

1

FOUNDING



Speechless, castaway, and wry, a spellbound oddity am I.

My feet are planted in the clay, my gaze is locked upon the sky.

FROM THE TALITH SONG "YEARNING FOR FLIGHT"



THE rain was without beginning and without end. It pattered on incessantly, a drumming of impatient fingers. The creature knew only the sound of the rain and the rasp of its own breathing. It had no concept of its own identity, no memory of how it had come to this place. Inchoate purpose drove it upward, in darkness. Over levels of harsh stone it crawled, and through dripping claws of vegetation. Sometimes it slept momentarily or perhaps lost consciousness.

The rain lapsed.

Time wore away.

With stiffening limbs the nameless creature moved on. Reaching level ground, it now rose onto trembling legs and walked. Thought-fragments whirled like dead leaves inside its skull.

The ground emptied from beneath its feet. It hurtled downward, to be brought up on a spear-point of agony. A band around its arm had snagged on a projection. The scrawny thing

dangled against the cliff face, slowly swinging like bait on a hook.

Then slowly, with great effort, it lifted its other arm. Bird-boned fingers found the catch and released it. The band sprang open and the creature fell.

Had it landed on the rocks, it would have been killed—a kinder fate—but it finished, instead, facedown in a green thicket of *Hedera paradoxis*. Stealthily the juices of the poisonous leaves ate into its face while it lay there for hours, insensate. When it awoke it was too weak to scream. It used its last energies to crawl from the toxic bushes and lie frozen in the morning sunlight, its now ghastly face turned up to the sky.

A benison of warmth began to creep into the chilled flesh, seeping into the very marrow of the bones. Detached, as though it viewed itself from afar, the creature felt its jaws being forced open, inhaled the steamy aroma of warm broth, and sipped instinctively. The sweet, rich liquid coursed inward, spreading waves of flowing warmth. The creature sipped again, then fell back, exhausted.

As its body attempted to normalize, its thoughts briefly coalesced. It held tightly to the one idea that did not spin away: the awareness that for as long as it could remember, its eyelids had been shut. It tried to open them but could not. It tried again and, before being sucked back into unconsciousness, stared briefly into the face of an old woman whose wisps of white hair stuck out like spiders' legs from beneath a stained wimple.

There followed millennia or days or minutes of warm, foggy half-sleep interspersed with waking to drink, to stare again at that face bound in its net of wrinkles and to feel the first very faint glimmerings of strength returning to its wasted body. Recognition evolved, too, of walls, of rough blankets and a straw pallet on the stone-flagged floor beside the heatsource—the mighty, iron-mouthed furnace that combusted night and day. The creature's face felt numb and itchy. And as senses returned, it must endure the sour stench of the blankets.

Stokers entered the room, fed the hungering furnace with sweetmeats of wood, clanged the iron door shut, raised their voices accusingly at one another, then went away. Children with malt-brown hair came and stared, keeping their distance.

The white-haired crone fed some broth to her charge and spoke to it in incomprehensible syllables. It stared back at her, wincing as she lifted it, blankets and all, and carried it into a small room. Beneath the peelings of bedding the creature was clad in filthy rags. The old woman stripped it naked before lowering it into a bath of tepid water. Wonderingly, it looked down at its own skeletal frame, floating like some pale, elongated fish, and perceived a person, with arms and legs like the crone but much younger. The crone was doing something to its hair, which it couldn't see—washing it in a separate container behind the bath, lathering the hair thoroughly with scented soaps, rinsing again and again.

The woman dressed the rescuee in garments of a non-descript sepia hue—thick breeches, long-sleeved gipon, and thigh-length doublet corded at the waist. There was a heavy, pointed hood with a wide gorget that was allowed to hang down behind the shoulders, leaving the head bare. About the creature's neck, beneath the gorget, she strung a leather thong tied to a rowan-wood charm crudely carved in the shape of a rooster. The bathed one sat, obediently, cross-legged while gnarled hands combed the cropped hair dry.

Bewildered, feeble, it lifted its scrawny hand to its head and felt the short stubble there. Its spindly fingers wandered to its face, where there was no sensation other than slight irritation. They found there grotesque lumps and swellings: a knobbed, jutting forehead, thick lips, an asymmetrical cauliflower of a nose, cheeks like bags of acorns. Tears filled its eyes, but its benefactress, chattering gummily to herself, seemed oblivious of its agony of humiliation.

Time organized itself into days and nights.

The days organized themselves around eating, dozing, and the exhausting minutiae of existence.

The spider-haired woman jabbed a stubby thumb at herself.

“Grethet,” she repeated. Apparently she had discovered her charge was not deaf.

Instantly grateful for this first attempt at communication, it opened its mouth to respond.

No sound came forth.

Its jaw hung slack, a crater of hollow disbelief—it had simply forgotten, or had never known, how to make speech. Frantically it searched its memories. It was then that the fist of despair slammed into the foundling.

There were *no memories*.

None at all.

The thing, pale and debilitated, stared into hot iron darkness for half the night. To its dismay, it could dredge up no recollection of a past and was unable to evoke its own name, if name it had ever possessed.

As days passed in bewilderment, meaningless sounds began to metamorphose into half-comprehended words—communications among other people. Although still confused, the newcomer compared their raiment with that which Grethet had put on him and concluded that its own sex was male. This was an identity, no matter how generalized, to be grasped and held secure, a solid fact in a morass of uncertainty.

He also discovered that he was unwelcome.

Despite his inability to guess or understand more than half of what they were saying, it was not difficult for the misshapen youth to recognize the despal, contempt, and hatred of the people among whom he dwelled. He huddled into a smaller bony heap in the furnace room corner when children spat at him. They thought him too repulsive to be approached, or they would have pinched him, as indeed they slyly pinched one another. Men and women generally ignored him. When they noticed him, they ranted coldly at Grethet, who appeared unconcerned. Sometimes, as if in self-defense, she would

point out the stranger's hair for their inspection. The apparent importance of his hair, he could not fathom. It seemed that she was tough, this old woman; they could not sway her. However, her frail patient had no illusions that she nurtured any love for him—she was kind, in a callous way, and he owed her his life, but all her actions were in the long term self-serving. To act selfishly, as the youth learned, was the way to survive in this place.

What *was* this place? The youth knew little of it beyond the windowless furnace room with its huge wood-stack, where translucent spiders concealed themselves with only their claw-tips showing in rows of four. The black walls of this chamber were roughhewn blocks of rock; they sparkled with tiny silver points where they caught the firelight. One corner of the room held the hefty iron fire-tongs, pokers, and other implements with which Grethet poked the fire after the men stoked it, several times a day.

Men here wore the drab surcoat belted at the waist, the thick breeches stuffed into boots, and the oddly heavy hood that was left to hang down behind the shoulders. Their wood-brown hair was cut short. Some were bearded. They disregarded the stranger as they ignored the other crawling things scrambling out of the fuel or unwisely hiding in it, to be later incinerated, curling in silent agony like dried leaves in the flames.

The children would poke at the wood-heap, disturbing insects and arachnids that scuttled crazily across the floor. Curiously emotionless, the brats stamped in a frenzied dance—when they had finished, a random design of smashed cephalothoraxes and carapaces remained, like pressed orchids, scarcely visible on the black stone floor with its shining flecks.

Truly, the lesser creatures had little chance.

Most of the time, Grethet was elsewhere. She would appear briefly to tend the fire, sometimes bringing food, abruptly leaning close to her ward to whisper, so that he shrank from her stinking breath.

“Boy,” she would always say, “you, boy. You do as I say. It is better.”

The youth in his weakness was grateful to be left alone, to lie in the warmth, feeling the pounding of the ravening heart in his birdcage chest; drifting in and out of exhausted, dreamless sleep.

He had been discovered, like a babe, with eyes shuttered against the world; this finding was the foundation of his aliveness. But unlike a babe, he was gifted with more than raw, untutored instinct—his body remembered, if his mind did not. A wide, if basic, world-understanding was patterned there, so that he comprehended heat and cold, high and low, light and dark—if not the word-sounds that symbolized them—without having to experiment. He recognized that a frown or a sneer, a suddenly engorged vein at the temples, or a tautened jaw boded a forthcoming kick or blow; he could walk and work and feed himself as though he were normal, as though he were one of them. But he was not one of them. A huge piece was missing: the sum of a past.

Without memories he was merely an automated husk.

Some nights the youth half woke, with tingling sensations making a racetrack of his spine and standing his hair to attention. Some days that same surge charged the air, rousing the blood like strong liquor. These crispate experiences generally dissipated after an hour or so, and as time dragged on, he became accustomed to them and did not think on them any further. They were a phenomenon that issued from Outside, and Outside was, for now, beyond his reach.

But oh, it beckoned—and sounds came to his ears from Outside—voices, the distant silver fanfare of trumpets, shouting, the heavy tread of boots, the barking of dogs, and often, very often, the clatter of hooves on faceted planes of black stone that sparkled like a star-pricked sky.

One night, awakened by one such commotion, he crept on trembling legs into an adjoining storeroom. Through a thin slot of a window in the thick stone wall he glimpsed a

round, red-gold moon. And for an instant he thought he saw an impossible silhouette flying across the bright face of it.

Soon—too soon for the nameless youth's liking or well-being—his benefactress decided he was fit enough to work at light tasks. She hustled him out of his pile of blankets and set him to sweeping floors, helping in the laundries, and cleaning the various ingenious instruments of lighting that had accumulated in this place over the years—brass candlesticks and chamber-sticks, candle-snuffers, wax-jacks, bougie boxes, wick-trimmers, douters, candle-boxes, and lamps.

His legs trembled constantly, and sometimes he nearly fainted with the effort. Fatigue and unfamiliarity made him slow—at whiles, Grethet lost patience and cuffed him. The first time it happened, he was greatly shocked and stared at her in horror, his thick lips wordlessly mouthing protestations. At this an expression of guilt flashed across her face, chased by a look of ruthlessness, and she cuffed him again, harder.

As day followed day like a queue of weary gray beggars, he became accustomed to her light, stinging blows and abusive tone, but alone at night he sometimes wept silently for want of love.

Nourished by food, sleep, and warmth, he began to gain strength as time passed. With strength came more understanding of the words employed by the other servants living and working within these dark walls. He “spoke” with the loveless Grethet, employing simple, universally obvious gestures.

“Hide yourself,” she would nag. “Maimed boy, you are. Wrap yourself and they won't see.”

How did I come to this place? he wanted to know, and, *Who am I?*

But he was unable to concoct a way of inquiring. Nonetheless, by keeping his eyes and ears keen he learned other things.

One law he learned first.

Miserable, stooped with weariness, he swept lint from the floors of the laundries. Steam imbued the air with breathless humidity. He pushed his taltry off his damp head for just a few moments of relief, but as he drew breath to sigh, a staff cracked down on his shoulder. He flinched but could not cry out.

“Taltry on . . . head!” screamed the chief laundress, her face empurpled as a ripe plum. “Never . . . off, understand?”

The wearing of the taltry hood was not merely a rule. To disobey it was a crime, punishable by beatings and deprivations. He must wear the heavy hood at all times, tied at the neck. It did not seem as important to wear it indoors, but outdoors was a different matter.

Later, Grethet took him aside and pointed to a slit of a window.

“Outside,” she pronounced in the simplified language she used for him, “outside. When outside, wear hood. Always.” She took him by the shoulders and shook him to emphasize the instructions. Working the drawstring of his hood, she compounded the ordeal by half strangling him. “Tie tightly,” she hissed. “Like this.”

The boy had examined his plain, mud-colored taltry closely, finding the reason for its peculiar heaviness. Between the outer cloth and the lining was a fine, metal chain mesh that could be felt through the cloth. Its purpose eluded him.

In the course of discharging his limited indoor employment, his toil in dark halls and cramped storerooms, the foundling came to understand in greater measure the vast and complex structure in whose understories he dwelt.

Grethet sent him to one of the kitchens to fetch bread. As he entered the fragrant, smoking cavern, one of the underbutlers spied him and emitted a yell of rage. By this time, the unnamed lad had become accustomed to loud vociferations of indignation accompanying his arrival anywhere. It had become part of his education.

“Get it out of here!” shouted the underbutler, brandishing a ladle. “It’s not allowed in the kitchens!”

As the lad was being chased down the passageway, he overheard a couple of scullery maids attempting to stifle their giggles.

“Its ugliness might cause Cook to faint into the soup,” said one.

“Such an accident might add flavor,” her companion retorted.

His appearance might have prevented his entry into some areas, but there were plenty of other tasks to be undertaken indoors.

Simply polishing the brass door fittings consumed much effort. There were knobs and handles, lock-plates and chased escutcheon plates embellished with the zigzag lightning insignia, engraved lock-covers, door-hinges and beaten copper finger-plates and cast-iron doorstops in the shape of coats of arms. Sometimes, with a sinking heart, the polisher caught sight of a monstrous visage leering at him from the convex surfaces of the burnished doorknobs and recognized his own reflection.

When Grethet suspected him of possessing a few moments of idle time, she would rattle off lists of occupations with which he might amuse himself. Unfortunately, by this time he understood her well enough.

“Furbish the bronze wall-sconces!” she would cry. “Wax the aumbries! Scrub the flagstones! Clean the second-best silver, sweep soot and cinders out of the fireplaces, and black the grates!”

He fetched, carried, and scoured. He rubbed whiting on the moon-bright trays, salvers, and elegant handbells with which the higher-ranking servants were summoned.

Once, lost in the labyrinth of passageways and stairs, the nameless lad found himself intruding upon a hitherto unexplored level of his prison-home. He had ventured higher than usual, climbing an unfamiliar stair. To his astonishment he gained the last step to see before him a corridor hung with finery, lit by the rich, golden glow of filigree lamps.

Massive rectangles of fabric covered the stone walls from floor to ceiling. Across them blazed spectacular scenes of forests, mountains, battles, gardens—scenes the lad recognized with that primeval instinct, but which he could not recall ever having beheld. On closer inspection, he perceived that the landscapes were in fact composed of countless tiny stitches in colored threads.

A voice from farther along the corridor jolted him into a panic. He sensed he should not be here, guessed he would

be punished severely if caught. There was no time to dash back to the stair-head. Softly he sidestepped behind the nearest tapestry, flattening himself against the cold stone of the wall.

Two men strolled leisurely into view. Their raiment was simple in design but sewn of sumptuous fabrics. The first, clad in black velvet edged with silver, was pontificating to the second, who wore brocade in the colors of a Summer sunset.

“. . . lower third of the structure,” he expounded, “which is occupied by the servants, was long ago hewn from a massive bulwark of living rock. Those levels are riddled with natural caves and tunnels extended by excavation, while the upper levels, reserved exclusively for us, are constructed of huge blocks of dominite mined out from those diggings. Internal and external stairways spiral their way between the multiple levels, but of course we of the House only travel in the lift-cages.”

“What are the stairways for, then?” asked the second man, demonstrating remarkable obtuseness. Magnanimously, the first lord gushed on, gesturing with his pale hands, while the menial behind the tapestry trembled in his rags.

“The servants are arranged according to a complicated hierarchy. The lower ranks, being forbidden to ride up and down between levels in the busy lift-shafts, must needs use the stairways, which reach the ground at exits near the domestic goat caves. Forbidden to trespass in the higher regions of the Tower, they pursue their drudgeries out of sight of their betters. Only the higher echelons of servant are permitted to personally serve the lords and ladies of the Tower. They use the upper stairs or, on rare occasions, the lift-cages.”

He cleared his throat.

“You, my dear peddler, who visit Isse Tower from regions rife with warm underground springs, will be interested to discover how our bathwater is heated for the Relayers and our scented ladies.”

“Mmph,” was the grunted response.

“All heating here on the upper floors is achieved by means of an ingenious furnace.”

“Extraordinary,” mumbled the orange guest.

“Extraordinary? But no,” contradicted the black-and-silver lord. “Isse Tower is, after all, the chief stronghold of an ancient and powerful dynasty second only to royalty. We of the Seventh House of the Stormriders deserve only superlative service for our creature comforts!”

“Which no doubt is well earned, as compensation for being forced to dwell in such an island as this,” said the visitor somewhat sourly, “surrounded as you are by wights and wilderness. No doubt you and your servants are rarely able to leave the Tower, or never, unless you go with a well-guarded caravan.”

“On the contrary, we come and go on the sky-roads as we please,” cried the other. “And what matter the servants? It does them good. They are safe here, and well fed—too well fed for the paltry amount of work they do, the lazy gluttons. What need have they to wander?”

Their voices had begun to fade, indicating to the cringing eavesdropper that they had turned around and were pacing away from him. As the conversation died to a whisper, he peeped around the fringed border of the tapestry. The aristocrat and the visiting merchant had indeed vacated the corridor. Instantly the lad darted from his haven and hurtled down the stairs.

But he was not to be so easily reoriented. Frantically, he searched through the lower level for some passageway or gallery he knew. He felt certain the first person he met would redirect him to Floor Five as ungently as possible, but he preferred to try finding his own way—which was why, when he heard an approaching voice for the second time, he concealed himself once more. This time he slid into a dim niche in the wall, between two stone ribs supporting arched vaults.

The figure that wandered into view was that of Mad Mullet, the compost-hauler. His job was to carry vegetable scraps from the kitchens down to the ground. There he blended them with animal dung to form a scrumptious medley for the use of the kitchen-gardeners.

His approach was usually heralded by his odor, and by the curious rambling monologue he voiced wherever he went—a

monologue that was barely intelligible at the best of times. As he ranted, he drooled. He was, as his nickname suggested, mad. However, being proud of bearing and regular of feature, he was quite comely to look at, and thus rated higher in the servants' hierarchy than the deformed lad—not that Mad Mullet cared one whit.

Orating, chanting, and singing in a queer high-pitched tone, Mad Mullet passed quite close by the place where the lad crouched, endeavoring to resemble a grotesque carving decorating the wall. The lad noted that the eyes of Mad Mullet appeared unfocused, blank, as if fixed on some distant object that none but lunatics could discern.

On tiptoe, the lad followed him.

Mad Mullet was sometimes wont to frequent the furnace levels. He might lead the way back to Floor Five.

Through the worm-ways went the two, and Mad Mullet never looked back, nor did his step falter. He led the way, but not where the lad had hoped. Without warning, a gust of pure, cold air buffeted the two. Light broke on them like a blue crystal, and they emerged upon a stone-flagged balcony as vast and sheer as the floor of the ballroom.

For the first time, the lad was Outside.

In his awe, he momentarily forgot that he was trying to keep his presence hidden from Mad Mullet. Stumbling to the edge, he gazed out to the horizon, cramming his memory with the scene. When it was filled he looked down, then from left to right, and at last he turned his head and craned upward to discover what loomed above.

Built at the sea's edge, the dominite fortress, black and glistening, towered more than forty stories straight up above the canopy of the surrounding forest. A soaring pile crowned with turrets, battlements, chimneys, and slender watchtowers, the fortress was defined by walled demesnes flanked on one side by a harbor and on the other by a sea of trees.

Balconies randomly toothed the sheer outer walls. Footed by jutting platforms leading nowhere, several arched gateways, set at varying altitudes, faced the four points of the compass.

High above ground level, at the seventh story, the circumference of the structure suddenly narrowed on the western side like a giant stair, creating a wide, flat shelf that ended in midair. No parapet or balustrade enclosed this space—instead, a row of iron-capped bollards, evenly spaced, lined the edge. Below, the outer walls of the Tower dropped precipitously—the lad reckoned it was more than a hundred feet—to the ground.

It was here, on this brink, that he was standing.

As he woke to that fact, he woke also to the proximity of the madman beside him. But in the next instant Mad Mullet was no longer at his side, for with a clear cry of “I can fly!” he had stepped joyously from the platform and plummeted to his death.

As the lad later overheard, such “flights” were no uncommon occurrence.