

SEERS

“Scat! Go on, clear off! And watch out for owls!”

Granny watched them scuttle into the darkness, two grown lads totally convinced they were fieldmice. Amazing what you could do with an air of menace and a bit of mindpower. All that mud’d take some explaining, of course, and them torn trousers, if they could talk without squeaking, that was.

Well, then, maybe that’d learn ‘em not to go breaking into folks’ cottages, scaring poor ole women, and messing with their stuff. Still chuckling, she went in and shut the door. Thomas purred and rubbed against her, wanting his supper.

“Well, old lad,” she told him, “that’s the best laugh I’ve had since them double-glazing women came!”

Then Granny poured herself a cup of stewed tea and sank into her fireside chair, preparing to let her mind out for the night. No television or books for her: who needs such things when they have the Sight?

Her mind drifts out into the lane, through the Beechwood and along the water-meadows: touches the roosting rooks and the ducks dreaming amongst the reeds. Meandering along the Nature-Trail, it crosses the carpark, nipping into the “Rat & Pitchfork” for a bit of scandal. (It doesn’t stay long, on account of the Over 60’s Krisps & Karaoke Nite being a bit grim.)

Decanting itself onto High Street, it lingers over the W.I. Monthly Meeting—prize for the most Suggestive Vegetable—then hangs around the chip-shop, filleting the incoming thoughts. No joy there either.

Lazy as the moon, it wanders out beyond the village, and on up the valley towards Brim Knap, hitching a lift on an owl’s swooping flight.

And soaring above the Guildwood, the Seers’ ancient place, snags itself on something bad---BUGGER!—her mind snapped back like a rubber band, distracted by the steady dripping. Danged roof leaking again. Have to get it seen to: cost a fortune, she’d be bound. Grumbling, she got up stiffly, rummaging around her small kitchen for something to catch the rainwater in..

SEERS' SEMINARY, KILBERSIDE. (TEN YEARS PREVIOUSLY.)

Dalsha the All-Powerful sits at the computer-terminal, gobbling chocolate. It's always the same when things get to her.

Cramming, crunching, gulping, comfort-eating again.

A fast-growing pile of wrappers litters the desk beside her--she's so mad she's broken two fingernails on them already.

The building lies in darkness: only Dalsha's screen flickers. Livid or not, she knows better than to advertise her presence with lights. With one hand, she feeds in the master-disc; the other gropes for a fresh bar of chocolate. This time, she uses her teeth to open it, and then to grind and splinter its contents. Strong teeth, Dalsha's got.

Rapt, she watches the long columns of figures swim into focus. Chocolate dribbles down the screen. Swearing, she rubs it, smears it, spreads it all over the keyboard. Now she's annoyed with herself.

Her anger is getting in the way: her attitude is uncool, and will get her nowhere. She is simply not being Professional.

Drawing a deep breath, she wipes the screen with her sleeve, then positions the cursor threateningly over one particular set of digits. Viewing them, her eyes widen. What a lot of noughts!

"That much, eh? Right, you old bastard," she smiles, "gotcha."

"You watch yourself at yon Seminary, girl. There's Men there. And Men are only after One Thing," her mother had pronounced.

"Is that right?" Dalsha had replied. If it was, she couldn't wait. Because she, too, had only one thing in mind--although not, apparently, the same one currently pre-occupying Professor Marikkson.

Crossing long, slender legs, she'd studied him with interest, never having actually seen an Archon grovel. In fact he seemed less the urbane academic than a man in the throes of a heart-attack.

He'd begun dribbling then, his breath rasping loudly round the small tutorial-room. His thinning hair lay plastered to his scalp, and his skin had a sickly, sweaty pallor. Furthermore, his flies were undone.

Dalsha had shifted on her seat so that her skirt rode up another few inches. It was the same seat she'd sat in when he'd interviewed her nine months previously. He'd drooled then, even as he'd offered her a place.

And then at her first tutorial, he'd turned anguished eyes upon her, mindblock slipping in his excitement: getting a bit flabby, she thought disapprovingly, letting his mind go.

"Dalsha," he'd moaned,"your--intellect intrigues me. I could teach you so much. Let me offer you--erm-- extra tuition. This very evening, in fact. Come to my rooms. I will introduce you to--um-- Early Seers' poetry. Yes, that's it-- upon which I am an authority. Really I am. We will have a little wine. Do say you'll come, my dear"--he pressed clammy hands onto hers--"you could make an old man--so very happy."

Dalsha had sniffed. It was sick. It was pitiful. The Principal of the most prestigious Seers' Seminary lusting after a first-year student?--it was also, fortunately, exactly what she'd planned.

Tossing back her long auburn hair, she had fixed him with great green eyes. Such fun watching him squirm.

"Oh, all right then," she'd told sweetly,"I'm sure it will be lovely. Will your wife be there?"

Control, control. Essential to keep control. Throughout all the ensuing extra tutorials, the supplementary, and even the extra-ancillary tutorials the Professor deemed necessary, she had never once lost it.

References to her intellect had soon ceased, she noted, the Professor's interest being much more fundamental. But that was all right--she was only after his mind, and the Unlicensed secrets that would take her into new dimensions. Psycho-kinesis. Teleprojection. Those were the things that turned her on. Control had carried her through the Abecedary year; which was, in her case, a formality. She'd already got her First and Second-status licences, and had been admitted unusually early. She was, she knew, years ahead of her contemporaries.

The Seminary had been the start of her new life, her new self, the casting-off of her past, her parents, everything that had gone before. Control had kept her from slipping off the pinnacle of perfection she'd created for herself: projecting the public persona, Being Dalsha.

Mindblocking was easy, inborn,--but altering others' perception, holding it steady as the old woman had taught her, was a terrible drag.

And Control was so lonely. So draining. So false. She could never let go, get close, because there was no-one, except the old woman, with whom she could stop projecting Dalsha the Beautiful and be herself. Chocolate, her only solace, didn't dry her tears; it only ran messily down her chin and stained her clothes.

She wasn't worried about Seminary work: it was easy. Too easy. It bored her. She knew that the Archon would inflate her grades if ever she fell behind. He owed her that much, and more. And she saw to it that the debt was paid; raping his mind, burgling it, taking without consent:--sucking deep from his semi-conscious thoughts whenever post-tutorial drowsiness overtook him.

"So perfect, so beautiful." He stroked her bare shoulder, spread a skein of thick, tawny hair across his hand and studied it.

"Absolutely flawless, my dear. You know, sometimes, I cannot believe you are real." Dalsha quelled the rising wave of hysteria. If only!

The Archon was drifting off now, eyelids drooping after his academic exertions. "Perfect, perfect, perfect," he murmured indistinctly, "mmmm-"

NOW. The right time, she knew, with his mindblock off, to trawl through his thoughts, pinching the tricks of the Seers' art.

If only she wasn't so tired. He was snoring now, mouth agape, bony chest rising and falling. She envied him his repose. Perhaps she could snatch a little time to drop her guard, let go as she'd never dared before. He would surely sleep til morning, and she could slip away long before then. What harm could it do?

Morning sunshine touched her face. Morning-- Whoops. Oh, shit.

She'd tried pulling the sheet over her head: a small girl creating a safe, dark cave. She groped wildly for Control, willing back Dalsha the Beautiful.

Too late. The Archon was already adjusting his spectacles, teeth agape like a dental-chart, shaking his head disbelievingly.

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear, dear, dear, dear, dear. How very unpalatable. How very nasty. How very--imperfect. I do believe I've been--what is the expression?--conned!" And then he'd begun to laugh.

Dalsha threw off the sheet, rose, and stood for a long moment, looking contemptuously down on him. "Correct," she'd murmured, "and I rather think you'll find you've been erased, as well."

Then gathering up her clothes, she stalked across the dark quadrangle to the Computer-block, his mocking laughter following all the way.

She sits at her green, flickering altar, finger poised over the balance-figure. And then, entering the name DALSHA and--why not-- MARIKKSON beneath, she presses TRANSFER. The figure shifts downwards. She smiles, satisfied with the double theft.

She calls up a new file. Rather a thin one, this, but her personal favourite. The one with the most potential.

Typing in the name TEKA MARIKKSON, she positions the cursor over it. She pauses, remembering the revulsion in his eyes. There had been others who'd laughed. But not any more. She hesitates only a moment before pressing the button marked ERASE, then the one marked CONSIGN TO LIMBO.

As the name winks out of existence, a faint, momentary keening fills the screen. Then silence falls.

Eyes closed, Dalsha remains, fingers resting lightly on the keyboard, maintaining contact as the essence flows from his now- Sightless mind into hers. It's one of those rare chocolate-free moments that she always relishes.

Slipping the master-disc into her pocket, she switches off the machine, screws up the chocolate-wrappers and, in darkness, makes her way back to her room, where she will pack a small bag, containing only credit-cards and a selection of chocolate-bars.

What else could she need? She'll never get her Third-status license now—but so what? Fondly, she pats the disc nestling in her pocket.

“Ah, well,” she mutters, “ten down, couple of thousand to go.”

She hadn't known they were coming: hadn't expected anyone. Which was why she'd taken her teeth out. Why she'd got her feet soaking in a bowl of her own garlic foot-restorative with a slice of beetroot over each eye, and was sprawled in the fireside chair, snoring her head off when they came in.

Granny awoke with a strangled snort, sat up just that bit too fast. The beetroot-slices fell messily into her lap: she scooped them up and automatically ate them--she didn't hold with wasting food.

Purplish juice blurred her vision, funnelling down her cheeks. She rubbed her eyes, blinked, and blinked again. She thought she'd seen a small boy gazing intently into her face, and a slightly bigger girl standing behind him. After a moment or two, the boy stepped back, announcing critically: “Your hair's all sticking up!”

“Eh?” she struggled indignantly upright, prepared to give him what-for, but he smiled disarmingly and added: “--I wanted mine like that, but my mum wouldn't let me.”

Granny rammed her glasses on, bringing into focus, for Sight's sake, two kids and her own sister, Mariander: all three of 'em grinning like turnips.

“Mari!” How long had it been? Years and years, she'd be bound. “I'll put the kettle on--” just in time, she remembered the foot-bath--“er. better get sorted out, first. Pass me that towel, somebody.”

She'd die rather than admit it, but it *was* good to see Mariander.

They hadn't exactly been close--mostly That Bernard's fault, of course. And them kids!--Mari's grandchildren, first time she'd seen 'em since their Guildings. She wondered what had brought them all the way out from Inchester.

Have to wait to find out: course, Mariander was mind-blocking. The kids had discovered Thomas, and were trying to play with him: Thomas wasn't having any. He was not a People-Cat, especially not a children-cat. He'd never gone in for fawning, purring or head-butting to get round anybody.

If somebody liked him, or, better, wanted to feed him, good for them. If not, tough. Thomas always did his own thing, which, for today, was sleeping, and he intended to carry on doing it. Granny was pleased to see that the kids left him to it.

The kettle sang. Mariander fished around in her bag. “I brought lemonade for the kids--they've heard about your tea. This is Quinnie and Christom, Thuja's two. Come and say hello to your Great-Aunt Bryony.”

Granny winced. If she had to get saddled with kids, she was having none of this Great-Aunt stuff. “You just call me Granny,” she said gruffly.

Christom pecked her on the cheek. His thoughts flowed and bubbled, clear as streamwater. Despite herself, Granny smiled. She'd forgotten how open kids' minds were. *happy*, she told herself *free and full of fun*, but *he goes a lot deeper*, Quinnie gave her a shy hug: *and this one's a worrier*.

“Go upstairs,” Granny told them, “and have a look in the top drawer. There's some old photos you might like.”

She and Mariander settled themselves in front of the fire.

"Now then," said Granny, "to what do I owe this honour? Left that husband of yours at last, have you?"

"Oh, don't start all that again," Mariander said wearily, "I haven't come to argue. And for your information, Bernard got took into the "Heaven's Gate" Retirement Home last month, so lay off, eh?"

"What?" Granny snorted. "Gone senile at last, has he? Well dearie me, poor ole Bernard!"

Mariander gave her a Look. "No need to pretend, Bryony--this is me you're talking to, remember. Let's just say that he won't be coming out again."

"Well there's a shame," Granny said, unrepentently. "And did you come all this way to tell me the good news, or is there something else up?"

"Well, first off," Mariander said, "Fritch passed on." Sadness touched her eyes. "He was old, but he was company. And now everything's too quiet, and I, I miss the barking and him on the furniture shedding hairs--I'm sorry." she blew her nose hard. "--well all of a sudden, I had to get out for a bit--"

"I know how you feel," Granny mused, "just like when Dubbin went. Funny how you sort of step over 'em when they ain't there anymore---"

"Anyway," Mariander held out her cup for a refill, "there's something else. Guild-business."

"Oh?" Granny felt her neck prickle.

"Yes. You know I ain't had a lot to do with the Guild, not since--wedding Bernard, but I--hear things. I've got contacts. There's something going on in the Inchwoods, I dunno what, and the Grandmaster's gone funny."

"Funny? How d'you mean, funny? Dressing up in women's clothes, sort of funny?"--Recalling the ceremonial robes of every Grandmaster she'd ever seen, Granny felt maybe she wasn't too wide of the mark.

"No, course he hasn't," Mariander snapped, "this ain't a joking matter, neither. You'll hear it official before long." She paused, for a telling moment, and then said, delicately, "it seems that the Grandmaster's become, well, Telegnostically Disadvantaged."

Granny frowned. "What?"

"He's lost The Sight," Mariander said.

Granny was shocked rigid. What a terrible thing--and not one she'd ever come across before. How ever could it have happened?

"Nobody knows," Mariander said, adding unnecessarily: "Your mindblock's slipping."

"And do they reckon it'll come back?" Granny demanded.

Mariander shrugged. "Who knows? Hasn't so far. They've put him in the Infirmary, for all the good it'll do."

"Who's next in line, then? Kaster Blayne, is it?"

"Yes. Although," Mariander's gaze focussed on Granny's ceiling. Rain was just starting to drip through. "from what I hear, he ain't too bright, neither. You want to get that roof fixed," she added absently.

Granny felt herself at a loss. "Could be coincidence," she mused, "else it might be something catching."

"Anyway," Mariander said, "I've told you now, so keep your wits about you. Just in case." She stood up. "We'll have to get goin', else we'll miss the bus, and then the train. Quinnie! Christom! Come on!"

"See you, then." Mariander put up her umbrella.

"Mmm. Could be sooner'n you think," said Granny thoughtfully.

Christom was clutching an old, yellowing photograph, which he waved in front of Granny.

"Is this *you*?" he asked dubiously.

Granny squinted. "Yep. Taken at the Guildschool. Bit older than your sister I was then.

"But, but--" the boy was obviously puzzled, "you look all different!"

Granny drew herself up proudly.

"Yes, young man, and in them days I had hair I could sit on!"

Christom's eyes widened. "Wow!" he gasped, "didn't you have any chairs, then?"

Bartlesham Grandmaster Tukesley Meredith had been having some very disturbing dreams. For weeks he had awoken drained after a feverish, unnatural sleep.

He sat in his study, amidst the sanity of leather, wood and old books.

He had a great deal of Guild-work to do. If only he could prevent his mind from wandering.

Dreams, ah dreams. Dreams were for young men and frivolous, not for those of his ilk. In truth, the Grandmaster never had been young.

He had not permitted himself dreams, or self-indulgence of any kind. Such was the price he had paid for lifelong devotion to the Guild: he did not begrudge it. Occasionally he had wondered about women, romance, even marriage. But, somehow, once those things had passed him by, and when he had discovered that the world kept on turning, none of it seemed to matter.

So why should the dreams seek to trouble him now? And why should they seem so real?

--- In his dreams, she had come to him, young, unimaginably beautiful, rapacious. And she had--burrowed into his mind, like a parasite. And he had begged her to stay forever.

Absurd. He refused to consider the matter any further. Probably indigestion. Hot milk at bedtime should settle it: he resolved to speak to Undermaster Coy.

And now, to work. Nothing like a stack of marking to solace the soul. He noticed that his hands were shaking. The Guildschool Intermediate papers awaited him: he drew the first one from the pile.

--and she had whispered deep into his mind, whispered of things at once delicious and terrifying---

He studied the answer-sheet. Words swam before his eyes: he could make no sense of them. The red pen hovered irresolute.

She had joined with him, melded, welded herself to him in so great an intimacy that he could not separate mind from body. What she did was forbidden. Were such dreams forbidden?---if dreams they were?

Unconsciously, his hand crept towards the bureau drawer, opening it a wicked fraction until his fingers touched the wispy, silky underthing that he had found in his bed.

Granny had waited months for Gobber Watts to come and see to her roof: he only turned up when he did because she'd threatened to go and sing to his chickens and stop 'em laying.

(Granny had the sort of voice, as Gobber remarked, could've warned ships off submerged rocks. Years ago, during some feud, she'd sung at--not to, mind, at--Varsil Moody's entry for the Fossetby Fete cake competition, -sure-fire winner, it'd been--made all the fruit sink, and left a dirty great crater in the middle.)

She knew what it was, of course. All them Yuppies demanding the services of a thatcher to pretty up their countryfied cottages. And there plain weren't enough thatchers to go round. Gobber was one of the last in Bartleshire--and the best. Yuppies was where the money was: didn't make no difference, though--in Granny's book, craftsmen owed first duty to locals every time.

He pulled up in the lane, jumped out of his thatched 4-track jeep, spat into a puddle, and stood there gawping at Granny's roof. Gobber lived for thatching--small wonder he'd never wed.

She peered down the garden, squinting in disbelief at Gobber's van, if van it could be called. Not every day you saw a big red jeep with a thatched roof on it. Looked as if he'd got hisself an assistant at last, anyhow. Might get done a bit faster then.

When she opened the door he was thatch-gazing again, and with him what she'd taken to be a young lad, but now realised was a slip of a girl, floundering about in a great big overall.

After a long interval, he tore himself away and said: "By, she's bin a good thatch to you, Bryony. Pretty as a picture. Spicks and buckles on her like a thoroughbred Camley swaffidge---"

"I'm sure." Granny interrupted, "but let's not have that sort of talk in front of the lass, eh?"

Gobber turned as though seeing the girl for the first time.

"Eh? Oh, this here's Monica. She's on a Y.T.S."

"Really." Granny looked the girl up and down, "is that like on probation?"

"Hur hur hur!" went Gobber, who liked a bit of a joke, "good one, good one. Nur, I'm learnin' 'er thatching." He spat into Granny's flower-bed.

"Id's by lifetibe ambition," sniffed the girl, sneezing violently.

"You gotter cold?" Granny asked.

"Oh, doh." Monica blew her nose noisily, "Ibe just allergic to reeds. And straw. And all that sort ob stuff."

Granny blinked. "---no, never mind. You goin' to fix my roof, then Gobber?"

"Yur, better 'ave a closer look." Spitting into his hands, he rubbed them together, anticipating the challenge. "Fetch the ladder, then, Monica."

The girl wandered off, mopping at her nose. Gobber followed Granny's gaze. "I knur, I knur. And she's an Outsider. But she's keen. There's not many young 'uns wants to be thatchers these days. So don't upset her, eh, Bryony?"

Monica struggled back up the path, dragging a solid wooden ladder.

"Nur, nur!" Gobber covered his eyes, "not like that! Treat 'er gentle! That ladder's bin in my family--" he caught Granny's eye--"a good year! Put 'er up there. That's it. year! Put 'er up there. That's it. Now then, up yur go, an' tell me what yur see."

Monica recoiled like a dog ordered to share its dinner with a cat.

"Me? Me? I don't do ladders. Never could stand heights!"

She sneezed again, for extra emphasis.

"Right," said Granny carefully, "I'll leave you to it then. Do you a cupper tea. When you're ready."

After a great deal of banging and scrambling around, Gobber made his way into the kitchen, grinning from ear to ear.

"Well," he said gleefully, "I can tell you right off, yer brortches is shot. And I've a nasty suspicion yer bliggets'll be next. Criminal neglect, a beauty like that. Surprised she lasted that long. Should've called me in ten year ago."

"I did," said Granny acidly, "but you was tarting up some incomer's thatch."

Gobber looked slightly abashed. But only slightly. "Well, that's it these days. Gotter make it while yer can."

Reaching into a pocket, he withdrew a crumpled piece of paper, which he unfolded. Granny could make out the heading: THEOTHATCH.

"Now then," he said, "what you *could* take advantage of is our Annual Service/Maintenance/100-year Warranty Plan. What we offer is---"

"Gobber." Granny gave him one of her Looks. "*Hundred-year warranty?* How old you think I am? And while we're about it, what's THEOTHATCH?"

"S me name," Gobber muttered. "I'm called Theoblod." He coughed. "After me Grandad."

"Oh." Granny felt her mouth twitch. She somehow thought he'd been born Gobber.

"Anyway. Yon roof. Her says to me: the legendary Scandy Thompson. Got 'is imprint all over 'er. Lovely craftsmanship. But she's gonna take some work, sure enough." He paused, licking his lips. "I'll have to strip her right off."

Granny sighed. "Reckon you'll be wantin' a cupper tea, then, Gobber. And how about that assistant of yours?" She glanced outside. "Where's she got to, anyway?"

Gobber pointed. "There." Monica was ensconced on top of a pile of reeds Gobber had removed from Granny's roof. A bluish smoke-haze hung companionably overhead.

"Nur, she's happy enough out there. Likes a fag when she's workin', Monica does."

Night crept over The Helmwood. The Head Ranger stirred, groaned, forced his stiff, aching body upright. He was getting too old for this sort of caper.

It wasn't the first time he'd kept watch beside them on the hard ground, nor would it be the last.

They'd rested where the forest was darkest and densest. He could just about make them out, stirring where he'd tethered them, blowing softly down their nostrils. Another day had passed, another hiding-place, and now another dusk would drive them on. Safer travelling by darkness. Time to get going. He shivered in the chilly wind, glad of the weatherproof stockman's coat he'd snatched before they fled.

His helpers stood ready, muzzles raised to the wind. He could rely on their scenting and their hearing. Throughout the lonely watches, he'd welcomed their animal warmth beside him, the comfort of their snores and snufflings.

He wondered when he'd ever sleep that soundly again.

He fingered the ancient pipe in his pocket: what he wouldn't give for a smoke. Mebbe once they were out of the forest. Cautiously, he opened his mind, but sensed no pursuit. Not that he could rest easy: he knew it'd come sooner or later. Untethering his charges, he spoke to them gently, feeding them from his dwindling stock of concentrates. The others would hunt as the need took them, as for himself, he'd just have to forage.

He wasn't worried, he could rough it when he had to. Just wasn't getting any younger, was all.

Later, Sight willing, they would cross the river Brock, and drink. "Walk on, then," he whispered, wondering when it would ever end. Or if it ever would. He willed strength into them. If they could keep going, they'd be safe. And They'd get there. He had to believe that.

It never occurred to him to abandon them. He was their Keeper for all time. That was what he did, what he was, what he would always be.

Granny was going into exile, and she wasn't best pleased about it.

She'd be staying with her sister while the roof was mended. Be nice to see Mariander, and she badly wanted to know what was going on with the InchGuild, because all she'd heard were rumours, but still--face it, Bryony, you're in a rut, she told herself, and don't like being off your own patch. Could do you a power of good, going visiting. Thomas would have to fend for himself, but then cats always managed. He'd be all right.

No, the worst of it was leaving her roof at the mercy of Gobber and, more to the point, that Monica. It had to be done, no question, water poured in now when it rained, but whether she trusted them two to right things was another matter.

The girl came slowly up the path, taking pictures of the cottage roof with one of them camelcorders. All morning she'd kept creeping up behind Granny, filming every blessed thing she did. She said she wanted a 'pictorial record of rural life.' It was a wonder she hadn't followed her down the garden and into the privy!

Eventually, Granny had explained very loudly indeed that she DIDN'T WANT TO BE IN NO FILM, TA VERY MUCH, and WHY DIDN'T MONICA BUGGER OFF AND DO SOMETHING USEFUL?

Granny had her old black coat on now, and was sitting by the back door ready for when the taxi came. Gobber was up on the roof, talking into one of them mobile phone things. He was ordering pizza from the "Rat & Pitchfork".

"Look, you, I'm the customer, ain't I? I don't give a monkey's about culinary integrity. If I wants tripe with sandwich-spread topping, than what's the problem? Righto, one o'clock then!"

Winking at Granny, he came down the ladder, pocketing the phone.

"Call 'emselves a delivery-service?" he snorted. "That Barney Swallow's gotta learn that the customer's needs are paramount!" He nodded at her battered old suitcase. "Yur ready for off, then?"

Granny grunted. "And this place better be standing when I get back, with a decent roof on it!"

"Calm down, Bryony. She'll be right. Off yur go and have a good time. When yur come back, you'll 'ave a thatch to be proud of."

"Yes, well." Granny wasn't prepared to be mollified. "Just so long as it keeps the rain out."

A taxi crawled up the muddy lane, pulling in behind the THEOTHATCH jeep. Gobber carried the suitcase, and Granny, black coat flapping, grumbled along behind him and climbed into the cab.

The driver, what she could see of him, looked fat and sweaty.

"Right," she snapped, "straight to the station with yer, and no detours!"

The cabbie, who was on a promise with Brassica Bray, one o' clock in the "Wormwood Arms," hadn't the lightest wish to linger down any country lanes with Granny, ta very much.

He could feel her eyeing the back of his neck, and it made him nervous. He accelerated away at reckless speed, spraying Gobber's jeep with mud.

"And *slow down!*" Granny snapped, before settling back to tune into his thoughts. Seers read Outsiders' minds as others leaf idly through magazines, and if Granny had to make this blessed trip, she wanted some enjoyment out of it. Not that she expected great things from the taxi-driver's brain: not that she found them. His thoughts were not on an elevated plane-more, in fact, on the level of an open sewer.

Probing the murky layers, Granny found the unmentionable mixed with the unsavoury, overlaid with the downright dirty.

Who'd of thought such things went on in that snug! Outraged, she prodded the back of his neck, causing him to swerve violently.

"Sex, sex, sex," she hissed, "you're worse'n an ole tom-cat! Startled out of what he'd considered his private erotic reverie, the taxi-driver flushed puce, and put his foot down. The sooner he got rid of this terrible old woman, the better.

Needless to say, Granny didn't leave him a tip.

Dust. Little piles of dust. Little piles of inky dust, puffing softly onto the Library floor.

Unofficial dust, not the greyish, everyday kind that the Grandmaster doesn't permit, not the sort that Undermaster Coy sweeps unofficially under the bookshelves twice a day, by no means *ordinary* dust.

Dust, recent and powdery, leaking from all the tomes in all the Seers' libraries, to lie redundant, mixing with old dust beneath the shelves. Black dust, with here and there a glint of gold.

Safely aboard the train, Granny spread herself and her belongings across two double seats and a table. Once she'd got her breath back, she looked around in some surprise.

Well! They'd tarted this train up, all right, and Mariander'd never said a word about it! All the windows had pretty little curtains, tied up with bows. There was soft, tinkly music, proper carpets, and pictures on the walls!-just like the old days! She squinted at a notice above the door, which read:-

WELCOME ABOARD THE NEWLY-PRIVATISED INCHESTER FLYER.NOW OWNED AND LOVINGLY MAINTAINED BY THE RURAL RAIL ENTHUSIASTS' SOCIETY

The carriage was crowded. One or two travellers approached Granny's domain and cleared their throats, but, faced with her basilisk stare, their nerve failed, and, somehow, they all felt more comfortable standing up.

Scornfully contemplating her fellow passengers, Granny began milking their minds. It made the journey go faster. She dismissed Outsiders much as a musical genius might regard the tone-deaf: plain disabled. Being born and existing without The Sight rendered them objects of pity.

The lad sitting opposite had a great big radio-thing, size of a suitcase, plonked on the table in front of him. It was playing loud enough to explode: didn't seem to worry him one bit, in fact he was jiggling about like someone who couldn't get to the privy in time.

She gave him one of her Looks, to which he responded with a cheeky grin, yelling over the racket "Gotter problem, Grandma?"

Kept him occupied all the way to Inchester, anyhow, trying to figure out why the thing wouldn't work, and why it rattled when, in frustration, he picked it up and shook it. Easy things to disable, Granny mused, but what a lot of bits inside 'em!

The train was late departing, and, ten minutes out of Bartlesham, came to an abrupt halt. Nothing happened for a good quarter of an hour.

At last, after a great deal of crackling, an aggrieved voice came unevenly over the loudspeaker:- "Go ON KEV, you did it LAST TIME. IT'S MY GO--" a bout of enthusiastic throat-clearing gave way to a startled--"what? AM I ON? Here we go then. HELLO EVERYBODY out there. The MANAGEMENT of the Inchester Flyer would like to apologise for the DELAY what has been caused by--WHAT?--can't read his bloody WRITING---A WHAT?"

Static filled the air. Then silence. The passengers sank back into the resignation of delayed travellers everywhere.

Prolonged hissing was followed by:- "It's ME AGAIN Eric. Kev says there's a DEAD SEAGULL on the line. NO HANG ON, could be a swan. It's a big bugger, anyway. The management is scraping it up as fast as possible. In the MEANTIME, Kevin's WIFE WILL be coming amongst you with complimentary BEVERAGES. That means FREE TEA AND COFFEE. I Thank you."

Granny brightened. Cupper tea! Good. That'd go down well. Mebbe it'd stop her fretting about the Inchguild as well. There wasn't much worth looking out of the window at, just two high banks, and no interesting thoughts.

Most of the passengers looked to have dropped off, even the ones standing up. P'raps she'd have a little nap herself--

"OH, AND THERE'S BISCUITS," boomed the loudspeaker, shattering her reverie. "WHAT?-- Oh, give over SULKING. YOU do it then."

A second voice said gruffly:-"Testing, testing, one-twoer-three. Kevin here. Well. Looks as if the hobstruction 'as now been got rid of. So, with a bit of luck, we'll be on our way very soon. Oh, and Janice says the refreshments are coming, soon as the kettle's boiled. Er. Have a nice day."

Eric's voice floated plaintively through the speakers:--"Does that mean I can get back to driving me train now then?"

They met on the platform, an hour later than arranged. The complimentary tea hadn't been up to much, neither. Proper owl's-piss, in fact.

Mariander was wearing a smart, towney sort of outfit, and a cheerful expression. At her feet sat a small, unprepossessing sort of dog, which looked as if it'd been put together on the foreman's day off. Granny gave it the once-over: the dog stared gravely back out of intelligent golden eyes.

The rest of it was a jumble of physical characteristics--smoothish black coat flecked here and there with grey, long body, short legs, ragged tail.

It wasn't a youngster--its eyebrows had gone white--but it looked as if it still had a bit of go in it. It was portly, short-legged, and didn't smell too good--much like Granny herself, in fact.

"Who's this, then?" she enquired.

"This is Grufty," said Mariander with quiet pride, "He sort of turned up one day, and moved in with us." Granny held his mind for a moment, found kinship, sniffed.

"I reckon he'll do," she said. The ungainly tail waved briefly, and then the dog sealed the bond by cocking his leg on Granny's coat-hem.

They waited at the bus-stop--a new experience for Granny, who'd never believed in queuing, one of her Looks usually serving very nicely, thank you---two stout elderly women and a broad-beamed mongrel.

They sat downstairs, not talking much as the bus ploughed slowly through the lunchtime traffic. Such a bustle, Granny mused. Folks all scurrying about like ants on sugar--and what for? Did they live longer, enjoy life more?

"One thing, Bryony, while you're here," Mariander broke into her thoughts. "Don't try and tune in too sudden--it can be a bit much all at once. It's different in the City."

"You reckon." Granny felt a sudden stir of anticipation. P'raps she might have a bit of fun after all.

It was a short walk from the bus-stop to Mariander's house, which was part of a shabby terrace, marooned amongst shops and offices. The other properties stood empty, and boarded up, giving Granny the creeps.

"Don't it get lonely here after dark?" she asked.

"Sometimes." Mariander sighed. "This wasn't a bad neighbourhood once. Course they've all moved on, now--sold out to developers and suchlike. But Bernard wouldn't have it--he never did like upheavals. Get a move on, Grufty!" The dog had stopped to prise something sticky off the pavement.

"You've give the shop up then?" That was a surprise. Two large grimey windows gaped emptily onto the pavement. A faded, hand-painted sign read:

MARIANDER'S HERBAL REMEDIES & BEAUTY.

"When Bernard retired." Mariander unlocked the front door. "Not that he ever approved, anyway. Full of plans he was then." She smiled, sadly. "Never came to anything, mind."

Grufty, the remains of something horrible coating his beard, strutted importantly into the house, and re-appeared lugging an enormous bone, which he laid at Granny's feet.

Mariander laughed. The dog wouldn't win no beauty-contests, but Granny knew he'd filled the space Fitch had left behind: he belonged.

"You're favoured," said Mariander, "You'll have to eat that now--I just hope you've got your teeth in! Go through and I'll get the kettle on."

At that point, Granny became aware of an extraordinary noise coming, seemingly, from Mariander's kitchen. Couldn't really be a fire-engine in there, could there? Or an ice-cream van?

The starling's plumage was brilliant. He settled straight onto Granny's shoulder, where he drove Grufty into a frenzy by miaouwing piteously.

Mariander grinned at Granny's surprise. "Found Sham in the gutter," she said, "prob'ly bin hit by a car. His leg was broke. Got him right, and, blow me, he wouldn't go! He does burglar-alarms, too. And telephones. And," she added maliciously, "He used to do a very good Bernard Snoring."

"Oh, yes, Bernard," Granny said. "How's he going on?"

Mariander shrugged. "Just the same."

And about as much use as a cardboard teapot, then Granny thought. But out loud, she said: "I'll never understand why you married an Outsider. They're on a different level, you can't communicate with 'em. It's like tryin' to explain colours to a blind person."

"Well," said Mariander, defensively, "Some of 'em's quite nice people. His *mother* was a Seer. That makes him half of one."

"No it don't. Either he's got it or he hasn't, no half-measures. His Dad weren't one, and he ain't one neither. You know it as well as I do--one parent's got the Sight, girls always have it, boys only sometimes. At least you're allright with Thuja and Sepia."

"Yes," Mariander agreed, "it's handy when you haven't got the phone. Still and all, Bryony, it was only after Bernard's Mother died that he took against Seers. And he *was* a bit of all right when he was young."

Granny recalled the last time she'd seen Bernard, flat out in the armchair he'd been, as per usual. That stomach! And them jowls, wobbling like a bulldog spotting a chocolate at fifty paces.

"You don't say," she said, politely.

Replete with Mariander's excellent stew, they lingered over cups of tea.

"Right," said Granny, "what's going on in the Inchwoods? And what's happened with the Guild?"

Mariander shook her head. "Rumours. Strange lights in the forest. Great big *things* flying over it. Folk going in and not coming out. That sort of thing. The Grandmaster's no better, and Kaster Blayne don't seem to know what he's doing. That's what I hear."

"He ain't lost the Sight as well, has he?" Granny said anxiously.

"Not so far--but he ain't looking good. Come tomorrow, we might know more. I'm taking you out for lunch. To Belladonna's Bistro."

Granny paused, her cup in mid-air. "Not Belladonna *Bray*?"

"The same. Done really well for herself."

"Never thought she'd settle to anything. Not after that Police-raid"-- "Ah, well, that's what did it. She married the Investigating Officer."

"You don't say! Jammy old bugger."

They talked far into the night, and later, lying in bed, Granny opened a corner of her mind, and turned it outwards, to the City.

The tumult was indescribable--nothing like the slow murmurings of the Beech-Wood, or the humdrum concerns of the Brimwold villagers. Just thousands upon thousands of random outpourings, the torrent of indecipherable consciousness that was the City.

It was too much. Clutching her forehead, she mindblocked. Mariander had been right. How did *she* make sense of it all? --leave it for tonight, ask her in the morning.

Funny how much she was looking forward to tomorrow.

Next morning, Mariander went off to visit Bernard.

Granny excused herself: too much bad blood between her and him. She knew how he felt about Seers and their "probing."

Must've been awkward, she supposed, growing up with a Mother and three sisters and no mindblock, but that didn't make it her fault, or Mariander's. And if he'd felt like that about Seers, why go and marry one?

Instead, accompanied by Grufty, she went for a wander round the neighbourhood. One or two places, food-shops and the like-- weren't too keen on Grufty's presence--(or Granny's, come to that)--but once she'd explained to them how she couldn't leave such a rare breed outside in case someone stole him, else he caught something off of the pavement, they seemed to understand.

They'd be seeing quite a bit of her, she informed them, due to her staying at her sister's, and exercising the dog. In the newsagent's, she bought a postcard to send the Bartlesham Guild-members. Nice silhouette it was, captioned:-THE INCHWOODS AT DUSK.

BELLADONNA'S BISTRO AND WINE-BAR was in an old basement, down some twisty iron steps. It looked a bit seedy to Granny, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Lunch was, after all, Mariander's treat.

Granny could hear folks talking, glasses clinking, and cutlery clattering, so she knew there must've been somebody about: just blessed if she could *see*'em. It always mystified her why anyone'd choose a place where they couldn't see what they was eating.

She groped her way through the darkness, holding onto Mariander's coat, until they fetched up at a small bar with nobody behind it.

"SHOP!" Mariander rattled the contents of her purse, "there's hungry, thirsty women here want serving!"

Moments later, once her eyes had adjusted, Granny saw that Belladonna hadn't changed one bit. Same rigid jet-black hair, same clanking jewellery, and the thickest make-up ever seen outside of a circus.

Same chest, too, Granny sniffed, wonder she didn't catch her death, why you could almost see her lungs!

"MARI, you ole trout!" roared Belladonna, "come out for some proper food, eh!"

"Yes," said Mariander, "and brought me sister, too."

Belladonna squinted through navy-blue eyelashes. "Sight save us, it is! It's ole Baggy Beamish!--whoops, sorry, just slipped out. Look, come through the back, why doncher, and we'll have a drink before you order. Latty, keep an eye on the bar!"

There was a gargling noise from somewhere nearby, followed by a sort of resigned shuffling. Granny peered hard, but saw nothing.

They made their way through a door marked STRICTLY PRIVATE, Granny muttering savagely: "Baggy Beamish? I'll give 'er Baggy Beamish, see if I don't!"

Daylight seemed blinding after the gloom of the bistro. As soon as she'd closed the door, Belladonna tore her hair off and threw it on the nearest chair, where it lay like a stiffening run-over cat. The stuff on her head, to Granny's amazement, was short, white, and tightly-permed.

Mariander sniggered. She's enjoying this, Granny thought. They watched Belladonna button herself into a thick-knit cardigan, kick off her spike-heeled shoes, and sink her feet into fur-trimmed slippers.

"Sometimes it all gets a bit too much," she sighed.

"You're talking different," Granny said, suspiciously.

"Yes, I expect I am," Belladonna, busy pouring drinks, gave a tinkly little laugh, made her sound like a set of them wind-chimes.

"But out there, you see, I'm in Character. The clientele expect it. It amuses me to let them think I'm a bit of a goer--whore-with-a-heart-of-gold sort of thing. But it seems to work--they keep coming back for more. Glass of bull's blood?"

"No, ta," said Granny, stiffly, "I don't drink nothing but tea, if it's all the same to you."

Belladonna chimed again. "Oh my dear, I see now. I offended you. But I didn't mean to be rude, really I didn't." "Baggy" was just one of those silly, adolescent nicknames, on account of your---

"Anyway, that cup of tea'd go down a treat," Granny put in hastily before Mariander could start asking questions, "and then you can tell me why you've gone all posh."

They were settled back in Belladonna's sitting-room, having eaten their fill in the Bistro.

There'd been a few small difficulties over things like sorrel soup with silly little bits of toast in it, vegetable tureens or somesuch, goat's cheese and so on, but once Granny had achieved her faggotts and three veg., followed by jam-sponge and custard, she was no trouble at all.

Belladonna, smiling brightly, kept saying: "The customer is always right"--although, for some reason, she was gritting her teeth as she said it.

"---so, you see," Belladonna was saying, "marrying Gally was the best thing I ever did. If he hadn't encouraged me, I'd never have gone to the Seminary, never have

got my Third-Status, never have become a Guild-Archivist. And I'd certainly never have learnt how to cook."

Granny couldn't suppress a gasp of amazement: she could hardly credit it. Belladonna Bray as was, with *her* background, for Sight's sake, graduating from a Seminary!--let alone being seen in fluffy slippers and a cardigan! It was right about the cooking, though.

It was something Belladonna's Mum had never gone in for: as she recalled, them Brays'd thought food was for more for throwing than eating: used to be deadly with an egg, did Brassica.

"We'd just got this place up and running," sighed Belladonna, "when Gally went."

"If that ain't that just like a man!" Granny snorted, "leave you with the cooking *and* the washing-up!" Then stopped, catching Mariander's Look, and said: "Oh. Er. Me and my big mouth."

"It's all right. Easily done." Belladonna's eyes went all misty. "Life must go on. But I tell you one thing: when Gally went, his creme caramel went with him."

"You mean--" how could she put this,--"you had it dolloped into one of them little urns and buried with him?" Granny found the idea rather touching.

Mariander, for some reason, closed her eyes, and began rocking to and fro.

"I mean," said Belladonna, stiffly, "We took it off the menu."

"Now that we've had lunch," put in Mariander, "ain't it about time you brought us up to date on the Guild?"

A shadow seemed to pass across Belladonna's eye-shadow. "Kaster and Japonica Blayne have both lost the Sight," she said, "they took them off to Ampleshott this morning."

Granny gasped. Another two!

"Wait a minute." Mariander had gone white. "That's the Grandmaster gone, along with the High-Master *and* the High-Mistress, right?" Belladonna nodded. "Well, then. You're Mid-Mistress *and* Senior Archivist. Don't you see?--that means you're next!"

Thuja, Mariander's eldest, brought Quinnie and Christom round later: Mariander, despite Lunch Out, was doing a big tea, with trifle and everything.

The girl wasn't quite so shy this time, though Granny didn't push her, and Christom plonked himself determinedly on Granny's knee, cheering her up no end by announcing: "I like sitting on you, you're just like a beanbag!"

They passed an enjoyable hour playing mind-games: the children's abilities, though raw and untutored, were impressive, particularly those of the boy, Christom, who learnt quickly and showed enormous promise.

When the children were out of the room, Thuja whispered that she and Mallon were hoping to send them to the Guildschool in Bartlesham. This pleased Granny no end, and she resolved to keep in touch with their progress: might be able to pass on a few tips along the way.

Before Thuja left, they talked briefly about the Guild: Thuja, who was a teacher, encountered a great many rumours at school: everyone, it seemed, was uneasy, but nobody really knew *why*. Everyone was jumping at shadows, frightened of something they couldn't see.

Larrimer Coy laced the Grandmaster's cocoa with double-strength powder, and then spat in it for good measure.

He stirred it with a grubby finger, watching the swirling mixture with satisfaction: bloody good, that. Not a trace. Loading the mug and a plate with a few biscuits on it,

onto a tray, he began the long climb up to the Grandmaster's study. Tonight, he wanted the old bastard sleeping like a baby, giving him the run of the house. He'd got things to do, places to go--and by the Sight, he was going in style.

That would be the best bit of all! --he could hardly wait to get his hands on the Grandmaster's car, drive it like it *should* be driven, give it some welly down the Ampleway--

He knocked briefly, not expecting any answer, and went in. He was still sitting there, staring at nothing, fiddling about with his paper-knife--didn't look as if he'd moved all day.

He's losing it Undermaster Coy giggled inwardly. *it's them dreams getting to him. Well, he won't have none tonight, but he'll sleep, ho yes, he'll sleep, alright.*

"Your cocoa, Grandmaster. Don't let it get cold." He set it down carefully on the desk and then, wearing his humble, subservient expression, hovered whilst the Grandmaster drank obediently, spit and sleeping-powder and all: the biscuits lay untouched.

More often than not, the silly sod completely forgot about food and drink: tonight, though, Undermaster Coy couldn't be doing with that.

"Goodnight, Grandmaster. Sleep well." Collecting up the tray, Larrimer Coy backed deferentially from the room. The Grandmaster didn't appear to notice.

Down in the kitchen, he inspected the empty mug before allowing himself a triumphant "YES!" Old Tukesley'd soon be flat out, dead to the world til mid-morning with the dose *he'd* had.

Just to be on the safe side, though, he hung around for a while, picking his nose and flipping through a comic he'd confiscated off some kid at the Guildenhall, but it was hard going--too many long words. When he judged it time, he crept up to the Library, shutting the door behind him before switching on the light. Then he got to work amongst the Archives, lugging out several bulky volumes.

Respect for books was not Larrimer Coy's thing. Accordingly, most of them got damaged in the process: stupid big buggers, he muttered, only fit for standing on, or propping doors open.

It was hot, heavy work, and, as he didn't believe in over-exertion, he decided on a bit of a snooze round before he carted them all downstairs.

He passed an entertaining ten minutes in the Grandmaster's quarters, trying on all his ceremonial robes, hats and trimmings. He strutted and preened before the long mirror, his runty little head and body lost in heavy folds of velvet and brocade.

Powerful he told himself *Noble. Whatta stud.*

He looked, in point of fact, exactly like a rat peering out of a thicket.

He wondered about special, ceremonial underpants, mebbe leather with runes tooled into 'em, or a jewelled posing-pouch---that'd be a puller, alright. He'd really go for it, if he were Grandmaster!--not like that old fool upstairs, with his delicate gloves and his gold-rimmed glasses. No, Grandmaster Coy would knock 'em dead in black leather. With big boots. And studded wristbands. And a hood. He'd have women fainting in the aisles--

Time he was moving. Sighing, he put everything away, exactly as he'd found it. Dint want no giveaways. Not yet. He'd just give himself a quick go through the Grandmaster's personal things: might be something he could hold against him some day. He could always hope.

Course, he cleaned this room every week--well, shoved the dust under the furniture--but he didn't take no longer than he had to, and, besides, he never got chance of a poke round, knowing the old bugger was just along the corridor.

But he might as well've saved his energy: old Tukesley didn't go in for things. Or secrets. Or memories: place could've bin anybody's. Even *his* basement had pictures on the walls: alright, so they wasn't to everybody's taste, and he'd had most of 'em sent in plain brown envelopes addressed to Mr. Smith, but at least they made it look homely.

And it came to him that, after all them years, he still hadn't got a clue what made the Grandmaster tick.

On top of the drawers were some bookends holding a few boring Guild-guides, a pen clipped onto a notebook, which he flipped through--lot of big, boring words--and a clock. No photographs or nothing. Everyday clothes hung in the wardrobe: there was a pair of slippers by the bed, a pair of pyjamas in it, and a dressing-gown hanging on a hook. There just wasn't nothing else.

He rummaged half-heartedly through the contents of the drawers, not expecting any dirty books or sex-aids. Wasn't even any deodorant he could have a snort of: far as he knew, the Grandmaster didn't sweat.

With grubby hands, he pawed at the clean socks and underpants, the neatly-folded vests and pullovers. No surprises there. Spare pyjamas in the middle drawer, along with a sort of cotton robe-thing.

Waste of time, might as well pack it in--no, hang on. There *was* something, jamming the bottom drawer. Wrenching it free, he pulled the thing out, looked at it in amazement, and sniggered.

The ole Bugger! Who'd've thought it! He shoved it into his back pocket for later, and made his way back to the library.

He started humping the books back to the kitchen: glad when two of them crashed down the stairs, spines broken and leather damaged.

Well, it was only old books: he wasn't going to lose sleep over 'em, and Tukesley was so far gone, he wouldn't even notice they were missing. Course, he had to go all the way back to switch off the light. Frowning, he noticed another of them little piles of black dust: as if he hadn't enough to do, without *more* muck appearing!

Grinding it into the parquet with the toe of his shoe, he turned off the light, and hurried downstairs to start loading up the Grandmaster's car. Mustn't be late for his meeting.

Granny wasn't sure which was worse: Sham doing car-alarms, Sham doing telephones--(woke her up with a start every time, that one)--or Sham flying round doing helicopter noises.

Truth to tell, she'd a bit of an after-lunch-allright, after-tea-as-well-headache--it'd bin hard to make out, in that gloom, what Belladonna'd bin pouring into their glasses--but much easier to taste what Mariander'd sloshed into the trifle.

All Granny really fancied was a quiet sit and think about what Belladonna had told them, and what it meant for the Bartlesham Guild. She'd have to go and see Ole Tukesley, soon as she got back. It'd been a beautiful day--just the sort of weather for sitting in a dark cellar, as she'd pointed out to Mariander, who'd called her an ungrateful Phyllis, or somesuch--and it suddenly occurred to Granny where she wanted to spend what was left of it.

Accompanied by Grufty, she took a chair, and sat in one of the empty shop-windows, fronting onto the street. Moonlight flooded in, poking into dusty corners: the room'd been a long time empty. Grufty sat at her feet, occasionally breaking wind, and glancing up apologetically--he'd pinched some of Sham's birdseed, which hadn't altogether agreed with him.

"It's all right, old lad," she told him, "I know just how you feel. I've et too much as well."

They sat on companionably, watching the passers-by and the ebb and flow of the traffic--none of it new to Grufty, all of it fascinating to Granny, and surprisingly relaxing. Ever so slowly, she opened a corner of her mind to the City.

Almost straightaway, she touched upon something she just knew she was going to enjoy--the delights of Electricity.

Live currents danced, arced and sparked a kaleidoscope pattern across her brain. She touched the high-tension thrumming of cables and pylons. Power surged and subsided, and energy danced along copper wires to earth itself before her mind's eye. It was absolute Poetry. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever experienced. Course, Brimwold had electricity--she used it herself, but not on this magnificent scale. And growing bold, she began to experiment.

Across the City, a great, fluctuating current danced, borne along by Granny's mind. Energy begat energy. Switches tripped, lights dimmed, alarms blared. Stand-by generators activated in factories and hospitals, and irate consumers jammed the Electricity Company's switchboard as Granny, oblivious, played with her new toy. Bit much, all at once. Abruptly, Granny abandoned the Grid-Network in favour of something a bit nearer home. Something gentle, stately, alternating and mechanical.

Red, yellow and green.

Something in her memory---and opening her eyes, she recalled the traffic-lights, almost outside the window. What a nuisance *they* seemed to be: just when the traffic got nicely going, them blessed lights made it stop! Very annoying. Soon sort that out.

She'd just have a little go, and then back to the electricity-supply. She sniffed. Very basic stuff: Mariander's girls could've done it when they was tinies. Nothing to it, only needed a pinch of mindpower---she'd try red, first, she decided. Always did like red.

Outside, traffic ground to a halt as four sets of lights showed simultaneous red. And went on showing red.

Gleefully noting the honking of horns, Granny tuned in to the drivers, stuck fuming at the crossroads. What a boiling of rage and frustration!--she could only hold it for a moment.

After a decent interval, she changed all the lights to green: the effect was more than gratifying, as four lots of traffic revved up and took off simultaneously. This was, Granny decided, the best bit of fun she'd had in ages. And she opened her mind to encompass the rest of Inchester's traffic-lights.

It took the police, who eventually ground their way through the chaos, a very long time to pacify the public, allocate officers to point-duty, and arbitrate in the dozens of minor collisions: particularly the one involving four buses all claiming their right-of-way.

And through it all, Granny, Grufty beside her, sat enthralled in her ringside seat. She hadn't enjoyed herself so much in years.

Larrimer Coy was wearing shades, which, while looking good, were not a lot of use for night-driving.

Disgustedly, he threw them onto the back seat alongside the old books, and, once clear of Bartlesham, accelerated hard. Not that his action had any noticeable effect on the vehicle's speed: it would've been easier had he been able to reach the foot-pedals properly: having to sit on a cushion didn't help.

Ejecting the Grandmaster's poncey string-quartet cassette, he fed in one of his own, opened the sun-roof, and roared a heavy-metal anthem to the night-sky. The car swerved erratically along the Ampleway, hitting something big with a satisfying squelch: he thought about stopping, but didn't. It was a very dark night, and there wasn't anybody about. He'd be coming back this way. Whatever he'd run over would keep til he could take it home and cook it--might have to bang it over the head first, mind--he didn't want no delays, it wouldn't pay him to be late.

He slowed as he reached the outskirts of the village: easy to miss the turn-off. The road became a potholed track, and he hoped the exhaust wouldn't drop off. He switched the music off: even crawling along, he needed all his concentration.

Something large flew across the bonnet, and he almost lost control. Wild, cackling laughter split the night. Ambarrow always made him nervous: but then, every burial-ground had its horror-stories: it was horribly quiet when he switched the engine off.

He sat listening, postponing the moment when he'd have to get out--he didn't lock the car, knowing that he'd have to come back for the books, and he left the headlights on, remaining huddled in the pool of friendly light.

"Boss?" he quavered, "that you, Boss?"

Something cackled from the ground near his feet, and he felt a sharp, stinging nip in his groin. After which the lights went out.

Thuja called round later, on her way home from a parents' evening which hardly anybody had attended, owing to the inexplicable behaviour of the Inchester traffic-lights. She was not in the best of moods, having her suspicions about the whole affair.

"I do hope," she gave Granny one of those reproachful own-up-or-I'll-keep-the-whole-class-behind looks teachers excel in, "that whoever's responsible isn't found out by the Guild and *struck off*."

Granny shook her head. "Disgusting, I call it. Whoever done it wants their legs smackin'. I dunno what the world's coming to."

Darkness clamped itself around Larrimer Coy. It wasn't the heavy, thundery summer-storm sort, or the chilly, echoing foggy stuff, and it wasn't the drenching, desolate lost-on-the-moors kind, either: them, he could've coped with.

No, this darkness was out to get him. He could feel it soaking into him, clutching and fingering and seeping into his ears and nose and mouth before it oozed into his blood and his bones and his brain and then flooded his lungs and drowned them in blackness--he rolled himself tight as a threatened hedgehog, and whimpered.

Abruptly, the headlights came back on, along with the car-radio, and the voice penetrated his mind: *ENOUGH of this frivolity. Compose yourself. You're a mess.*

Piece by cautious piece, he straightened himself out, checking, as he dusted himself down, that all his bits were intact and working. He was surprised to find that they were: he'd thought he was a goner, that time.

Something flickered, on the edge of his vision, all spooky and shadowy--fear shook him--and then he got it. Did his head in, every single time. Funny how he never felt like laughing.

"Boss?" Relief flooded his voice. "You been there all along, right?"

Mirth rebounded around his sinuses, making his teeth rattle. And the voice seemed to come from everywhere, but at least it wasn't in his head anymore. Unsteadily, he put his mind-block back into position: not that that'd keep the Boss out—

"Nothing like a little jocular amusement."

Undermaster Coy frowned: he every seldom knew what the Boss was talking about, but this time the word "amusement" gave him a clue. After a moment he ventured: "You mean you've been having me on?"

"Just so. And have you borne that which I asked you to bear?" Tough one, that. Something about being born a bear--eventually after a great deal of blinking and lip-chewing, he worked it out.

"Yes, and I done even better than that, Boss." He waited expectantly. Shadows shifted. Mud squelched beneath his feet, and in his shoes.

"WELL?" came the reply, "PROCEED. You think me a mind-reader, perhaps?" Huh? Stupid thing for a Seer to come out with. Was the Boss having him on again? Better not to ask.

"Yes, but. How about my reward?"

"REWARD? Does your deed merit such a thing?"

"Oh, you bet Boss. You'll really like this one."

That laughter in his head again: made him want to go and lie down.

"And what reward do you seek, little rodent?"

No need to think about *that* one. Dreamily, he said:

"Motorbike. Great big black bugger with--"

"And your second choice?"

"A alligator. Or a pike. Or both."

"Explain."

"Well, they make good pets. You can always eat a alligator if you get fed up of it, and you can make a cracking handbag out of a pike."

There was such a long silence, he thought the Boss must've cleared off.

"You entertain--interesting fantasies, Larrimer Coy. Show me this device, and I will judge it worthy, or unworthy."

Eagerly, he reached into his pocket. "Never believe what I found in old Tukesley's bedroom! Here, have a look--" The force of the blow knocked him flat. And this time, the voice drilled into his skull.

You dare presume to touch your betters! Lay the offering before me, and then display the books!!

Sullenly, he got up, wondering whether it was worth bothering before he got knocked down again--and then shuffled off towards the Grandmaster's car. Talk about touchy! Couldn't do a thing right, as usual. Bring the Boss a pressie, get shouted at and covered in mud for his trouble, not that a bit of muck bothered him, but what about them car-seats?

Hours and hours they'd take to get clean, and guess who'd be doing the scrubbing?--not the Boss, for a start! Grumbling steadily, he dragged the heavy tomes across the back seat, arranging them in an untidy pile so that their titles could be read, and all the time vaguely aware of the Boss flickering about behind him, examining the thing he'd found in Tukesley's room.

"WELL, WELL, WELL!" Catching a rare note of approval, he turned to bask in its warmth. "You have indeed excelled yourself in this matter. There is much advantage to be gained from this device--you CARELESS CRETINOUS VANDAL! You brainless, brachi-cephalic OAF! You stupid little SOD!"

Oh, oh. The Boss had come down to earth, which meant that he was for it. Instinctively, he closed his eyes and tensed himself: be on the floor again, any minute now.

"Look at these books! They're ruined! Every one destroyed! Have you no finer feelings? No, how could you have, you reprehensible little turd!"