

# *Alphabet of Thorn*



PATRICIA A. MCKILLIP



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

*One of the most spectacular fantasists of our time,  
Patricia A. McKillip creates fairy tale worlds of wonder and magic.  
Now, she opens the page on a time and place where an orphan girl is  
haunted by thorns...a reluctant queen rules between  
sea and sky...and epics never end...*

Deep inside a palace on the edge of the world, the orphan Nepenthe pores over books in the royal library, translating their languages and learning their secrets. Now sixteen, she knows little of the outside world—except for the documents that traders and travelers bring her to interpret.

Then, during the coronation of the new Queen of Raine, a young mage gives Nepenthe a book that has defied translation. Written in a language of thorns, it speaks to Nepenthe’s soul—and becomes her secret obsession. And, as the words escape the brambles and reveal themselves, Nepenthe finds her destiny entwined with that of the young queen’s. Sooner than she thinks, she will have to choose between the life she has led and the life she was born to lead...

“Patricia A. McKillip has given readers an imaginative world to escape to in *Alphabet of Thorn*... If you’re a bibliophile who loves books about books, get entwined in this one.”

—*The Kansas City Star*

“McKillip creates the atmosphere of a fairy tale with her elegantly lyrical prose and attention to nuance. Her characters are at once intimately personal and larger than life.”

—*Library Journal*

“Those who have bemoaned the death of the true fairy tale will be delighted by this charming foray from World Fantasy Award–winner McKillip... In this magical world blissfully free of bias, people are simply themselves, equally intelligent and witty and thoroughly capable while prone to the occasional error, in a manner that transcends feminism and becomes a celebration of essential humanity... Leaves the reader longing for more.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“McKillip has a long record of creating magical stories and faery worlds that truly live... This book is an excellent example of her approach.”

—*Booklist*

### **Praise for *In the Forests of Serre***

“A hauntingly beautiful tale... The ever-masterful McKillip weaves yet another powerful spell.”

—*Booklist*

“McKillip’s luminous retelling of the Russian legend of ‘The Firebird’ retains its fairy tale feel while exploring the depths of the human heart. Elegant.”

—*Library Journal*

“In a twist on the Biblical adage ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,’ McKillip presents a mystical, eerie fantasy about the flight from love—and the haphazard progress toward love... a skillfully told adult fairy tale.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

### **Praise for *Ombria in Shadow***

“McKillip has once again proven herself a master in the field.”

—*SF Site*

“Like the royal tutor (a key figure), the novel ‘wavers between history and magic,’ and the ornate, occasionally mannered prose conceals both wit and intelligence.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*

“The author’s graceful prose and remarkable depth of characterization bring to life a tale of love and loyalty that transcends time and space.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

### **Praise for *The Tower at Stony Wood***

“This is McKillip at close to the height of her powers, which is to say close to the highest pinnacle in contemporary fantasy.”

—*Booklist*

“A tale full of fierce longing and bright courage... richly intoxicating.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“The real strengths of the book are the splendor of its imagery, the elegance of its prose, and the character of Cyan, whose own nobility, rather than anything external, holds the key to the success of his quest.”

—*Booklist*

“Mesmerizing and unforgettable—a true flowering of a major talent.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

### **Praise for *Song for the Basilisk***

“McKillip is at the top of her form... [A] sweeping story about the redeeming powers of kindness and the potentially deadly beauty of music.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Her unique brand of prose magic splendidly repays your attention.”

—*Locus*

“*Song for the Basilisk* is a wonderful tapestry of history, music, power, love, magic, and humanity, deftly woven.”

—*Mythprint*

### **Praise for *Winter Rose***

“The pace here is deliberate and sure, with no false steps; the writing is richly textured and evocative... [*Winter Rose*] weaves a dense web of desire and longing, human love and inhuman need.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Characteristically fresh, dainty fantasy... tingling and affecting work... delightful, delicate.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Of all the fantasy writers still alive, Patricia McKillip comes closest for me to capturing the real flavor of fairy tales.”

—*Science Fiction Chronicle*

“Beneath the surface, this is a story about the search for identity, the power of one’s heritage, the strengths and hazards of community, and the dangers of love.”

—*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*

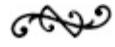
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## About the Author

## ONE

On Dreamer's Plain, the gathering of delegations from the Twelve Crowns of Raine for the coronation of the Queen of Raine looked like an invading army. So the young transcriptor thought, gazing out a window as she awaited a visiting scholar. She had never been so high in the palace library, and rarely so warm. Usually at this time of the morning she was buried in the stones below, blowing on her fingers to warm them so they could write. Outside, wind gusted across the vast plain, pulling banners taut, shaking the pavilions thrown up for the various delegations' entourages of troops and servants. A spring squall had blown in from the sea and crossed the plain. The drying pavilions, huffing like bellows in the wind, were brilliant with color. The transcriptor, who had only seen invading armies in the epics she translated, narrowed her eyes at this gathering and imagined possibilities. She was counting the horses penned near each pavilion, pelts lustrous even at a distance after the rain, and as clear, silhouetted against one another's whites and grays and chestnuts, as figures pricked on a tapestry, when the scholar finally arrived.

A beary man, he shed a fur cloak that smelled of damp and an unusual scent of tobacco. He carried a manuscript wrapped in leather that he laid upon the librarian's desk as gently as a newborn. As he unswaddled the manuscript, the transcriptor standing silently at the window caught his eye. His hands stilled. He stared at her. Then his head, big, dark, and very hairy, jerked toward the librarian who had shown him in.

"Who is this?"

"We called her Nepenthe," the librarian said in his austere voice. His name was Daimon; Nepenthe had known him all her life, for he had found her and named her. Of the child she had been before she became Nepenthe, neither of them knew a thing. In sixteen years since then, she had changed beyond recognition, and he had not changed by a moment, being the same dispassionate, thin-haired wraith who had picked her up with his bony hands and tucked her into a book bag to add to the acquisitions of the royal library. "She is one of our most skilled and creative translators. She has a gift for unusual alphabets. Such as you say you have, Master Croysus?"

"I've never seen anything like it in my life," Master Croysus said. He continued unwrapping the manuscript, still tossing glances at Nepenthe. She stood quietly, her long fingers tucked into her broad black sleeves, trying to look skilled and creative, while wondering what the scholar found wrong with her face. "It looks like an alphabet of fish. Where did you come from?"

"Don't let her youth deceive you," Daimon murmured. The scholar shook his head

absently, squinting at Nepenthe until she opened her mouth and answered.

“Nowhere, Master Croysus. I was abandoned on the cliff edge outside the palace and found by librarians. The last foundling they took in was named Merle. N was the next available letter.”

Master Croysus made an incredulous trumpet sound through his nostrils. “I’ve seen that face,” he said abruptly, “on a parchment older than Raine. I don’t remember what it was, except that the ancient kingdom it came from lay far beyond the Twelve Crowns and it no longer exists except on paper.”

The librarian looked curiously at Nepenthe; she wished she could take off her head and look at herself.

“A clan of wanderers,” he suggested, “remnants of the forgotten kingdom. Perhaps they were passing through Raine when Nepenthe was born.

“There was no one—?”

“No one,” Daimon said simply, “came looking for her.” He paused, added to clarify and end the subject, “It was assumed that whoever left her in that precarious spot—her mother, most likely—flung herself for her own reasons into the sea. The child was left in hope, we also assumed, of a less difficult life, since she was left alive and wailing with great energy when we found her.”

The scholar grunted, which seemed his last word on the subject. He laid the manuscript bare and gestured to Nepenthe.

She stepped to the desk. They all gazed at the strange, elongated ovals neatly imprinted on something that Nepenthe did not recognize.

She brushed it with her fingertips. It was supple and tough at once. Some kind of pelt, it seemed, though it was white as birch and strangely unwrinkled.

“What is this?” she asked puzzledly.

The scholar regarded her with more than fantastic interest. “Good question. No one knows. I’m hoping that the contents may indicate the tools.” He was silent a moment, his bushy brows raised inquiringly at her, and then at the librarian. “I can stay only as long as the delegation from the Ninth Crown stays after the coronation. I’m traveling in the company of Lord Birnum, who will pay his respects and go home to civilization as soon as he can. It is a powerful gesture and a stirring custom for rulers to be crowned in the palace of the first King of Raine, but not even he, with all his ambitions, imagined the rulers of Twelve Crowns under his ancient roof at the same time.”

“Are you with Lord Birnum in the palace?” Daimon asked delicately.

“No,” Master Croysus sighed. “In a leaky pavilion.”

“We can offer a bed of sorts among the books.”

The scholar sighed again, this time with relief. “I would be immensely grateful.”

“I’ll see to that, while Nepenthe takes you down to show you where she will be working on your manuscript. Transcriptors dwell in the depths. As well, I must warn you, as do visiting scholars.”

“I trust the depths don’t leak.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll sleep happily buried in stone.” He wrapped his manuscript again in leather and himself in fur, and followed Nepenthe.

She led him down and down until mortared stone became solid stone, until they left

even the green plain above them and the only light came from windows staring across the sea. Until then, he questioned her; she answered absently, wondering about the fish wrapped in his arms.

“You don’t remember anything of your life before the librarians found you?”

“How could I? I had no teeth; I didn’t know words for anything. I don’t even remember—” She stopped to light a taper, for the stairways had begun to plunge into hand-hewn burrowings. “I do remember one thing. But I don’t know what it is.”

“What is it?”

She shrugged. “Just a face, I think.”

“Whose?” he demanded.

“I don’t know. I’m an orphan, Master Croysus,” she reminded him patiently. “A foundling. The librarians have always taken us in; they train us to become scribes and translators. We get accustomed early to living and working in stone suspended between sky and sea.”

“So you’re content here?”

She flung him an uncertain glance, wondering what he meant. “I don’t think about it,” she answered. “I have nothing of my own, nothing that’s not on loan from the librarians. Not even my name. I don’t know what else I could choose.”

“Do you like the work?”

She smiled, smelling books now, leather bindings, musty parchments, flaking scrolls that lived with her underground. “Here,” she told him, “there is no time. No past, no future; no place I can’t go, no lost realm I can’t travel to, as long as I can decipher its fish.”

She showed him where she worked. It was a doorless cell lined with books, a cell in a hive that was itself a cell in the huge hive that clung by walls and pillars and towers of stone to the immense, steep cliff rising straight out of the sea. The palace of the rulers of Raine had grown from a seedling through the centuries. Long ago, it had been little more than a fortress on the edge of the world, guarding its portion of thick wood and plain against other princelings. Through the centuries, the palace had become a small country itself, existing between sea and air, burrowed deep into the cliffs, piled above the earth so high that on a clear day, from the highest tower, the new Queen of Raine could see all but three of the Twelve Crowns she ruled. The first king had taken the first Crown: lands as far as he could see from his single tower. Before he died, he had added two linked Crowns to his own. Now there were twelve, and they flew on a tower higher than the king could ever imagine, even in his wildest dreams, as he guarded Raine in his sleep in the secret cave within the cliff below the palace.

So many lands had produced so many words. During the centuries they found their way, in one collection or another, to the royal library. The library was a city carved into the cliffs beneath the palace. Parts of it were so old that scrolls and manuscripts got lost for entire reigns and were discovered again in the next. Languages transmuted constantly as they wandered in and out of the Twelve Crowns. Such mysteries required flexible minds. A librarian had found the baby sitting abandoned on the sheer edge of the world; the librarians kept her. That proved shrewd. Nepenthe had drooled on words, talked at them, and tried to eat them until she learned to take them into her eyes instead of her mouth. Surrounded by that rich hoard into which chance and death had brought her, she had not yet imagined any other kingdom.

Within those stones she had grown her weedy way into a young woman, long-boned and strong, able to reach high shelves without a stool. Her hair, which was waist-long and crow-feather dark, she kept bundled at her neck with leather ties; during the course of the day she would inevitably pull them out to use as book marks. In that sunless place, her skin stayed brown as hazelnut. The eyes that gazed absently back at her in the mornings from her wash-basin were sometimes green and sometimes brown. What Master Croysus had seen in her face, she had no idea. She was curious about it, as she was about nearly everything, but that would have to wait.

He examined her tiny space, a shallow cave so full of shelves that her table barely fit among the books, and she had to sit with her stool in the hallway. He looked at work she had done, the fat jars of ink colored variously and stamped with her initial, her carefully sharpened nibs. Finally, reassured, he unrolled his manuscript again. They discussed the oval, finny letters with an eye here, a gill there at random. He told her his ideas; she pulled down previous alphabets she had deciphered, one seemingly of twigs, another of bird-claw impressions in wax. By the time Daimon came to show him his bed-chamber, Master Croysus seemed content to leave his treasure with her.

She dreamed that night about fish, bright flashing schools of them whose whirls and darts and turnings this way and that meant something vital in a language of fish. But what? She struggled with it, trying to persuade her unwieldy human body to move gracefully among the little butterfly flittings, until finally in her dream she swam with them, wheeling and shining, at ease in the water, speaking the invisible language of fish.

Deep in the stones, playing among the fish, she was scarcely aware of the coronation above her head. Master Croysus vanished for most of a day or two, then came to her late in the morning, reeking of smoke, his hair standing on end, to see how far she had gotten into the mystery. He seemed pleased with her work, and less pleased with what was going on in the complex and incomprehensible palace above ground.

“She’s very young,” he muttered of the new queen. “Younger than you, and with far less—far less—”

Less what he could not find a word for. Nepenthe, oblivious of most of what went on beyond the library, assumed that the world would take care of itself, and got on with her fish.

That night she woke with a start to the sound of her name.

She answered instantly, pulling herself upright out of a stupor of dreams: “Yes.”

Then she opened her eyes, puzzled. The world was so still that it might have vanished, swallowed by its own past or future. The name was already fading; she could only hear the backwashed eddies and echoes of it in her head. Outside her door, the stone corridors were silent; no one had called Nepenthe. Neither the drowsing embers in her brazier nor the single star hanging in the high narrow window shed any light upon the matter. Yet someone had dropped a word like a weight on a plumb line straight into her heart and she had recognized her name.

She dropped back down, still listening, hearing only her slowing heartbeat. Nothing spoke again out of the dark. A visiting mage from the Floating School, she decided finally, celebrating the coronation too heartily, had flung a word carelessly into the night, heedless of where it landed. She closed her eyes, burrowed toward sleep, and reached the memory on the borders of dream, the one thing that she could claim as her

own, that she had in her possession before the librarians found her.

The memory was of a face, misty, ill-defined. It seemed to shape itself out of the sky, displacing the blue, flowing endlessly above green, racing far into the distance to meet it. She didn't know the names for colors then, nor could she name the force that blew across the green so that it roared and glittered and seemed to stream wildly away from her. The face came close, as close to her as her own face, tried to meld itself with her bones, her eyes. Then she was falling slowly, the face growing farther and farther away from her. She felt the distance between them like something physical, a coldness that refused to end. A word came wailing out of her then, but what it meant had vanished into the blue.

And after that, everything was gone.

She woke to another reverberating sound: the enormous gong in the refectory. Confused, remembering the strange word in the middle of the night, she moved too abruptly and fell out of bed. She untangled herself, muttering, pulled on a patched linen shift, and stumbled down the hall to the baths. There, in that steamy warmth, she closed her eyes again and let herself fall into a chorus of laughter and protest, flat and stiff as a tome into a tank, causing a wave at both ends that submerged more than one floating head.

Someone spread a hand on her head and dunked her again as she surfaced. "Nepenthe!" she heard as she sputtered soap bubbles. "Must you fling yourself into the water like a whale falling out of the sky?"

"It's the only way I could wake up this morning," she answered. Her eyes were finally open. She floated a little, trying to remember when she had begun to comprehend that her mother must have done just that: flung herself like a strange fish off the edge of the world into a sea so far below that until she was halfway there, she would not have heard the waves break against the cliff.

But why? she wondered, as always when she had fallen asleep in the realm of memory.

She felt water weltering around her. A head appeared, slick and white as a shell. It was Oriel, whom the librarians had acquired shortly after Nepenthe. She had been discovered by a scholar on the track of some obscure detail, surrounded by books in a forgotten chamber and bawling furiously. Fineboned and comely, she could well have been the embarrassing afterthought of a highborn lady-in-waiting in the court above. Her pale hair, which she kept short with a nib sharpener, floated around her face like a peony's petals. Her fingers, pale as well, and impossibly delicate, closed with unexpected strength on Nepenthe's wrist.

"You have to come with me."

"It's amazing," Nepenthe marveled, "how your hands can feel like they're sweating even in bath water."

"They always sweat when I'm frightened."

Nepenthe peered at her, wondering if it was important. Everything agitated Oriel. "What's the matter?" A coming storm, she guessed; the phase of the moon; a translation about to be reviewed by the head of librarians. But she was thrice wrong.

"I have to get a book from the Floating School. I don't want to go alone; that place terrifies me. Come with me."

Nepenthe ran soap through her hair, tempted by the prospect: a ride across the plain

through the brilliant pavilions, into the mysterious wood in which anything was said to happen. Then she wondered: what book?

“Why can’t they bring it here?”

“Everyone is here,” Oriel said vaguely, “and the students are involved in some magic or another. A trader brought a book to the mages that they can’t read. The trader told them he thought it might be magic since no one he had ever met could read it. A mage told the librarians last night, and now they can’t wait to see it and I must go and fetch it because everyone else is working or celebrating—”

“I am, too,” Nepenthe remembered. “Working, for a visiting scholar.”

Oriel gazed at her despairingly. “Is it important?”

“Well, he thinks it is.”

“What is it?”

“It seems to be turning into a supply list.”

“A supply list!”

“For a caravan of traders about to cross—”

“Not an epic,” Oriel interrupted pointedly. “You can finish that with your eyes closed.”

“It’s thousands of years old! And written upon the hide of an animal unknown anywhere in the Twelve Crowns.”

“Maybe it was a fish,” Oriel suggested grumpily.

“Maybe it was,” Nepenthe said, intrigued. “Or maybe some kind of a seal—”

“Nepenthe! Please come with me. Your scholar can wait half a day. He’s probably sleeping off yesterday’s celebration anyway. He’ll never know you’re gone. Please.” She added cunningly as Nepenthe hesitated, “I’ll let you see the book before I give it to the librarians.”

Nepenthe submerged herself to get the soap out of her hair. She shook her head, sending her dark hair swirling around her while she thought. Books sent to the librarians from the Floating School were extremely rare; the mages had their own ways of recognizing words. And Oriel was right about Master Croysus: he might not appear until late afternoon if he found his way down at all from the heady business of celebration.

She straightened abruptly, sent her long hair whirling back with a toss of her head, nearly smacking someone behind her. “All right.” She stopped, snorting water as Oriel splashed extravagantly with relief. “Meet me,” she added stuffily, “at the library stables after breakfast.”

In her tiny, shadowy chamber, she dressed quickly and simply for the ride in a long woolen tunic and boots. It was still early spring, and bound to be brisk on the plain. Then she went to breakfast. The refectory was so high and broad that swallows sometimes nested along the walls. There she could step beyond the arches into light; she could pace above the sea. Dawn mists were shredding above the water, tatters and plumes of purple and gray. The hilly island that was the Third Crown lay clearly visible in the distance, its white cliffs gleaming like bone in the morning sun. She filled a bowl from the huge cauldron full of inevitable boiled oats, and added nuts and dried fruit to it. She took it with her through the arched outer doors to the balcony beyond. It was made of marble from one of the southern Crowns; its fat, pillared walls and railings were high and very thick. There, if she listened hard on a fine, still day,

sometimes she thought she could hear the breaking waves.

Not that morning: she only heard the voice of Master Croysus, oddly energetic at that hour. He was standing at one corner of the balcony, talking to a couple of librarians. One glance at his face told Nepenthe he had not been to bed yet. His eyes were red-rimmed and shadowed at the same time; his face was so pale it might have been kin to the glacial, ravaged face of the moon.

“They say she can’t keep a thought in her head. She’s scarcely there, behind her eyes. Yet she is her father’s daughter. She has his eyes, his hair, everything. Everything but his ability to understand what will hold twelve restless Crowns under her rule.” He shook his wild head and scooped another spoonful of oats. “It’s disturbing.”

“She has Vevay to counsel her,” a librarian reminded him.

“She has the entire Floating School, but she does not seem to realize that she might need all the help she can get.”

Nepenthe, hovering in the doorway, took a discreet step back out of eyesight and stepped on someone’s foot. She turned. It was only Laidley, who seemed to have been following her.

His head bobbed diffidently as she apologized. His lank, straw-pale hair hung in his eyes, which were too close together and a pallid gray. Intent on Nepenthe’s face, they seemed slightly crossed. He was a stoop-shouldered young man whose hair had already begun to thin, revealing the bulge of the well-filled skull beneath. He knew more languages than most of the transcriptors. Around Nepenthe he could barely find words in any of them.

But he spoke that morning as she began eating her porridge. “Oriel says you are riding with her to the Floating School to bring back a manuscript the mages can’t translate.”

She nodded, feeling guilty about the scholar, awake and oblivious, just on the other side of the wall. “Why? Do you want to go instead of me?”

He shifted, disconcerted. “I was thinking: with.”

“But then I wouldn’t have to go.”

“But then—” He paused. She read the rest in his eyes, in the slant of his mouth: then I wouldn’t go with you.

She swallowed oats wordlessly, then made an effort to change his expression, which seemed to be bleak, lately, whenever he looked at her. “Do you want to see the book before we give it to the librarians? They might keep it to themselves for months while they decipher it.”

His eyes looked crossed again, this time with avidity. “Yes. Very much.”

“Then work near the south stairs in the library and watch for us to come back.”

His head bobbed again; he swallowed a word. Then he smiled, a generous and surprisingly sweet smile that made her stare. “Thank you, Nepenthe.”

It took half the morning, it seemed, for the two transcriptors to find their way up and out of stone onto earth. They took horses from the library stables, a pair of gentle nags that could not frighten even Oriel. Once outside the palace walls, as they made their way along the cliff road to skirt the pavilions and paddocks, servants, wagons, the assorted paraphernalia of travel, Nepenthe turned to look back. The immense and complex maze of stone with its spiraling walls and towers built upon towers clung like a small mountain to the cliff, spilled halfway down it, a crust of angles, burrows,

parapets between more towers, balconies and bridges thrust out of the face of the cliff, windows in the stone like a thousand watching eyes. The east gate in the outermost palace wall opened as she paused. A troop of guards or warriors in sky blue and silver rode out. Against the massive sprawl they seemed as tiny as insects. Riding away from it among the pavilions, they regained human stature. Nepenthe sent windblown hair out of her eyes and caught up with Oriel, who had turned away from the sea toward the wood.

It seemed a dark, impenetrable tangle, a smudge along one edge of Dreamer's Plain. The school, which occasionally and inexplicably floated above the trees, was nowhere to be seen that morning. Its history was as nebulous as the wood. The school was either younger or older than the royal library, or it had once been the library, during the rule of the first King of Raine. Legend said that as the palace grew more complex through the centuries, the school broke free of it and floated away, searching for some peace and quiet in the wood. Another tale had it hidden within the wood for safekeeping during a war. Yet another said that the wood was not a wood at all, but the cumulative magic of centuries spun around the school, and that the magic itself could take any shape it chose. As far as Nepenthe knew, it generally looked like trees. But they were thick, shadowy, strange. No one hunted there. The animals, tales said, had a human turn of thought and talked too much.

As they rode toward it, the dark wood began to leak color like paint spilling between stones. Oriel pulled her horse to a halt and reached out to Nepenthe at the sight. Light shimmered from between the trees, great swaths of dazzling hues that Nepenthe only glimpsed from a distance when a parade of courtiers rode to hunt beyond the plain. Such silks they wore then, such rich golds and reds, purples and summer blues that they looked like flowers blown across the plain. As the transcriptors stared, bolts of flame and sun unrolled like rippling satin into the air above the trees, shook across the grass, and seeped away.

"I'm not going in there," Oriel said flatly. Her damp fingers were icy around Nepenthe's wrist.

"It's nothing," Nepenthe murmured, entranced. "Magic. Illusion. They made it out of nothing."

"They can kill each other with it!"

"They're students," Nepenthe argued unconvincingly. "They don't practice that on each other."

"If it doesn't kill you, it can transform you into something loathsome."

"They can probably see us coming. They wouldn't turn a pair of transcriptors into maggots."

Oriel balked. "No. Anyway, how do you know what it is or who is making it? They could be having a war in there for all we know, and we'd ride into the middle of something deadly just looking for a book."

"All right," Nepenthe said. "All right. I'll go."

"No."

Nepenthe coaxed her placid mount forward a step or two. "My horse doesn't even see it," she said, but Oriel sat obstinately still.

"I'll wait," she said tersely. "Just hurry."

The mages must have seen them coming some time ago, Nepenthe realized when

she saw the robed figure come out of the trees to meet her. The young man was carrying something in one hand. His hair, Nepenthe noted idly, was the same gold-leaf hue that had splashed so profligately out of the mysterious wood. As she rode up to him, he gave her a smile somewhere between amusement and rue.

He nodded at the figure in the distance, then said to Nepenthe as she turned her mount to rein beside him, "We frightened her, then."

"She's easily frightened."

"There was no need." He looked up at Nepenthe, mouth open to continue, then did not, for a moment; only the wind spoke, racing exuberantly between them. He finished his thought finally. "You aren't. Easily frightened."

"No." The word snagged oddly. She cleared her throat, then for once in her life could find nothing coherent to say.

"What color are they?" she heard.

"What?"

"Your eyes. They were brown. Then when you turned your horse to face the sea they became as green as water."

"They do," she answered. "They do that." His own eyes seemed the color of his hair, full of morning light. Rich, she thought dazedly, rich, though he wore the plain brown wool of a student, and that was none too clean.

"What is your name?"

"Nepenthe. I am a ward of the royal library." From mute to babbling, she had suddenly gone. "They were up to N when they found me on the cliff edge."

"Nepenthe." His eyes had narrowed slightly; they seemed to pull at her, doing a mage's work. In some magical world, she dismounted; she stood on the grass in front of him; his hands, graceful and strong, something crusted and glittering beneath the nails, moved to touch her...

But no: they still held the book. She blinked, still mounted. He remembered it, too, in that moment.

"Oh. Here." He held the book up to her; she took it. It was very plain, worn, undistinguished by gold ink or jewels; the binding smelled of wax and old leather. "It came to us in a trader's wagon. He said it had been passing from hand to hand across the Twelve Crowns and more than likely beyond them. Nobody can read it, so he gave it to the mages for nothing. If the librarians find it deals with magic, the mages want it back. Otherwise, they'll settle for some explanation of it."

"I'll tell them." Idly, because she had been surrounded by books since she had been found, she opened it, glanced at the odd letters.

"My name is Bourne," she heard him say, "of Seale. If I come to the library, will they let me see you?"

They looked like thorns, the strange letters: brambles curling and twisting around one another, linked by their sharp spurs. "Yes," she said to him. And then a word spoke out of the book, a deep, sudden sound she recognized, swift as an adder biting into her heart and clinging.

She looked at the young man, Bourne, dazed by the unexpected wealth: his gold eyes, his name, the book coming to life in her hands. "Yes," she said again, holding those eyes while she slipped the book into a deep pocket in her tunic, beneath her cloak. "Come to me."