

THE SALT GARDEN

by

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*salt spray stinging his face . . . foaming
surf and the seabirds crying . . . down
the cleft to The Lady's cavern . . . taste
her sweet water welling up from the
depths of Her bitter sea. . . .*

Orel of Estindale awoke huddled in a culvert with a stinking green horsehide wrapped around him. The sandstorm had passed, leaving the Waste drearier than ever. Here and there a few broken branches still poked above the yellow grit. Gone were the berries he had hoped to eat. Gone as well was every nearby landmark.

But Orel had grown used to disaster this past decade since the Hounds of Alizon had demolished his seacoast home. He smiled grimly with both corners of his mouth, the right side of his face pulling up to match the rictus frozen on the left by an invader weapon.

But for the moment it sufficed that this bit of the Old Ones' stonework had saved his life. Orel blessed the vanished builders. Even so, the makeshift refuge was a close fit for his short, stocky young body. He crawled out, stretched, and tried to brush himself free of sand. Despite vigorous effort, his clothes and thick red hair remained miserably gritty.

Orel refolded the stiff hide that had shielded his head,

once more making it into a crude pack. It was all that he had left of the mount he had had to slay three days earlier after her leg broke. Poor reward, he thought, for the swiftness that had borne him away unscathed from an outlaw attack.

Pack on shoulders, staff in hand, Orel took stock of his changed surroundings. The storm had given as well as taken. Although sand now covered the faint road he had been following, it had blown fairly clear of the ancient watercourse the culvert had been built to serve. His experienced eyes traced the slight trough marking the channel and fragments of stonework that must have once edged the lower side of the embankment. He bent down to examine the cracked, worn blocks. Despite their decay, they still commanded his respect, for the Old Ones had lavished fine workmanship even on humble things.

But whatever their fabulous powers, he reasoned, their water still had to come from somewhere—somewhere higher up. (Orel was not one to abandon common sense when thinking about the Old Ones.) If he could follow this dry watercourse to yonder spur of mountains, he might be able to find remnants of its former source before he perished of thirst.

Not only did he have his staff to probe for buried structures, he trusted The Lady's amulet to guide him on wholesome paths. He reverently stroked this talisman, a spiral shell from Estindale's shore, sealed with wax and hung on a neck cord. It held a few precious drops of fresh water from the miraculous spring in her sea cave, a shrine sacred to his folk since they first came to the Dales.

His hand closed in a protective fist, for The Lady's cavern was no more. The invaders had blasted it to slag and ash like all the rest of Estindale. The very Waste about him was friendlier to life than the poisoned ruins of his former home.

Orel's twisted face hardened. He could not spare the moisture on tears for sorrows old or new, not for his tall fair brothers fallen at the family hold, nor for his father

slaughtered at their campfire a mere ten-day ago. Now he was the only one left to bear the sword-and-lily emblem of Karpad's line.

What mattered at the moment was staying alive. With their maps in those brigands' hands, he dared not continue toward his original goal, nor attempt a return to the Dales. Thus, unequipped though he was, Orel meant to continue still deeper into the desert. If he was to die in the Waste, let it be while exploring the unknown.

He tossed a distracting pebble into his mouth and set off.

It was hard to keep a steady pace. Although the land rose only gradually, enough sand overlaid the hard-packed rubble of the bank to make the footing treacherous. But at least Orel could find sufficient traces of worked stone to stay on course.

The strain of searching helped keep his mind off hunger. Thirst was proving more insistent: the pebble-sucking trick had distinct limitations for a man with a twisted mouth. He clamped his cracked lips in a resolute grimace and trudged on.

Heat was no hazard this far north in the Waste this early in the year. But since spring should be a desert's richest season, the dryness was far worse than expected and the emptiness more ominous. Not a single pair of wings crossed the bare sky. How he ached for the sight of another living creature! Even a common serpent would have seemed a kinsman in this silent, barren land.

The old channel widened and meandered but Orel held on to his hope in the mountains. Each weary step brought them closer. Now he could clearly see how the highest peak in the range was topped with snow: It looked like a pale-faced woman clad in a dark blue robe. The cliffs of Estindale had been as blue and its crashing waves as white. He touched The Lady's amulet and pleaded for her care. But how could she whose names were numberless as the waters of the world hear his cry in this waterless place?

* * *

Shadows lengthened across the sand. The helpful waterway ended abruptly in a jumble of boulders, the remains of repeated landslides from the foothills. Orel's heart quickened. Amid the rubble he spied a shattered wall. Its white stones fairly sparkled against the ochre rocks. He traced the usual protective signs but, happily, sensed nothing of the Dark about this place.

His pain submerged in the thrill of discovery, Orel tried to trace the foundations. It was impossible to determine the building's original purpose. It might have been anything from a temple to a tax-gathering station. Frustration tempered his excitement because he could not investigate his find properly. However, using his staff to probe the inner surface of the wall, he located traces of a staircase.

Each riser bore a band of carvings too worn to appreciate. But scratching deeper revealed a step that was somewhat better preserved. The figures strung across the rise were humanlike, but some appeared winged or oddly proportioned or had too many limbs. Judging by the remaining stumps of the balustrade, each support had been a separate small sculpture, but the surviving feet had talons or hooves as often as toes.

Orel knelt awhile on the lowest step tracing the alien forms with his fingers, vainly willing them back to wholeness. An old familiar longing swept over him—to know the Old Ones in their glory, in the fresh morning of their era. All his life he had heard that wonder was gone beyond recall and none could summon back what was fled. Yet he would not cease from searching in this life or in any other that should be granted him.

Weariness came flooding back but he continued to poke about in the disturbed sand. He turned up some shards of thin, hard pottery with a sea-blue glaze. Surely one fragment had been the neck of a ewer, an identification no sooner made than regretted, for it reminded him of his thirst.

But as he rose from his digging, Orel saw a greater blessing than he had dared to ask for: In a sheltered corner of the wall grew a bountybush. He scrambled over, snapped off a swollen leaf the size of his hand, and bit. Sweet liquid flooded his mouth like rapture. Breathing a prayer of thanks, he plucked more leaves and ate his fill of the moisture-laden pulp. It was his first nourishment since eating his mare's flesh days earlier.

That night Orel slept, somewhat contented nestled against the broken stairs.

The next morning he stripped off half of the bountybush's remaining leaves to serve as provisions in the mountains. He nicked his finger and let fall a drop of blood by way of offering to the powers of this parched land.

Since there was no question of climbing over the rock fall, Orel began working his way northwest along the base of the steep hills. By midday, he stood amazed before a splendid gate. Sinuous twin figures whose blurred curves still proclaimed them female joined hands above the opening to form a horseshoe arch. Beyond them beckoned a passageway cut through solid rock and open to the sky. It was so narrow, his outstretched arms could touch both walls at the same time. Its floor had been worn hollow by the passing of countless feet. The way led inexorably upward.

Bridling his excitement, Orel held himself to a cautious walk. Neither did he stop to examine the unfamiliar inscriptions covering the passage's walls, merely noting that one cluster of partly effaced symbols repeated regularly.

An hour later he emerged into a broad valley holding an entire ruined city. No explorer of the Waste had ever seen the like! He could scarcely sort out the marvels lying before him.

Down the middle ran a dry riverbed that vanished into an opening in the rocky rampart he had just crossed. This must have originally fed the ancient watercourse he had been following. Perhaps its own source was a glacier on that snow-capped peak at the far end of the valley. In any

event, it had once served a complex irrigation network. Orel took the road along its left bank past lifeless fields and orchards of skeletal trees. The roofless houses of the city proper formed a maze of half-tumbled walls. A larger structure with hints of extra stories may have been a palace. A nearly intact stone bridge connected it with an open square on the opposite side, possibly a marketplace. This adjoined a graceful round building with a shattered dome.

As he reached the ruined palace, Orel broke into a run, for beyond it grew a garden hedge, green as living hope. Skidding and sliding to a halt beside it, he reached out to pluck a yellow flower among the glossy leaves.

He screamed.

The blossom was made of beaten gold and grew on a branch of jade.

Orel stumbled to his feet. He continued on around the hedge, struggling to make sense of what he saw. The plants were nothing but stone and metal. Neither decay nor dust marred that perfect foliage. Only bejeweled insects poised on those shining petals. His probing fingers had barely touched a bud when someone called out.

"If you desire a flower, stranger, I will gladly make you one. Do not molest my garden."

The voice, which tinkled like crystal windchimes, came from a gate in the hedge. Orel turned warily toward it, brushing his guilty hands on his thighs.

"I meant no harm," he cried in a stubbornly level tone.

"Then come into my garden, innocent one." The speaker laughed and peeked out the open gate to beckon him.

He beheld an exquisite young woman. Her dainty body was as smooth and translucent as yellow jade. She wore a paneled golden crown and equally lavish ornaments on every limb, yet was barefoot. Her sole garments were a scarf and a long full skirt, both woven of sheerest spun gold that crackled softly as she moved.

She pressed her palms together, bowed, and said: "Be welcome with whatever words your people use."

Orel copied her gesture. "For the welcome of the gate, gratitude. To the ruler of the place, fair fortune." It was not quite the formula of the Dales but he hoped it would suit the occasion.

"Well spoken!" She giggled like a girl behind a fan of fingers. "Ask your questions without fear."

How could he be suspicious of the glee in those slanting eyes? Besides, The Lady's amulet still rode quietly inside his shirt.

"What is this place?" he asked gravely.

"It is the city of Narat, once called The Jewel of the Mountains." She paused for a sly smile. "It used to belong to my sister Javar—she and I are of one birth—but now it is all mine." She swept out her arms and hugged herself. "I am Tarna. That is my own true and famous name. I say it plainly since courtesy forbade you to ask."

Orel frowned. "I mean no offense, Lady Tarna, but among my folk, knowing a name gives mastery. Have you no fear of what I, a stranger, might do with such knowledge?"

She bent double with laughter. "I? With all this fine dry earth for dominion, I fear some mortal man weighed down with gross wet flesh? What a jest! Say something else amusing."

"How can I predict your taste in drollery? Some men have found my twisted face a matchless amusement." He did not add that most women found it ghastly: There would be no Cup and Flame for one both mutilated and landless.

"A surface trifle." Tarna waved a dismissive hand. "But your skeleton," her voice turned caressing, "is just splendid—strong, straight bones with never a break, heavier certainly than those of the folk who used to live here. Of course they looked different on the outside, too."

Orel retreated a step. "If you never saw anyone like me before, how can you speak my language?"

"Why, I plucked it straight out of your mind, Orel of Estindale." She continued more earnestly. "Would it ease your fears if I promised not to scan any other thoughts?"

Besides, I would much rather have you surprise me. Nothing this entertaining has happened to me for centuries and centuries. Enough of these delays." Her curling fingers beckoned. "You must come into my garden. Now."

Orel could not have refused the summons of those fluttery little hands. Though Tarna was a dream made real, he did not feel entirely safe in her company. He recalled the old adage: "Be careful what you wish for lest you get it." Obviously she was some hitherto unknown kind of Old One. But did the Mistress of the Garden belong to the Light? To the Dark? To neither?

What lay within the hedge did boast a pavilion and flowerbeds but otherwise bore no resemblance to the gardens of the Dales.

The round, two-storyed pavilion at the center was made of stone latticework and surmounted by a knobbed spike. As he expected, all the vegetation was fashioned from colored stones and metal in the same ingenious manner as the enclosing shrubbery. And the ensemble showed the same passion for detail: Bright enameled bees bore gold dust pollen and onyx spiders lurked in webs of silver wire bedecked with moonstone dew. Yet the very brilliance of the illusion was its undoing—no living things could look so perfect.

Insofar as he recognized familiar species, Orel noticed that Tarna had grouped her plants according to the hour and season of their peak beauty. Thus, to circle the garden was to make the circuit of the year. It was the only way for time to pass in this timeless place where seeds could never sprout nor fruit decay.

Even contemplation had its allotment of space. From canopied benches in the four corners one could admire arrays of curiously eroded boulders. Linking these were stepping stones and walkways that crossed the glittering white ground whose surface was not sand but purest rock salt. Crystals both fine and coarse had been raked into ridged patterns around each upright object. Ultimately these

waves wound into a great spiral leading back to the central structure.

It was the whole universe shrunk down to a jeweled toy.

Orel's honest delight in the garden was muted by Tarna's compulsion to explain exactly how she had achieved each striking effect. Because she had been too long an artist without an audience, she veered abruptly between demanding praise and weeding compliments. He struggled clumsily to satisfy the hungers his coming had awakened in her and pitied her for the loneliness he did not know how to relieve.

The taste of failure reminded Orel how hungry he was and the mere sight of so much salt was parching his throat. He was relieved when Tarna suggested that they retire to her pavilion. At least that offered shade and perhaps a place to sit.

But what she had in mind were further demonstrations of virtuoso skill: The ground floor was her workshop. As a boy, Orel had once seen a lapidary at work during the great Ulmsport fair. That craftsman's gear was paltry stuff indeed compared with Tarna's. Not only did she possess every conceivable tool for working stone as well as metal, each of these items was as finely made as an heirloom weapon. Her work benches might have been altars. The very bins holding her gems and nuggets were worthy of what they contained.

Orel felt bloated with perfection, like one who has eaten too many dainties at a feast. Somehow, the broken bits of the Old Ones' world had held more wonder than all this hard, bright elegance. His father would have judged otherwise.

He remarked, mostly to himself: "My father would have died happy had he seen such treasures from the vanished world. But neither treasures nor happiness was fated to be his."

"Was he also seeking his fortune in the Waste?"

"It was the only place we could seek it, after the war ruined our holding. My father could not resign himself to

poverty, but instead always dreamed of new wealth. What we found here and there in ruins was seldom of much value; nevertheless I loved the work for its own sake. We had hopes of discovering a prime new site on this last journey, but marauders attacked our camp while I was chasing a runaway horse. My flight from the killing ground brought me here."

"Then your loss was my gain," she replied lightly.

He flared at her. "Do you not understand, Lady Tarna? You are entertaining a desperate treasure-hunter. Beware lest I steal something!"

"Why would you want to do that?" She laughed. "You may have anything here for the asking. Or allow me to make you something new, so you can see just how cunning my fingers are. Come now, what shall it be?" She clapped her small hands eagerly.

Orel sighed. He could not hate her for acting like a thoughtless child. After pondering a moment, he asked: "Can you copy a red pond-lily?"

"Certainly—full size, in cinnabar and jade if you wish."

He watched her choose uncut lumps of these substances from her stock. "How do you get your raw materials?" he asked.

"These mountains are rich in precious minerals. Indeed, they were the source of Narat's wealth. But I do not leave my garden to seek anything. When I require something from the mines, I summon it and it comes rolling to my door, tame as one of your dogs. The things of earth are mine. They hear my voice and obey."

She split the stones and trimmed them to size. Chisels, blades, and files flew. Soon the cinnabar became a spiky ball of petals and the green jade, round flat leaves. The process was amazingly quick and deft. At her touch stone behaved almost like wax, causing Orel to wonder how strong those inhuman hands actually were.

"Why did you choose this flower?" she asked while she polished the carving. "Does it have some special meaning?"

"It is part of the emblem of my House. Look at the decoration on my swordhilt." He approached and showed it to her without drawing the weapon from its scabbard lest she misunderstand the gesture. The enamelwork was cracked and chipped but the design was still visible. On a white background, it showed a red pond-lily impaled on the tip of a green sword.

After she had admired it he explained: "This signifies the line of Karpad, a hero doomed by luck."

"Is there a story? I do love stories and here there is none to tell me any."

Orel was willing to humor her.

"Centuries ago," he began, "my forefathers reached this world. They emerged from a tunnel in a sea cave, a tunnel no one ever after could find again. Because they came here by this odd route, they were not of the same stock as other Dalesmen. In truth, they were merely a small tribe of bloody-handed barbarians.

"To insure that his warriors would maintain their old ferocity in the strange new country, their chieftain promised his daughter (and through her the heirship) to the first man who would bring him a 'dripping head.' He expected someone to find and slay a native of the place. But an untried youth named Karpad immediately slashed a floating lily from its roots and bore it to the chief on the tip of his sword. Though he regretted his rash promise, the chief declared Karpad the winner and bestowed his daughter's hand forthwith.

"Other warriors cried foul and threatened violence to the victor. But even as they were arguing, the flower was transformed into the head of a beautiful woman. Karpad had unwittingly slain a shapechanger in disguise. Then the tribe declared itself satisfied and accepted Karpad as their future chief.

"Nevertheless, the infamy of his deed followed him all his days. In the end, his wife betrayed him to his death. She hated him for winning her through trickery she felt shameful. Her son in his turn slew her to avenge his father.

Afterward he settled in Estindale and even prospered ere he drowned. But each succeeding generation has labored under a double heritage of cleverness and grief."

"An excellent story to be sure! How did I manage for these long years without you to entertain me? Do you wish me to put a slit on the underside of the lily so you can balance it on your sword as your ancestor did?"

"That will not be necessary." Her heart as well as her hands must be harder than stone. Wearily he forced himself to add: "I am glad that my tale pleases you."

She handed him the finished flower.

"—As this magnificent ornament pleases me."

He did not need to gild his praise. Here was the essence of every floating lily that had ever blossomed on a pond. Curving scarlet petals drew the eye downward to the shadowed throat. Smoothly swelling contours invited fingertips to glide.

Tarna glowed. "There are even better ways of pleasing each other." Her coyness deepened. "As you will discover upstairs."

Orel was too exhausted to panic—or resist. Had accepting the flower bound him to its creator's will? The lily seemed to grow both heavier and lovelier by the moment. With leaden steps he followed Tarna up a spiral staircase in the center of the pavilion. He might as well have been climbing a mountain to the moon.

The upper chamber did hold a bed draped in gold gauze but Orel scarcely noticed it. What captured his attention were the skeletons. They were very white and carefully polished. And since Tarna had spared no effort embellishing them, the whole charnel company—birds and beasts of the Waste, men and not-quite men—glittered horribly.

Orel stood transfixed by their jeweled stares.

But Tarna took no heed of his distress. She was too eager to show him how cleverly she had articulated the bones with gold wire so that she could pose them in various positions as the fancy took her. She darted about in a frenzy of

pride adjusting the slope of a wing here, the jut of a tail there. At last she whirled around to confront him.

"Now you must not be jealous. Your skeleton is better than any of these. I wanted to add you to my collection the moment I saw you. Oh, you would have been so beautiful with emeralds for eyes and spun copper hair once your wet flesh was gone. But as I came to know you, I formed a better plan. Let me turn you to stone and make you my consort!"

Her offer left him too numb to reply.

She turned petulant. "Remember, you are already half mine—I could call your bones right out of your body if I chose and take my will of you." Her lips softened and she pleaded: "Come to me of your own accord. My salt is in your very blood."

"And in my tears," he answered. "The tears I would shed for you while you slew me. My mortal life is a poor thing compared to yours, Lady Tarna, but let me live it to its natural ending." Then all his weariness overwhelmed him. His voice broke and he began to weep.

"No!" she cried.

Tarna raised her hand to brush away the tear flowing down his ruined cheek, but as soon as her finger touched his skin, bolts of agony seared through to his skull. He screamed and fled stumbling down the spiral stairs. The stone lily that he dropped rolled after him like a severed head and smashed on the workshop floor.

But Orel was out the door, through the garden gate, and halfway across the bridge before he glanced back to see if Tarna was pursuing him. He spied her standing beside the hedge, holding shards of the cinnabar petals in one limp hand.

On he ran, dodging gaps in the roadbed, leaping fallen column, until he reached the river's opposite bank, passed a tumbled wall, crossed a sandy courtyard, and collapsed exhausted inside the wreckage of a hall.

He lay on the floor gasping for a long while. As his panting slowed, he tried to sit up, saw dark spots and sparkles

before his eyes, and rested his head on his knees until the blood returned. He stretched his limbs cautiously and tried to calm his mind.

A hasty check confirmed that Tarna had not followed him. He saw her still standing at her own gate, casting a long shadow before her. If what she said earlier about not leaving her garden was true, perhaps the dry river was a mystic barrier. But what kind of force could prevent her from crossing from left bank to right?

Orel touched his ravaged face. Tarna's caress had marked his left cheek with three stone-hard spots, as if pebbles had been driven into his skin. The affected area no longer ached but its very numbness was a kind of pain. He had not been one for mirrors and was glad he could not see these new disfigurements. He was even gladder that his whole body had not suffered the same fate.

The bountybush leaves in his pack were still decently fresh. They made the finest meal he had ever eaten.

By now it was evening and the air already held a chill. Orel looked around for firewood. There was no fuel inside the ruined hall, but the surrounding courtyard had once been landscaped with pools, flowerbeds, and an orchard that might have been dead for a thousand years. He gathered a bundle of branches that snapped like an old woman's arms, then went in search of better shelter before the light entirely failed.

Beyond the entrance hall opened a vast circular room with a dome that was partly intact. The dome's summit featured a round opening or "eye" designed to allow rainwater to fall freely into a catchbasin below. Orel brushed the debris out of this basin and built his fire in it. The ancient fruitwood burned with the fragrance of harvest festivals centuries past.

By its flickering light Orel studied his surroundings. (Now that he was somewhat refreshed, he reverted to old habits of mind.) Surely this had been a temple. Although the plastered walls were badly flaked and gouged, he could tell that they had originally carried garishly bright murals

aswarm with fantastic beings. The dome itself had been divided into four sections, each painted a different color—red, green, yellow, and blue—which seemed to have coordinated with the wall frescoes below. Three battered female statues stood on pedestals placed equidistant around the central basin.

Orel took a burning brand from the fire and used it as a torch to examine the statues more closely. They must have been spectacular in their day, these wooden images of dancers whose bodies were as delicately shaped as Tarna's but blue-white in color instead of yellow. That each had two pairs of arms in no wise detracted from their grace. But, like the wall paintings behind them, the statues had been mutilated. Their heads and hands had been struck off and battered to pieces. The sorry bits still lay scattered on the floor. What hatred had despoiled such rare beauty?

As Orel stirred through the remains trying to imagine their original appearance, he came upon a wooden cup with its base gone. It must have been held by one of the statues. On impulse, he raised the broken relic in a salute to the banished Power and then brought it to his twisted lips as if to drink.

But why had he thought "Power" and not "Powers"? Did the three statues represent the same being? Orel was incapable of ignoring a mystery. He looked at the pedestals again. They bore stylized symbols of clouds, waves, and ice. Since each was a form of water, were the images successive aspects of a water goddess as Maid, Mother, and Crone? Was she possibly Javar, the twin sister Tarna had mentioned? Did the painted decorations proclaim that her rule extended over all four directions and every kind of creature native to this land? And most exciting of all, was Javar but another name for Estindale's own Lady?

He cradled her shell amulet in both hands and begged her protection through the night.

The full moon shone down on Orel as he fell asleep beside his fruitwood fire.

* * *

Narat lived again in Orel's dream. Its haughty folk walked in sumptuous trailing garments. Caravans brought the wealth of a continent in trade for its jewels and precious metals. Although slave gangs burrowed deep into the mountains, the finest gems were dredged out of Narat's river. Greed demanded greater yields. So the fatal decision was made to dam the river and plunder its bed directly.

Having done so, the city proudly changed its sole allegiance from Javar, the Water Power, to Tarna, the Earth Power, hitherto a shadowy figure. They invoked their new goddess with deep, droning chants and bloody rites. At the climax, when Tarna deigned to manifest herself bodily among them, her new worshippers responded with such fervid zeal that they sacked Javar's temple.

From that day forward, the dammed-up river began to shrink. It dried up all the way to its mountain source. The melting snow that used to feed it remained frozen on the highest peak all year round. Without water for irrigation, the city died.

Only Tarna remained in the ruins. She sowed a patch of ground with salt and began fashioning her perfect garden of stone.

Orel awoke sweating despite the cold. He knew the dream for a message calling him to action. The time had come to undo the wrongs done here of old lest this local desert continue to spread century by dusty century, first into the rest of the Waste, then into the Dales until it sucked at the mighty sea itself.

Orel had clung to life so stubbornly while others perished, he was loathe to let it go. He stared hard at the remains of Narat and remembered the ashes of Estindale.

The moon still hung in the dawn sky when he strode forth to confront Tarna.

She met him at the garden gate. They greeted each other with the solemn courtesy that precedes mortal combat.

"Have you come to offer your surrender?" she asked.

"No, I am here to accept yours," he replied.

"Yesterday you were amusing, but not today."

"This is no jest, Lady Tarna. I beseech you to bring back your sister Javar."

"Why?" Tarna sneered. "Let her sleep on her frozen mountain as she has these past thousand years. Now this place is mine alone. Here I tend my garden."

"Yours is a garden of death," he said gently. "There can be no life without water."

"Water? Insignificant, shifty stuff. It changes; stone endures."

"But not forever. Water can wear it away. You call water insignificant. I call salt barren. Yet water and salt together nourish life, in the depths of the sea or in the veins of a man."

She scowled. "Why bother to bring forth life at all? It is a flower that blooms by day and fades when the night comes on."

"Nevertheless, that is our destiny. Unless we walk our appointed path, how can we aspire to a higher one? It makes no difference that you are a goddess and I a mortal. The world still turns about us like a great wheel where day succeeds night and night, day. We cannot hold fast to one half and banish the other."

"How dare you tell me what I cannot do! For a mere half, I have managed well enough alone since Javar and I were born from the sundering of Vedi, the One who ruled here before the city of Narat ever rose."

The last piece of the pattern fitted into place. Vedi must have been this land's primordial form of the Power revered in Estindale while Tarna and Javar were but aspects of her, dangerous only because they had been driven into isolation. Orel summoned his courage for a final plea.

"Take pity on the land, Lady Tarna. Let life begin anew. Rejoin your twin and once again be Vedi."

"Never! For I would cease to be myself."

"If you let the wheel of change turn unhindered, you would still have a place in it that nothing could take from you."

"Nothing can take from me what I already have. Nor

shall you, flesh-clad mortal." Each word struck like a crystal gong: "I will drive you out of my garden."

Tarna shrieked with a fury that would have split rocks. Her whole body quivered to a high thrumming whine that arose from her throat. Suddenly, she had too many arms to count and each one held a lethal tool. Orel attempted to draw his sword. It barely cleared the scabbard before the keening vibrations shook it to splinters. Vainly he held up empty hands to ward his breast. But Tarna's swarm of arms enclosed him in a monstrous embrace. His leather jerkin protected his back for a moment until her knives and scrapers slashed it away, inflicting wounds that turned to troughs of stone quicker than they bled. Staggering with the pain of her flailing blows, he struggled to free his trapped arms before her face reached his bare neck. Getting the shell amulet into his hands, he rammed it against her snarling lips. She bit it in two. The broken edges gashed his fingers. His blood and a drop of the amulet's hallowed water touched her tongue at the same instant she stabbed him in the spine.

All anguish froze. Ice seized his limbs, then melted like the promise of half-forgotten springs. Away flowed his life while his spirit slipped into the sea of white peace that was Vedi.

The entwined remains of Orel and Tarna flashed with furious lightnings as they turned to mist. This rose as cloud and fell as rain. The rain pelted; the rain lashed; the rain scoured. It smashed and scattered stone. What storm began, flood finished. The land was washed clean of Narat.

Now the whole valley blooms like a garden, for its mountain-born river never fails. Wild horses from the Waste come to graze its lush meadows that taste faintly of salt. They care not what bright shards lie buried in the turf. Nor do they ask why here and here alone grows the flower called Orel's beauty, the one with sea-green leaves and petals red as fresh-drawn blood.

Afterword

The Witch World is an archeologist's dream. Its civilizations are so much older, their remains far more exotic than anything on our Earth. Contact—for good or ill—with relics of the past is a recurring motif in the series, for instance in Year of the Unicorn, my own favorite. So the perils of wresting treasures from the Waste plus the classic Nortonian plot of an outcast finding his place seemed appropriate choices for this story.

But the particular perils and treasures met in "The Salt Garden" result from a chain of happy accidents. When the invitation to participate in the Witch World came, I was doing research on the Silk Road, the trade route that linked Byzantium and Ancient China, which also happened to have just been the subject of three major museum shows. My story draws much of its inspiration from the marvelous exhibition catalog Silk Route and Diamond Path by Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter. Thus my hero takes his name (but nothing else) from Sir Aurel Stein, legendary excavator of Silk Road cities. I adapted imagery and symbolism from Vajrayana Buddhism, the "Diamond Path" of Tibet. The estranged twin Powers are a pair of fierce and gentle Taras, female deities from the same source. Finally, the garden itself grew from a set of jade lotus blossoms seen at an antique show while the story was germinating. Flowers precisely copied in stone were favorite decorations in Ching Dynasty China. But their sterile beauty gives me the shudders, so I enjoyed grinding them to precious dust.

—SANDRA MIESEL