover about their mother's body and with great solemnity, they and appointed others carried her down the grass slope to the river's edge with Husid leading the way. Dufazza followed behind the bier all the while playing upon her reedwinds.

In watching Husid lead them on, Dufazza realized that his presence at the dying reedmaker's side had been as important as hers—perhaps more so, but she did not yet comprehend it.

At the river's edge, they placed the grand Sultana, now still and silent, upon a great reed raft, strewn with gigantic white petals. And in a brief moment, Dufazza saw again the fleeting vision she'd had in the river channel—of a great white pelican taking flight within the light of the crystal tree.

Dufazza played until the raft drifted beyond the light and until the departing torch bearers dotted the nightscape like brilliant fireflies as far as the eye could see.

When Dufazza returned to the cottage, she saw the Sultana's son gathering the cured reeds in bundles. She wanted to ask him to wait, but he spoke first.

"This was her wish," the young Sultan said. "These are her legacy to the new reedmaker who follows. It is as it should be; as it was for her."

"Another maker of reedwinds?!" Dufazza exclaimed. It hadn't, until that moment, occurred to her that there should be another.

"Yes," the Sultan said. "It has all unfolded as it should."

Dufazza could not see Husid, but suddenly it was important that she find him.

"He's in the reed room—down the passage to your right," the Sultan said in answer to her unspoken question.

Following his direction, Dufazza came to the room where her own reedwinds must have been made. She had never imagined seeing this room. In truth, she had never really thought about the skills of the reedwinds maker—or that her own gift would have no voice without a reedmaker. And now to think—more vital than her own coming had been the coming of Husid—to take up the craft of the reedwinds.

Husid was hunched over a papyrus when he heard Dufazza's step. "She has left everything to me," Husid said, his eyes full of wonder. "There are marvellous instruments here and plans for many others. But she says I am not to copy her only. I am to find my own sounds. I am to travel and find what speaks to me and then I am to shape my own reeds and winds. Her supply will last till I am ready. I can scarcely comprehend it."

"It is the most incredible thing," Dufazza said in awe. She would have said more, but Husid was too elated to allow even a moment of silence.

“Do you know how I dream, Dufazza? I dream with my hands. I dream of things like these. There was nothing like this in Bahqun. To them, music was not useful. It couldn’t fill a treasure house. But I used to search for things that made sound or things that couldn’t, but wanted to—and I would find the voice. But the Bahqun kept destroying everything I created. It was a great waste, they said, like dreams and fantasies that lead nowhere.”

Husid gestured about the room. “That is why I find this almost unbelievable—so beyond my furthest imagination.”

Dufazza turned and ran her finger along a polished reed as she sought to control the tightness in her throat. She did not wish to influence Husid against his life’s purpose, but she knew her life’s purpose did not include remaining in this Land of the Sultanz, however much she might have liked.

She had learned from the quiet conversations circling above the dying Sultana that this land

was truly a place apart—a place of gifts and of giving. A place of equity. Thus, there were no poor and needy here, yet they were her life's work, even as the grand Sultana had said.

With studied casualness, she took a reed and measured it against another, as she asked, "So does this mean that you are to live here? To stay here the rest of your life?"

Husid was quick to reply. "On, no. She says I am to begin wherever the Pelican's gift takes me." He gave a sort of lopsided, unsure grin and added, "I was wondering if you could guess where I'm pretty sure that is?"

"I know where I hope it is," Dufazza said, with more emphasis than she had intended. She blushed and kept her focus upon the polished reeds.

"You don't mind?" Husid asked, as if he were surprised at her vigorous tone, but not waiting for an answer, he spoke on, stammering a little as he tried to subtly express his hope. "See, I was thinking—since I have no family now—I

was thinking, wondering actually, if maybe—perhaps maybe—you might be wanting another brother in yours?”

“Well, not exactly,” Dufazza said, gaining more courage and drawing the words out for emphasis. “How would we settle who was going to be eldest?”

“I would never argue,” Husid said, with mock soberness, raising his hand against the very idea. “You must remain the eldest till the orchids bloom in two years time, and then—”

Dufazza interrupted. “Till the orchid’s bloom!” she exclaimed in surprise, wondering what Husid could possibly know of the Valley’s most famous festival.

“My father’s best memories belonged to the orchid time,” Husid said, “so, as I was saying, when the orchids bloom in two years time—after my first years of travel—perhaps we could talk again of ... ah ... the order of things?” Husid arched his eyebrows toward his hairline in a sort of facial question.

He saw the twinkle appear in Dufazza's eye as she said, "What would that order be?"

He quickly added, "The best order—the way of the Sultanz. The way of the Pelican."

Dufazza laughed. "I should like that," she said. "More than most anything."

"Well, it's settled then," Husid said resting his chin on his clasped fingers and smiling. "Young Sultan says whenever we are ready—which I'm thinking in two or three days—if you also agree—we can begin the journey home. He says, with the Pelican's gift, if we leave at dawn, we should be home by breakfast."

"I should like that," Dufazza said again. "I should like that very much."

Smiling their understanding, they turned back to their preparations, knowing that in search of the Pelican's gift, they had received more than even dreams can tell.

## **THE END**

## Colophon:

Series: Once Upon a Journey ♦ VI

Title: *The Pelican's Gift*

Author: SM Smith

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ISBN: 978-0-9918690-6-0 (ebook)

Adobe InDesign & Illustrator CS3

Title font: Kabarett D (URW Studio)

Text font: Shannon™ (Holmes/Prescott-Fishman))

Cover design & book layout by SM Smith

Cover illustrations:

Oasis scene © Erica Guilane-Nachez / Fotolia.com #48318003

Girl & camel © Morphart / Fotolia.com #35123336

Camel#2 © Nova Development Corporation

Inside Illustration:

Great White Pelican © Morphart / Fotolia.com #35097675

Circa - 23,400 words

DO: 1992/12/23

DC: 1995/01/20

DLR: 2013/12/20

Published by Zanthym House (2013/12/20)

PO Box 115 Mountain View, AB Canada T0K 1N0

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First distributed as a PDF ebook at Scribd.com (2013/12/20)

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