

THE LOST GATE

A NOVEL OF THE MITHER MAGES

ORSON SCOTT CARD



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To Phillip and Erin Absher

After all we've shared over the years,

From California to Kansas,

From Provence to Myrtle Beach,

With all the magics along the way:

This book is for you.

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Tor Books by Orson Scott Card

DREKKA

Danny North grew up surrounded by fairies, ghosts, talking animals, living stones, walking trees, and gods who called up wind and brought down rain, made fire from air and drew iron out of the depths of the earth as easily as ordinary people might draw up water from a well.

The North family lived on a compound in a sheltered valley in western Virginia, and most of them never went to town, for it was a matter of some shame that gods should now be forced to buy supplies and sell crops just like common people. The Family had spliced and intertwined so often over the centuries that almost all adults except one's own parents were called Aunt and Uncle, and all the children were lumped together as "the cousins."

To the dozens and dozens of North cousins, "town" was a distant thing, like "ocean" and "space" and "government." What did they care about such things, except that during school hours, Aunt Tweng or Auntie Uck would rap them on the head with a thimble finger if they didn't come up with the right answers?

School was something the children endured in the mornings, so they could spend the afternoons learning how to create the things that commoners called fairies, ghosts, golems, trolls, werewolves, and other such miracles that were the heritage of the North family.

It was their heritage, but not every child inherited. Great-uncle Zog was notorious for muttering "The blood's too thin, the blood's too thin," because it was his considered opinion that the Norths had grown weak in the thirteen and a half centuries since the Evil One closed the gates. "Why else do we have so many weaklings who can't send their outself more than a hundred yards?" he said once. "Why else do we have so few children who can raise a clant out of anything sturdier than pollen and dust, heartbind with one of their clan? Why do we have these miserable drekkas like Danny in every generation? Putting them in Hammernip Hill hasn't made us stronger. Nothing makes us stronger."

Danny heard this when he was eleven, when it wasn't a sure thing yet that he *was* a drekka. Plenty of children didn't show any talent till they were in their teens. Or so Mama said, reassuring him; but from Great-uncle Zog's words Danny began to doubt her. How could it be "plenty" of children who showed no talent when Danny was now the only child in the Family over the age of nine who couldn't even figure out whether he *had* an outself, let alone send it out to explore. When the other kids used their outselves to spy on Danny's school papers and copy them, he couldn't even detect that they were there, let alone stop them.

"Drive them away, can't you?" demanded Aunt Lummy. "You're the only decent student in this school, but they're all getting the same marks as you because you let them cheat!"

"I know *how* they're doing it," said Danny, "but how can I drive them away when I can't *see* the

or *feel* them?”

“Just make yourself big,” said Aunt Lummy. “Hold on to your own space. Don’t let them crowd you!”

But these words meant nothing to Danny, no matter how he tried to act them out, and the cheating went on until Lummy and the other Aunts who taught the school were forced to make separate tests, one for Danny and one for all the others at his grade level. The instant result was that by age twelve Danny was soon the *only* student in his grade level, the others having been put back where they belonged. In the outside world, Danny would have been doing ninth grade work, two years ahead of his age.

The other kids resented him more than ever, and therefore taunted him or froze him out as drekka. “You’re not one of us,” they said—often in those exact words. During free time they refused to let him come along on any of their escapades; he was never chosen for a team; he was never to be seen when one of the Aunts was sharing out cookies or some other treat; and he always had to check his drawer for spiders, snakes, or dog poo. He got used to it quickly, and he knew better than to tell any of the adults. What good would it do him? How much fun would he have if some adult forced the others to take him along? What kinds of pranks would they do if they had been whipped for pooping his clean clothes?

So in this idyllic world of fairies and ghosts, gods and talking animals, Danny was a profoundly solitary child.

He knew everybody; everybody was kin to him. But he had been made ashamed of everything he did well, and even more ashamed of everything he could not do, and he regarded even those of his cousins who treated him kindly as if their kindness were pity. For who could genuinely like a boy so unworthy, whose existence meant no more than this: that the bloodlines of the North family were weak and getting weaker, with Danny the weakest of them all.

The irony was that Danny had been kept as a child apart since he was born—but for the opposite reason. His father, Alf, a Rockbrother with an affinity for pure metals, had found a way to get inside the steel of machines and make them run almost without friction, and without lubrication. It was such a useful and unprecedented skill that he had been made ruler of the Family, and was therefore renamed as Odin; but Danny called him Baba.

Danny’s mother, Gerd, was only slightly less remarkable, a lightmage who had learned to change the color of reflected light so that she could make things nearly invisible, or hide them in shadows, or make them glow as bright as the sun. For years Alf and Gerd had been forbidden to marry by Odin, Gyish, who was then the Odin, for fear that the joining of two such potent bloodlines might create something awful—a gatmage, which the Norths were forbidden ever to have again, or a manmage, which all the Families were sworn to destroy.

But when Gyish retired after losing the last war, and machine-mage Alf was made Odin in his place, the Family voted almost unanimously to allow the marriage. Danny’s birth was the result, as close to a royal child as the Norths had had in many generations.

In his early childhood, Danny was pampered by all the adults. He was the golden boy, and great things were expected of him. He had been bright as a child—quick to read, clever with all the family

languages, dextrous with his fingers, an athletic runner and leaper, curious to a fault, and clever of tongue so he could make almost anyone laugh. But as he got older, these traits could not make up for his utter lack of harmony with any of the magics of the Family.

Danny tried everything. He gardened alongside the cousins who had a way with herbs and trees and grasses—the ones who, as adult mages, would continue to make the North farms so astonishingly productive. But the seeds he planted grew weakly, and he could not feel the throbbing pulse of a tree.

He roamed the woods with those who had a way with animals—the ones who, if they could only form a deep bond with wolf or bear or (failing everything grand) squirrel or snake, would become Eyefriend or Clawbrother and roam the world in animal shape whenever they wished. But the creatures ran from him, or snarled or snapped at him, and he made no friends among the beasts.

He tried to understand what it meant to “serve” stone or water, wind or the electricity of lightning in the air. But the stones bruised his fingers and moved for him only if he threw them; the wind only blew his hair into a tangled mop; and storms and ponds left him wet, cold, and powerless. Far from being precocious, with magic he was slow. Worse than slow. He was inert, making no visible progress at all.

Yet, except for the loneliness, he didn't hate his life. His long roving in the woods were a pleasure to him. Since neither tree nor animal was drawn to him, he simply ran, becoming swift and tireless mile after mile. At first he ran only within the limits of the family compound, because the trees that guarded the perimeter would snatch at him and then give the alarm, bringing the adult Seedguards and even Uncle Poot, the only Sapkin in the Family right now, to warn him not to leave.

But during this past winter—perhaps because the trees were dormant and less alert—he had found three different routes that allowed him to avoid the sentinel trees entirely. He knew that as a probability drekka he was being watched—Danny never knew when the outself of some adult might be following him. So he took different routes to these secret passageways each time. As far as he knew, he had never been seen leaving. No one had challenged him about it, at least.

Liberated now, he would run and run, miles in whatever direction he chose. And he was fast! He could cover miles and still be home by suppertime. He would only stop when he came to a highway, fence, a house, a factory, a town, and from the shelter of the woods or hedges or weeds he would watch the drowthers go about their lives and think: I am by nature one of *them*. Without affinities or powers. Living by the labor of their hands or the words of their mouth.

With one slight difference: Drowthers didn't know they were bereft of all that was noble in the world. They had no sense of lost heritage. The North family ignored them, cared nothing about them. But if Danny tried to leave, all the Family secrets would be at risk. The stories told on dark nights, of traitors, of wars between the Westilian families, all ended the same way: Anyone who defied the Family and fled the compound without permission would be hunted down and killed.

In these twilight times Norths may not have all the power they used to have before Loki closed the gates, before the centuries of war with the other families. But they were superb hunters. Nobody evaded them. Danny knew he took his life in his hands every time he left. He was insane to do it. Yet he felt so free outside the compound. The world was so large, so full of people who did not despise him yet.

They have no talents like ours, and yet they build these roads, these factories, these houses. We have to import *their* machines to air-condition our homes. We tie in to *their* internet to get our news and send emails to the trusted rovers the Family sends out into the world. We drive in cars and trucks we buy from *them*. How dare we feel superior? None of these things are in our power, and when the Westilian families ruled the world as gods of the Phrygians, the Hittites, the Greeks, the Celts, the Persians, the Hindi, the Slavs, and of course the Norse, the lives of common people were nasty, brutish, and short—nastier, shorter, and more brutal because of our demands on them.

The world would be better if there had never been such gods as these. Taking whatever we wanted because we could, killing anyone who got in our way, deposing kings and setting up new ones, sending our disciples out a-conquering—who did we think we were? In the long-lost world of Westil, where everyone was talented, it might have been fair, for everyone might have had a chance. But here in Mittlegard—on Earth—where only the few Westilian families had such powers, it was unjust.

These were the thoughts that Danny was free to think as he watched the teenagers come out of the high schools of Buena Vista and Lexington and ride off in buses or drive off in their cars. At home he never let himself think such things, because if he did his face might reveal his repugnance or dismay at something that a relative did or some old story of an ancestor's adventures. His only hope of having any kind of useful life was to convince them that he could be trusted to be allowed out into the world that his loyalty to the Family was unshakeable.

Meanwhile, he pored over the books that children were allowed to read, especially the mythologies, trying to understand the real history of the Westilians from the tantalizing tales the drowthers had collected. He once asked Auntie Uck which of the tales from *Bulfinch's Mythology* were true, and she just glared at him and said, "All of them," which was just stupid.

Somewhere there were books that told the true stories. He knew that family histories were kept—histories that went back thousands of years. How else could the adults make their cryptic references to this or that person or event in the distant past? All the adults knew these histories, and someday the other cousins would be given these secrets—but not Danny, the one best suited to read, understand, and remember. If he ever learned the truth about anything, he would have to find it out himself.

Meanwhile, he had to stay alive. Which meant that as much as he loved to run outside the compound, he only did it now and then, when he couldn't stand to be confined in his loneliness another day; when it began to seem that it might be better just to go up to Hammernip Hill, dig his own grave, lie down in it, and wait for someone to come up and finish the job.

When he was analytical about it, he realized that running outside the compound *was* a kind of suicide. A game of Russian roulette, without any idea of how many chambers there were in the revolver, nor how many bullets there might be. Just run to a secret passageway and keep on running—that was how he pulled the trigger.

His life was not unrelenting solitude and hostility, of course. There were aunts and uncles who had loved him from childhood on, and they seemed to love him still, though some were certainly more distant now. And since Baba and Mama themselves had never particularly doted on him, certainly he could detect no difference in their indifference now. In many ways his life at home was normal. Normalish, anyway.

And maybe he would find a way to make himself useful to the Family so they would let him live.

He had tried to get them to let him become the family computer expert. "Let me set up a local area network," he said. "I've been reading about it online. We could have computers in every house, in every room, and they could share the same internet connection so we wouldn't have to pay the cable company a dollar more."

But all they could think to say was, "How did you learn about these things?"

"I googled them," he said.

The result was that the family made a new rule that kids could access computers only with an adult in the room, and you had to be able to demonstrate at any moment just how the stuff you had on the screen was related to the classroom assignment you were supposed to be doing.

"Thanks a lot, drekka," Lem and Stem said as they beat him up a little behind the haybarn the next day. They were particularly annoyed because Danny's inquiry had led to Auntie Tweng finding the files of pornography, which got them a screaming tongue-lashing from their drekka mother, Miz Jan, and a whipping from one of Uncle Poot's most savage hickories.

So now Danny was trying to make himself useful by helping train the kids who were just learning to create clants with their outselves. Not that Danny knew anything about clanting, but since the kids couldn't see their own clants, Danny watched how the clants took shape and then reported to them on their results. Pure observation, but because Danny was doing it, an adult was free to do something else.

The trouble was that the three children whose clants he was supervising were Tina, Mona, and Crista, and instead of working on their assignment—to make their clant as close to lifesize as possible—they were remaining under a foot in height and trying to make themselves as voluptuous as they could. All three girls were just starting to develop as women in their real bodies, but the miniature female bodies they were forming out of fallen twigs, leaves, and nutshells were shaping up with huge breasts and exaggerated hips. Forest fairies, a drowther would have called them. Or sluts.

"I'll report this, you know," said Danny. But it was wasted breath—none of them was good enough at clanting to be able to hear anything through their clants. They could see, however—the outside could see whether it was formed into a clant or not—and one of them noticed Danny's lips moving.

Almost at once, all three of the forest fairies turned to face him. Two of them flaunted their chests, the other turned around, thrust her buttocks toward him, and wagged it back and forth. They could not have made their contempt more clear.

Danny didn't care. It was better than getting beaten up by Lem and Stem. But it was his responsibility to make sure they worked on what they were supposed to work on. He had no authority himself, and even if he had, he couldn't have done anything if they chose to defy him. Adults could use their own outselves to give the girls' clants a shove, which they would feel in their own bodies as well. But Danny had no outself, or hadn't found one, anyway. The only thing he could do was find an adult and report them—but by the time an adult arrived, they'd be working on what they were supposed to work on, and the adult would be annoyed at Danny.

Not that the adult would doubt Danny's word—he was known not to lie, and besides, they knew exactly what Tina, Mona, and Crista were like. But the very fact that Danny had to fetch an adult

enforce the rules meant that he really wasn't worth very much as a clant-minder. Sometimes Danny was conscientious enough to report such antics as these, but most of the time he put his own survival ahead of the goal of pushing the children to develop their skills, and let them get away with whatever they wanted.

The danger was that when these children grew up, they would remember how worthless Danny had been as a child-minder, and far from being grateful that he hadn't reported them when they were young, they'd realize he couldn't be trusted to take care of their own children. Then he'd just be Poor Uncle Danny the drekka. Or Poor Old Danny, the body under the nameless headstone on Hammer Hill.

All he could do was kick out at them, dispersing the stuff out of which their clants were formed, so they'd have to take a few moments to gather them up and shape themselves again. It took only a second or two—they'd been making forest fairies of *this* size since they were nine or ten, and Danny was the darling little eight-year-old that they liked to pamper when adults were around or torture when they weren't.

Well, even though Danny couldn't make a clant the size of a thimble, he had listened well during the early lessons and remembered things that those with talent often forgot. For instance, he knew the warning about letting drowthers capture a small and fragile clant. "You hold the clant," Uncle Poot had told them, "and the clant holds *you*. If you let them capture you when you're little, they can keep your outself from returning to your body, which leaves you completely helpless."

"Why can't we just toss away the clant?" Danny had asked—for in those days, he still expected to be able to use these lessons.

"You have to be able to spin and leap to cast away the bits from which you made the clant," said Uncle Poot. "If they trap you so you can't move far enough, the bits of clant stay bound to you. It's just the way it works."

"I'll just make *my* clant with scissors," Friggy, Danny's best friend in those days, had boasted. "Then I'll cut my way out."

"Make your clant with scissors?" Uncle Poot had laughed. "Why not make it with a gun and shoot your captors through the sack they caught you in?"

"The clants that children make are faint and small," said Danny. "They have no strength in them."

"That's right," said Uncle Poot. "The son of Odin never forgets. It's only truly a clant when it's full-size and every bit as solid as you are in your own body. Until then it's a small or a faint or a faint and it could no more lift a pair of scissors than a boulder."

Remembering such lessons, Danny pulled his tee-shirt off over his head and then idly scratched his side, as if that had been his purpose. The girls made their clants point at him and pantomime rolling on the ground with laughter—they really were quite good at giving lifelike movements to their small clants—but all that mattered to Danny was that they weren't paying attention to the danger they were in. It took only a moment for Danny to have his shirt down on top of the two nearest fairies and another moment for him to gather it into a sack containing them.

The third was free, and it leapt and scampered up the sack, up his arms, into his face. But it was only a mere annoyance—he swept it away with a brush of his hand and the pieces of it fell to the ground. F

expected that girl—he had no way of knowing which it was, since they weren't good enough yet to put their face on the clants they made—to drop her outself back to the ground and form the clant again, so he didn't wait around to see. Instead he gripped the tee-shirt in his teeth and began to climb the nearest branchy tree.

No one climbed trees better than Danny, and this time he moved so fast it seemed to him that he was flying, just tapping the branches with his hands and feet. Meanwhile the fairies in the bag kept trying to jump and spin so they could shed their clants and return to their bodies, but they didn't have the strength to do much more than jostle the bag a little.

At a high branch, Danny stopped climbing, took the tee-shirt out of his mouth, and tied it so tight to a slender branch that there was hardly room for the clants to move at all. Then he let himself back down the tree, taking much longer jumps downward than he had managed on the way up. When he reached the bottom, the third girl's clant was nowhere to be seen.

So Danny walked back to the house, to tell Uncle Poot what he had done.

But it was Great-uncle Zog and Grandpa Gyish who intercepted him on the path, and they gave him no chance at all to explain that he was only teaching the girls a lesson.

"Where are they!" screamed Grandpa Gyish.

"What kind of drekka bags a child!" Great-uncle Zog bellowed at him. "I'll have you up the hill for this, you fairy-thief, you child-abuser!" And then he was shaking Danny so hard that he was afraid his head would come clear off. Years of flying with the eagles had caused old Zog's arms and shoulders to bulk up and he had so much strength that he could break a big man's neck with a swipe of his hand—he'd done it more than once in the wars. So it was a relief when Auntie Uck and Auntie Tweng showed up and clung to both Zog's arms, dragging him away from Danny.

As it was, Zog didn't let go—the Aunts dragged him, but he dragged Danny, his grip like a talon on Danny's shoulder. He staggered to keep his feet under him so that he didn't have his full weight dangling from Zog's massive grip. Who would have thought an old man could be so strong?

A few minutes later, the adults who were in the compound had gathered, and Danny found himself in the midst of something like a trial—but without the legal forms they saw in the TV shows. There was Danny and there was his accuser, Crista, the oldest of the girls, and there was Gyish, presiding like a judge in Baba's absence, with Zog as the prosecutor.

But that's where the resemblance to a fair trial left off, for there was no one to speak in Danny's defense. Not even Danny—whenever he tried to speak, Zog slapped him or Gyish shouted him into silence. So the only story anyone could hear was Crista's.

"We were trying so hard to make our clants big," she said, "that we didn't even see that Danny was sneaking up on us with a giant sack. He caught all three of us but I just barely managed to get out before he sealed the neck of it with Tina and Mona inside. And then he broke my clant in pieces and before I could put myself together he was gone, up in the sky."

"He flew?" demanded Gyish.

"Yes!" cried Crista. "He flew away and dropped the bag outside the compound and now we'll never get them back!"

It took a moment before she realized that she had pushed too hard. For the adults were all shaking

their heads and some were laughing derisively.

“Danny? Fly?” said Uncle Poot. “If only he could.”

“You can see that Crista’s lying,” said Uncle Mook. “Maybe everything she said’s a lie.”

“It’s not a lie!” shouted Gyish—he had made no pretense of impartiality. “I saw the poor girl’s bodies lying helpless in the house! Children so young don’t have the strength to bring their outselves back when their clant is captured! Nor the skill to wake up their own bodies when their outselves are clanting! They might never wake up!”

“Let’s hear from Danny,” said Aunt Lummy mildly.

Zog turned on her savagely. “A drekka has no voice here!”

“But the son of Odin and Gerd has the right to speak in his own defense,” said Lummy. And Mook, her husband, moved closer to her, standing beside her, to give more force to what she said.

“What will we hear from *him* but lies?” said Gyish. “I know what drekkas and drowthers are—they’ll say anything to save their worthless lives!”

“If he is so determined to save his life,” said Aunt Lummy, “why would he harm these children whom we trusted to his care?”

“Because they hate us! Drekkas hate us worse than drowthers do!” Gyish was almost frothing at the mouth. Danny realized that he was seeing now what lay behind the muttering and grumbling that were Gyish’s usual form of speech. The old man’s wrath and shame at having lost the war and the seer of Odin had made him into this poisonous old gnome—or so he seemed, because he stooped to point his quivering finger at Aunt Lummy as if he meant to jab it through her heart if she took one more step toward him.

“Piffle,” said Auntie Uck. “You’re behaving like a child, Grandpa Gyish, and Zog, you’re just a bully. Let go of the boy at once—you’ve probably broken his shoulder and you know we don’t have a first-rate healer anymore.” She turned to Gyish again. “Which *you’ll* rue if you let your anger give you a stroke!”

It took Uck’s no-nonsense tone and un intimidated look to get Gyish back to his normal level of grumbling, while Zog tossed Danny on the ground and stood there, fists clenched, waiting for Danny to be such a fool as to try to rise again.

He needn’t have worried. Danny’s shoulder hurt so badly that he could only lie there, holding his head with his other hand, trying not to cry.

“Danny,” said Uncle Mook, “tell us what happened.”

“I already told you what happened!” shouted Crista.

Uncle Poot silenced her with a glare. “We already heard your lies, girl. Now we’ll see if Danny can come up with better ones.”

“Well, boy?” asked Zog. “You heard them! Answer!”

“They were staying small,” said Danny, “and giving themselves huge boobs.”

“So what!” shouted Gyish. “So what if they were! It’s what they do! They’re stupid little girls, it’s what they do!”

“I knew that if I went to fetch you, Uncle Poot, they’d lie and say they were trying to be big.”

“I wouldn’t have believed them,” answered Poot.

“But you wouldn’t have punished them, either,” said Danny. “So they’d just have kept on doing it.”
He heard the other adults murmur their agreement.

“So now you’re a critic, is that it?” Uncle Poot replied. “Telling me that I’m not good at training youngsters?”

“It doesn’t excuse you putting them in a sack!” said Zog. And the adults murmured the agreement at that, too.

“I didn’t have a sack,” said Danny. “I stood there right in front of them and took off my shirt and walked right over to them. It was plain enough what I was doing—if they’d been paying any attention. I didn’t expect to actually *catch* them with my shirt! I just wanted to give them a scare, remind them to take their study seriously. But when I found that two of them were in the shirt, I didn’t know what to do. If I just let them go, they’d mock me and I’d never be able to get them to do what’s right without bothering some adult. The whole point of having me watch them is so none of you has to be bothered, isn’t it?”

Even as he said it, though, Danny realized that he had just declared that it was impossible for him to tend the clants if the other children didn’t want him to; he wouldn’t save the adults any time at all, and so they might as well have one of them do the minding and leave Danny out of it. But what choice had he had? The accusation Crista made was so terrible, and with Gyish and Zog calling him a drekk, one who could be killed whenever it was convenient, there was a great danger that the trial would end suddenly with Zog tearing his head off and tossing it into the trees.

“So you trapped them in your tee-shirt,” said Aunt Lummy. “And you didn’t let them go. Where are they now?”

“Crista’s clant was going for my eyes and so I did brush her aside. And then to get away from her I climbed a tree.”

“And yet you are not in a tree,” said Uncle Mook. “And you seem to have neither your shirt nor the clants of two disobedient and stupid girls.”

“I tied the shirt to a branch and climbed down and I was just going to fetch Uncle Poot and turn their clants over to him when Great-uncle Zog and Grandpa Gyish attacked me.”

“No grandpa of yours!” shouted Gyish, though this was only partly true, since Danny’s mother, Gerd, was Gyish’s firstborn granddaughter.

“I believe you,” said Mook. “But what you don’t know—what you could not possibly understand—is how terrified those girls are now. There’s nothing worse for an inexperienced child than to have your outself trapped and be unable to bring it back. It’s like you’re suffocating and can’t draw breath.”

The others present murmured their agreement.

“I’m sorry,” said Danny. “I really am. It’s not as if I planned it. I only did what came to mind, to try to get them to work on what they were assigned. I didn’t know that it would hurt them.”

“Look at his shoulder,” said Auntie Tweng. “Look at that bruise. It’s like a truck ran over him.”

“He was trying to get away!” said Zog defensively.

“He was in agony,” said Tweng. “How dare *you* punish the boy before the rest of us were called?”

“I didn’t punish him!” Zog roared. “I *brought* him!”

“You know your strength, and you’re responsible for what you do with it,” said Tweng. “You and

Grandpa Gyish did *this* to him? It's at least as bad as anything he did to those two girls—why, wouldn't be surprised if his clavicle was broken along with a few thousand capillaries.”

Since neither Zog nor Gyish was even slightly educated in the drowther sciences, they had no idea what they were being accused of having done, but they were clearly angry and abashed at having the tables turn like this.

“And while you're torturing this child,” said Tweng, “and refusing to let him speak, has anyone thought that only *he* knows where he hung that tee-shirt with a brace of stupid disobedient fairies inside?”

Danny could have kissed her then and there, if he'd thought that Auntie Tweng would stand for it. Within a few moments, uncles Poot and Mook had Danny on his feet and helped him keep his balance—he was faint with pain—as he led them back to the tree.

It was farther than Danny had remembered, or perhaps pain magnified the distance, since every step jostled him and made it hurt worse. But finally they were there, with all the Aunts and Uncles—and now a fair entourage of cousins, too—staring up into the tree.

“I don't see it,” said Zog. “He's lying.”

“He said he put it high in the tree,” said Auntie Tweng. “Of course you can't see it. The leaves are in the way.”

“I can't climb that thing,” said Uncle Mook.

“Can you get the tree itself to bring them down?” Aunt Lummy asked Uncle Poot.

“Is it on a living branch?” Poot asked Danny. “Green with leaves?”

“Yes,” said Danny.

“Then we should try another way,” said Poot, his voice now gentle, “before we ask this scarlet oak for such a sacrifice.”

“Then Zog,” said Auntie Tweng. “Send up a bird to untie the shirt and bring them down.”

Zog whirled on her, but then seemed to swallow the first terrible thing he had meant to say. Instead he spoke softly. “You know my heartbound died in the war. Such birds as I can speak to now have no such skill as the untying of a knotted shirt. I can make them attack and kill, but not untie a knot.”

“Then someone has to climb the tree,” said Uncle Poot.

“Make a clant first,” said Auntie Tweng, “and see how high it is, and how dangerous the climb might be.”

Uncle Poot was one of the foremost clanters of the Family, and he must have been showing off a little, for he sat down at the base of the tree and formed his outself into a clant using the leaves and twigs of the living oak. The smaller branches merely bent toward each other to form the leaves in the vague shape of a man. It progressed up the tree by joining higher leaves into the shape and letting the lower ones fall away behind it. Soon it came back down, little more than a rapid quivering of the leaves and branches, yet always shaped like a man, and Uncle Poot opened his eyes again.

“How could you climb so high?” he asked Danny. “How could such slender branches bear your weight?”

“I don't know,” said Danny. “I climbed up them and they didn't break and I didn't fall.”

“I can't send another child up there,” said Uncle Poot. “As we were so recently reminded, we have

no healer capable of dealing with grave injuries.”

“Then let me go,” said Danny.

“With that shoulder?” asked Aunt Lummy. “I don’t think so!”

“I can do it,” said Danny. “It’s only pain. I can still move my arm.”

So he climbed the tree for the second time today, slowly this time, testing the strength in his leg and arm and shoulder every time before relying on them to hold him.

When he was far enough up the tree that he could see none of the people below him, he came to a place where he couldn’t find any kind of handhold at all. The next higher branch was simply out of reach. Yet he had come this way. This high in the tree there were no alternate routes.

I was moving faster, Danny thought. I was almost *running* up the tree. I must have leapt upward and reached it without realizing it.

Yet he knew this was not true. Such a leap as this he would have noticed and remembered—if for no other reason than to brag that he had done it.

He had climbed the tree in the same kind of single-minded trance that came over him when he ran. He didn’t remember picking his way or watching his footsteps when he ran his fastest, and likewise he had no memory of gripping this branch or that one when he had made his first climb, though he remembered every handhold and every reach on this second time up the tree.

He closed his eyes. How could he possibly go back down and tell them that what he had climbed before, he could not climb a second time? What could they possibly think, except that he refused to go? What if someone else got to this same place, and saw the tee-shirt hanging far out of reach? What would they think? Only that Danny didn’t want to free the girls from their imprisonment. Then Uncle Poot would ask the tree to sacrifice and break the living branch, and Danny’s punishment would be severe indeed. Who would think him anything but a drekka then?

Yet he knew there was a way up, and not just because of the logic that the tee-shirt was knotted around a branch, so Danny must have been there; he knew there was a way because he could sense where it began and where it led, even though there were no handholds that his eyes could see.

So he closed his eyes and reached upward, sliding his hand along the rough trunk. Ah, if only you could speak to me, Scarlet Oak, if only we were friends. If only you could bend your branch to me.

And as that yearning mixed with his despair, he twisted and flung his body upward. What did it matter if he missed the branch and fell? His days were numbered anyway, if he did not bring those girls back down.

His hand gripped a branch. He opened his eyes.

It was not the next branch up, the one that he had reached for in vain a moment before. It was the very branch the tee-shirt hung on.

How did I get from there to here?

But even as he asked himself the question, he answered it. I could not have done it with hands and feet. Nor is there any magic that lets a twelve-year-old boy leap upward three times his own height.

No, there *was* such a magic, only Danny had never seen it. The whole world had not seen it since 632 A.D. He had to close his eyes and breathe deeply as he took it in.

I must have made a gate. A little one, a gate that takes me only there to here. I must have made

when I climbed the first time, and when I leapt again just now I passed through it.

He had read about gates like this in books. They were the gates that were within the reach of Pathbrothers, or even Lockfriends sometimes, back in the days when gatemagery was still practiced in the world. And now that he was thinking of it this way, Danny could see just where the gate began and where it ended. It was nothing visible, not even a quivering in the air or a rearrangement of the leaves, like the gate Uncle Poot's temporary clant had been. He simply knew that it was there, knew where it began and where it ended, *felt* it almost as if it were a part of him.

Danny had *made* a gate. How many others had he made, not knowing it? It must be gates like the ones that had allowed him to get past the watching trees at the perimeter. How long had he been making them? How many were there?

As soon as the question formed in his mind, the answer came. He could sense the placement of every gate that he had ever made. There were scarcely two dozen of them, but from his reading he knew that this was really quite a lot. Even a Pathbrother could only make a dozen gates of any size because each gate required that a portion of the gatemage's outself remain behind with it. A trained and experienced gatemage could close the gates that he had made himself, erase them and gather his outself fragments back into the whole. But Danny had no idea how such a thing was done. And there was no one to teach him.

I've made two dozen gates without knowing that I was doing it, without feeling it at all. Yet I've been finding the ones that lead outside the compound, because I could sense without realizing exactly where they were and where they led and how to use them.

Now every one of them is lying about inside the compound, waiting for someone to stumble into it and find himself abruptly in another place. It only had to happen once, and the discoverer would know there was a gatemage in the world again, and one with strength enough to make a gate rather than merely find and open up a gate that someone else had made.

Danny exulted at the knowledge that he was not a drekka at all, but instead a rather powerful mage of the rarest kind. But eating away at the thrill of triumph was the fact that to be a gatemage in the North family was worse than being drekka.

For the last gatemage in the world had been Loki the trickster, the monster Loki who had sealed up every Great Gate in the world so thoroughly that all traffic between Westil and Mittlegard was cut off at once. It had shattered the power of every Family in the world, for the mightiest of powers could only be sustained by frequent passages back and forth. Magic gathered in one world was magnified a hundred times by passage through a Great Gate into the other. Little gates like the ones that Danny made had no such power—they led from Earth to another spot on Earth, and meant nothing except that his body moved from there to here. But the Great Gates had been what turned the mages of Westil into gods when they came here to Mittlegard.

And when they closed, when Loki made it impossible for anyone to even find them—even the gates that had stood for three thousand years or more before his time—the gods became mere mages and easy to find and kill if someone was determined to; they could die from the blows of drowther swords or the darts from drowther bows. They had to learn caution, to isolate themselves, to pretend that they were ordinary people. To hide, as the North family was hidden here in the Virginia hills

where people who kept to themselves were not exceptional and others mostly left them alone.

The wars had been fought at first to force the Norths to reopen the gates, for no one believed that Loki's actions were not part of some nefarious plan. Only after the Families had decimated each other and the Norths had fled with Leiv Eiriksson to Vinland—only then, seeing how helpless the Norths had been against five centuries of onslaughts, did the other Families finally believe that Loki had acted alone, that the Norths were not holding on to some secret Westil Gate that would enable them to build up power that no other Family could withstand.

Even so, once America was conquered the Families made war on the Norths again from time to time, whenever the pain of being cut off from Westil became too much to bear, if only to punish the Norths or perhaps destroy them utterly—what else did they deserve?

But as truces and treaties were formed and broken, made anew and once again broken, they always included this clause: that if any gatemage was born into the world, into any Family but most especially the Norths, he would be killed. And not just killed, but his or her body cut up and one piece sent to each of the other Families as proof that it was done.

Otherwise, whichever Family got a gatemaker first would have a devastating advantage and could destroy the others if they were not stopped in time. All the Families feared the others would cheat because that's what they themselves would do.

If any of the adults had sent a clant to watch Danny and saw what he just did to reach this spot, then when he came back down they'd hack him to death on the spot, and care nothing. For if the Norths were caught with a gatemage of any degree of power left alive and making gates, the other Families would unite again and this time they would not stop till every North was dead.

I am a mage with power to do what no other living mage can do; and yet I am a dead man. If Loki had not played his monstrous, inexplicable prank and closed the gates, the discovery of my power would be a cause for celebration. I would at once become one of the leading members of the Families and mere beastmages like Zog would defer to me, and Lem and Stem would never dare to raise their hand against me. But Loki closed the gates, and now it's a crime for me to breathe. If I were a good boy, I'd fling myself from this tree and die, saving them the trouble of killing me.

But Danny was not that good a boy.

He owed them nothing. He was not one of them. He did not accept their power over him. He would not let them kill him if he could avoid it.

The only trouble was, he didn't actually know how to use his power. He had made a gate, but unconsciously; he could map with his mind all the gates that he had ever made, because they were part of him. But he had no idea what to do in order to create another. Useful as it might be right now to make a gate that would take him from this treetop to a place somewhere in Canada or Brazil, he had never made a gate that took him more than fifty yards, and never made a single one on purpose.

So he inched his way out to where he had tied the shirt, unfastened it, opened it, and released the two feeble fairy clants. At once the girls' outselves let go of the pieces of their clants and let the twigs and leaves and nutshells tumble or flutter to the ground. Upstairs in the schoolhouse, their eyes were opening; no doubt they were wailing and clinging to each other and making noise about how terrific they'd been.

And it's a near certainty that they'll never wave their clanty boobs and butts at me again, though Danny, if I were ever set to watch over them again. So my plan was a good one, except for the part where it nearly got me killed.

Danny made his way slowly down the tree, pausing here and there to try to hear what was going on below him. Then he noticed that his shoulder did not hurt at all anymore. That it had not hurt since he made the leap through the gate and hung from the branch where his shirt was tied. He looked at his shoulder and saw no trace of injury—not a bruise, not a scratch.

Gates heal. He had vaguely known that, but since it was a positive aspect of gatemagery, no one spoke of it much. When Auntie Uck referred to not having a first-rate healer, she was talking about the lack of a Meadowfriend who specialized in herbs and could enhance their healing powers. But before 632 A.D., any injury could be healed by pulling or pushing someone through a gate.

If they saw his shoulder, they would know. The injury had been severe enough it could not have healed without a mark. Only a gatemage could be unscathed.

Pulling on his shirt would not be enough. One of the aunts would insist on seeing the wound and dressing it. He had to have a suitable injury to show them. Yet how could he inflict it on himself, here in the tree?

He gripped his shoulder with all his might, jabbing his longish, dirty thumbnail into several spots. It hurt, and there were red marks, but had it been enough to bruise himself? He could only hope as he pulled his shirt on again.

When he got to the bottom of the tree, only Uncle Mook and Aunt Lummy were waiting for him. Lummy was Mama's youngest sister and looked like her, only plumper and not as irritable as Mama. She always seemed to be. But then, Aunt Lummy was not a great lightmage; she was good with rabbits, a skill not much called for once she had persuaded them to leave the vegetable garden alone. So she spent her days trying to teach all the useful languages, written and spoken, to children who most could not understand what they might ever be used for.

And she was kind to Danny. So was Uncle Mook. And these were the two who had been left behind to wait for him.

Danny dropped from the lowest branch to the ground and faced them. "How much trouble am I in?" he asked them.

"With me," said Aunt Lummy, "none at all."

"Those girls should have been wrapped in a sack long ago, to teach them sense and manners," said Uncle Mook.

"But Zog and Gyish are now your enemies," said Aunt Lummy, "and they want you dead, to put you down plainly. And many there are who think they have a point, and that the only reason you're still alive is because your parents are who they are."

"As if Mama would miss me if I died," said Danny, "or Baba would even notice I was gone."

"Don't be unjust," said Uncle Mook. "Your parents are complicated people, but I assure you that they care a great deal about you and think about you all the time."

"But if the Family decided I was drekka and dangerous and had to be killed, Baba would put me up in Hammernip himself, and Mama would shovel on the dirt."

“Nonsense,” said Aunt Lummy.

“Of course they would,” said Uncle Mook. “It’s their duty.”

“Now, Mooky,” said Aunt Lummy.

“The boy is old enough to know the truth,” Mook said to her. And then to Danny, “They know the duty to the Family and they will do it. But right now the madness is over and it’s time for you to come back home to eat. With *us*, I think, in case somebody takes it in their head to make a preemptive strike before your folks come home.”

“Oh, Mooky,” said Aunt Lummy impatiently. “Don’t scare the boy!”

“He should be scared,” said Mook. “He should have cut off a hand before he put those children in a sack. Now he knows it, but the deed’s been done. Everything he does from now on will be viewed with suspicion. If we mean to keep him safe, we have to help him learn to be as innocuous as possible. No more strutting around about how smart he is in school—”

“He never struts,” said Aunt Lummy. Danny was grateful that she defended him, but he realized that there *had* been times when he flaunted his superiority in classwork.

“It looks like strutting to the other children,” said Mook, “and you know it.”

Aunt Lummy sighed. “If only he could leave here and grow up in safety somewhere else.”

“Don’t put a thought like that into his head!” cried Mook.

“Do you think I haven’t thought of it a thousand times?” said Danny truthfully. “But I know they can track me down and find me, and I won’t do anything like that. The only life I’ll ever have is here, and all I can hope to affect is how long it lasts.”

“That’s the attitude,” said Mook. “Humility, acceptance, willingness to sacrifice.”

They led him back to the house, and Danny ate well that night, since Lummy’s best talent was neither with rabbits nor students, but with cooking. After dinner, she insisted on applying her favorite and smelliest salves to his injuries, and when she pulled his shirt off, he was relieved to see that his self-inflicted replacement injuries had left bruises, though small ones.

“Well,” said Lummy, “either Zog is getting weaker in his old age or he was being gentler than he seemed, because you’re only bruised a little.”

“Danny has the resilience of youth,” said Uncle Mook. “They’re tougher than they look, the children.”

Well-salved and stinking to high heaven, Danny went to bed. Only then, alone in the darkness, did he allow himself to know what he must know: that he intended to survive, no matter what.

Now the entire business of his life was to figure out a way to escape from the North Family compound in such a way that they could never find him. Fortunately, unlike so many others who had ended their lives on Hammernip Hill, Danny had the power to move himself from anyplace to anywhere—if only he could figure out just how his power worked, and how to make it do things that he consciously desired.

THE GREEK GIRL

It was Christmastime when the Greeks came.

Not that any of the Families would be so weakwilled as to celebrate Christmas. It was merely the time when most of the Indo-European world took at least a few days off work. It was the Indo-European tribes that had once worshiped the mages of Westil as gods, so most of the Families got the holiday right along with the descendants of their worshipers.

The Persian Family had been wiped out quite accidentally by Tamurlane a thousand years before, while the Sanskrit Family lived in shabby isolation on a compound in the lower reaches of the Himalayas. But the Greeks had prospered, primarily because they had had an unbroken string of Poseidons—seamages who could make sure that their ships prospered and those of their rivals did not. They had been weakened severely since Loki closed the gates, but such powers as remained were enough to provide a competitive edge.

So when a trio of long black cars made their way unerringly through the magics designed to make the North Family compound hard to find, everyone knew at once that it was the Greeks arriving for one of their periodic “surprise inspections.”

Not that the adults were really surprised. Thor had come home a few days before the Greeks arrived. It was his job to maintain a network of drowthers who watched the other Families for him—nowadays consisting mostly of computer wizards—a metaphorical term—who tapped into the electronic communications of the Families. They had picked up chatter that an inspection was in the works, and since the Greeks had more money than anybody, they were the ones most likely to carry out.

The Norths always had to make a great show of cooperation and humility in order to avoid provoking another war. The last one had left the North family even smaller and weaker than the Sanskrits—but none of the other Families relaxed their vigilance, least of all the Greeks.

So Danny, thirteen since September, lined up with all the cousins. He was tall enough to be in the second row now, and to avoid the jostling (or worse) of the bigger boys, or the obvious snubbing of the girls, he took his place at the farthest end, keeping his head down. But not too obviously, either—the last thing he wanted was to attract attention by having a posture too abject.

The Greeks got out of their cars in the dooryard of the old house. No one lived there anymore, but once it had been a beehive of family life. In the early days of the compound, they had kept adding wings and stories onto the house, so it crept up the hill like the labyrinth of Crete. The oldest section had thick beam-and-girder construction, so that the facing of the outer walls was nearly a foot from the inner lath-and-plaster walls. Between them was nothing but air, and Danny had long since found

way into that space, where he could roam through the edges of the house unseen and unheard.

That was how he had first learned the true use of Hammernip Hill, and how he had heard of Gyish's grumblings about the weakening of the Family's blood. Ever since the business with bagging the clants, however, Danny hadn't chanced any such spying. He made it a point to be visible to someone almost all the time, so that nobody could accuse him of anything or even wonder where he was. And he was glad he had made that his policy, because Gyish and Zog had enlisted several of the boys and girls to spy on Danny. As the children got better with their clants, Danny became less and less certain of whether he was being watched at any given moment. For the last little while, he had even given up leaving the compound through the gates he had made.

But today he knew there would be serious meetings between the Greeks and the Family council, and he wanted to hear them. He had never been old enough to understand anything when other Families had sent observers before. And since the Greeks would be most alert to any sign that gatemage had emerged among the North Family—a "new Loki," they would call any such—Danny wanted to be there to hear if there were any accusations. Because if there were, he would have no choice but to run, even though he still had no real plan for how he would get away and keep from being caught.

Right now, though, they were still outdoors in the cold December air, being inspected by some of the people who had killed a lot of the Family in years not long past.

The Greeks walked up and down the line of children, looking at everyone closely. Some of them—especially the middle-aged women—gave them all a look of disdain. And why not? The North cousins were mostly barefoot, even in the cold weather, with hair that only vaguely remembered having been touched with brush or comb. They were all suntanned and dirt-smudged, and their clothes were patched-up hand-me-downs or offerings from Wal-Mart or Goodwill, chosen by thrifty grownups by guessing at the child's size.

By contrast, the Greeks were all dressed as if they were going to a rich man's funeral—dark suits and dresses, all looking like they cost serious money, with hair perfectly coiffed and fingernails manicured. Above all, they were clean. Yet they wore their perfect costumes with ease, as if they were dressed this way every day, and didn't care if they got dirty as they walked through the mud of melted snow from the storm a week ago. They could always replace whatever clothes got mussed. They could buy a small planet, Thor had once said. Not that any amount of money could buy passage to the other planet where they all had wanted to go for nearly fourteen centuries.

From time to time as they walked along the line, the Greeks would pause in front of a child and ask something in the ancient tongue of Westil—the original from which Indo-European sprang five thousand years before—and one of the Norths would answer. If they had spoken louder, Danny could have understood them; he was the only one of the lined-up cousins who had achieved real fluency in the language. But they spoke softly, so it was not until they came quite close that Danny realized that these murmured words were questions about what branch of magery a particular child was showing an affinity for.

It should have been Baba who answered them, but he was away buying new equipment. Danny suspected that the Greeks had waited until Baba was gone, so they could speak to others less

accustomed to answering questions without revealing anything interesting. The result was that Aunt Tweng usually answered—she being the most taciturn of the adults—though sometimes Uncle Poot would answer, since he worked most closely with the children. One thing was definite: Every question was answered, and promptly, too.

The little children directly in front of Danny were not interesting to anyone—they hadn't shown any particular affinities yet, though of course they could already raise a bit of a clant. But the girl just to Danny's right was Megan, Mook and Lummy's daughter, just turned fifteen, and a very promising windmage. So there was some discussion of her, and Danny noticed that while Poot praised her highly, the particular feats he mentioned were actually things Megan had done when she was ten. So even if the word was true, but the impression Poot made was that the Norths were such a pathetically weak Family that they boasted when a fifteen-year-old did things that a talented ten-year-old should do.

Danny wondered about this. Years before he had overheard an argument about whether the Family should appear strong, to deter attacks and insults, or appear weak, so that no one would feel envy or resentment. "They don't attack us because they fear us," Baba had said, "they attack us because they think they can get away with it."

But Gyish, perhaps because he had led the family during the last war, took the opposite side. "As the Families are getting weaker and they all blame us. The flames of hatred burn deep and long, Odin—they need to see that we are weak so that their hate for us is satisfied."

Apparently Baba had given in to Gyish's view—or, in Baba's absence, Gyish had bullied the others into following the strategy of humility.

"And this one?" asked the short, slightly heavy woman who seemed to be the Greeks' chief inquisitor.

Danny raised his head to look Poot in the eye. Poot said nothing.

It was Auntie Tweng who spoke. A single word. "Drekka."

A little smile flickered on the Greek woman's face. "And still here?"

"We still have hope for him," said Poot, and then turned and walked away. The others followed him, though Tweng took a moment to glare at Danny before she strode behind them.

That's all I needed, thought Danny. One more reason for the Family to wish me dead.

Danny noticed now that there was a girl of about eleven or twelve among the Greek adults. She was the only child that they had brought along; Danny wondered why they had brought any. The girl stayed well back and looked bored. Maybe she was the spoilt child of the woman who always took the lead—certainly the Greek leader took the girl's arm and hustled her along, which suggested that the girl was her daughter. A bratty child, perhaps, who threw a tantrum when they thought to leave her behind. It pleased Danny to imagine her that way, because as the son of Odin he was always accused of being that way, though he was pretty sure he never had been.

The children had been told to stay out of sight as soon as they were dismissed, and most of them took this to mean it was a play day, as long as they took their games to remote locations within the compound. The whooping and hollering began the moment they were out of the dooryard.

Naturally, no one invited Danny along. He made his way toward the schoolhouse as if he intended to study something in the one place where none of the other children would willingly go during a play

day, but after entering the school he waited only a little while before he slipped out the back and made his way around behind Hammernip Hill to approach the old house from the most isolated side.

A steep slope on Danny's left side led to a runoff ditch on his right. The ditch ran right under the crawl space of the newest wing of the house—it had obviously been dug long before the wing was built, and Danny knew that was more than a hundred years ago. Danny made a point of *not* checking to see if anyone was watching him. He knew that a glance around would make him seem furtive, whereas if he just ducked under the house without the slightest concern about who might see him, he would seem innocent. If anyone asked, he would say that he liked to nap in the near darkness there. The story was a bit more plausible in summer, because it was so much cooler under the house. In winter, though, it provided shelter from the wind, so he could still make a case for its being his private hideaway.

And it was, wasn't it? The only thing he concealed was that instead of lying down on the cold earthen floor of the crawl space, he made his way to the cranny through which he entered the wall spaces.

He had discovered it first when he was only five, small enough to fit through the passage more easily. But long habit had taught him how to bend his body to fit around tight corners. He had grown quite a bit in the months since he had last crept inside, and he worried that he'd have to turn back at some point, or—even worse—get stuck and have to call for help. But no, he moved smoothly through the familiar passages.

The leaders of the two Families would meet in the library, at the opposite end of the house because that's where the important meetings were always held. There was a big table in the middle of the room, and several extra side chairs around the walls.

The books that filled the shelves, written in every Indo-European language and sometimes in Westil itself, contained all the lore of the North family clear back to the ancient time when the tribes began splitting off, each taking a Family of gods with them to lead them to victory and guarantee them the support of heaven and earth, beast and tree. In those days the power of the Families had been unstoppable, and the Indo-Europeans—Hittite and Persian, Aryan and Celt, Illyrian and Latin, Dorian and Ionian, German and Nord and Slav—prevailed over the locals wherever they went. Their conquests only ended when their gods got bored or distracted, and refused to help them invade the next land and subdue or slaughter its inhabitants.

The Families that prospered most were the ones that worked hardest at supporting their worshipers in battle and in agriculture. But the more a particular tribe succeeded in spreading across a large area and ruling over subject nations, the more likely it was to fragment into smaller clans or city-states. When they divided, the clans vied for the attention of their favorite gods. Sometimes a Family divided, some following one clan, some another. Sometimes the divided Families fought each other for decades, using their worshipers as surrogates.

More often, though, to keep up their strength a Family would simply pick one of the tribal clans and stay with it, letting the others fend for themselves without the help of gods. But if the Family felt itself to be ill-served by their worshipers, they would choose another clan or city, and leave the first bereft of Westilian help. That was the secret history behind the histories, behind the waves of invasion, the ups and downs of a city's fortunes. And drowther scholars actually thought that Homer

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