

THE STRIPPED-DOWN JEEP banged and rattled its way northward. Jon-Tom was convinced it had no suspension at all: just wheels attached to an axle that was directly bolted to the underbody. He wondered which would come apart first: the underside of the jeep or his own.

Clothahump was of two minds concerning Jon-Tom's otherworldly procurement. While considerably less comfortable and reassuring than a L&MTMborian riding snake, he had to admit that the jeep was faster. And it had no will of its own. When they startled a fifteen-foot-tall trouk lizard sunning itself in the road, the jeep did absolutely nothing to defend them. A L&MTMborian snake would have quickly driven the monster away.

Instead they had to settle for an inglorious end-run around the awakened carnivore. The concomitant jolting nearly bounced the wizard out of his shell. In addition to these unexpected drawbacks, the hydrocarbon spell that kept the metal box's belly sated was continuously running down and had to be periodically renewed. He reminded Jon-Tom that his resources were not unlimited. Before long they would reach the point where the machine would become useless because they could no longer fuel it.

The bone-jarring ride affected Sorbl least of all. When the bouncing and jouncing began to bother him, he simply spread his great wings, released his grip on the backseat, and took to the air, soaring effortlessly above the treetops while keeping track of his unfortunate companions below.

They encountered no more dozing carnivores, however, and the road began to smooth out as they drew nearer to Lynchbany. The autumn Bellwoods were beautiful to look upon, with many leaves still clinging to the trees and the ground between carpeted with umber and gold.

They were less pleasing to listen to, since the dying leaves that still hugged the branches sang out of tune when the wind blew through them. As Clothahump explained, the music of the bell leaves was a direct function of the seasons. An experienced woodsman could forecast the weather by listening to the music the trees played. The tree songs were sweet and melodious in springtime, languorous in the summer, and harsh and atonal as they dropped from their limbs in the fall. They struggled to blot out the discordant chorus from Lynchbany all the way past Oglagia Towne, until they left the woods just south of Ospenspri.

Not as fine a sight as grand Polastrindu, Clothahump told him, but an attractive little city in its own right, sequestered among rolling hills at the northernmost fringes of civilization. He was leaning forward expectantly, scanning the terrain ahead for their first sight of that lovely metropolis.

They were driving through herds of fat abismo lizards let out to graze on the last of summer's grass. Off in the distance the landscape lifted toward the sky, the distant slopes the first manifestation of the high Northern Plateau. It struck Jon-Tom as strange that no herdsfolk were visible among the abismos, but perhaps they were trained to return to their barns at nightfall by themselves.

Ospenspri is particularly famed for its orchards, Clothahump was telling him. Up here they grow the best apples and toklas in the warmlands.

Jon-Tom kept both hands locked on the wheel. The long drive north from Lynchbany had been harder on the jeep than on any of them. While never exactly responding like a Porsche, its handling had become worse than ever. He'd driven the last couple of days haunted by visions of the wheel coming off in his hands just when they were attempting to round a sharp bend in the road. But the wheel stayed on the steering column.

Just get us into town, he whispered silently at the straining machine, *and I'll see that you get a formal funeral.*

They swung around a hill crowned with pines and saw the cloud first. A massive black cloud. It was not moving. It just hung there in one place like a lump of sooty cotton that had been pinned to the sky. Directly above Ospenspri. Jon-Tom slowed but didn't stop.

As for beautiful Ospenspri, the Ospenspri that Clothahump had never ceased describing to him ever since they'd left home, Ospenspri of the numerous streams and delicately arched bridges and many fountains, Ospenspri the flower of the north, it bore little relationship to the wizard's word pictures.

Instead of tall, graceful buildings with fluted walls, the valley that lay beneath the black cloud was occupied by a succession of mud and adobe huts. Dirty water flowed down a few central canals. These joined together below the city to form a single river. What beggared comprehension was not the fact that the water above the city flowed clear and pure, but that it appeared to become fresh again the instant it left behind the city limits. It was as though the pollution it acquired within the city was unable to depart with the current.

Yet there was no sign of any kind of filtering or treatment system where the canals became river.

There were plenty of trees among the houses, as Clothahump had predicted. Every one of them was dead, and not from the onset of winter. They had been blighted by something far worse than inclement weather. On the slopes north of the city where grew the famed apple and tokla orchards there was nothing but twisted, spiny lumps of brown bark huddled together against the wind. No neatly tended rows of healthy trees with busy citizens working among them.

And hovering over it all, that single, ominous, unmoving black cloud.

Sorbl fluttered down to resume his perch on the frame of the backseat. Are you sure we didn't take a wrong turn somewhere, Master?

No, we did not take a wrong turn, you feathered twit. But there was little venom in the wizard's retort. He was staring in disbelief at the city spread out before them. This is Ospenspri. There's the Acomary Hill, and there the three springs, each winding its own way into town. He rose, leaning on the windshield for support. It groaned.

Behind them stood the autumnal forest of the Bellwoods, shedding its leaves to the accompaniment of mournful but hardly malign notes. Ahead was once-beautiful Ospenspri, with its polluted waterways, devastated architecture, and clear air, dominated by that unnatural mass of cumulonimbus. When he spoke again, his tone was subdued.

Drive on, lad. Something dreadful has overtaken this place and the people who make their home here. Perhaps we can do something to help. We are honor-bound to try.

Jon-Tom nodded, took the jeep out of neutral. The tenuous transmission made gargling noises, and they lurched forward.

What's a tokla?

You never had a tokla, my boy?

I don't think so. He kept his eyes on the road as he spoke. It doesn't sound like anything that grows where I come from.

That is your loss, then, for it is a most delightful fruit. You can eat all you want because it shrinks inside your stomach.

You mean it shrivels up?

No. It shrinks before it is digested. In shape it is like this. His hands described an outline in the air that reminded Jon-Tom of two pears joined together at their tops. Each bite starts shrinking on its way down. By the time it hits your belly, it's barely as big as a fingernail, but you're sure you've eaten something as big as a loaf of bread.

Would that ever be a hit on the shelves back home, Jon-Tom murmured. The tokla fruit diet.

Diet? What's a diet?

You don't know what a diet is?

You always repeat questions, Jon-Tom. I don't know why humans waste so much of their talking time. If I knew what a diet was, I wouldn't have to ask you what a diet was, would I?

I think I like you better when you're drunk, Sorbl.

The owl shrugged. I'm not surprised. I like me better when I'm drunk too.

A diet is when people intentionally restrict their intake of food in order to lose weight.

The famulus twitched his beak. He was a little shaky on his unsteady backseat perch, but not so shaky that he couldn't recognize an absurdity when he heard one.

Why would anyone want to lose weight, when nearly everyone is working hard to put it on? Are you saying that among your people there are those who intentionally starve themselves?

To a certain degree, yes. They do so in order to make themselves look better. See, among the humans where I come from, the thinner you are, the more attractive you're considered to be.

Sorbl wiped at his mouth with a flexible wingtip. Weird.

The multiplicity of peculiar notions your world is infected with never ceases to amaze me, Clothahump put in. I'm glad I am exposed to them only through you. I do not think I could cope in person.

Sorbl interrupted long enough to point. Look. It's now, though the mud and wattle structures were hardly worthy of the term. Staggering listlessly through the filthy alleys were the citizens of Ospenspri. It was evident that whatever catastrophe had blasted their community had affected them personally.

As with all large cities, the population was a mixture of species, and all had been equally devastated. Felines and lupines, quadrupeds and bipeds, all wore the same dazed expressions. They shared something else besides a communal aura of hopelessness, a singular physical deformity that owed its presence to something other than defective genetics. Difficult to accept at first, the evidence overwhelmed the visitors as they drove on toward the main square.

Every inhabitant of Ospenspri, every citizen irrespective of age or species or sex, from the youngest cub to the eldest patriarch, had a hunchback.

Clothahump adjusted his glasses, his expression solemn. "Whatever has happened here has crippled the people as well as their land. Turn right at this corner, my boy."

Jon-Tom complied, and the jeep slowed as it entered an open circular courtyard. In its center stood a thirty-foot-high pile of mud and gravel. Water trickled forlornly down its flanks. It was surrounded by a fence fashioned of rotted wood and a few lumps of granite.

"Stop here." Jon-Tom brought the jeep to a halt, watched as Clothahump climbed out to stare at the pitiful structure.

"What is it, sir?"

The Peridot Fountain. Three years in the designing, twenty years in the construction. Fashioned by the Master Artisans' Guild of Ospenspri. "I've read of it all my life. This is where it should be, and this patently is not it. It is built of marble and copper tubing, of sculptured alabaster and peridots the size of my shell. Whatever has infected this place breaks beauty as well as backs."

Many dispirited citizens had seen the strangers drive into the square, but only one retained enough curiosity and spirit to seek them out. The fox was old and bent like the rest of the populace. He had to lean hard on the cane he carried to support himself. The fur of his face was white with age and he was missing all the whiskers on the right side of his muzzle. A few of the others tried to hold him back, but he shook them off and advanced. The thought of death no longer frightened him. There are some older folks who are never touched by that particular fear, and the fox was one of them.

"Strangers, where do you come from? By your posture as well as your faces I know you are not from the city or its immediate environs."

"We're up from the south," Jon-Tom told him. "From just south of Lynchbany."

"A long way." The fox was nodding to himself. He turned his attention to the jeep, walked slowly around it, felt of the metal with an unsteady hand.

"A most peculiar method of transportation. I have never seen the like. I should like to compliment the blacksmith who fashioned it."

"We make do with what we have." Clothahump waddled around to confront him. "I am more concerned with what has happened here. I have never visited your city, but I feel as though I know it from all that I have read about it and been told by other travelers. The last description I was given was not so very long ago. Surely Ospenspri cannot have changed so much in such a short time." He gestured at the sagging edifices surrounding the square, the dead or dying vegetation. "This has all the hallmarks of a sudden disaster, not one long in the making."

The fox was eyeing him with interest. "You are perceptive, hard-shell. In truth, we lost everything in an instant. There was no warning. One moment all was well with our city and selves. The next there was the cloud." He jabbed skyward with his cane.

"See the evil thing hanging there? It does not drop rain and move on. It does not thunder or hail. No wind blows out of it save an ill one. It is as motionless as stone."

"You have been unable to influence it?" Clothahump had his head tilted back and was studying the black mass.

"All the efforts of our best magicians have failed. Their spells either have no effect on it at all or else they pass right through it. It is only vapor, after all. How does one threaten vapor? We have invoked every agent in the meteorological pantheon, all to no avail."

"It is not a climatic phenomenon that hangs over your city and your lives but a pall of supernature. Weather spells will have no effect on something like this."

"The perambulator," said Jon-Tom, with a sudden realization of what the wizard was getting at.

"Quite so, my boy."

"But we're inside the city now, and we haven't changed." He found himself straightening his back reflexively. "And the forest beyond the city limits wasn't affected."

"Not all the effects of the perambulator are global in scope, lad. Many perturbations, of varying degree, are highly localized. It is shifting and spinning and throwing off, upsetting energy all the time. Sometimes nothing larger than a plot of land a foot square is affected. Sometimes a grove of trees. Or, in this case, an entire community."

"But this is the severest perturbation we have yet encountered. Remember what I told you, that unless it is freed, the perambulator's perturbations will grow steadily more intense, until we run the risk of being locked in permanent change. That is what has happened here in Ospenspri. The perturbation, of which I believe that cloud to be an indication, has settled in permanently. This part of the world has been damaged for good. Unless—"

"Unless you can do something about it?" Master, Jon-Tom finished respectfully.

The wizard nodded. "We must certainly give it our best effort."

"Our best effort." Jon-Tom moved to the back of the jeep and began unpacking his gear. Clothahump moved over to put a hand on the young man's wrist.

"No, my boy. Leave this one to me. The citizens of this poor community have suffered enough."

Jon-Tom swallowed his hurt. He knew nothing of the mechanism that had devastated Ospenspri, and he had many occasions on which to learn the error of false pride. It was time to abide by the turtle's wish.

The fox watched them intently as Sorbl aided Clothahump in his preparations. A second distorted figure came hobbling over the dirt to join them. It made for Jon-Tom.

He turned to the newcomer as the bent shape drew close. "We're friends. We're going to try to help you. But my mentor there needs plenty of room to work his magic and—" He stopped in mid-sentence, staring. Despite the hunchback, there was something almost familiar about the oncoming figure. That was absurd, of course, but still, that outline, those eyes, those whiskers—

"Don't tell me to get lost, you airy son of an ape!"

"Mudge?" Jon-Tom couldn't take his eyes off the figure. It was nearer now, and he could see the speaker more clearly. Bent, dirty, undistinguished and unmistakable. "Mudge, it is you!"

"O course it is me, you bloody oversized naked monkey! "Ave you gone blind? Me head happens to be a mite nearer the ground at the moment, but it ain't by choice, wot? Me face is still the same, though. So yours, I see. As ugly as ever."

A warm feeling spread throughout Jon-Tom's body. "Mudge, it's good to see you again. Even under these circumstances."

"Circumstances ain't the half of it, mate." The otter nodded toward the jeep. "There's sorcery, senile as ever, and it's not of an apprentice. Would you have any booze with you, do you know? I could use a good stiff one, if you ain't drunk all the liquor betwixt here and the southern ocean. I never could understand those people wot drinks to excess."

"That sounds pretty funny coming from you, Mudge."

"Why? I never drink to excess, mate. Me body don't know the meaning of the word. I just drink till I'm full. Then I piss it out and start over. So I never reach excess, wot? Tell me, wot are you and it's nibs doi' so far from it's tree? I think you'd be hunkered down south, warm waiting for winter."

"Perhaps you've noticed something a bit out of the ordinary in the world these past few weeks?"

The otter chuckled, shook his head. "You always did have the gift of understatement, mate. Aye, you could say that, if you'd call the world going totally mad a bit out of the ordinary."

"How'd you get all the way up here, Mudge? Why are you in the same sorry state as the Ospensprites? Not that your usual state isn't sorry, but this is different."

"Just lucky, I guess, mate. Well, I happened to be doi' some work down in Malderpot it ain't such a bad place anymore since they had that recent change of government and I had occasion to depart the vicinity in a bit of a hurry."

"Who'd you cheat this time?"

"Wot, me cheat someone, mate? You sting me to the quick, you does."

"Forget it," Jon-Tom said dryly. They were both watching the jeep. Clothahump was assembling something out of pieces of wood salvaged from the crude fence enclosing the mud fountain, adding unrecognizable devices from his pack and what looked like a few kitchen utensils.

"It's been an interesting month for old Mudge, the otter went on. "Ever since this out-of-the-ordinary's took hold of us. You never know wot you're going to wake up facing in the mirror, much less wot you're liable to find yourself in bed with. Why, there was the night in Okot I was dallying with the most luscious capybara lady you ever set eyes on—you know I like 'em big, mate."

"You like anything that walks, talks, and is a member of the opposite sex, Mudge?"

"So I'm enthusiastic instead of discriminatin'. Anyways, there we were, just about to consummate the evening, when suddenly, right before me very eyes, not to mention beneath me chest, she turns into something with a half a dozen extra see-alls, two heads, and all the rest of the critical body parts badly out of place as well. Course I looked just about the same, but I tell you, mate, the damage to our respective libidos was no short devastating."

"I can imagine. Spare me the sordid aftermath."

â€œI had was the trouble, mate. Werenâ€™t no sordid aftermath. Werenâ€™t much foremath, either.â€ He sighed with weariness. â€œAnyways, was after that that I â€™d me little difficulty in Malderpot and decided that wot with winter comiâ€™t on aâ€™t all, it was time for me to â€™ead south again. Fast. But I thought to take some time to linger up â€™ere in be-ooti-ful Ospenspriâ€™ and it were beautiful, you can take me word on that, mate.â€

â€œSo Clothahump has told me.â€

â€œRight. So Iâ€™m doiâ€™t a little sight-seeinâ€™t, takiâ€™t in the air and the good food and an occasional compliant aâ€™t â€™t hopefully drunk lady or two, when all of a sudden another one oâ€™t those bleediâ€™t suddenlike changes comes over me. Aâ€™t the â€™t hole bloomiâ€™t city and everyone in it as well. Only this time, a couple oâ€™t minutes go by, and then a couple oâ€™t â€™t ours, and suddenly weâ€™t realizeâ€™t that the change is â€™t ere to stay. First off everyone goes a little crazy, not that I blames â€™t em. I went a mite bonkers meself. Then the panic goes away and this permanent depression kind oâ€™t takes â€™t old of you. Like wakiâ€™t up one morniâ€™t to find someoneâ€™t stolen your balls while you were asleep.â€ He jabbed a thumb skyward.

â€œAâ€™t over it all, that bloody stinkiâ€™t black cloud, sneeriâ€™t down at us aâ€™t mockiâ€™t the memories oâ€™t our former lives. Pretty pitiful, mate. So thatâ€™s â€™t ow I come to be â€™t ere talkiâ€™t to you like this, all bent over and stove up like everyone else. I â€™t ope â€™t is wizardness can do somethiâ€™t about it, because most oâ€™t these folks are just about at the end oâ€™t their rope.â€

â€œelf anyone can do anything. Clothahump can,â€ Jon-Tom replied with pride.

â€œAye, if â€™t e â€™t masnâ€™t forgotten â€™t alf oâ€™t wotever spell â€™t eâ€™t a mind to try. Two â€™t undred years ago I wouldnâ€™t worry, but â€™t e ainâ€™t the wizard â€™t e used to be, you know.â€

â€œNone of us are what we used to be, Mudge.â€

The otter spat sideways. â€œelf youâ€™t re goiâ€™t to go aâ€™t get profound on me, lad, Iâ€™t m goiâ€™t to leave. Iâ€™t ve â€™t ad about enough solemn pronouncements this past week to last me a lifetime. Sayâ€™t he squinted sharply up at his old friendâ€™t â€œwot brings you up from the wizardâ€™t cozy â€™t ome to this cold part oâ€™t the world, anyways?â€

â€œThe very thing thatâ€™t ruined this town. The same thing thatâ€™t causing similar changes all over the world. Unless somethingâ€™t done to stop it, these perturbations, as Clothahump calls them, will keep getting worse.â€

â€œel see. Aâ€™t you and mister Clothyrump aim to try and do something about â€™t em? Wotâ€™t behind it, lad? Some kind oâ€™t runaway natural condition?â€

â€œYes and no. These kinds of changes happen all the time but usually on a much smaller scale and always with far less frequency. The problem is that someone or something is making sure that the cause of all the changes sticks around. Clothahump thinks whoeverâ€™t doing it is completely mad.â€ He nodded in the direction of the mountainous slope with its blighted orchards. â€œWhoeverâ€™t responsible is holed up with the perambulator, the change-inducer, somewhere north of here. Thatâ€™t where weâ€™t re headed.â€

Mudge eyed him in disbelief. â€œNorth of here? You canâ€™t mean that, mate. You know wot the Plateau country can be like this time oâ€™t year, wot with winter fixiâ€™t to settle in? â€™t is not a comfortiâ€™t place to be, especially for a poor â€™t uman like yourself wot â€™t as no fur of â€™t is own to protect â€™t im from the cold winds and snows.â€

â€œMy comfort matters little when considered in the greater context. If this perambulator isnâ€™t freed and its captor challenged, then the world risks permanent perturbation. A little cold will be a trivial danger by comparison. You know how serious it is, because Clothahumpâ€™t come all this way.â€

â€œInstead of sendiâ€™t just you, for a change, â€™t is magicship â€™t is riskiâ€™t â€™t is own precious arse, wot? I admit thatâ€™t a point, lad.â€ The stooped otter considered. â€œA perambulator, eh? So thatâ€™t wotâ€™t causiâ€™t all the trouble. And you call wot itâ€™t doiâ€™t â€™t perturbingâ€™t things.â€

Jon-Tom nodded. â€œThatâ€™t right.â€

â€œThen itâ€™t only right aâ€™t proper that you and â€™t is sorcererness be the ones to be â€™t untiâ€™t it. Iâ€™t ve always known old Clothybump to be more than a little permanently perturbed, and Iâ€™t ve never been too sure oâ€™t you, neither. Well, I expect that youâ€™t re doiâ€™t wot â€™t as to be done.â€ He tried to straighten, but his distorted spine fought against the effort. â€œelâ€™t m comiâ€™t along, oâ€™t course.â€

â€œWhat?â€ Jon-Tom stared hard at the twisted, furry figure. He must be wrong. This couldnâ€™t be Mudge.

â€œAye. As you say, someone â€™t as to stop this bleediâ€™t switchiâ€™t and changiâ€™t from gettiâ€™t any worse. You can use all the â€™t elp you can get, especially where youâ€™t re goinâ€™t. Besides, mate, wot would you do without me to bail you out of a tough spot?â€

Jon-Tom had no ready reply. Nor could he mouth one upon a momentâ€™t reflection. The otterâ€™t words were as much of a shock to his system as the sight of the perturbed city. Mudge possessed an extensive and colorful vocabulary, but to the best of Jon-Tomâ€™t knowledge, the word *volunteer* was as alien to the otter as celibacy.

â€œIâ€™t m not sure,â€ he finally said slowly. â€œAre you actually offering to help? Of your own free will? Without having to be coerced by Clothahump or myself?â€

â€œWell, oâ€™t course I am, lad.â€ Mudge looked hurt, a specialty among his vast repertoire of expressions. â€œWot do you take me for?â€

â€œLetâ€™t see.â€ Jon-Tom ticked them off on his fingers as he recited. â€œA thief, a wencher, a coward, a scoundrel, aâ€™tâ€

Mudge hastened to interrupt the steady flow of derogatory appellations. â€œLetâ€™t not be overenthusiastic, mate. Oâ€™t course Iâ€™t m volunteerinâ€™t. Youâ€™t re goiâ€™t to need me â€™t elp. Neither you nor â€™t is wizardship is wot youâ€™t d call a master at scoutiâ€™t or fightinâ€™t, and that flyiâ€™t bag of feathery booze old hard-shell calls â€™t is famulus ainâ€™t much better.â€

â€œWeâ€™t ve managed to make it this far.â€ It was Jon-Tomâ€™t turn to be insulted.

â€œLuck always travels in the company oâ€™t fools, wot? Nonetheless, Iâ€™t m come along if youâ€™t m Iâ€™t ave me. Wotâ€™t left oâ€™t me, that is.â€

The combination of the once vibrant otterâ€™t wrenched appearance coupled with his apparently selfless eagerness to be of assistance caused moisture to begin forming at the corners of Jon-Tomâ€™t eyes. He had to struggle to keep his voice from breaking as he replied.

â€œOf course, weâ€™t m be glad of your company and your help, Mudge.â€

The otter appeared both pleased and relieved. â€œThatâ€™t settled, then.â€ He nodded toward the mud fountain where Clothahump was engaged in the erection of his sorcerous apparatus, mixing the steady litany of a long spell with selected curses that he heaped on the bumbling, unsteady Sorbl. â€œWotâ€™t â€™t e up to?â€

â€œel donâ€™t know,â€ Jon-Tom confessed. â€œHe said that he was going to try to help these people, but he didnâ€™t go into details. You know Clothahump: heâ€™t d rather show than tell.â€

â€œAye. Thatâ€™t so innocent bystanders like you aâ€™t me donâ€™t â€™t ave a chance to get out of the way.â€

A few of the blasted inhabitants of Ospenspri had gathered to watch, but all remained on the fringe of the square. Only the aged fox was daring enough to stay and chat with them. Jon-Tom left him conversing animatedly with Mudge and walked over to see if he could help the wizard in his work.

â€œYou certainly can, my boy,â€ the old turtle told him as he adjusted his glasses on his beak. Jon-Tom started to swing his duar off his back, and the wizard hastened to forestall him. â€œNo, no, I do not have need of your singing. Could you hold this up here?â€

Mildly mortified, Jon-Tom bit back the response he wanted to make and took hold of the folding wooden platform, steadying it on the cracked surface of the square. Mudge did not comment on this demotion with the expected flurry of jeers. Perhaps the otterâ€™t disfigurement had sobered him.

He tried to make some sense out of the interlocking platform and failed. â€œWhatâ€™t this setup for, anyway?â€

Instead of answering, the sorcerer was walking a slow circle around the enigmatic apparatus, studying it intently from every angle, occasionally bending over or kneeling to check its position relative to the hills on the north side of the city. From time to time he would interrupt his circumnavigation to adjust this or that piece of metal or wood, then step back to resume his journey.

Having returned to the precise spot where heâ€™t d begun, he turned and marched over to his supply pack. A large box had been removed and now stood next to it. It contained half a dozen drawers. As Jon-Tom watched and struggled to contain his curiosity, the wizard began to mix powders taken from the six drawers in a small bowl. It took only a few minutes. Then he dumped the contents of the bowl into a small, deep metal goblet that hung suspended in the center of the structure Jon-Tom was steadying against the breeze.

â€œThat cloud overhead,â€ the wizard explained, as though no time at all had elapsed since Jon-Tom had first asked his question, â€œis the localized center of the disturbance that continues to hold Ospenspri and its population fast in its perturbing grasp. If we can change its composition, not to mention its disposition, back to that of a normal cloud, I believe this also will result in a shift in the perturbation.â€

Jon-Tom tilted his head back to gaze up at the threatening mass of black moisture billowing overhead. â€œHow are you going to do that, sir?â€

â€œThe best way I know how, my boy, the best way I know how. Hold the platform firmly now.â€

Jon-Tom tightened his grip on two of the wooden legs, at the same time frowning at his mentor. â€œThis isnâ€™t going to be dangerous, is it?â€

â€œMy boy, would I ever involve you in anything dangerous?â€ Before Jon-Tom had an opportunity to offer the self-evident reply, the wizard had launched into a most impressive and forceful incantation, simultaneously passing his hands rapidly over the central goblet as he traced intricate geometric shapes in the empty air.

Harken to me, affronting front.
Winds that linger, false winter
solstice. Prepare to flee, to leave, to shunt
Aside thy paralyzed coriolis.

Disintegrate and break apart the lattice
That maintains thy present cumulostratus status!

As the wizard recited, the goblet began to jiggle and bounce. Then it broke free of its leather bindings, and instead of falling to the hard ground below, it remained in place, dancing and spinning and beginning to glow. Jon-Tom could feel the powerful vibrations through the supporting sticks. The apparatus seemed far too fragile to contain the rapidly intensifying rumble that was emanating from the base of the goblet, but somehow the arcane concatenation held together.

The goblet was glowing white-hot. The ground began to tremble. He held his position as the few observers who had clumped on the outskirts of the square scattered into the mud huts. The rumble became a deafening roar in his ears. He felt as if he were standing under a waterfall. Clothahump's words faded into inaudibility.

The wizard abruptly brought both hands together over his head. A small thunderclap rolled across the square. Sorbl was knocked from his perch atop the jeep's windshield. Jon-Tom gritted his teeth and held on, the concussion making his ears ring, his fingers beginning to go numb.

Through half-closed eyes he saw something bright and shiny rocket skyward from the mouth of the goblet. The whistling sound of the miniature comet's ascension was quickly swallowed up by the roiling blackness above. Clothahump was shading his eyes with one hand. He spoke absently, clearly concentrating on the place where the shiny object had vanished into the bottom of the great cloud.

â€œYou can let go now, my boy.â€

With relief Jon-Tom did so, joining the wizard in gazing skyward while he tried to rub some feeling back into his hands.

The cloud let out a rumble that was a vaster echo of the one the goblet had generated. It was less explosive, more natural, and the sound of it lingered not unpleasantly in the ear. It was preceded by something akin to lightning but not of it, a more benign electrical relative. The pale white pulsation that lit the underside of the cloud spread quickly to its edges. A second rumble came from the far side. It sounded like a question.

â€œWhat did you do, sir?â€

â€œThe only thing I knew how, my boy, the only thing I knew how.â€

â€œWhat happens now? Something wondrous and magical?â€

â€œI'm we're lucky, yes.â€

Unable to keep his head tilted back any longer, Jon-Tom turned his attention to the now-silent jumble of wooden poles and metal strips that had been used to precipitate the glittering whatever-it-had-been into the sky. The leather strips that had originally supported the metal goblet had been vaporized. The goblet itself now lay on the ground, a blob of half-melted pewter. In contravention of every law of physics, the fragile wooden apparatus remained standing. The explosion that had flung the shiny object skyward should have blown the collage of dowels to bits; the heat that had melted the goblet should have fired it like kindling. Jon-Tom shook his head in amazement. Truly Clothahump was a master of elegant supernatural forces.

Mudge, who had limped over to join him, nodded at the construction. â€œWeird, ain't it?â€ His black nose twitched as he leaned toward it. â€œOne of these days I'll have to ask you conjurers why magic always stinks.â€

â€œMudge, you could steal the wonder from a fairy castle.â€

â€œCastles stink too; marble floors soak up odors. I've met some pretty slovenly fairies.â€

Trying to ignore him, Jon-Tom bent over and reached for the goblet. Thunder continued its querulous exhortations overhead, and a prickly dampness could be felt in the air. He touched the melted metal carefully. It was cool against his palm.

Removing it, he turned the barely recognizable lump over in his hands. Not just cool but ice-cold, despite the intense heat it had recently endured. And Mudge was right; there was a peculiar smell attending to the metal. He stuck a finger inside, rubbed it against the bottom of the curve. When he removed it, it was smeared with black and glittering sparkles. He held it to his nose and sniffed.

Mudge made a face. â€œWot is it, guv'nor?â€

â€œI'm not sure.â€ He eyed the sky again. â€œIt smells and looks something like silver iodide. Where I come from, something similar is used for seeding clouds.â€

The otter gave him a sideways look. â€œWe seed the ground here, mate, not the clouds. You're not making any sense.â€

But Jon-Tom knew better. He looked over to where the patiently waiting Clothahump stood motionless, still shading his eyes and inspecting the sky. You clever, sharp old codger you, he thought, and found that he was smiling.

Then something wondrous and magical began to happen, exactly as the wizard had indicated it should, and Jon-Tom found that he was not just smiling, he was laughing. Laughing, and feeling good enough to kick up his feet in a celebratory jig.

It began to rain.

The rumbling from the cloud had sounded querulous at first, then confused, but now it was booming and roaring with unperturbed assurance. He stood there with the rain pelting his upturned face, luxuriating in the clean, pure, undistorted moisture.

Well, maybe just a little distorted.

Mudge grabbed the goblet. â€œEre now, let me have a sniff of that, you dancin' ape. Something's not right here.â€ He inhaled deeply. Then his eyes grew wide. â€œBugger me for a wayward clergyman! That's brandy, mate, and top-quality stuff too! Maybe there's a drop or two left in the bottom to whet old Mudge's whistle, wot?â€ He started to tilt the melted goblet to his lips.

Jon-Tom quickly snatched it back. â€œWhoa! Silver iodide's a strong poison, Mudge. Or maybe it was silver chloride? No matter.â€ He sniffed himself, looked puzzled. â€œIt's not brandy, anyway. It's bourbon.â€

The otter leaned forward, and now he looked equally confused. â€œPeculiar, mate. I get chocolate liqueur this time.â€

And Jon-Tom again, â€œSour mash or vodka. Say, what's going on here?â€

Clothahump was trying to keep his glasses dry against the downpour that was soaking them. â€œIt's none of those, my boy. The particular ingredient to which you refer and which you are having such difficulty identifying is far more basic, not to mention expensive. I would never utilize it so freely were it not for the seriousness of this moment of mercy. It is very scarce, very hard to come by, and very much in demand, and not only by those of us who dabble in the sorcerous arts. We call it Essoob.â€ He glanced upward again, studying the storm with a critical eye.

It was raining steadily. The thunder had worked itself out, and now there was only the steady patter of rain against the ground. There was no wind and the big drops came straight down.

â€œNever heard of it,â€ Jon-Tom confessed.

â€œEssence of Booze. I determined that we needed not only to prime this particular cloud but to shock it back to normality. I also had to utilize something that would mix well with water.â€

Mudge was standing with his head back and his mouth open, swallowing and smacking his lips. â€œWell, I'll be a shrew with a migraine! Drink up, mate! We'll likely never stand in a storm the likes of this ever again!â€ Sorbl, too, was partaking of the alcoholic rain, had been since the descent of the first drops. That explained the owl's unusual silence, Jon-Tom mused. The famulus was drifting peacefully in some imbibed heaven.

Cautiously he parted his lips and sucked in the moisture that was running off his nose. CrÃ©me de mÃ©the. A second slurp brought home the taste of Galliano, a third of Midori, or something like it.

Enough, he told himself firmly. He was not thirsty and had no desire to be unconscious.

â€œOasafin!â€ Mudge was babbling. â€œTerraquin. Coosage, guinal, essark, goodmage, sankerberry wine!â€ The otter was lying on his back in the mud, his arms and legs spread wide but not as wide as his mouth.

And he was the only one, for the unique properties of the downpour Clothahump had induced had not passed unnoticed among the other inhabitants of Ospenspri. They came stumbling out of their mud and wattle houses, in pairs and trios at first, then in a delighted, exuberant rush. Even those citizens who considered themselves teetotalers participated, for they could hardly pass on such a wonderful piece of sorcerous business and leave it to their less inhibited neighbors to tell them all about it when it was over.

As the aromatic rain continued to fall it began to have an affect on the desiccated trees and shriveled plants. Flowers bloomed from seemingly dead stalks. Bushes put out new, fresh green growth. Up in the ruined orchards the apple and tokla trees straightened; their limbs lifted and erupted in a burst of green. They did not put forth fruit, for it was too late in the season, but next year's harvest would surely be spectacular.

The rain worked its most wonderful transformation out in the fields of late autumn wheat. The flattened, burned stalks lifted skyward, and the dry heads grew swollen with golden kernels. Not merely gold in color but in promise. Because for months thereafter, any bread baked from that season's threshing was famed throughout the Bellwoods and even beyond. Renowned and marveled at, bread and long rolls alike, for their texture and color and most especially of all, the faintly alcoholic flavor each bite imparted to the palate.

Through the rain and the fog that accompanied it, Jon-Tom could witness the transformation of Ospenspri and its inhabitants. The city itself seemed to straighten as it returned to health, buildings and citizens alike drawing strength from the rain and the concomitant metamorphosis of the cloud. As that black mass of moisture lightened, so did the mood of the city and the lands surrounding it. As he stared, Ospenspri changed from an island of devastation and despair to the jewel of the north.

The mud huts vanished, to be replaced by finely wrought structures of hardwood and dressed stone. The mud seemed to dissolve beneath his feet, leaving behind yard-square paving blocks of ocher-streaked white marble. Close by, the mud spring was transformed into a graceful spire of filigreed arches. Water spurted or trickled from dozens of nozzles. Set among the marble sculptures that comprised the fountain were hundreds of the brilliant green garnets called peridots, which gave the square its name.

The storm was beginning to abate, the black cloud to break up. Once the dissolution had begun, it proceeded rapidly. For the first time in weeks the sun shone brightly on the tormented city. The thirsty earth soaked up what precipitation managed to escape the tubs and rain barrels of the inhabitants. Having spent its force, the cloud and the perturbation it had sheltered faded away with equal alacrity.

Nor was the city all that returned to normal. Mudge had straightened and now danced a wild saraband on the marble edge of the towering fountain. But Jon-Tom found his attention drawn to the one citizen of Ospenspri who had greeted them.

No longer crooked and bent, the old fox stood tall and proud before Clothahump. He was bigger than Mudge, and his silver-streaked ears were on a level with Jon-Tom's shoulders. As both wizard and spellsinger looked on, he performed a deep, profound bow. In place of the dirty rags he'd been wearing when he initially approached the visitors, he now wore a splendid suit of dark brown edged with green velvet and fastened with hardwood buttons inlaid with brass. A peculiarly narrow hat of green felt and leather rested between his ears.

"Am Sorenset," he informed them, "a senior member of the ruling council of Ospenspri." Another bow toward Clothahump. "We are laid low by the weight of your genius, sir, and raised up again through your timely assistance. I am honored to reflect the glory of the greatest of wizards."

"The people of Ospenspri have always been famed for the accuracy of their observations," Clothahump said blithely. "I only did what any traveler of my stature would have done."

"But which none could do until now." Sorenset closed his eyes and stared at the sun, luxuriating in its feel against his face. "The curse has been lifted. Ospenspri has suffered before, but such calamities have wrought their damage and then moved on. We began to fear that the black cloud was destined to stay with us forever."

"I could return, in the same guise or another."

Sorenset dropped his face and stared at the wizard. "Do not say such things. Have you not banished the cloud?"

"Yes, but not its cause. Until we can do that, no morning will be the same as the one that has preceded it, and none of us can go to sleep with any assurance that we will wake up recognizing what we are. It is to remedy this matter that the three of us have undertaken this journey from our home in the South."

Sorenset nodded somberly. "Anything that you require that can be found in Ospenspri will be provided. We will help in any way that we can. You have restored our bodies, our city, and our souls."

He turned toward the beautiful homes and apartments, no longer poor structures of mud and wattle, which fronted on the central square. Laughter, shouts of relief, and other sounds of merriment poured from open windows and doors. The cries might have been deafening except that many of Ospenspri's restored citizens had ingested too much of the flavorful downpour and now lay savoring their restoration in stuporous slumber on porches and doorsteps, streets and benches.

Mudge leapt off the fountain enclosure and wrapped his arms around Jon-Tom, hooting and barking with delight. Jon-Tom staggered under the weight and collapsed to the ground with the otter on top of him. He wasn't angry. He could only grin. The otter's high spirits were infectious. Besides, he'd done more than taste of the alcoholic precipitation himself. He was feeling pleasantly giddy.

As for the wizard's famulus, Sorbl was flying in tighter and tighter circles around the spire of the fountain, until his wings and coordination finally gave out. Mudge and Jon-Tom had to drag him from the pool.

As befitted their station, Sorenset and Clothahump observed this display of youthful celebration with a tolerant eye. "It appears that it is left to us to proceed with practical matters."

"I am not displeased," Clothahump told the fox. "We will not be interrupted with foolish questions. I will lay out our needs for you. They are modest in scope. We will also require proper lodging for the night, assuming any innkeeper has recovered sufficiently to serve us."

"I know just the place," Sorenset replied. "The finest establishment in the city. When the owners learn who their guests will be, they will be even more effusive in their praise than I. This I will attend to myself, in the name of the council and the people of a grateful Ospenspri."

The music that the orchestra was playing for the enjoyment of the diners was soft and light, all flutes and strings. Such sounds ordinarily would have driven a hard-rock guitarist like Jon-Tom from the building. But after all they'd been through on the long journey northward, he found he was glad of the respite from anything harsh, including sounds. He was particularly fascinated by the multireeded flute the bobcat was tootling on and the thirty-stringed lyre the well-dressed gibbon was stroking. The latter made the double strings of his duar seem simple by comparison. But then, the gibbon had arms that trailed on the ground when he walked. No human could match his reach.

On the other hand, he told himself as he regarded his duar fondly, it wasn't an easy matter to bring forth chords from strings that tended to blur into another dimension when you were playing on them, either.

It seemed that everyone in Ospenspri wanted to thank the city's saviors personally. Sorenset politely but firmly warded off the multitude of well-wishers, explaining that their visitors were exhausted and still had many leagues to travel.

The deluge of hosannas was mitigated more than a little by the perturbation that struck later that afternoon. It was not as damaging to the spirit as the black cloud and it lasted less than ten minutes, but it was a sobering reminder to all that the world was still a long way from returning to a state of normalcy. Everyone became a multihued butterfly, each building a cocoon of varying size and shape. There was much nervous flapping of brilliantly colored wings before the perturbation ended and the real world returned with a snap.

It certainly took the edge off Clothahump's achievement. Sorenset no longer had to fend off citizens who wanted to kiss the wizard's feet.

"Ungrateful wretches." The turtle sipped his soup. "It's not enough that for them I turn their town right side up. They want me to tip the world for them."

"Don't be too hard on them." Jon-Tom was finishing his own meal, savoring the subtle spices and the tender meat that now rested comfortably in his belly. After weeks of hasty meals followed by continuous jouncing in the old jeep, the meal at the inn had reminded him that eating could be a delight as well as a necessity. "They don't understand what's going on. We're probably the only ones in the world who do—along with whoever's restraining the perambulator, of course."

"Ignorance is no excuse for bad manners," grumped the wizard. But Jon-Tom had managed to soothe him somewhat.

Sorenset and several other members of the city council joined them at the oval table. A pouty Clothahump allowed Jon-Tom to tell their story and explain what they intended to try. The rulers of Ospenspri listened politely.

"One thing is certain." The flying squirrel, Talla, was president of the council and wore his medals on the flaps of skin that connected his wrists to his ribs. "The vehicle in which you arrived will not take you where you wish to go. Between here and the northern reaches you will have to climb."

"What about riding snakes?" Jon-Tom asked.

The squirrel shook his head. "No. Lâmborian could survive the conditions on the Plateau. It's far too cold."

"Then we will have to continue on foot." Clothahump was tapping the table with the fingers of both hands. "A daunting prospect, yet one that does not concern me a tenth so much as whatever we will encounter at the end of our journey."

"What do you suggest?" Jon-Tom asked again.

Sorenset considered. "Ospenspri is home to many independent transporters. But to go north of the Plateau at this time of year, I don't know. All we can do is inquire if any quadruped is willing to undertake such a journey. You will have all the supplies you need, but we cannot compel a citizen to risk a life against his will."

"Of course not," said Clothahump.

"I will go and make inquiries right now." A nervous bandicoot excused himself from the gathering and hurried toward the door.

"Even a single horse willing to carry our supplies would be a great help," Clothahump said, "although I am not sanguine about one volunteering."