# The Rebirth of Wonder

Lawrence Watt-Evans

*In memory of Jack Wells*

Chapter One

Cue 84: Grandmaster slow fade, count of ten, to black. Count five, and wait for the curtains to close completely; then bring up the curtain-warmer on Dimmer #3 for curtain calls.

No problem. Art Dunham took a final glance at the cue sheet clipped to the cord of his work light, just to be sure he wasn’t missing anything. Reassured, he turned his attention back to the stage, keeping his right hand closed firmly on the black knob of the largest lever.

Jamie was alone on the stage, giving the closing speech, and he’d gotten himself off-center, off his mark, so the pink light was all on the near side, and his other side was washed in blue. That was something to mention, last performance or not; Jamie meant well, and he could act, but he was so damn sloppy about the details sometimes!

“...If we be friends...”

That was the cue. Still watching the stage, Art gripped the big lever more tightly and began pulling it down, slowly and steadily. It took some muscle; the controls were old and stiff, and there were half a dozen dimmers mastered on — not with electronics, like some modern boards, but with old-fashioned mechanical linkages.

“...and Robin,” Jamie said with an appropriate bow and flourish, “shall restore amends.”

That was the last line; Art continued the fade. Either his count was off tonight or Jamie, eager to be done with the show, had rushed his delivery; there was an awkward half-second before the lights were completely down when Jamie was standing alone on the stage, silent and motionless. That hadn’t happened in any of the previous performances or rehearsals.

Please, Art thought, don’t move, Jamie. Don’t look over here to see what’s taking so long. Don’t run offstage. It would ruin the effect.

Then the lights were out, and as he reached up with his left hand for the #3 dimmer he heard Jamie scampering off the far side of the stage.

The curtains were closing, which was good; Marilyn was slow getting started, sometimes. She wasn’t really big and strong enough to be working the ropes alone, but the actors had never settled on who should help her when, so Marilyn had to make do. Typical of actors, Art thought.

Applause was welling up from the audience, the first tentative patter turning into a spilling roar, like a summer thunderstorm breaking.

The curtain was completely closed, so far as Art could see from his place at the board, and he’d counted his five; he unceremoniously shoved the #3 dimmer to the top. With rustles and whispers and uneven footsteps the players slipped through the curtains at stage right and walked out to take their bows.

For perhaps the hundredth time, Art wished that the theater had proper footlights and overhead strips. The curtain-warmer he’d rigged, despite his best efforts, still left shadows where no shadows should be. He couldn’t see them from backstage, of course, but he knew they were there. With the curtains closed and no strip lighting out front, just a couple of Fresnels, there wasn’t a thing he could do about it — but he still resented it. It was his job not just to do the best he could with what was available, but to do the lighting right.

He promised himself, as he had a dozen times before, that somehow, somewhere, he would scrounge up the materials and build himself some new strips, first chance he had.

Which might be fairly soon, he thought with a rather grim satisfaction — this was the last show of the summer, and it was only the second of August.

The applause faded away, and the actors came running off the stage, smiling broadly. Art could hear the more impatient members of the audience getting up to go, their voices and the rustle of their clothing increasingly audible over the diminished clapping.

The actors, too, were talking as he pulled the #3 dimmer back down on a count of five. As it passed the halfway mark in its slot he reached up above the lighting board to the dimmer knob at the end of the bank of switches on the wall, and turned it, bringing up the houselights. He heard Anne and Susan giggling, and Jamie babbling happily about something.

When he had the houselights all the way up he slid his hand over an inch or two and flicked the ordinary toggle switch that turned on the backstage work lights, then reached up and tugged the chain that turned off his own little work light.

He left the stage unlit, though of course the backstage lights kept it merely dim instead of dark; any brighter light there might show through the curtain.

Besides, the onstage work lights had been gelled over as rudimentary strips, as usual, and they were patched through a dimmer at the moment, which was another reason to leave them off. It was time to shut down the board.

Somebody on the other side of the stage was opening a bottle of champagne; Art wished that whoever it was had waited until the last of the audience was out of the theater. That was sloppy showmanship; the popping cork must have been audible clear out to the lobby. That violated what Art considered a basic theatrical principle: that the audience out there should never be reminded that there is a backstage.

The pop was followed by laughter and high-pitched voices — released tension at work, now that the show was over, not just for tonight, but for good.

“Hey, Art!” someone called. “Come and get it!”

“Just a minute,” Art answered. “I’ve got to reset the board!”

“You can do that later!”

“I’ll do it now,” Art replied. “I don’t want to forget.”

He wasn’t likely to forget, really; he just hated leaving anything hanging.

He began systematically turning the knobs that uncoupled the individual dimmers from the masters, and the masters from the grandmaster, checking to be sure that each lever was pushed all the way down to zero. When he had checked everything to his satisfaction he reached up and ripped the cue sheets from the clamp that held them, then dropped them neatly into the wastebasket beside the lighting board.

Then he reached over and threw the master switch, cutting all power to and from the main board.

After a final glance around the curtain, out at the empty house, he crossed the stage toward the clustered actors and crew.

As he drew near someone patted him on the back; when he turned around to see who it was a plastic cup of champagne was thrust into his hand. He caught it awkwardly, slopping a little onto his fingers.

“It went just fine tonight, didn’t it?” someone asked.

“Pretty well, I guess,” Art answered absentmindedly. He caught sight of Jamie, still in costume but with his makeup smeared and half gone, and called, “You were off-center for your final speech, kid, halfway out of the light!”

“I was?” Jamie laughed. “Oh, well, maybe next year I’ll get it right!”

“What about next month?” an unidentified female voice asked. “Has anyone heard anything?”

“No one’s booked the theater,” Art answered. “No one’s even asked Dad about it, so far as I know.”

“I didn’t want to do a second show this year anyway,” Jamie said. “I’m going out to California for a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s fine for you,” Susan said. She had removed most of her costume and was wearing only a black leotard, without any of Titania’s fairy splendor. “Some of us aren’t going anywhere.”

“I’d love to do another show, if anyone’s planning one,” someone said.

“So would I.”

There was a general chorus of agreement, followed by a few dissenting voices.

“I guess,” Art said, “that if anyone were planning one, he’d have no trouble finding a cast.”

“And no trouble getting a tech crew, either — you come with the theater, don’t you, Art?” It was Marilyn’s voice; Art looked for her, and spotted her off to one side, near the ropes.

“When I get paid, I do,” Art agreed. “Not that I’m an entire crew.”

“Oh, don’t talk about money!” Susan protested.

“Why not? Just because you don’t have any?” Jamie joked back.

“That’s one good reason,” Marilyn said.

“Well, hey, Marilyn, you could probably talk your way into a share of the profits if you wanted to get paid to work here,” someone answered.

“What profits?” half a dozen voices asked simultaneously.

Anne’s voice overrode the laughter, demanding, “Has anyone counted tonight’s take yet?”

George’s voice called from the men’s dressing room, “I’m counting it now!”

“If there’s any left, I vote we give it to Marilyn,” someone said.

“No, it’s gonna pay for the cast party!”

“I mean if there’s any left after the party.”

“There never is!”

“We’ll make sure of that!”

More laughter ensued, continuing until George appeared in the dressing room door, cashbox in hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he shouted above the hubbub. “I have an announcement!”

The cheerful babble faded momentarily into relative quiet.

“Our proceeds tonight have exceeded my expectations, and we will not have to take up a collection! In fact, after setting aside the balance of what we owe Art and his father, and covering all other necessary expenses, I find we have a surplus totaling seventeen dollars and fifty cents with which we are free to party!”

The babbling surged anew, and someone proposed a toast.

“To George,” he called, “our director and producer, who kept the lot of us safely off the streets for the past six weeks!”

“To George!”

Two dozen plastic glasses were raised in salute, and cheap champagne was drunk or spilled. Art sipped his carefully, avoiding outthrust elbows, listening to the shouted comments.

“Hey, if we didn’t have to pay Art, we’d have lots of money left!”

“Yeah, but we wouldn’t have a theater or anyone to run lights.”

“But maybe we could hire a new director.”

“Ha!” Art said. “You’ll never find a director who works as cheap as I do!”

“You love it, Art, and you know it.”

“You don’t care about the money!”

“Yes, I love it,” Art agreed, “but yes, I care about the money, too!”

“George, do you really have to go?” Marilyn asked.

“Yes, I really do,” George replied. “You know I do. My folks have been planning this for years.”

“Yeah, poor George! He has to go to Europe while all the rest of us get to sit around and do nothing for a month!”

“I don’t see why someone else can’t direct,” said a peevish voice.

“D’you want to try it?”

“What about producer?”

“Oh, that’s easy!”

“Producer is nothing. We’ve got the theater right here, and it hardly takes any money...”

“That’s what you think!”

“If anyone wants to volunteer to direct and produce another show this summer,” Art said, “it’s fine with me.”

“More money, huh, Art?”

“I thought you said you wanted a vacation, Art!”

“And it looks like I’m going to get one,” he retorted. “I don’t hear anyone volunteering!”

There was no answer to that. The conversation broke up gradually into several smaller conversations, none of which included Art. Two of the women were badgering George, one on either side of him, asking him to take them along to Paris. Anne and Susan and Jamie were in a corner together, laughing at each other’s jokes. The other actors, and the guests they had let in, gathered in clumps of three or four, talking and laughing, while Art found a gap between ropes where he could lean back against the wall and sip his champagne.

It was very cheap champagne, that was obvious, but what else, he asked himself, could he expect from a bunch of amateurs like this? Half the cast wasn’t even out of high school yet; the girls who had played Titania’s attendants might still be in junior high. This might be the first champagne some of them had ever tasted — it could give them entirely the wrong idea of what the stuff was supposed to taste like.

But it was no business of his; he was part of the theater, not part of the company. It was entirely possible that he would never see any of these people again after the party broke up — and that might happen despite several sincere promises of help in striking the set and cleaning up the entire building. Somehow, such promises tended to be forgotten once the final performance was over.

For the past three years George had always made a point of helping, and he had always dragged along whomever else he could find — but he wouldn’t be around this time. His flight left Sunday morning, a detail that had canceled the final matinee that had originally been planned — even if they could have managed without a director, George also played the Duke of Athens, and they’d run out of male understudies.

The early departure meant George would be unable to stay late at the cast party. The women who had been trying to get into his bed — there was always at least one, every show, attracted either by the director’s aura of power, or simply by George’s natural charm — would be disappointed.

If he had been in George’s position, Art thought, he wouldn’t have been so reluctant a conquest. He wasn’t the director, though; he was just the lighting director, a fixture of no particular interest.

“Hello, Art,” someone said.

He turned, and found Marilyn peering at him around a cluster of ropes.

“Hi,” he replied.

“How’s the champagne?”

“Awful.”

“I know.” She stared at him for a moment; he let his gaze wander out past her to the mob of teenaged actors and actresses, and the friends and family members who had drifted backstage to join them. They looked younger every year — not because they were younger, but because they stayed the same, on average, while he grew older.

The individual actors changed, and went off to other places or found other interests, but there were always new ones, always the same — and he was always here, helping out, and growing older, the gap between himself and the actors steadily widening.

“There really won’t be another show this summer?” Marilyn asked. “The theater will just be empty?”

He could hear her dismay. He shrugged and sipped his champagne.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Something might turn up. No one’s talked to my father, though.”

“Why don’t you talk to him?”

Startled, Art stared at her. “About what?”

“About renting the theater, of course!”

Puzzled, he looked closely at her, noticing that she had a black smear of something on one cheek. “About who renting the theater?” he asked. “Nobody wants it for the rest of August. I suppose we’ll have all the usual meetings and concerts come fall, but nobody’s asked for it for August. Not even hinted.”

“Couldn’t you rent it?”

Art studied her, baffled. “I could get it free, if no paying customers show up,” he said. “I mean, my dad knows I have to come in here to clean and check the place over whether it’s rented or not, so why not? But what would I do with it?”

“You could put on another play,” Marilyn insisted. “You’d have no trouble finding a cast, you said so yourself, and I’d be glad to stage-manage and do sets and crew again.”

“Oh, right,” Art said. “Who’s going to direct? George is going to Europe, Jack Gunderson is in Oregon, Fred Sohl is working for IBM somewhere, and Jenny Dawson’s got kids to take care of. Who else in Bampton knows anything about directing?”

“You could do it. Or we could do it together.”

Art shook his head. “I don’t know anything about directing, and I don’t want to.”

Hesitantly, Marilyn ventured, “Then I could direct, maybe.”

“If you want to try doing it yourself, go ahead; I’m sure my father will be easy to persuade. He hates to have property standing empty. Don’t expect anything from me, though, beyond what I always do — I’ll hang and run your lights, and I’ll handle building maintenance, and that’s it. That’s my job.”

“You won’t help me direct?”

“Nope. Get someone else.” He waved his almost-empty cup at the crowd of half- costumed, smiling people.

“They’re just kids,” she said.

“So?”

“You’ve been here for years, Art. You probably know more about putting on a play than anyone else here, even George.”

“I just run lights,” Art insisted.

“But you’ve been here for every show I remember! You’ve watched how everything is done, you must want to try something besides lighting!”

He shook his head. “Nope. Not really. I’ve been here running lights for the last ten years because it’s something to do in the summer, a way to pick up a few bucks and help out my dad, but that’s about it. I never wanted to act or direct any more than most of those kids wanted to run lights. I’ve stayed on here because my father doesn’t trust anyone else not to burn the place down, that’s all.”

“But then what will you do all summer?” she asked, her tone almost desperate.

“Oh, I don’t know — spend some time at the beach, read a few books, or see a lot of movies. Just relax, that’s what I intend to do.”

She stared at him for a moment, then lowered her eyes. “I guess it’s different for you. You’re not going anywhere. I’m going off to grad school in September, though, and I hate to waste my last month in Bampton.”

“You’ll be back sometimes, won’t you?”

“Yes, but... oh, hell.” She turned away from him and shuffled off.

He watched her go, then shrugged and looked for more champagne.

Chapter Two

Nobody had showed up to help him strike.

Art was not surprised at all. George was somewhere over the Atlantic by now, well on his way to his parents’ dream vacation in Europe, the whole clan reunited in London and Paris. The others had all forgotten, or were still sleeping off the party, which had lasted deep into the morning, roaring on long after George had gone off to bed (alone).

Art considered phoning a few people and demanding that they come and help, but decided against it. He didn’t think he wanted to see a bunch of bright and cheerful young faces — or even dirty, sullen ones, so long as they were that young. Bampton Summer Theatre’s rental contract said the group was required to leave the premises clean, and at least as tidy as it was when they arrived in June, but nobody, not even Art’s father, who owned the place, ever seemed to take that clause seriously. Cleaning up was Art’s job — and unpaid, except in the form of continued free lodging in his father’s house.

That meant he had to do the job alone, and the larger pieces of the sets would have to just sit in the wings for now; they were too big and awkward for one person to haul down to the basement for storage.

The first priority, though, before striking the set or any of the other equipment, was to clean up the party debris.

Art had come prepared, with half a dozen green plastic trash bags and a pocket full of twist-ties. He gathered up the cups and napkins and empty bottles and tossed everything in the bag — he was not going to worry about sorting anything for recycling. If someone wanted to sort through the bag later, that was fine with him, but he wasn’t about to do it himself.

When the trash was collected from the stage and wings he tackled the tiny dressing rooms and lavatory, and finally the house.

He was scraping up a pink wad of relatively fresh chewing gum from the aisle floor, two rows from the back, when he heard the theater’s big front door rattle. Startled, he froze where he was kneeling, then looked up at the lobby doors.

He heard voices. He put down the putty knife and dustpan and stood, brushing the dust from the knees of his jeans.

“I think you’ll see that it’s bigger inside than it looks,” Art heard through the door. He relaxed; the voice was his father’s.

“Oh, I saw that last night,” an unfamiliar voice boomed, a voice with a slight British accent. “I was here for the play, for A Midsummer Night’s Dream. A fine show they put on, a fine show!”

Art grimaced slightly. The show had been okay, but nothing special, even for a bunch of amateurs.

The lobby doors were locked; Art stepped up and threw back the bolt just as his father turned the knob from the other side. Together they swung the double doors wide.

“Art!” his father greeted him. “Glad you’re here. This is Mr. Innisfree — he says he might be interested in renting the theater for the rest of August. Mr. Innisfree, this is my son Arthur.”

Mr. Innisfree was a tall thin man with curly brown hair, his face darkened by sun and creased by lines left by smiles. He was wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat, white shorts, and a long, loose white shirt that looked vaguely North African — appropriate garb for the weather, which was hot, even for August, by New England standards. His age was hard to guess, but Art judged it to be at least twice his own twenty-six years.

The hair, Art thought, was probably dyed.

Mr. Innisfree shook Art’s hand vigorously and said, “Arthur — that’s a fine name, for a fine young man!”

“Thank you, sir,” Art replied. “Call me Art.”

“I will, my lad, I will. So this is your theater?” He surveyed the hall.

“It’s a fine building,” Art said loyally.

Mr. Innisfree grinned broadly. “I’m sure it is, Arthur,” he said, spreading his hands. “I’m sure it is!”

It seemed his accent had changed slightly; where before Art would have thought he was English, now he sounded Irish. The lilt wasn’t strong enough to be certain either way.

The elder Dunham gestured sweepingly. “Seats three hundred,” he said.

Art quirked a corner of his mouth, and did not point out that the place could only seat three hundred by using every single seat, including the ends of the front row where most of the stage could not be seen, and the dusty old balcony that was now largely taken up with sound equipment and an empty projection booth.

Mr. Innisfree nodded, smiling.

“Would you like to see backstage?” Art asked.

“Yes, lad, I would,” Mr. Innisfree said, his accent now almost a Scottish burr.

The three men marched down the center aisle. “I’m afraid I haven’t finished cleaning up,” Art apologized.

“Of course not,” Innisfree replied. “Who’d have expected it? I shan’t be troubled by a little dust.”

“Well, it’s not dust so much,” Art explained. “I mean, the lights are still set up, and the flats are still hung, and the sets aren’t put away...”

“Don’t worry about it, young Arthur!” Innisfree told him, as he vaulted onto the stage. “We’ll take care of everything!”

Art smiled briefly at the sight of a man Innisfree’s age hopping up like that; there were high school kids he knew who didn’t have that much energy.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Art’s father hastened to say, as he made his way around to the stage right steps. “We’ll take care of cleaning the place out for you and getting it ready for your show.”

“Uh...” Art hesitated, still standing in the “orchestra pit,” then asked, “What sort of a show are you planning, Mr. Innisfree?”

Innisfree turned and gestured broadly, waving both arms. “A grand and glorious spectacle, Arthur!” he proclaimed. “My companions and I, we call ourselves the Bringers of Wonder, and we have wonders indeed to show your sleepy little town!” Innisfree’s accent had changed yet again, to something Art couldn’t place that was still vaguely British. He wondered whether these shifts meant the man was completely phony.

Probably born in Brooklyn, Art thought.

“Oh?” he said politely.

“Yes, indeed!” Innisfree said. “We intend to stage our first production of that mystical classic of the stage, The Return of Magic, here, before we take the show on the road. One show and one show only, on the thirtieth of August.”

Art blinked. “The Return of Magic?” he asked.

“That’s right, Arthur — right here in Bampton, Massachusetts, we will put on such a production as the world hasn’t seen in centuries!”

Arthur climbed up onstage before replying, “I’m not sure this theater has the facilities for a big production, Mr. Innisfree. I mean, this isn’t exactly Broadway.”

“No fear, lad,” Innisfree answered, looking about with interest, his gaze taking in the inadequate flies, the ancient and rusty lightboard and patch cords, the slightly frayed ropes and somewhat musty curtains, the peeling, oft-painted dressing room doors. “I’m not seeking Broadway, nor off-Broadway, nor off-off Broadway, to as many offs as you might choose; there’s nothing broad about the way we follow. Ours is a narrow path of experiment, a route full of curious twists and unknown byways, not the flamboyant and gaudy displays that tourists attend.”

“Well, then, I’m sure that this theater will do just fine,” Art’s father said, forcing a smile.

“And I am, too,” Innisfree replied.

“Then all we need to do is settle the terms of the lease,” Dunham père said, his smile a little more genuine now. “One month, correct?”

Innisfree nodded, then stared up at the catwalk high overhead.

“Rent is five hundred dollars, plus you’ll be responsible for the electric bill — I don’t think we need to worry about heat in August. Water is included — they only bill quarterly anyway, so it’s not worth breaking it out.”

“Indeed it’s not,” Innisfree agreed, tugging gently at the curtain.

“Art, here, can handle lights and cleanup — he usually gets six dollars an hour, but that’s between you. And he knows all the locals — he can get you whatever other help you need.”

“Oh, we shan’t need him,” Innisfree said, turning back to the Dunhams. “Or anyone else local. We’ll take care of our own lights.”

The elder Dunham, taken aback, paused for a moment before asking, “Well, what about sets? Costumes?”

Innisfree smiled at them. “Sets, costumes, cast, director, dancers, stagehands, roustabouts, janitors, music, lights, darks, sound and silence, we’ll take care of it all, Mr. Dunham!” he announced.

Art’s father glanced at Art, who shrugged.

“I don’t know,” Dunham began.

“Mister Dunham,” Innisfree said, “our little group is a selective one, and our preparations are private — you might even say secret, hidden, occult, cryptic. While I’m certain Arthur here is a fine young man and the very soul of discretion, we’d really prefer to take care of ourselves and clean up our own messes. A closed set, as it were.”

Dunham’s mouth tightened.

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry, Mr. Innisfree, but this is an old building, and it’s got its delicate features, its little quirks. There’s a lot of valuable property in here, too, and these old wooden buildings — no. I’m not just offering Art as a favor to anybody; he’s my agent here, and I won’t rent to you unless he’s in here every day that your people are. He knows this place better than anyone else, better than I do. I don’t want anyone else setting lights in here, I want someone who will keep an eye on things like smoking, and any fire effects you use in your show — it’s too easy to start a fire in a theater, especially an old wooden one like this. And that catwalk up there, the locks and storerooms — no. I want Art in here regularly, and I want him inspecting anything you do with the wiring, and nobody uses the lighting equipment without his okay.”

Innisfree stared at him for a moment, but Dunham’s expression remained firmly set. Finally, Innisfree sighed.

“Very well,” he said. “Your son will be free to come and go, and we’ll pay him for his time — but we won’t be making much use of his skills.”

Dunham looked at Art.

“That’s fine,” Art said. “I don’t mind a rest.”

“Good enough, then!” Innisfree grinned and thrust out a hand. “Shake on it, and the pact is made, the bargain set!”

They shook, while Art watched.

Ten minutes later they were back at the office of Dunham Realty; the paperwork was settled in short order, and Innisfree put down the required deposit in the form of a cashier’s check drawn on a Boston bank. The two older men shook hands again, and Innisfree turned to go.

“Wait a minute,” Art called. “When should I meet you there?”

Innisfree turned back. “Tomorrow morning at eight? Would that be too early?”

Art shrugged. “That would be fine,” he said.

“Then at eight it shall be. We’ll meet in the lobby, shall we?”

“If you get there first, we’ll meet out back,” Art said. “I still have the keys — I need to get in there to finish cleaning.” He held up the ring and rattled it. “Try the back door — if I get there first I’ll leave it open. The stage door, I mean.”

“As you say, then,” Innisfree agreed. “In the lobby at eight.”

Art frowned, but didn’t bother to correct him again. Instead he just watched him go.

When he stepped out onto the sidewalk himself and headed back down Thoreau Street toward the theater, Innisfree was nowhere in sight.

Chapter Three

It was almost midnight by the time Art was finally satisfied with the theater’s readiness for its new tenants. He had everything as clean as he could reasonably get it, working single-handed. The ropes were all coiled away, in two neat rows; the lighting instruments were ungelled and stored away on the stage left shelves, licos on top, Fresnels below. The gels, frames, cords, and plugs were sorted and put away as well, the on-stage work lights stripped back down to ordinary hundred-watt bulbs, their power routed back through the regular wall switches.

The sets were disassembled, the pieces either back in basement storage or, if they were too big for him to manhandle downstairs alone, arranged along the back wall of either wing.

The dressing rooms were swept and emptied, the costumes back down in the basement, in wardrobe storage; the ashtrays were dumped and wiped, the toilet scrubbed.

In the house the seats were all brushed, litter removed, the floor swept. Posters had been removed from the lobby walls, the red runner was hung over the fence out back to be beaten, and the two burnt-out bulbs in the lobby chandelier had been replaced.

No one from the cast of A Midsummer Night’s Dream had shown up except Marilyn. Of course, she was technically crew, rather than cast, Art corrected himself; none of the cast ever came.

Art hadn’t really expected Marilyn, either, but she had arrived late in the afternoon and apologized for not being there sooner — family business had kept her away.

Marilyn’s help had made the job considerably easier. Art had even considered taking advantage of her presence to haul the rest of the sets down to the basement — the mock stage for “Pyramus and Thisbe” was the big one, and then the two sections of Titania’s bower were awkward — not all that heavy, but awkward.

He had put it off, however, as being of secondary importance, and Marilyn had had to leave at eleven, so the sets still sat in the wings when he locked up and went home to bed.

He was in bed by 12:30, with the alarm set for 7:00, and he was up again at 6:50; he had always hated alarm clocks, hated having any machine ordering him around and telling him he wasn’t doing what he should, and he had long ago developed a defense mechanism against them — he always woke up before they went off.

A warm shower, then breakfast, and then down the street to the theater, arriving at ten to eight — plenty of time. He fished the key ring out of his pocket and let himself in the front, with the intention of taking a quick look around, just in case he’d missed anything, before opening the stage door for Mr. Innisfree.

The interior was dim; sunlight spilled in the door around him, and dust, stirred up by his cleaning the night before, danced in the golden air.

“Ah, good morrow to you, lad!” Mr. Innisfree said.

Astonished, Art jerked away from the door and turned to stare.

Innisfree was standing on the left-hand balcony stair, wearing a light gray suit and smiling down at him.

“How’d you get in here?” Art demanded.

“Why, the door was open!”

“It was?” Art turned and stared. “No, it wasn’t; I just now unlocked it.”

“Not that one, my boy, the stage door.”

Art frowned. He had locked all the doors last night when he left, hadn’t he? He had certainly thought so.

He remembered checking the front doors before he walked home, and taking a look down at the big basement door where the chain and padlock had been securely in place. He had come out through the stage door — was it possible he hadn’t locked it behind him?

He thought he had locked it...

“We found it open when we arrived, so we came inside to look around,” Innisfree added, helpfully.

“We?”

“Certainly, we; didn’t I tell you? Did you think I was alone? I’m sure I mentioned the others; after all, what would one man do with a theater?”

“I knew you had a group,” Art admitted. “The Harbingers of Wonder, or something like that? But I didn’t know you were... I mean, I thought you’d be coming alone this morning, to sort of plan things out before the others got here.”

“By no means, Arthur!” Innisfree smiled broadly. “Ours is a cooperative effort, and we must all share in the planning, if our little production is to have the success we hope for!”

Art nodded.

“Oh, and it’s the Bringers of Wonder, not harbingers,” Innisfree added.

The door to the house opened just then, and a face appeared between the two valves of the big double door. It was no one Art had ever seen before, a rather tall, thin woman, obviously Oriental — in fact, without knowing exactly why he thought so, Art classified her specifically as Chinese. She was wearing a long, utterly simple white dress — the sort of simplicity that dress designers charged a fortune for. She wore her hair long — lush, straight black hair that spilled past her waist, so fine that it seemed to float about her in a cloud.

She was staggeringly beautiful.

“Ah, Ms. Fox!” Innisfree called. “Come on out here and meet young Arthur Dunham, our landlord’s scion and representative!”

The name Fox was hardly Chinese — but then, it wasn’t Asian at all. “Hello,” Art said.

Ms. Fox emerged two tentative little steps into the lobby and then bowed, without making a sound.

Art blinked. He couldn’t remember anyone bowing to him before, ever, and was unsure how to respond.

Then Ms. Fox whirled and vanished back into the theater’s depths; the sudden motion sent her hair up into a glorious black cloud, and perfume spilled from it into the surrounding air. Art took a step after her, then looked up at Innisfree.

Innisfree smiled. “Go on in, lad, and meet the others!”

Art was getting tired of being called “lad” or “my boy” — after all, he was twenty-six years old, he wasn’t a kid.

This wasn’t the time to argue about it, though. He went on into the theater.

The others were up on the stage, milling about and speaking quietly among themselves; most of them were smiling. As Art watched, Ms. Fox leaped up to rejoin them, jumping the thirty vertical inches as if it were nothing.

There were about a dozen, and at first he saw them as an undifferentiated mass. Gradually, though, individuals emerged.

To one side, crouched against the proscenium, fingering the ancient velvet of the curtain’s edge, was a bent old woman, her white hair straggling out around a red kerchief; she wore a drab brown skirt and sweater and a frayed white apron.

Near her stood a woman Art judged to be in her thirties, tall and straight, in a dark green gown, red hair swept back from her face and bound in a single thick braid.

An immense black man in a brightly colored shirt and faded jeans stood beside the woman in green.

A short, swarthy woman with curly black hair could have passed for a gypsy fortune-teller; she wore a white blouse and leather slacks, though, rather than the traditional long skirt. Art wondered why on earth anyone would wear leather in August.

A middle-aged black woman in faded jeans and a floral-print blouse knotted at her midriff stood with her hands on her hips, arguing amiably with a rather smug-looking, mustached man in black slacks and a Hawaiian shirt.

An obese Oriental wearing only a pair of brown shorts stood panting in center stage, looking up at the flies.

Two swarthy men, one in a turban, were talking together well upstage, where Art couldn’t see them clearly.

And a woman, or maybe only a girl, with light brown hair and a summer dress, sat on the edge of the stage, smiling at him.

They were an even more motley crew than most theater troupes, Art thought. He also wondered whether this was the entire company; Bampton Summer Theatre usually had twice this number.

But then, Bampton Summer Theatre was purely amateur.

Most of the others had turned when Ms. Fox leapt up on the stage, looking to see what the commotion was about. What desultory conversation they had been pursuing now died away completely as the entire company turned to stare at Art.

“Hi,” he said, standing in the aisle feeling foolish.

Behind him, Innisfree cleared his throat.

“My fellow... ah, thespians!” Innisfree announced. “This is Arthur Dunham, our landlord’s son. We are to make him welcome, as a requirement of our rental here!”

Most of the smiles that had been present had vanished. “You think he’s no trouble, Merle?” the black woman asked.

“Ah, my dear Tituba, trouble or no, what choice have we?” Innisfree called back.

“I won’t be any trouble,” Art said, annoyed. “I’ve worked here for years, done more than a dozen shows. I know where everything is, how everything works.”

“You do not know how we work,” the man with the mustache retorted.

Art shrugged. “I’ll learn. And I’ll stay out of your way, if that’s what you want.”

“That is indeed what we want,” the big black man replied. “We mean you no ill, Mr. Dunham, but we have our own ways.”

“Well, that’s fine, then,” Art said, trying to hide his annoyance. “But my dad wants me here to keep an eye on the place, and Mr. Innisfree agreed, so here I am. Now, is there anything I can help with? Anything I can tell you about? Maybe show you somewhere you can put those things?” He pointed out the Duke of Athens’s stage and the fairy queen’s bower.

Several of the Bringers of Wonder turned to look where he pointed, as if noticing the retired sets for the first time.

“Can we use those?” the woman in green asked, directing her question not to Art, but to Innisfree.

“We don’t need them,” the black woman replied.

Innisfree turned up empty hands. “If you like, Faye, I’m sure we can find a use for them.”

“Everyone already saw them in A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” Art pointed out.

“Then we’ll transform them,” the woman in green said, “and none shall recognize them.”

“Suit yourselves,” Art said. “But if you’d rather just get rid of them, there’s storage space in the basement, and there’s a trapdoor upstage there that we can lower them down through — it’ll take about five men, I’d say, two up here and three downstairs.”

“Boy,” the old woman in the kerchief snapped, startling Art, “haven’t we told you to mind your own business? If we want ’em stashed, we’ll do it ourselves!” Her voice was no weak old woman’s quaver, but sharp and strong; it cut through the theater like an oar through water.

That was one person who would have no trouble projecting to the back of the theater, Art thought. “I’m sorry, Ma’am,” he said, “but it is my business — anything to do with this theater is.”

“Merle,” the old woman said, glowering at Innisfree, “if I’d known this place came with its own built-in twerp, I’d never have agreed to it.”

“Peace, Grandmother,” said the man with the turban. “Where else would we go?”

“Any number of places, you little snot,” the old woman retorted. “To Hell, for all of me. I didn’t say I’d have gone elsewhere — I might just have gone home and said I’d have none of this whole lunatic production.”

“Oh, no,” said the woman in green, “you don’t mean that! We need you!”

“She’s right,” the turbaned man agreed. “We can’t do it without you, Grandmother!”

“Listen,” Art said, “I’m sorry; I don’t want to cause any trouble. I can just sit here and mind my own business, if that’s really what you want.” He stepped into a row of seats.

“I don’t want you anywhere, nitwit,” the old woman answered. “I don’t need some punk watching me.”

The others were uncomfortably silent for a moment; at last Innisfree suggested, “I think that Ms. Yeager means we’d prefer to have no audience until we’ve got a little farther along.”

“All right,” Art said. “Then I’ll go work on cleaning the basement. If you need anything, just come on down.”

He marched down the aisle, hopped one-handed up onstage — if Innisfree could do it, so could he — and found his way through the players to the stairway door in the stage right wing.

The Bringers of Wonder watched him pass; then the woman who had been sitting on the stage got to her feet and called, “Hang on a minute, I’ll come with you. I’d like to see what’s down there.”

He turned and smiled at her.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’d be glad of the company.”

Chapter Four

“My name’s Maggie,” she said as they descended the narrow steps, “Maggie Gowdie.”

“Art Dunham,” Art said, reaching for the string that would turn on the dangling bare light bulb at the foot of the stair.

“Pleased to meet you. It’s a long way down, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Watch your step.” He stepped off the bottom stair onto the rough stone of the floor and turned to offer Maggie a hand. She accepted it and stepped down beside him, then looked around.

They were in a small room, perhaps eight feet square, with brown plank walls and a single door. Art pulled the key ring from his pocket, found the one he wanted, and unlocked the door; he opened it, reached inside, and flipped the light switch.

“Come on,” he said.

Maggie followed him through the door into the basement’s central corridor. Three lights in wire cages lit the ancient plaster walls of the narrow passage, walls that had been painted white once, long ago, but were now covered with scrapes, stains, and graffiti. At the near end the passage ended in a sliding door; at the other it turned a right angle into darkness. Closed doors were spaced along either side. The floor was raw granite; the foundations had been cut into the living bedrock. The ceiling, too, was stone, which startled Maggie. It was also some fifteen feet up.

“What a strange place!” she said.

“Yup,” Art agreed. “Come on, we’ll start at this end.” He turned toward the sliding door, and Maggie followed.

“This seems like a lot of basement for a little old theater,” she said, as he rolled the door aside. “And it looks different, too. I mean, upstairs is all wood, and down here there’s stone.”

“That’s because the foundation’s a lot older than the rest,” Art explained. “Originally this place was a church, but it burned down. The crypts weren’t damaged much, but everything else was a total loss. That was about 1910; it was a ruin until 1923, when someone bought it and built the theater.”

Maggie looked over Art’s shoulder into the gloom of the large room below the stage; he could smell the sweet odor of her hair. Light spilled in from the corridor and seeped, here and there, through cracks and knotholes in the floor overhead; there was no ceiling to hide the joists. They could hear voices — not well enough to make out words or even tell who was speaking, but enough to know when someone was talking. The air of the room had a cool, earthen feel, and Maggie could smell dry dust and moist soil.

Then Art flipped the light switch, and half a dozen wall fixtures came on, illuminating a strange and cavernous chamber.

Where visible, three of the walls were rough-hewn stone, while the floors above and below were simple plank — a sort of reversal of the corridor. When Maggie leaned forward to peer in she could see that the wall with the door in it was plaster, like the corridor. The wooden floor was a step down from the solid bedrock of the passage, which seemed completely unreasonable — why would anyone have cut farther down into the stone to make room for flooring?

Whatever the reason, they had done exactly that. Maggie continued her examination.

Stone columns were spaced along the three stone walls, curving over at the top as if to support a vaulted ceiling, but then ending in broken stumps. The stage floor above them rested on huge wooden beams, not on stone.

Between two of the columns, off to the right and well above the floor, was a huge double door to the outside, perhaps four yards square, held shut with a heavy wooden bar that rested in black iron brackets. A chain and padlock held the brackets closed and kept the bar in place.

Most of the wall space, and in fact almost half the total floor area, was filled with pieces of old sets — staircases and window seats, balconies and pulpits, all packed in together however they would fit. The dark greens of haunted forests shaded the vivid pinks and purples of nightclub stages, while staid floral wallpaper showed through Gothic arches. In the center of the chamber was a scattering of debris — Titania’s wrap, Bottom’s mask, Moon’s lantern and thornbush — from the most recent production; cleaning that up was Art’s major excuse for coming down here.

“This part was built about 1850,” he said. “This end of the church fell in during the fire, which is why there’s no ceiling. It’s handy for the traps.” He pointed to three trapdoors in the stage. Then he indicated the big door in the right-hand wall. “That’s where we bring in lumber and so forth — it opens on a ramp up to the parking lot.” He dropped his hand and pointed to the floor. “And there’s another level underneath here, but we closed that off when I was a little kid — a lot of trash fell down there during the fire, or got thrown down there when the place was abandoned, and it wasn’t much more than a stone pit to begin with, so when the old floor rotted we didn’t replace the ladder or the door, we just put the new floor in over it.”

“Your family’s owned this place a long time, then?” Maggie asked.

“Oh, yes,” Art agreed. “My grandfather bought it back in the forties, during the postwar housing shortage. He wanted to convert it to a house and sell it, but he couldn’t raise the capital.”

“So he left it a theater.”

“Right.” Art cleared his throat. “Anyway, you’re welcome to use any of these old sets, if you like. And you can store stuff down here. It’s a little musty at this end — might have something to do with the pit, I suppose — but then there are plenty of storerooms under the house. The people who built the theater put walls in under each of the main support arches, and then ran that corridor down the center, so there are nine separate rooms, not counting the one with the stairs.”

Maggie nodded.

“And down the far end, around the corner, is where the water main and the electricity and phone lines come in.” He pointed back down the corridor. “There’s a small fuse box, too, for the outside lights. The main fuse box is upstairs near the light board, though.”

“Makes sense,” Maggie said.

“Um,” Art said, flicking off the lights in the big room. “Is there anything else you’d like me to show you?”

“Well... what’s in all the storerooms?”

“Mostly costumes on this side,” he said, pointing. “And props on the other. And smaller set pieces; it’s only the big ones we leave in there.” He jerked a thumb toward the chamber beneath the stage, and as he did he caught, from the corner of his eye, a vivid blue flash, shining for an instant through the tiny openings in the floor above.

“What the hell...” he said, angrily. “What are they doing up there?” He turned and charged toward the stairs, forgetting Maggie.

She followed, calling after him, “Art, it’s okay! Don’t worry!”

He ignored her, rushing up the stairs at full speed and out through the open door into the backstage area.

“All right,” he shouted, “who did that?”

The Bringers of Wonder all turned, startled, to face him.

“Did what?” Innisfree asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I saw blue light, a bright flash of blue light — was one of you trying out the lighting instruments?”

Some of them shook their heads; a couple muttered, “No.” The black woman — Tituba, Innisfree had called her — pointed at the shelves of equipment. “You mean those? Nobody touched those, boy.”

Art could see that the lights looked undisturbed; the main power switch for the lightboard was still off, the pilot light dark.

“Then what was it, a flashpot or something? Damn it, if you’re going to be using pyrotechnics, let me know, so I can check ’em out and make sure we’ve got sand buckets ready!”

“No one used any fireworks, Mr. Dunham,” the woman in green said.

Maggie had come up behind him. “Art,” she said quietly, “I think it was just a camera flash.”

Art turned to look at her, then turned back to find Innisfree holding up a camera.

“Maggie’s right, Arthur,” he said. “Just snapping a few ’before’ shots for a little before-and-after.”

Art hesitated.

“How’d you see it in the first place?” the old woman in the kerchief demanded.

“The cracks in the flooring,” Art explained, pointing. After a moment’s consideration, he said, “It seemed awfully bright for a camera flash.”

“A trick of the eye, perhaps,” Innisfree suggested.

“I guess so,” Art agreed.

“Young man,” the woman with the gypsyish looks said, “are you going to be rushing in here and interrupting us every time there’s any little disturbance? Because if you are, that could be a serious problem.”

“You know that our show involves magic, don’t you?” the woman in green said. “We’ll have things appearing and disappearing and flying about fairly often. And I wouldn’t be surprised by a few flashes and bangs.”

“Um,” Art said thoughtfully.

“It would be inconvenient,” Innisfree said.

“Sorry,” Art said. He chewed his lower lip as he looked the lot of them over, then said, “Okay, but listen, tell me before you set off any fireworks, okay? And whoever’s going to do lights, talk to me first, and let me help you set up.”

“Assuredly,” Innisfree said. “Certainly, by all means, and most assuredly!” He smiled ingratiatingly.

Uneasy but outnumbered, Art backed down from any further argument. In fact, it seemed like a wise idea to leave completely for a little while. “All right, then,” he said. “I guess the basement can wait, anyway; I’ll go take a little walk and leave you folks in peace for a bit.”

“Our blessings upon you, then,” Innisfree said, bowing.

Reluctantly, Art turned and walked out the stage door, uncomfortably aware of a dozen pairs of eyes watching him every step of the way.

Outside, the sun was painfully bright; he blinked, and shaded his eyes with his arm as he stood on the little porch, waiting for his pupils to adjust.

Spread out before him was the theater’s little parking lot, only about a dozen spaces — for successful performances, the patrons lined the streets for blocks and usurped the parking lot of the bank across the street. The asphalt was bare and gray, baking in the August sun; a thin sifting of sand had found its way onto one corner.

The lot was empty.

His eyes had adjusted, but Art blinked again anyway.

There were no cars.

He looked out at the street, and saw no cars parked along the curbs. He scratched his head, baffled.

How the hell had the Bringers of Wonder got there? There were no hotels within what he’d have considered reasonable walking distance, and a motley bunch like that would have stood out on the Bampton streets on a Monday morning like seals in a schoolroom.

Someone must have given them a lift, he realized. Maybe there was another member of the group he hadn’t met yet who was off buying supplies somewhere.

They’d have needed a bus, but they might very well have a bus, for all he knew.

And it didn’t matter anyway. It was none of his business. As long as they didn’t burn the theater down, they could arrive by dogsled for all he cared. With a shrug, he descended the four wooden steps and went for a stroll.

\* \* \*

He didn’t bother to knock when he came back from his walk; he just slipped quietly in through the stage door, trying not to disturb anybody.

The Bringers of Wonder were still sitting or standing about, talking quietly or looking over the theater. They had spread out somewhat — before, all but Innisfree had been onstage, but now the man with the turban was studying the lighting equipment — and not, Art was relieved to see, touching any of it — while Tituba and the woman in green looked over the ropes and ladders, the two Orientals studied the leftover sets, and two of the men, the big black one and the short one with the mustache, sat out in the middle of the house, chatting quietly. Innisfree was up in the balcony, poking through the dusty junk up there.

The rest were sitting either on the edge of the stage or in the front row, talking.

There were no signs that anything had been done toward organizing a performance; nobody was pacing out blocking, no scripts were in evidence, no one was giving direction.

Maggie, seated on the edge of the stage, turned at the sound of the door. She hopped up to her feet and crossed toward him, as several of the others cast unfriendly glares in his direction. Innisfree took a quick look, then turned and disappeared into the shadows farther up the balcony’s slope.

“How’s it going?” Art asked Maggie as she approached.

“Oh, fine,” she said. “How was your walk?”

“Fine.”

“We’re almost done for today, I think.”

“But it isn’t even noon!” Art protested, startled.

“Oh, well, today was just sort of preliminary,” Maggie said, with an offhand gesture. “You know, make sure everyone knew where the theater was, make sure we all knew each other, and so on. We can’t really start on anything until the moon... I mean, until tomorrow night.”

Tituba and the other — Faye, had someone called her? — moved away a little as Art and Maggie walked downstage.

“Make sure you all knew each other? I thought you folks had been together for a while,” Art said.

Maggie shook her head. “Not really. We all knew of each other, I guess, but... well, Ms. Morgan wasn’t on speaking terms with some of the others for the longest time, and Merle’s been away, and I’m sort of filling in for my grandmother, I’m not... I haven’t been around as long as the others.”

Art nodded. “How’d you people get together, then?”

“That’s hard to explain,” Maggie said. “Family connections, you might say.”

“Sure.” Art stopped walking. “So today was just introductions? That’s why there aren’t any scripts or anything?”

“That’s right.”

“Are all the parts cast, though?”

Maggie hesitated. “I think so,” she said.

“So who do you play?”

“Oh, I’m just in the chorus, really.”

“What’s the play again?”

“The Return of Magic. It’s not exactly a play, it’s... it’s a performance.”

Art nodded. “Hope it goes over. Bampton’s kind of old-fashioned; about as experimental as anyone’s ever gotten around here was when they tried putting on Shaw’s Man and Superman. And that was a disaster — must’ve been less than a third of the audience that stuck it out to the end.”

“Oh, we’re not worried.”

“Well, that’s good, I guess.” He looked around, and then added, “Guess I’ll go clear out that stuff downstairs. When you folks are ready to leave, let me know, and I’ll lock up.”

“All right.” She smiled at him, then took his hand for a moment, gave it a quick squeeze, and turned away.

He watched her cross back to the edge of the stage; then he marched over to the stairway and down into the crypts.

Chapter Five

“Art?”

At the call Art looked up from the pile of dust and wood shavings that he’d swept together. The wrap and mask and lantern and the rest were all safely stashed away in the appropriate storerooms, which just left sweeping up.

“Art, we’re going now; you can lock up any time.” It was Maggie’s voice, coming from the stairwell.

“Thanks,” he called back. He leaned the broom against the wall, fished the key ring from his pocket, and headed for the steps.

After he’d locked the door at the foot of the stairs he found that Maggie was waiting for him on the second landing.

“Mr. Innisfree said to tell you we’d need to be in by noon tomorrow, but we won’t be doing any more mornings,” she told him as he climbed the steps toward her.

“That’s fine,” he said. “I never heard of anyone doing theater work in the morning anyway.”

“Well, I haven’t done much theater,” Maggie said. “I don’t think any of us have, really, except maybe Ap... Mr. Tanner.”

He reached her level, and the two of them proceeded up the narrow steps with her in the lead. “Why are you all doing it now, then?” he asked.

“Oh, well, The Return of Magic is special, and when Mr. Innisfree offered us a chance at it...” She shrugged.

“It’s special?” Art asked. “I never heard of it.”

“Hardly anyone has,” Maggie agreed. “That’s one reason it’s special.”

They reached the door at the top of the stairs and emerged backstage.

“Well, if it’s like that,” Art asked, “how’d you people hear of it, then?”

“Well, we’re all interested in... well, magic,” Maggie explained.

“Stage magic, you mean.”

She smiled crookedly. “Yes, of course, stage magic.”

“That explains things,” Art remarked. “You mentioned magic before, too; I should have realized. No offense, but you folks don’t look or act much like any other theater people I’ve worked with — but magicians, yeah, I can see that.” He closed and locked the stairway door, after making sure the lights were all out.

He looked around and found the stage and wings empty.

“The others have gone already,” Maggie explained.

Art nodded. “If you want to go on, I can finish up myself.”

“No, that’s all right, I’m not in any hurry.”

“Okay, then, next stop is the lobby.” He led her around by the stage-right steps, rather than jumping over the edge, and made his way up the aisle.

Maggie followed.

“So, you said your grandmother got you into this?” he asked, just to make conversation.

“That’s right.”

“She was a magician?”

“She was... well, she liked to claim she was a witch.”

Art snorted. “She work up in Salem, for the tourists, or something?”

“No, no. Scotland.”

Art turned, startled. “You’re Scottish?”

“Grandmother was. I was born in Halifax.”

“Oh. You don’t have any accent.”

Maggie grinned. “That’s not what Grandmother’s people said; they always told me I had the most awful American accent they’d ever heard.”

“Well, that’s what I meant, you don’t have a Scottish accent.”

“I grew up in... well, all over North America, really. My folks moved around a lot.”

Art was silent for a moment before replying. “I think I might be jealous of all that moving,” he said at last. “I’ve spent my whole life in Bampton. But I’m not sure I’m jealous, really; I like knowing where home is.”

Maggie grimaced. “I know what you mean, and I don’t think you should be jealous at all; I’ve never been sure where I belong. If anywhere. It’s not a good feeling.”

They had, by this time, emerged into the lobby; Art locked the doors, and for good measure threw the deadbolts. He was still upset that the Bringers of Wonder had found the place unlocked.

Then it was back across the lobby and down the aisle.

“So was it Innisfree who got all of you together and came up with the idea of staging Return of Magic?” Art asked, as much to make conversation as to get an answer. He found Maggie easy to talk to, and wanted to keep it that way, not let an awkward silence develop.

“Well, sort of,” Maggie said. “I mean, the Bringers of Wonder, the group, was originally formed, oh, maybe seventy or eighty years ago, when M... when Mr. Innisfree wasn’t around. And they always intended to do this — a production of The Return of Magic, I mean — but it wasn’t until Mr. Innisfree turned up that they actually thought they might pull it off. They’d sort of let the group fall apart, but when he turned up everybody got back together. Except that I’m here instead of Grandmother, of course.”

“Is Innisfree the director, then?”

Maggie hesitated slightly before answering, “Yes.”

“So this play, Return of Magic — who wrote it?”

Again, she hesitated.

“I’m not really sure,” she said at last. “You’ll have to ask Mr. Innisfree.”

Art nodded as he let her go up the steps to the stage ahead of him. He figured he could look it up at the library.

They were almost to the stage door when Maggie asked, “You said we weren’t like theater people. What did you mean?”

Startled, Art glanced at her, then reached for the doorknob. “I mean you aren’t,” he said.

“How?”

“It’s hard to explain, if you’ve never worked in the theater,” Art said, opening the door. “There’s a sort of... a sort of fellowship in the theater that you people don’t seem to have. I mean, actors bicker with each other, and compete for parts, and try to upstage each other, but they always know they’re all really on the same side, that they need each other.”

“We know we need each other,” Maggie protested, stepping out into the sun.

“But you don’t know you need me,” Art said, following her. “I’m theater, too, and you people just about threw me out of here.”

“Well, we aren’t used to having strangers watch us while we prepare,” Maggie explained.

“But you should be,” Art replied. “Actors love an audience, any time, any place, practically.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Maggie said. “I’d always heard that stars get tired of fans and spend half their time trying to get away from the public.”

“That’s not the same thing. Besides, you people aren’t movie stars.”

“You’re just angry because you feel we’ve shut you out.”

“No, I’m not,” Art said, locking the door behind them and carefully keeping out of his voice anything that could be taken as a sign of resentment. “I don’t care if you do, honestly; I was just surprised, because it’s not like any theater people I ever saw before. But if you’re magicians, that explains it — magicians have trade secrets to protect.” He looked around.

“Hey, Art!” someone called.

He turned, and spotted Marilyn on the sidewalk. He waved.

He turned back, and Maggie was gone. Startled, he looked around, but didn’t find her, or any of the other Bringers of Wonder.

She must have run down the steps and around the corner while he was locking the door, he decided — while he was still talking.

That was pretty rude — just the sort of thing he’d been trying to explain to her.

He shrugged and checked the door again, then thumped down the steps and shouted, “Hi, Marilyn!”

They ate lunch at Arby’s, on the town square. Marilyn restricted herself to small talk until the sandwiches had been eaten; Art, certain she was dying to know who had rented the theater, admired her self-restraint.

When the last bite was in Art’s mouth, though, Marilyn could restrain herself no longer.

“So what were you doing at the theater?” she asked.

“Just keeping an eye on things,” Art replied, watching her closely.

“Oh.” Marilyn was plainly disappointed. “So nobody’s renting it after all?”

“What made you think someone might be renting it?” Art asked blandly.

“Oh, you know, I just... well, you were there this morning, and someone said he saw your dad there yesterday. Nothing, really, I guess; I was just hoping.” She fluttered her hands in confusion.

Art decided it would be cruel to tease her any longer. “Well, you’re right,” he said. “Someone did rent it. They were there this morning, making plans.”

“Oh?” Her face lit up. “Who is it? What are they doing? I mean, is it a play, or just lectures, or something?”

“It’s a play...” Art began.

“It is? What kind? Musical? Shakespeare?” Marilyn was practically bouncing in her seat.

Art held up a restraining hand. “Whoa!” he said. “Let me tell you!”

Marilyn grinned, and held a finger in front of her mouth. “My lips are sealed,” she said. “Death before further interruption, I swear by the seven sacred soothsayers of Samarkand. Speak, O font of all wisdom!”

“The seven sacred soothsayers of Samarkand?” Art asked, grinning back.

Marilyn stared at him, but didn’t say a word.

“Well, that’s better, I guess,” Art said, “whoever they are.”

She still held her mouth tightly closed as she bobbed her head, and made beckoning gestures; Art had to fight down laughter to continue.

“It’s not anybody local,” he said. “It’s some group called the Bringers of Wonder — I didn’t get the details, but apparently they travel around, and have been in business for a long time, though they haven’t been very active lately.”

Marilyn nodded, eyes wide.

“They’re all magicians, and the show they’re doing is something called The Return of Magic, so I guess it’s some kind of magic show, more than a regular play.”

“Oh, neat!” Marilyn said, oaths sworn by nonexistent seers instantly forgotten. “You mean sort of like those jugglers doing Shakespeare?”

“The Flying Karamazov Brothers. Yeah, maybe — I don’t really know.”

“So will they be holding auditions or anything?”

Art shook his head. “Nope. No local people at all, not in the show, not even backstage — at least, that’s what they’ve said so far. I’m only there because my dad insisted — I’m his agent and fire marshal, more than their crew. I guess I’ll be helping with the lights, but that’s... well, they don’t like outsiders.”

Marilyn blinked in surprise. “They don’t?” she said. “You mean not even theater people?”

“Not even theater people,” Art confirmed. “Remember, they’re magicians — they’re kind of paranoid, I guess about people learning secrets about their tricks.”

“That’s silly,” Marilyn said.

Art shrugged. “I won’t argue,” he said.

“So I can’t work on the show?”

“Probably not.” Art hesitated, and then said, “Look, if there’s any chance at all, I’ll try to get you in, but I can’t promise anything. They’re pretty strange.”

“Really?” Marilyn set her elbows on the table, laced her fingers together, and leaned forward, resting her chin on the back of her hands. “Tell me more!”

Chapter Six

Art swung open the stage door and stepped into the dim, dry heat of the theater. He slid the key ring into his pocket and found the switch for the backstage work lights.

The lights came on, faint and yellow after the blaze of the summer sun out in the parking lot, and he closed the door behind him.

The inside of the empty theater smelled of dust and old wood and ancient paint, of yellowed paper and crumbling fabric — an attic smell, a hot summer smell that Art found wonderfully comforting. Nothing was disturbed here, nothing was dangerous; everything was safely dead and desiccated, dried out and folded up and put away, tucked away in neat jumbles of mystery, in trunks and boxes, on shelves and in stacks, to be taken out only as needed. The storerooms were packed with wonders and marvels, all of them safely false, just sequins and tissue paper, papier-mâché and poster paint.

Beyond the open curtain the house was dark; the even rows of empty seats were parallel lines of deepening blackness, stretching to an apparent infinity — but really only to the invisible and reassuring rear wall.

There were times when Art admitted to himself that he liked the theater best when it was empty and dark like this, no one here but himself, with all its hidden treasures his own, all its store of imagination unshared, no one imposing a playwright’s dreams on him. It was his own personal playhouse, in every sense of the word.

He strolled downstage, into the dimness, his footsteps loud on the wood; outside he could hear the distant buzzing of summer — lawn mowers and insects and traffic, all of it diminished by distance. The heat in the theater was stifling, his shirt prickled with sweat, but just now he didn’t care. The theater had air conditioning — the switches were in the lobby, near the box office — but of course, he hadn’t left it turned on overnight.

He would turn it on in a moment, but for now he wanted to just sit and think a little.

The Bringers of Wonder were due any minute; Art supposed they would start blocking out their show. Had they already assigned roles, decided who would provide costumes and props and so forth?

Well, that wasn’t his concern, was it? He was here if they needed him — just as he was in his winter job, driving a snowplow for the town. Most of the time, all he had to do was be somewhere they could reach him, and for that they paid him ten dollars a day; when the snow started falling, he worked, and they paid him ten dollars an hour. Bampton wasn’t big enough or rich enough to hire full-time snowplow drivers.

When he worked depended on the whims of the weather; in a mild winter he didn’t have much to do, while in a bad one he worked almost constantly. He was accustomed to that.

His summer work had always been different, though; Bampton Summer Theatre had always kept to a schedule, kept him busy for exactly so many evenings. There had always been plenty to do — even when everything was designed and hung and wired and gelled and focused and tested, he could find ways to tinker, to fine-tune the lights, and there was always cleaning to be done.

And if he had nothing important to do, he could watch the rehearsals and offer advice.

The Bringers, it seemed, were going to be different.

He sat down on the edge of the stage and looked out at the darkened seats, his eyes steadily adjusting. He wondered whether it would have been a good idea to have brought a book to read; if the Bringers weren’t going to keep him busy, he’d need something to do. Especially if they didn’t want him watching.

It wouldn’t be practical to build the strip lights he wanted; first, because he didn’t have the money for materials, and second, because he couldn’t use the stage to work on while the Bringers were there.

Well, the basement wasn’t as clean and tidy yet as it could be; this was a chance to tackle long-neglected corners in the storerooms down there, maybe clear out old junk that no one was ever going to use again.

All the same, bringing a book might have been clever. He would plan on dropping by the library tomorrow morning and finding something good. Someone had mentioned a couple of possibilities — had that been Jamie, during rehearsals for A Midsummer Night’s Dream? Or George?

“Ah, Arthur,” Innisfree’s voice said, “A pleasure to see you.”

Art started, and looked over his shoulder.

The Bringers were on the stage behind him — not just Innisfree, but several of them, perhaps all of them.

Art scooted himself off the stage and turned to face them. “I didn’t hear you come in,” he said.

“Well, we didn’t want to disturb you,” Innisfree explained. “You looked so thoughtful, sitting there.”

Art had not realized he was being particularly thoughtful, and did not understand how he had failed to hear the stage door opening and closing, had failed to hear footsteps on the stage, had failed to see the sunlight when the door was opened. He made no answer, but instead simply stood, looking up at Innisfree, and the old woman, and the woman with the braid — she wasn’t in green today, but in a gown of maroon silk that looked totally inappropriate for such hot weather.

“What the devil are you staring at, boy?” the old woman shouted. Her voice was incredibly piercing.

“Nothing,” Art said. “You startled me, ma’am, that’s all.” She was, he noticed, wearing either the same clothes as yesterday, or others equally dismal and unmemorable. Like the other woman’s, they were far heavier than was reasonable on a hot August day.

“That’s no reason to stare like a damned owl.”

“Sorry.” Art blinked and turned his gaze elsewhere.

Maggie was off to stage right, watching him; she wore cutoff jeans and a red paisley halter.

“Well,” Innisfree called, “I think we’re all here; shall we get started?”

“What, you expect us to get anything done with this idiot staring at us as if we were his television set?” the old woman demanded. “It’s pretty clear he doesn’t have the wit for anything more complicated than TV.”

“Baba,” Innisfree said, “leave the boy alone. You know why he’s here.”

“All the same, sir,” said the man with the elegant mustache, “I think we would all be happier if he did not remain where he is, watching us from the audience.”

Innisfree looked about, confounded, as a general round of nodding and affirmative muttering greeted this.

“It’s all right,” Art said, coming to Innisfree’s rescue, “I’ve still got some things I can do down in the basement. If you need anything, you can send someone down, or just call through one of the traps.”

Innisfree’s relief was obvious. “Thank you, Arthur, you’re a gentleman.”

“You’re welcome,” Art said, as he headed for the steps up to the stage.

Maggie met him there, and walked beside him to the basement door; she glanced back over her shoulder, then whispered, “Don’t mind Ba... I mean, Ms. Yeager. She’s just as disagreeable with everyone.”

“Yeager?” Art threw the old woman a quick glance, which she nonetheless seemed to catch. When he turned away again he was sure she was glaring at him.

Maggie nodded. “Barbara Yeager. Her friends call her Baba — if she has any friends.”

Art paused with his hand on the doorknob and looked at Maggie, noticing the sweat on her forehead. He still hadn’t turned on the air conditioning, and the stage was hot.

“I’d sort of like to know who everybody is,” he said. “Nobody’s ever done any real introductions, and I don’t like not even knowing any names.”

Maggie blinked. “Well, you know my name.”

“That’s true,” Art admitted. “And I know Mr. Innisfree, but you people call him something else.”

“Oh — Merle, I guess you mean. That’s his first name. M-E-R-L-E, Like Merle Haggard.”

Art nodded. “And the Chinese woman’s name is Fox? Like the animal?”

Maggie nodded. “I don’t know her first name,” she said, apologetically.

“Are you two going to stand there jabbering all day?” the old woman demanded.

“Just a minute, Grandmother!” Maggie called back.

“Is she your grandmother, the one who said she was a witch?” Art asked, whispering.

“Oh, no, of course not!” Maggie stifled a laugh. “No, we just call her that. I think she likes it. She’s Russian, you know, and ’Baba’ is short for ’Barbara,’ but it’s also the Russian word for ’Granny,’ so... well, anyway, I don’t think she really has any kids or grandkids of her own, and none of us are directly related. Except maybe Merle and Faye. I think they’re connected somehow, cousins or something.”

“Who’s Faye?”

“Faye Morgan, the redhead with the braid.” She pointed.

Art glanced at the woman in maroon silk. Yes, he’d heard her called Faye; it had slipped his mind. “What about...” he began.

“Maggie!” the redhead called. “Could you come here?”

“Go ahead,” Art said, opening the door. “Thanks.”

Maggie turned to see what Faye Morgan wanted, and Art switched on a light and descended into the relative coolness of the basement.

He wondered how long it would be before someone asked him how to turn on the air conditioning; he had intended to do that, but had gotten distracted.

For the present, he didn’t worry about it — the basement was cool enough that he wouldn’t suffer, and the Bringers, as they had made abundantly clear, weren’t his problem. He found the dustpan and broom; the little heap of dust and wood shavings was just where he had left it, waiting to be cleared away.

He could hear footsteps overhead as the Bringers went about their business — whatever it was. His playhouse wasn’t private anymore.

Down here, the theater’s odor was just as distinctive, but different — the hot attic smell of dry wood was thin and faint, almost lost in the cool dark cellar fragrance of earth and must and damp stone.

Cellars below, attic above, and nothing in between; the theater was treasure house and playroom, but no one’s home.

He swept up the mound of debris and dumped it in the battered steel drum that served as a trashcan. That done, he returned broom and dustpan to their regular places, and then stood, eyes closed, in the center of the big room.

Below him, he knew, was the pit in the stone that he had told Maggie about; he remembered seeing it when he was just a kid, maybe four or five years old. It had been a dark square surrounded by gray stone that seemed to go down and down and down forever, deep into the secret black heart of the world; it had terrified and fascinated him. He remembered that he had thought it smelled strange, and a faint draft had seemed to blow down into it, as if something huge and moist and alien were down there, breathing slowly in, trying to suck him down into the blackness.

He supposed that whoever built the church had intended it as a crypt of some sort; it had been too big for a well. So far as he had ever heard, though, no one was entombed there; it was just a big square empty hole that later generations had dumped trash into.

He hadn’t seen any trash as a kid, so far as he could recall, but all the grown-ups had told him it was down there.

Maybe they should have left it open, he thought, and gone on dumping trash down there until they filled it; it would have been easier than hauling the steel drum out through the big outside door every so often to empty it.

Now, though, with the new floor in place for eighteen years, there was no sign that the pit existed, or had ever existed. He couldn’t feel any air moving through the cracks in the floor, couldn’t smell that strange scent over the ordinary stone and moisture of the basement.

He opened his eyes and listened.

The Bringers were moving around overhead, going about their business — whatever it was. He could hear voices muttering, but could make out no words. He could hear footsteps as they moved about, but no pattern, no organization. No one was calling instructions, no one was moving sets.

He wondered just what sort of a show this Return of Magic really was; was it a play, or a magic act, or what?

Well, it apparently wasn’t his business, and nobody was calling for him to come turn on the air conditioning, or to help hang lights, or to show them where anything was. Irritated, he turned and marched out into the passageway, where he pulled the key ring from his pocket and unlocked the first door on the right.

He turned on the light inside the door and looked at a long, tall, narrow room lined with shelves — to either side the shelves were built onto the wooden walls, while at the far end freestanding storage racks stood against the rough stone of the foundation. Most of the shelves were filled with cardboard boxes; a few held loose items, sometimes neatly stacked, sometimes shoved onto the shelves in heaps.

This room was dedicated to small props and set dressing — things like silverware and lampshades and vases. Sorting through all this would, he was sure, keep him busy for hours.

Maybe days.

An hour or so later he rolled the steel drum in from the big room; the objects deemed too far gone to be worth saving had overflowed the box he had chosen for their disposal, and he had barely started.

Chapter Seven

It still seemed as if he had scarcely begun when he heard Maggie’s voice calling, “Art? Are you down here?”

He put down the chrome cocktail-ice mallet he had been studying and called in reply, “In here!”

A moment later the witch’s granddaughter stuck her head through the doorway and smiled at him.

“Hi,” she said. “We’re all done for today.”

Art glanced at his watch and read 5:44. “Dinner break?”

“No, we’re finished for today.”

“Okay.” He looked over the various objects he had pulled out of the box he was working on, and shrugged. “I’ll do the rest of this tomorrow, I guess.”

“What are you doing?” Maggie asked, stepping into the room.

“Sorting,” he said.

Maggie looked at the rows of boxes. Some were labeled, in a variety of different hands and using a variety of implements, from charcoaled stick to fountain pen to felt-tip marker, from crayon to pencil to paint; others were not marked in any way. Some of the inscriptions were cryptic — “E Laws 3rd C’nut,” for example — while others, such as “Cocktail set, Christie’s Mousetrap, 1973 production,” were clear. Many boxes bore names, or dates, or descriptions of contents, or some combination thereof; most of the names were unfamiliar, and the dates went back at least as far as 1926.

“What is all this stuff?” Maggie asked.

“Props,” Art told her. “If you need any for this show you’re doing, let me know, and I’ll see if I can find them for you.”

“Where’d they all come from?”

Art shrugged. “They just sort of accumulated. People would pick them up at yard sales for a show, or find them in attics, or make them — ” he gestured at a foot-long prop dagger made of wood painted silver, the wood cracked with age and the paint flaking, ” — and then after the show, they’d just leave them here in case someone needed them again later.”

Maggie nodded. “I think I see,” she said slowly. “This explains a lot.”

“It does?” Art looked around, puzzled; he didn’t see how the prop room explained anything at all.

“Never mind that,” Maggie said briskly, in an abrupt change of tenor. “I came down to tell you we’re leaving, and we’ll want to get back in tomorrow at two o’clock.”

“Two?”

“Yup.”

Art looked around.

This could wait, he decided. He would have plenty of time to get it done before the Bringers held their one and only performance on August 30th. He picked up the ice hammer, placed it atop the 1973 cocktail set box, then turned off the light and herded Maggie out the door before closing and locking it behind them.

At the top of the stairs, when they emerged into the backstage area, Art was startled to realize that the air was cool and sweet, the hot, dry, dusty air of the morning gone. The Bringers must have figured out for themselves how to turn the air conditioner on, he decided. He would need to check on that and make sure they had turned it off again.

The only illumination came from the backstage work lights; the stage was dim, the house dark, the lobby doors closed, so far as he could see. Maggie, paying no attention, headed for the stage door, while Art turned toward the steps.

“Where are you going?” Maggie asked, startled.

“Oh, I need to check the place over,” Art said. “Make sure you people left everything where it belongs. You go ahead, you don’t have to wait for me.”

Maggie hesitated, then answered, “All right,” as Art descended the steps from the stage.

He waved a quick farewell; when he turned to say good-bye the stage door was closing behind her.

He hesitated, slightly irked at her quick exit — though he knew that was unreasonable of him. He’d said himself that she didn’t have to wait. Then he shrugged off his annoyance and marched up the aisle to the lobby, through the lobby to the box office, and back to the control panel.

The air conditioner was off, the thermostat still set where he had left it; he put his hand on the air conditioner housing, and could feel no coolness. The metal was room temperature.

They must have turned it off a while ago, he decided. But usually the theater heated up fast. Had it cooled off outside? The weather reports hadn’t predicted that.

Puzzled, he went on about his business, checking all the doors. When at last he emerged at the rear of the theater the sun was swimming on the horizon, bloated and red, and the air was still furnace-hot.

He stood on the back porch for a moment, trying to figure it out.

Then, with a shrug, he gave up and went home for dinner.

Chapter Eight

The town library’s copy of the book Jamie had particularly recommended, Ray Bradbury’s Something Wicked This Way Comes, was already checked out; Art checked the entire shelf twice, just to be sure.

He couldn’t remember any other titles. He could have just chosen a book at random, but he hated doing that; he’d gotten too many boring volumes that way.

It was ten-thirty, and he didn’t have to be anywhere until two — well, quarter of, to be safe — and he couldn’t find the book he wanted.

Annoyed, he turned and saw the card catalog, and a thought struck him. He crossed to the wooden cabinet and found the title index, then looked under R.

Return of the King, Return of the Native — no, there wasn’t any “the” in the middle. Return of Nathan Brazil, Return of Monte Cristo, Return of Mr. Moto, Return of Martin Guerre, Return of Lysander...

No Return of Magic.

He flipped a few dozen cards in either direction without finding it; then he tried under “The,” just in case.

It wasn’t there, either.

He gave up on the title index and tried by subject, under “drama,” “magic,” and “theater.”

No luck.

Well, Bampton’s library was pretty good for a small town, but it still didn’t amount to much compared to a big-city library, or a university’s. They probably just didn’t have the play in their collection.

But they might have a mention of it somewhere; he left the card catalog and found the theater section.

Most of the books were obviously not going to help much, but a few looked promising; he pulled them out and thumbed through the indices.

The Return of Magic was not a Restoration comedy, apparently; he found some impressive lists of those. It wasn’t mentioned in books on medieval mummers’ plays, passion plays, and the commedia dell’arte. It wasn’t by Shakespeare or Shaw or Ibsen or Chekhov; it had never been a Broadway hit.

He frowned.

Maybe if he knew who wrote it — going through every single playwright’s biography would take forever. And it might have an alternate title, for that matter.

He would have to ask about that.

It was almost noon by the time he abandoned the search, and even if he hadn’t found a book, he had at least managed to use up the morning; he went home for lunch, and then headed to the theater at about one-thirty, equipped with a couple of old magazines to read while waiting for the Bringers.

He had been sitting on the edge of the stage reading the June issue of Esquire for perhaps ten minutes when he heard footsteps behind him. He put the magazine down and turned, and found Innisfree standing at center stage, ludicrous in Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt.

Again, Art had not seen or heard anyone come in; he was beginning to find these silent entrances and exits rather aggravating.

“Hi, Mr. Innisfree,” he said, putting down his magazine.

“Good afternoon, Arthur, and a fine day it is, too!”

Art had his own opinion on that, which was that it was still too damned hot out — he had turned the air conditioning on as soon as he could, and it was just now beginning to cut through the dry, dusty heat of the theater. He didn’t say anything about that. Instead, he remarked, “I’ve been wondering — what’s this play of yours about?”

Innisfree blinked at him. “What’s that?” he asked.

“This play you’re putting on, The Return of Magic — what’s it about?”

Innisfree cleared his throat. “Well, that’s a bit hard to say.”

Art suppressed the urge to say, “Try.” Instead he just looked up expectantly and waited.

“Well,” Innisfree said, “you see, it’s about a group of wizards and sorcerers who are worried about their magic fading away, and who gather together to seek out a new source of power.”

“Sounds interesting,” Art said. “Lots of special effects and fancy lighting, I suppose.” He glanced at the shelves where the lighting instruments and cables remained untouched.

“Well, I suppose; we haven’t got into that yet,” Innisfree said uneasily.

“Could I see a script?” Art asked.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any extra copies,” Innisfree replied, apologetically. “In fact, some of us are sharing as it is.”

“Well, I could make some photocopies if you want...”

“No, thank you — that might get us in trouble. The proprietors are very picky about that.”

Art nodded. “Maybe I could find you some more, then,” he suggested. “Who wrote it?”

Innisfree smiled crookedly. “No one you ever heard of, I’m afraid,” he said. “And I doubt you’ll find copies.”

“I might,” Art said. “You might be surprised what one can find here in Bampton. Who was it?”

Innisfree smiled. “A fellow named Merton Ambrose,” he said. “Or at least, that’s the name he used; I suspect it’s a stage name.”

Art nodded. “I’ll take a look,” he said.

“For what?” someone asked. Art started, and realized that the woman with the curly black hair was in the stage-right wings. He hadn’t seen her come in. She was wearing a low-cut sundress and white sandals, and was walking toward them.

“For The Return of Magic,” Art replied. “Mr. Innisfree said you could use another copy or two of the script.”

“Oh, did he?” She gave Innisfree a look Art couldn’t even begin to interpret, and stopped two paces away.

“Yes, Ms... I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name?”

The black-haired woman turned her inscrutable gaze on Art, then smiled wryly.

“My stage name,” she said, “is Kaye. Kier Kaye, K-I-E-R K-A-Y-E. I can’t say I really care for it any more, but I seem to be stuck with it.”

“It’s pretty,” Art said, truthfully.

“Ha!” another voice interjected. “The lad thinks he knows beauty!”

Art looked, and discovered the mustached man off to stage left, in embroidered white shirt and loose black pants.

“Arthur Dunham,” Kier Kaye said, “allow me to introduce Dr. Eugenio Torralva, a man whose blessings sound like curses.”

Dr. Torralva bowed deeply. “Your servant, sir,” he said.

“Hello,” Art replied.

Now, these two seemed like actors — the flamboyant bow, the snide remark, that was the sort of behavior he expected from theater people.

He discovered that while he had been speaking to this pair, the rest of the Bringers of Wonder had somehow arrived — though again, he hadn’t seen or heard the stage door open. “Hello,” he said again, this time directing it to the entire group.

Old Ms. Yeager glowered at him; Maggie smiled. One of the men gestured, and pulled a flame from thin air; it seemed to burn without fuel between his thumb and forefinger, a bright orange flame four or five inches high. Then he parted his fingers, and it was gone.

Art hesitated, unsure whether he should applaud, or whether the sudden sleight-of-hand demonstration had any purpose at all. And of course, playing with fire wasn’t necessarily safe, in the dry old wooden building, and maybe, in his role as fire marshal, he should say something about it. “Uh...” he said. “Ms. Kaye, who is that?”

She smiled again.

“Apollonius!” she called. “Would you come here a moment?”

The man who had conjured the flame strode over to them. He was tall and rather thin, old enough that his hair was white, but he was still straight and strong, with few wrinkles; he wore a white robe that looked vaguely Arabic, and Art was unsure whether this was a costume or his normal street wear.

“Kier,” he said.

“Your little stunt caught our young friend’s eye,” she told him. “Art, this is Apollonius... Apollonius Tanner.”

“Call me Al,” the tall man said, holding out a hand.

“Art,” Art said, shaking.

Before he could say anything more, issue a warning about open flames, Yeager interrupted, calling, “Can we get on with this?”

“Yes,” Innisfree immediately said, rubbing his hands together and marching to center stage. “I think we should get started.”

“Then get that damned kid out of here!” Yeager demanded, pointing at Art.

The open flame wasn’t worth arguing about.

“I’m going,” Art said. He climbed up on the stage, tucked his magazines under his arm, and marched toward the basement stairs. Behind him, he heard a few murmurs uneasily raised in his defense; he ignored them.

After all, he had plenty of sorting still to go.

As he descended the steps he reviewed the names he had learned so far, and concluded that he could now attach a name to eight of the twelve Bringers; he still wasn’t sure of either of the two blacks, or the fat Oriental guy, or the one in the turban, but he knew the others. And the black woman’s name was Tituba, he thought.

In the storeroom he found the boxes and props as he had left them — but the gleam of metal caught his eye the instant he turned on the light.

He knelt and looked over the heap of unsorted objects, and saw what it was he had spotted. He pulled a foot-long dagger from the pile.

It was a fine piece of work, a glittering steel blade and a hilt of carved bone, colored dyes worked into the patterns on the grip. It looked archaic, ancient, really, but the metal shone like new.

He had never seen it before.

He was quite sure of that; he would have remembered a thing like that. It looked valuable, and out of place in the jumble of dusty, worthless props. How had he missed it, yesterday?

He held it up, studying the play of light on the razor-sharp blade.

Nobody would use that thing onstage, he thought. Far too dangerous, with an edge like that; sooner or later someone would get cut, would wind up with bloody fingers or a slashed costume at the very least. So what was it doing here?

He looked down at the pile, puzzled.

Knives — where had he been putting prop knives?

Hadn’t there been a wooden one, with peeling paint, in this pile? Had he put that somewhere?

It certainly wasn’t here now.

He stared at the pile for a moment, then sighed, seated himself cross-legged on the floor, and placed the dagger carefully to one side.

That was an exotic, expensive-looking knife. Perhaps one of the Bringers of Wonder had lost it, and it had somehow wound up down here? Dropped through a trapdoor, perhaps?

No, the traps all came out in the big room, not the prop storeroom.

Maybe it had been caught in his clothes and then had fallen out down here? Or maybe that Apollonius guy was playing a little trick of some kind?

That reminded him that he had never issued a warning about conjuring up fire, the way Al, or Apollonius, or whatever his name was, had.

Well, it could wait. He would figure it out later where the knife came from. For now, he had sorting to do.

He ignored the dagger and began pulling items one by one from the pile.

Chapter Nine

That evening Maggie’s call to lock up didn’t come until seven. Art had lost track of time, and hadn’t noticed his empty stomach. He hurried home, but was too late to join his father at the table; he had to scrounge up his own dinner.

He had intended to ask the Bringers if they could identify the mysterious bone-handled knife, but he had missed his chance; all but Maggie were long gone, and by the time he remembered his intention she, too, had left.

The next day’s call was for four in the afternoon, Maggie told him; that meant he had plenty of time to go through the theater books in the Bampton library again, this time looking for any reference to Merton Ambrose.

He found not a trace; the name did not appear anywhere. Not in the card catalog, not in the theater books, not in any of the reference books he checked.

Frustrated, he wandered out onto the sidewalk, where he found Marilyn sitting on the ornamental stone wall by the Leader Federal Savings Bank. She waved at him.

He hesitated, then strolled down the block and hoisted himself up beside her.

For a moment the two of them sat side by side in friendly silence, enjoying the shade of the maples and studying the scattered spots of afternoon sunlight that had found a path through the leaves and now wandered about the sidewalk beneath their dangling feet.

It couldn’t last forever, though. “Ever hear of Merton Ambrose?” he asked, still watching the play of light. A solitary ant was scouting the concrete, he noticed.

She considered the question carefully while she, too, watched the ant, and then looked up and replied, “No; should I have?”

Art shrugged.

“Is he an actor?” she asked. “TV, or movies?”

“No,” Art told her, turning his attention from the ground to his companion’s face. “He’s a playwright. Or a magician, maybe. He wrote the play that those people are staging.”

“Oh!” Marilyn was suddenly intensely interested; she forgot all about the ant and the sunlight and the maples. “Merton Ambrose, was it?”

Art nodded.

“And it’s called The Return of Magic, you said?”

“Yup.”

Marilyn glanced past Art at the library, and said, “I take it you were just looking it up; what’s it about?”

“I didn’t find it,” he answered. “Didn’t find a trace of it anywhere. It’s gotta be really obscure.”

Marilyn thought that over, then shrugged. “Well, at least it’ll be different, then; I don’t think I could stand seeing yet another production of Oklahoma!”

“I don’t know,” Art said, trying to spot the ant again. “There’s something funny about the whole thing.”

She blinked at him, then asked, “Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know, a lot of little things.” Art hesitated, and then explained, “They won’t let me watch them rehearse — but they can’t really be rehearsing yet, and why shouldn’t I watch blocking? I haven’t seen a script, or any costume sketches, or anything; they haven’t touched the lights, or started building sets. And I haven’t heard anyone say a single line from the show!”

“They won’t let you watch?” Marilyn stared at him. “Then what have you been doing all day?”

He grimaced. “Cleaning the prop room — I’ve been meaning to do that for years, to go through all that junk down there and throw out most of it. Or maybe sell it, hold a big rummage sale.”

“Good idea,” she said, thoughtfully.

Art didn’t bother to answer.

They sat silently for a moment, Art staring down at the cracks in the sidewalk, Marilyn watching him do it. The ant had gone.

Marilyn was the next to speak. “They haven’t started on the sets or anything?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“So what are they doing, while you’re cleaning the prop room?”

Art shrugged. “I don’t know. I honestly can’t figure it out.”

“Do you think they’re really getting ready for a show? I mean, maybe it’s one of these minimalist things, with a bare stage. Or they’ve got a set ready-built somewhere that’s getting shipped in.”

“Really, Marilyn, I just don’t know,” Art told her. “I don’t have any idea at all.”

“If they aren’t doing a show,” she persisted, “what are they doing?”

“Marilyn, I don’t know,” he insisted.

“Are they dealing drugs, maybe?”

Art shook his head. “Nobody else ever comes to the theater,” he said. “Where are their customers?”

“If you’re in the basement all day, how do you know nobody comes?”

Annoyed, Art found himself unable to answer that. A week ago he’d have said he could hear people come in, but after a couple of days with the Bringers, who almost seemed to appear out of thin air and then vanish just as mysteriously, he was no longer going to make any such claim.

Marilyn didn’t press the point. Instead, she suggested, “Or maybe it’s prostitution; didn’t you say they were mostly women?”

“Not mostly,” Art protested. “About half of them, same as any bunch of actors. It’s just the ones who talk to me are the women.”

Marilyn nodded.

Art added, “And that’s normal enough, too, I guess.”

“So maybe the men are pimps...”

Art sighed. “You’re being silly,” he said. “One of the women looks about ninety and talks like Don Rickles, and one of the others looks like, I dunno, Pearl Bailey or somebody. The others all look good enough, I guess, but what’s that, four hookers to support a dozen people?”

“So maybe the men peddle their asses, too.”

“In Bampton? Oh, come on!”

“Sure, in Bampton!”

“A bunch of strangers, coming to Bampton for that?”

It was Marilyn’s turn to have no good answer; after a pause, she said, “Okay, so they’re dealing drugs...”

Art turned away in disgust and slid down off the wall.

“Hey, wait, Art, I’m sorry!” Marilyn called.

Art stopped, and waited, standing by her knees. He didn’t look at her; instead he studied the stones that had been fitted together to make the wall on which she sat — or perhaps had just been stuck on the surface, it was hard to be sure. In any case, the wall was hardly traditional New England dry stone; it was obviously held together with mortar or cement.

When she was certain that he wasn’t about to depart, Marilyn asked, “Okay, so do you really think they’re putting on this play?”

Art shrugged. “What else could they be doing?”

“Umm... kiddie porn, maybe? Or some kind of cult thing?”

At that Art looked up. There was that mysterious knife to explain — with its bone grip and strange carvings, might it be some sort of ritual dagger?

He didn’t want to get Marilyn off on another tangent, though.

“Maybe,” he said.

“If you figure it out, tell me,” Marilyn said. “Or just give me a call sometime anyway.”

“All right,” he said.

For a moment the two of them remained as they were, looking at each other without making direct eye contact; then Art turned away.

“Guess I’ll go sort some more old props,” he said.

“Have fun,” she said.

She sat on the wall, watching him go.

The dimness of the theater seemed somehow different today, Art thought; it wasn’t as familiar and comforting. Maybe that was because, this late in the day, the theater was hotter than outdoors — it held the heat. He ambled up the aisle to the lobby and got the air conditioning running.

The Bringers weren’t due for almost an hour. He wasn’t entirely sure why he had come early; sorting props wasn’t exactly his idea of a grand and glorious good time. Sitting in the shade talking to Marilyn was a good way to pass the time, but somehow he hadn’t wanted to stay there.

There was something a little uncomfortable in his friendship with Marilyn just now; he figured it was because she was going to be leaving in a month. What was the point in getting closer to her when she would be leaving, and he would be staying?

Better to just keep his mind on his work, such as it was.

He took his time coming down the aisle again, and used that time to study the proscenium, the curtain, the stage.

It all looked just as it had three and a half days ago, when the Bringers had first arrived; they hadn’t so much as moved the curtain, so far as he could tell. There were no sets, no props.

However, he realized, he did see marks on the stage — those would presumably be for blocking, for showing the cast who belonged where in various scenes. He climbed up on the stage and looked.

Every other production he’d ever worked on had used colored tape for blocking marks, but the Bringers had used chalk, white and red chalk. They had drawn a white circle center stage, about fifteen feet in diameter, with little red symbols here and there around the circumference.

It was a very neatly drawn circle, obviously not done freehand; the symbols, on the other hand, looked like little more than scribbles to Art. He could make no sense of any of them.

As he walked around the circle, he remembered Marilyn’s suggestion that the alleged play was a cover for some sort of cult activity. The idea had a certain plausibility that made him uneasy; this chalk figure could be some sort of mystic figure for an occult ritual.

But it was probably just blocking marks.

Maybe the play had some sort of ritual in it. It was about magic, after all.

But what if it was some kind of occult ceremony these people were planning, rather than a play? What then?

Well, what then? What business was it of his?

Not much. People had a right to their own beliefs. That was in the Constitution.

But it would mean they had lied to him, and to his father, and that was wrong, that was a violation of the rental contract. And why would they lie? It wasn’t any big deal if they wanted to hold a ritual, was it?

And why in the theater? There were some local pagans in Bampton, people who called themselves Wiccans, who held meetings, and they always held them outdoors, not in theaters.

So the Bringers weren’t Wiccans, obviously. Maybe they were Satanists, and the fact that the foundation had originally been a church had appealed to them.

But Maggie had apparently not known that the theater was built atop a ruined church until he had told her.

He looked down at the chalk lines on the scuffed wood of the stage and frowned. He was being silly. They were just a bunch of actors and prestidigitators. These were blocking marks. And the knife in the basement wasn’t anything special; someone had dropped it somewhere, that was all, and it had wound up in the prop room by accident.

But why couldn’t he find any mention of Merton Ambrose or The Return of Magic? It was all rather odd.

He would, he decided, bring the knife up here and wait for the Bringers, and ask a few questions. Simple enough.

When he started down the stairs the theater was empty and silent. By the time he had fetched the dagger and started back up, even though it was still ten minutes before four, he could hear voices; the Bringers had begun to arrive.

He was spotted the instant he reached the top of the stairs. “Ah, Arthur!” Innisfree called. “I’d wondered where you were!”

“I was getting this from the basement,” Art explained, carefully holding the knife out by the blade, hilt extended. “I think one of you must have left it here the other day.”

Innisfree and Morgan, the two closest of the four Bringers in sight, came to look.

“A fine weapon,” Morgan said, “but not mine.”

“Nor mine,” Innisfree said. He looked up and gestured to the man in the turban — who also wore a loose white shirt and black denim jeans.

Art took the opportunity to transfer the knife to his left hand and hold out his right.

“Art Dunham,” he said.

After a moment’s startled hesitation, the turbaned man took the offered hand and replied, “Mehmet Karagöz.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Art said.

“Thank you; it is an honor,” Karagöz answered, dropping Art’s hand. “May I?” He gestured at the knife.

“Of course.”

Karagöz took the dagger and studied it carefully.

“It is not mine,” he said at last, handing it back, “but it is assuredly a fascinating item.”

More of the Bringers had arrived — though as always, Art hadn’t seen them enter. He began to wonder about some secret entrance somewhere; had they cut a new door in the wall or something?

Wherever they had come from, they were interested in the knife, and he found himself passing it around, like a kid at show-and-tell.

At least this got him introduced to the remaining members of the group; the obese Oriental was Wang Yuan, the aging black woman was Tituba Smith, and the herculean black man was Mr. Rabbitt — no first name was given, and Art found himself without the nerve to ask.

None of them recognized the dagger, leaving him as baffled as ever about its origins.

While Granny Yeager and Dr. Torralva were studying it, Art took the opportunity to remark to Innisfree, “I tried to look up Merton Ambrose at the library, and couldn’t find a thing.”

Innisfree’s mouth quirked. “I am not surprised,” he said, his accent definitely Scottish for the moment.

“No?”

Innisfree looked sideways at Art for a moment, studying him. “I suppose I should explain, Arthur.”

Art did not reply, but simply looked at Innisfree, his eyebrows raised expectantly.

Innisfree sighed.

“The Bringers of Wonder,” he said, “are perhaps more nearly a philosophical society than a thespian troupe — or at least, they once were. And Merton Ambrose held the post I now hold. The Return of Magic was his masterwork, but it was only printed privately, not published to the general public. Among us, it’s recognized as a classic, I would say, but virtually no one else has ever heard of it, and it can’t be found in any ordinary town library.”

“Oh,” Art said. “Um. Then do you expect much of a crowd for your performance?”

Innisfree seemed surprised by the question; he eyed Art carefully before answering, “I believe those we wish to see it will come see it, and that will be enough.”

“Boy!” Ms. Yeager shouted before Art could think of another question. “Come take your damned gewgaw and get out of our way, we have work to do!”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. He collected the dagger and a few apologetic glances from the others, and headed for the stairs.

Chapter Ten

That session was relatively short; Art was called upstairs at seven, and went home for a late dinner. Call for the following day was for six — Art had noticed the trend toward a later and later start, and he entirely approved. Six o’clock meant he ate dinner first, a little early, and arrived at the theater about a quarter to.

The day had not been one of the best he ever had; he had been thinking about driving into Boston, to see if the Boston Public Library had anything about Merton Ambrose, but he had wanted to take Marilyn along for company, and he couldn’t find her anywhere.

By the time someone finally told him that she’d gone swimming with Anne and Susan, it was too late to make the trip to Boston by himself. Instead he had spent the afternoon wandering around town, looking at the shops and watching the tourists and sweating in the heat.

At a quarter to six it was still hot outside, and the inside of the theater was sweltering, but the sky had clouded over and he heard thunder rumbling in the distance as he let himself in. No one was in sight anywhere near the theater, inside or out.

He walked up to the box office and turned on the air conditioning; by the time he had crossed the lobby and re-entered the house, the Bringers were all waiting silently for him onstage.

He had actually been expecting that. He accepted without question the mystery of how they all appeared so suddenly and quietly; it had become familiar and contemptible. He waved brusquely to the group as he passed and headed wordlessly for the basement.

There was no point in trying to learn anything about what they were really up to. They weren’t going to tell him, and he had other things to do than argue with them. He was in no mood to listen to old Ms. Yeager bitching at him.

He had completed his work on one wall of the prop room the day before; anything that had rotted, rusted, or torn he had pulled out and thrown in the trashcan, and the rest he had sorted out and put away again, using a fat felt-tip marker to label the boxes as clearly as he could.

All the prop guns were in one box, prop swords in another, prop knives in a third — except that that one particular wooden one with the peeling paint had never turned up.

He would have thought that someone had walked off with it, but that would mean that someone else had been down here, and that didn’t make sense. No one had been down here while he was here, and the place was locked the rest of the time.

The stupid thing had probably gotten tangled in something and put in the wrong box.

It didn’t matter, anyway. He was here because he had to be. It made no difference to him or to anybody else if some moldy old prop was mislaid.

Stepping up onto the steel frame against the stone wall at the outer end of the room, he reached up and pulled an unmarked box off the top shelf.

It was heavier than he expected, and he almost dropped it. Carefully, he held it over his head as he lowered himself to the floor. When he was standing safely on bedrock once again, he lowered the box and opened the flaps.

Junk. Old toys, mostly. He wondered what play they were from.

He reached in and pulled an item out at random, and found himself holding an old Star Wars action figure, a worn and battered storm trooper.

He smiled. He’d gotten one of these when he was a kid, when he was five or six years old and they’d just come out. He’d named it Charlie, Charlie the Stormtrooper, and he and Charlie had fought long wars against invisible Nazis on the floor of his bedroom.

He’d lost Charlie years ago, of course.

This one looked just like Charlie. Of course, all these mass-produced figures looked alike, but this one even seemed to be worn in the same places, had the same crooked angle to its head from getting bashed against the headboard of his bed during a brief period of Nazi success.

A coincidence.

He put the storm trooper aside and reached into the box.

A seashell, a shell the size of his fist — just like one he’d picked up on Cape Cod one summer. His father had told him what kind it was, but he didn’t remember; a whelk, maybe? Whatever it was, it was about the most intact shell he’d ever found anywhere on the New England coast.

This one looked just like it.

He held it to his ear and listened in wonder to the roar of the sea — though he knew it was really the echo of his own bloodstream pumping.

He lowered it again and stared at it.

What had happened to that old shell of his, anyway? It had disappeared once when he cleaned his room, and never turned up again.

Strange coincidence, the shell and the stormtrooper both looking so familiar. He reached into the box again.

When his hand came back out, it slowed, and then stopped, his third discovery dangling before him.

It was Bear.

There was absolutely no possibility of a coincidence or a mistake; this was Bear, the ratty, mildewed teddy bear he had adored as a child, and then relinquished in an impromptu ceremony when he started first grade. The left hind foot was torn, and the pink patch his mother had sewn on had never quite covered the tear; the button eyes didn’t match exactly because one was a replacement; a narrow wedge of the dark brown plush was pale gray where bleach had been spilled on it once in the laundry room.

It was, beyond any question, his very own Bear.

What the hell was it doing here?

Was this really Charlie, then? And his own lost seashell? He dumped the box out on the floor and began pawing through its contents.

Several minutes later he sat back, confused and furious.

Everything in the box was something he had lost, something that had once been beloved and magical. Practically everything he had ever loved and had lost was in there. There were a few items he didn’t really recognize on a conscious level, but they were old, heavily used baby things, and there could be little doubt that they, too, had once been his. A pacifier still had part of his name on it.

What the hell was all this stuff doing here? Who had put it here? Who had collected it all? How had they collected it all?

It couldn’t have anything to do with the Bringers of Wonder; they wouldn’t have known about any of this stuff, or been able to find it.

Had one of his parents found and saved all these old things without telling him? Had his father put the box down here for safekeeping, with the idea of hauling it out someday for the sake of nostalgia?

That didn’t sound like his dad at all. He was nostalgic enough, maybe, but he’d have kept everything in the house, and he’d have told Art, he wouldn’t have kept it a secret.

And whoever it was — what right did they have to muck around with Art’s private past?

There were things here he’d have sworn were secret, that no one ever knew he even had — the ragged copy of Bizarre Sex #9 he’d kept hidden behind his bureau when he was ten, the foil-wrapped condom he’d picked up in the parking area on Hilltop Drive when he was thirteen. How had anyone found those?

And why would anyone collect all this stuff so indiscriminately?

It was crazy. It made him nervous.

He dumped everything back in the box, closed the flaps, and started to carry it back to the high shelf — then stopped.

Why should he put it back up there? After all, this was all his stuff. It didn’t belong in the theater at all!

He took the box over to the door and set it down. All those lost treasures were going home with him.

So was one other item, he decided. He got the bone-handled knife from the shelf where he’d left it and put it on top of the box.

That settled, he pulled out the next box, a big one.

For a moment, he hesitated before opening it. What if this box held something else weird and mysterious? What if it held more lost things — someone else’s, perhaps? Or an entire set of strange cutlery? Or something even more out of place?

Well, what if it did? It wasn’t going to jump out and bite him.

He lifted the flaps and found a stack of cardboard imitations of Roman shields, a remnant of a production of Julius Caesar some ten years back. Those went over near the swords, of course.

He found no other oddities that evening.

It was about eleven when Maggie called him. She was waiting at the top of the stairs when he came trudging up, the box of lost treasures under his arm.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Oh, found some things I’d lost,” he replied.

She blinked at him, then smiled broadly.

“Already?” she said.

He stared at her, puzzled and angry, as he mounted the last few steps.

“What do you mean, ’already’?” he demanded. “What do you know about it? Did you have anything to do with this?”

“No, no,” she said, “I didn’t mean anything.”

“Then why’d you say it?”

“Just... I don’t know. It popped out. I didn’t mean anything.” She turned away, toward the stage door.

He glared at her back. So the Bringers were involved after all — but how could they be?

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Art said, trying to hide his anger. “Where are you folks all staying, while you’re in town? You don’t all live around here, do you?”

“Live around here?” Startled, she turned to look at him. “You mean us?”

“Sure, you know, in Concord or Bedford or wherever — I’m pretty sure none of you are from Bampton, are you?”

“Oh, no, none of us are local.” She managed an uneasy little laugh. “We came in from... well, from all over.”

“That’s what I thought,” Art said with a nod. “So where are you staying?”

Maggie waved a hand vaguely. “Oh, different places,” she said. “I’m rooming with some distant relatives, third cousins or so.”

“Oh. Anyone I might know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“In Bampton?” he persisted.

She hesitated. “I’m not sure,” she said.

That was ridiculous, of course; how could she not know what town they lived in? He glowered at her.

As he glowered, he was trying to figure out just how the Bringers could have known about all those lost things. It seemed clear that they must have local people working with them — but who? And why?

The whole thing was just crazy.

“I need to go shut off the air conditioning,” he said, putting down the box.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” Maggie said, smiling. “At seven, this time.”

“But tomorrow’s Saturday, you can have all day...” he began. Then he stopped. “Oh,” he said. “Do you mean seven in the morning?”

“No, no — seven p.m. In the evening. Even if it is Saturday.” She opened the stage door and blew him a kiss, and then she was gone.

Chapter Eleven

The Boston Public Library wasn’t any more help than the Bampton library, as far as Merton Ambrose and The Return of Magic were concerned, and his car overheated on the drive back. By the time he got home and rushed through a quick meal of leftover chicken it was five past seven.

He wasn’t sure whether he expected to find the Bringers of Wonder waiting for him in the parking lot or not; it might be more in character for them to appear mysteriously once he was inside.

In the event, he found Maggie sitting alone on the porch, elbows on her knees, watching the sun set over old man Christie’s fields. Christie’s aging white gelding, Spanner, was in the nearest field, watching her in that vaguely puzzled way horses have. White birds were circling over her head; as Art approached they swooped away and seemed to vanish, like soap bubbles popping, in the shadows of the theater’s eaves.

“Hi,” he called. “Sorry I’m late.”

She turned and smiled. “Hi, Art,” she said.

“Where are the others?”

“Oh, they saw you weren’t here and went down the street to get a soda or something.”

He looked up at the sidewalk, but didn’t see any sign of anyone else. “I guess they aren’t in any hurry,” he said.

“I guess not,” Maggie agreed. “After all, everything’s been going so well...”

“Has it?” Art asked, startled.

“Well, yes,” Maggie replied, equally startled by his reaction.

“But it’s been almost a week, and you haven’t built any of the sets, or hung any lights. Do you have costumes designed, or anything?”

“Well, no...”

“Then what’s going well?”

Maggie hesitated before replying. “The performance,” she said at last. “The preparations. I mean, I guess we haven’t done much on the... the technical side, but we’ve got the scripts all set, and I think everyone knows his part, just about.”

“Really?” He glanced up at the red-painted clapboards behind them. “I hadn’t heard anyone rehearsing.”

“Have you been listening?”

“Um...” Art realized that for the past few days he had been far too busy in the prop room to pay any attention to noises overhead. For that matter, while one could hear what was happening onstage from the big room, from the prop room events upstairs were pretty inaudible.

“I guess not,” he admitted.

For a moment they stood silently on the little porch; then Maggie suggested, “Let’s go on inside; they’ll all be along in a minute, and if I’m not here waiting they’ll know to come on in.”

“Right.” Art fished the key ring from his pocket and unlocked the stage door.

Inside, with the work lights on, he could see that a second, larger white chalk circle had been added to the design on the stage, completely surrounding what had been there before.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“What? Oh, that,” Maggie said. “That’s just so we all know where to stand. See, over there, that red squiggle? That’s my place. At the beginning, I mean, when the curtain goes up.”

“Blocking marks,” Art said.

“I guess,” Maggie agreed.

“Sort of funny ones,” Art remarked. “Fancier than usual.”

Maggie just shrugged.

Blocking marks, learning the script — that sounded normal enough. Maybe the group was legitimate after all, and just had some peculiar approaches to their business. Art looked over at the lighting equipment shelves, in the stage left wings. “Still haven’t done any lighting work,” he remarked.

“No,” Maggie agreed. “I think we’re still working on the staging. I mean, don’t we need to know what’s going to be where before we light it?”

“Yeah,” Art admitted, “you do. But you haven’t started building the set, either — are you going to have a set?”

“The show doesn’t call for much of one,” Maggie explained. “It’s mostly supposed to take place in a single room, on a single night.”

“Still seems like you’d want to get that done and out of the way,” Art muttered.

Maggie shrugged again.

“What about costumes?” Art asked. “Did you people bring those with you?”

“Some of us,” Maggie admitted. “I haven’t got mine yet, though.”

Art nodded.

Maggie was being relatively informative tonight, he thought, and in fact, everything was looking somehow far more normal than it had all week. Blocking marks, learning lines, going out for a drink before getting started, that was all the sort of thing he expected. He found himself feeling generous.

“If you like,” he said, “you can come down and look through the costumes downstairs, see if you find something you like. What sort of part is it?”

Maggie smiled wryly. “Oh, I play a witch,” she said. “Of course.”

Art smiled back. “I’d have expected old Ms. Yeager to play that part.”

“She’s the old witch, silly,” Maggie said, grinning. She poked him in the shoulder. “I’m the young witch.”

“Oh.”

For a moment, the two of them stood there on the stage, looking at one another; Art glanced around at the door, wondering when the others would arrive.

“There are costumes downstairs?” Maggie asked, breaking the silence.

“Sure,” Art said. “Wanna see?”

“Lead the way.”

Art did just that.

The first costume room was on the north side of the central passageway, next to the stairway and across from the prop room; the ancient paneled door was painted green, with a cardboard sign held on by thumbtacks, ink that had once been black but was now faded to pale gray on a card that had once been white but was now brown and speckled.

Wardrobe, it said.

This wasn’t the only room that held costumes, but the others were considered dead storage; all the good stuff was supposed to be in this one. After some experimentation, Art found the appropriate key; he opened the door and groped for the light switch.

Maggie pushed the door wide as the light came on, and stared in.

A lone bare bulb cast yellow light on a long, narrow room; to either side a steel pipe extended from end to end at about eye level, with dozens, perhaps hundreds of costumes and empty hangers hooked over it. Both pipes sagged in the center from the weight of the clothing. Above each pipe ran a single long shelf, stacked with hats and hatboxes. The room’s far wall was rough stone painted white; centered in the stone was a small black door, of normal width but only about five feet high.

Maggie stepped in and ran her eye down the row of costumes on the left, then turned and looked over the row on the right. There were gowns and robes galore, and several bodysuits of plush or velour for use in simulating animals. There were cheap imitations of tuxedoes, cut correctly but made of thin cotton; opera capes, togas, doublets, and various period garments. Velvets, silks, sequins, and gold braid abounded.

“I don’t see anything really witchy,” Maggie said. “What’s through there?” She pointed at the black door.

Art followed the pointing finger and stared, baffled.

He had seen the door when they entered, of course, and surely he had seen it before, whenever he came into the wardrobe room, but somehow he didn’t remember it.

Where could it go? That was an outside wall; anything beyond it would be under the parking lot.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Really?” Maggie turned to stare at him.

Art shrugged. “Really,” he said.

Maggie marched down the length of the room, grabbed the knob, and tried to turn it.

“Locked,” she said.

Art was curious now. How had he missed ever noticing that door, in all the years he had hung out in the theater?

“Hang on a minute,” he said. “I’ve got all the keys here; let’s see if one of them will open it.” He marched up beside her and began trying keys.

None of them fit.

He went through the entire ring twice without finding a single one that would fit in the keyhole. Finally, disgusted, he flung the entire ring against the wall. It struck with a jangle, and fell to the floor; he glowered at it.

“Well, it’s not important,” Maggie told him.

“Yes, it is,” he protested. “I’m supposed to know what’s going on around here, and I don’t. I don’t remember any door in here, and I’m supposed to have a key for every door and I don’t have a key for this one, and there are things in the prop room that shouldn’t be here — just what the hell is going on here, anyway?”

“I don’t... I don’t know,” she said, taken aback.

“And then there’s you people,” he shouted, turning all his accumulated anger and frustration on her. “You appear out of nowhere, come and go mysteriously, like a bunch of spies or something, you’re putting on a play nobody ever heard of that you haven’t started advertising with just three weeks to go, you’ve got no sets, no lights, you’re a dozen of the most strangely-assorted people I’ve ever seen, you won’t say where you’re staying, you won’t let anyone watch you do anything — just what the hell is the big mystery, anyway, lady?”

Maggie blinked back tears.

“I can’t tell you,” she whispered.

“Why not?” he demanded.

“I can’t tell you that, either.”

“Oh, hell.” He scooped up the key ring. “Look, you people just have fun tonight, okay? I’m going to leave you all to your own devices. You can find your own witch costume. I’m going out for a walk, and if you finish up before I get back, use the phone by the lightboard to call my house, and either I’ll be there or someone will take a message.” He turned, and stamped away, down the passage and up the stairs.

The Bringers of Wonder were on the stage, standing in a ring around the chalk circles, arguing about something. He paid no attention as he stamped out, slamming the door behind him.

Outside, the sun was down, and the sky was the deepening liquid blue of summer twilight. Three white birds, startled by the slam of the door, fluttered out from under the eaves and soared away on the evening breeze.

He stared after them. Where had they come from? He had never noticed any birds nesting there, and certainly not any like those. They weren’t seagulls or pigeons — they were smaller than gulls, more graceful than pigeons; he couldn’t place them.

His anger dissipating, he marched down the steps to the asphalt.

To the west the last glow of sunset gleamed above the treetops on Christie’s little farm — if you could really call it a farm. Two acres of pasture, chicken coops, and vegetable gardens, inhabited by an old man, two horses, and a dozen hens — not much of a farm, but the closest thing left in Bampton. Spanner was still out in the field, quietly cropping grass in the gathering gloom; his companion, little Sparkle, was nowhere to be seen.

To the north was a row of quiet little houses, his family’s own among them; to the south was the center of town, where the tourists passed through and sometimes stopped on their way to more interesting places, and where the locals did their shopping when it wasn’t worth a trip to the Burlington Mall.

It was a quiet, pleasant place, Bampton was; Art was used to that, and he liked it that way. If he wanted excitement or confusion, he could go into Boston or Cambridge.

What were these people doing, these Bringers of Wonder, bringing their mysteries here?

He looked east, out toward Thoreau Street, along the side of the theater. Black asphalt shingles along the roof, red-painted eaves, red-painted clapboards, down to the whitewashed stone of the foundation — where could that door go? It would have to come out under the parking lot, but there wasn’t anything under the parking lot.

It didn’t make any sense.

Maybe it didn’t go anywhere; maybe it was a fake, a practical joke. Or maybe it opened into a tiny little clothes-press, inside the stone foundation wall.

He couldn’t figure it out, and after a moment he stopped trying and just started walking.

Chapter Twelve

“Dad?”

Art’s father looked up from his magazine. “Hi, Art,” he said. “They quit early tonight?”

“No.”

The elder Dunham glanced at his watch. “It’s only eight-thirty,” he said. “Seems early to me.”

“They didn’t quit yet. I walked out. I’ll go back to lock up later, I guess.”

His father put down the magazine and sighed. “What’s the problem? They doing something illegal, or dangerous, or something?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Art said. “Just a... a personality conflict, I guess. I felt like... well, there have been some weird things happening, and I needed to think, so I took a walk.”

Paul Dunham looked at his son silently for a moment. “Okay,” he said at last, “but I hope this isn’t going to be a regular thing. I want you in there, keeping an eye on the place.”

“I don’t do all that much of that anyway, Dad; I spend half my time in the basement while they’re doing mysterious secret stuff.”

Dunham frowned.

“Anyway,” Art said, “there was something I wanted to ask you about.”

“What?”

“That door in the wardrobe room, the room next to the stairs, the black door in the outside wall — none of the keys you gave me will open it.”

Art’s father frowned again, this time more puzzled than annoyed. “What door?” he asked.

“In the basement, in the first storeroom on the left, with all the old costumes on hangers.”

Dunham thought for a second, then said, “I don’t know what door you’re talking about. There should be keys for all the doors on that ring.”

“Well, I couldn’t find a key to fit that one.”

Dunham sat for a moment longer, staring at Art, then asked, “What do you want me to do about it? I don’t know what door you’re talking about, or why you want it open at all.”

Art explained, “Maggie Gowdie — she’s one of Innisfree’s people — anyway, Maggie and I were downstairs looking to see if we had a costume that would fit — she plays a witch — and she asked if there were more costumes on the other side of this black door, and I don’t remember ever even seeing the door there before. I tried to open it, tried every key on the ring, and none of them fit.”

“There isn’t any door there,” Dunham said.

“That’s what I thought, but we saw it.”

His father stared at him for another moment, then stood. “Come on,” he said. “Show me.”

They could hear the Bringers’ voices even before they reached the porch steps, but could not make out words; father and son looked questioningly at each other. Normally, one could not hear much through the theater walls.

Art shrugged and opened the stage door, and they heard Kier Kaye shouting, “...isn’t working, Merle!”

Several other voices chimed in, as Innisfree tried to reply and Art stepped in. He glanced back at his father, who waved him on without saying anything.

They crossed the stage-right wings to the basement door as the Bringers continued to argue among themselves, but then, as Art grasped the knob, the argument suddenly ended. In the abrupt silence the click of the latch was clearly audible.

Startled, the Dunhams turned to face the Bringers, and the Bringers turned to see the Dunhams.

A rain of pink and red flower petals was settling softly and noiselessly to the stage, and to the hems of dresses and the laces of shoes and the seams of pants; Art did not see where they had come from.

Maggie was not dressed as a witch, nor was anybody else in a recognizable costume, though Granny Yeager still wore her kerchief and Karagöz his turban.

“’Scuse us,” Art said. “Small problem in the basement.”

The Bringers stared at him, and then at each other, as Art led his father down the basement stairs. By the time they reached the landing the Dunhams could hear voices behind them, speaking again but no longer shouting.

In the wardrobe room, the instant Art flipped the light switch Paul Dunham stopped dead in his tracks and stared.

“Son of a bitch,” he said.

Art didn’t say anything; he waited.

“Now, how the hell did I ever miss noticing that?” the elder Dunham asked himself aloud. “Art, I swear I never saw a door there before, but there it is.”

“I had the same reaction,” Art said.

“None of the keys will open it?”

“Nope.”

For a moment longer, Art’s father stared at the black door. Then he asked, “Where does it go?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Art said.

Dunham shook his head. “Art,” he said, “it’s a complete mystery. I mean, it’s obviously always been there, but I swear I never saw any door there before this minute. Son of a bitch. Must’ve been something hanging in front of it or something.”

“So what do we do about it?” Art asked. “Do we hire a locksmith?”

“Yeah,” Dunham said, “I guess we do. It’s not an emergency, they charge extra for weekends — but Monday morning, first thing.”

Art nodded.

“Arnie Wechsler’s good,” Dunham said. “That’s who I’ve always used in the business. You want to call him, or should I?”

“I’ll call, I guess,” Art said.

“Good.” Still staring at the mysterious door, Dunham began backing out of the room. “Guess I’ll leave it up to you, then, and get on home.”

“Okay.” Art decided against accompanying his father; after all, he still had to lock up after the Bringers left. And he wanted to talk to them, anyway — or at least to Maggie.

Maybe he could do that immediately; the Bringers hadn’t looked as if they were doing anything terribly secret. “I’ll walk you upstairs,” he said.

Together, the two ascended the steps.

Innisfree was waiting for them at the top. Behind him, onstage, the other eleven Bringers stood watching.

“Mr. Dunham,” Innisfree said, spreading his hands. “An unexpected pleasure to see you here, a real delight!” His accent was almost Cockney this time.

“Mr. Innisfree,” Dunham said. “I was, ah, just checking on something downstairs.”

Innisfree smiled. “And is all in order and as it should be?”

“I’m not sure,” Dunham admitted, “but it isn’t anything to worry about.”

“Well, that’s good, that’s good, that’s fine, then.”

Dunham stared at the smiling magician. “Was there something you wanted?” he asked.

“Well,” Innisfree said apologetically, “I’m afraid it’s your son I need to speak to.”

Dunham glanced quickly at Art, who shrugged ever so slightly.

“I’ll get on home, then,” Dunham said. “Call if you need me.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Dunham waved to the others as he walked across to the stage door. He hesitated, looking back at his son and the tall foreigner. Innisfree smiled, and Art waved good-bye.

Then Dunham was gone, out into the warm summer night, and Art turned to face Innisfree.

“Is there a problem?” He wondered whether Maggie had said anything about his storming out.

“You might say so, yes,” Innisfree said; he was eyeing Art contemplatively, as if trying to determine not the best way to say what he had to say, but rather, how much to tell.

“I’ve been staying out of your way,” Art said.

“Indeed you have, lad, and therein lies the problem.”

Art blinked.

“It seems we misjudged our capacities, and we do, indeed, need your help,” Innisfree said. He paused, and quickly amended that. “Or at least, we might.”

“Um... just what did you have in mind?”

“Oh, we merely ask that you not leave the building during our rehearsals. Working in the cellars is fine; we can find you there easily enough. When you took your walk tonight, though — well, it was worrisome.”

“Worrisome?” Art looked around, puzzled. The other Bringers were still just standing there, watching the conversation — didn’t they have anything better to do?

Perhaps they didn’t. “Was there something you needed help with?”

“Oh, we managed, we managed,” Innisfree said hastily. “We just wanted to ask you not to leave the building during our rehearsals.”

Art stared at the tall man, trying to figure this out.

The Bringers of Wonder had, right from the first, made it absolutely clear that they didn’t want any outsiders around, and that outsiders included Art. Now they said they needed him to be in the building.

Anywhere in the building?

And they weren’t asking him to help with anything. They just wanted him in the theater.

Did that make any sense at all?

No.

This might finally be a chance to find out just what the heck was going on, though.

Or maybe not; maybe it was just as they said.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Do you want me to help out or not? Because if you don’t, what difference does it make where I am?”

“Well, we want you close by, just in case,” Innisfree said with a smile.

“So how about if I get some fresh air in the parking lot?”

The smile vanished.

“We’d prefer it if you stayed inside the building.”

“Well, but I don’t feel like going back downstairs — it’s sort of musty down there, and my allergies are acting up.” This was a lie; Art had no allergies.

Innisfree glanced over his shoulder at the others.

“I could sit and watch,” Art suggested.

When Innisfree didn’t answer immediately, he added, “And once I’ve seen the play, I could help with lighting it — I notice you haven’t started rigging lights yet.”

Innisfree sighed.

“We’re not ready for that yet,” he said. “Perhaps, if not the basement, there’s something to be done out in the lobby?”

Art considered.

“All right,” he said. “I can find something, I’m sure.”

Innisfree smiled again. “Fine! That’s fine, then! Thank you, Arthur, my lad!”

“No problem.” He closed the basement door, checked the lock, and made his way slowly up the center aisle.

He could feel a dozen pairs of eyes watching him.

He wondered whether Innisfree knew what he was doing. Did these people not want someone watching just because it would make them nervous, or was there something they really didn’t want him to see?

If the latter, they’d just blown it, because in the little corridor behind the box office was a peephole with a clear view of the stage. It was there so that ushers could let latecomers in without interrupting anything important, so that actors making entrances from the rear would know when to appear — it was a normal and obvious feature of the theater. Ordinarily he would never have used it to spy on the Bringers, if they had simply told him they didn’t want anyone watching, but all this nonsense about not leaving the building, and sending him out to the lobby...

Well, if they didn’t have the sense to realize he might be able to watch from there, it wasn’t his fault.

He smiled to himself, and almost skipped the last few steps.

He was finally going to see them rehearse The Return of Magic.

Chapter Thirteen

It was odd to see the stage lit only by the worklights from here — usually, he would only use the peephole much farther along, after the lights were up. Everything was dim and bare.

“Places, everyone!” Innisfree called. Voices did not carry very well through the peephole, but Art could hear that clearly enough.

Except for Innisfree himself, the Bringers dispersed, to the wings and far upstage — Art wondered whether there would be sets of some kind hiding the three who now stood along the back of the theater, right against the plank wall.

Innisfree stood center stage, facing away from his audience — the audience he presumably didn’t know was there. Art shifted his feet slightly; he expected to be watching for some time yet, and he didn’t want to get stiff.

The tall man on the stage raised his hands and spoke a word, a word Art had never heard before and could not begin to spell; abruptly, Innisfree’s white shirt and light gray slacks vanished, replaced by a floor-length white robe.

Art blinked.

That was a very good stunt; he had no idea where the robe had been hidden, or how Innisfree had gotten it on so quickly without a single snag or jerk.

Then Innisfree began chanting. This time the words weren’t quite as strange, but they still weren’t English; Art thought the language might be Latin.

Other voices joined his, and four of the Bringers stepped forward — Faye Morgan and Al Tanner to stage left, Wang Yuan and Kier Kaye to stage right. They moved inward in slow steps, stopping at the inner chalk circle, forming a ring around Innisfree.

They were wearing robes, gold and red and green and blue. Each of them was holding something. Morgan raised what she held, and Art saw that it was a sword — and at least from where he stood, it didn’t look like a prop. It seemed to catch the light amazingly well.

She waved it slightly, and the tip of the sword drew a flaming red line in the air, a line that hung there, burning. She twisted it back on itself and formed it into a symbol, something resembling an infinity sign, but not exactly that, something a little more complex.

Art blinked, and took a moment to rub his eyes.

How did she do that?

Wang held up a bone, and etched a symbol in the air; this one blazed white.

Kaye used a gnarled black staff, and her sign glowed green.

Tanner’s shape, drawn with something that Art couldn’t make out, something that glittered like glass, burned gold.

The lights dimmed.

Art started; how did they do that? None of the work lights were on dimmers! The backstage lights never had been, and he’d patched the onstage work lights back out onto the regular toggle switch so they’d be handier for the Bringers.

Were they running some kind of heavy equipment that was draining current? Maybe they’d blown a fuse before, maybe that was the emergency they’d wanted him for.

The other seven Bringers stepped forward now, forming an outer circle; they were still in their street clothes, and they didn’t join in the chanting. Some held things, some did not. Maggie stumbled over something, and Art thought he could hear Yeager’s penetrating voice muttering.

The lights returned to normal, and the four symbols in the air vanished in wisps of smoke. Innisfree, still standing at center stage with his arms spread, called out, “Behold, our arts are mighty!”

“Nay, Lord,” replied Morgan. “They fade, they die!”

“See, Master,” Tanner said, “where once we brought forth dragons!”

A pigeon appeared in the air before him, flapping wildly. Art was mildly impressed; he couldn’t imagine where the bird had come from. It wasn’t anywhere near so fine a trick as the writing-in-air stuff, though.

“See, Magister,” Kaye announced, “where once we devastated kingdoms!” A flash of fire sprang from her fingers and vanished in the air.

Art had seen Tanner do that, or something very similar, once before. Maybe Tanner and Kaye had switched roles?

“Sire,” Wang said, “our powers dim!”

“That’s more like it,” Yeager said — not in a theatrical proclamation like the others, but just speaking normally. Her harsh voice cut through the mysticism and shattered the illusion the play had created; Art shook his head in annoyance at being yanked out of the dream.

Onstage, Innisfree dropped his pose and nodded. “It’s working again,” he said. “We don’t need to run through all of it right now.”

“You’re sure it’s that young man who’s responsible?” Karagöz asked.

Innisfree shrugged. “What else could it be?”

“But he’s not...” Maggie began.

“Oh, he’s not doing it on purpose,” Innisfree interrupted.

Art blinked. Not doing what on purpose?

This was all very interesting. There apparently really was a play being put on, and he had just watched a scene from it — the opening, perhaps? And they had costumes and props, at least some of them, even if they didn’t have lights or sets.

They had special effects, too — amazingly good ones. That writing-in-the-air stuff was really something.

They weren’t drug dealers or white slavers or anything else reprehensible, after all; Marilyn’s theorizing had been wrong. They were a bunch of magicians putting on a show, just as they’d said all along.

But what was he supposed to be responsible for? Why did they want him in the building, but not watching? What was he doing, not on purpose?

“All right, people,” Innisfree said, clapping his hands together in a gesture Art thought every director who had ever lived must have used, back at least as far as Aristophanes. “Let’s see what we can do.” Innisfree looked around, then pointed at Kaye.

She smiled, and vanished in a flurry of green silken robe. A large black cat appeared in her place.

Innisfree’s gaze fell on Wang, who raised a hand. Wang held it over his head for a moment; something seemed to shimmer.

Then he lowered it again and shook his head.

“All right, all right,” Innisfree said. “It’s still early, still three weeks to go.”

Art stared at the cat, which was behaving very calmly for a beast that had presumably just been flung onto an open stage by some hidden device. The animal was sitting there, watching Innisfree and the others; it wasn’t even washing itself or curling up, it was just sitting there.

Where had Kaye gone, anyway? He hadn’t seen any of the Bringers checking the traps or anything. If she was down in the basement...

Something orange and white strolled out onto the stage; at first Art thought it was another cat, but then he got a better look at it.

It was a fox. A red fox.

He stared; how on earth had that got there? He’d never heard of anyone taming or training a fox.

The word reminded him of something, and he looked at the Bringers.

Ms. Kaye was still missing, and now so was Ms. Fox.

These people were good, he decided. If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn that Kier Kaye had actually transformed herself into a black cat, and Ms. Fox into a red fox.

The fox and the cat watched each other, but neither made any hostile move — and that, in itself, was pretty amazing. The fox settled down on its haunches a yard or so from the cat and looked about with interest.

Flowers were raining onto the stage, and Art had been so intent on the animals that he had no idea who was responsible. Pink blossoms were falling and drifting from nowhere.

A sudden wind stirred them up, disrupting the slow, gentle swirls and sending petals and stems skittering across the stage. Even from the far end of the house, on the other side of the little peephole, Art could feel the sudden change in the theater’s air; it had turned cold and dry, and the wind was increasing.

Art pulled away. What kind of wind machine could do that?

He hadn’t seen any wind machine, anyway. The theater didn’t come with one; previous productions had borrowed household fans when they needed wind. He hadn’t seen one backstage anywhere.

He felt a chill that wasn’t just from the cool breeze now spraying out through the peephole.

People onstage were applauding.

This was crazy.

Art marched to the double doors connecting the lobby to the house and swung them wide.

For an instant, he felt that cold, impossible wind; then it died away, and the warm, dead air of the theater was just as still as ever. A hush fell as everyone onstage turned to look at him.

The fox ran for the wings; the cat watched him with interest, but did not immediately flee.

“Arthur!” Innisfree called. “Was there something you wanted?”

There were flowers and loose petals strewn all over the stage; he had not imagined that. The cat was still there, staring at him; he had not imagined that, either.

But what could he say?

Could he say, “I think your magic is too real,” or, “You’re frightening me,” or, “What are you doing?”

“I’m done up here,” he said. “Thought I’d check the fuses; it seemed like the lights dimmed a minute ago.”

The cat got up and ambled off, stage right.

“Suit yourself,” Innisfree said. “Can’t say as I noticed anything.”

Art strolled down the aisle, hands in his pockets, determinedly casual, as the Bringers stood about, watching him or doing nothing. They looked just as sincerely casual as he did, he realized; all ten of them looked as if they were nervous and trying to hide it.

Eleven of them, that is; Ms. Fox reappeared as he reached the front row. And twelve; when he mounted the stage-right steps, Ms. Kaye emerged from the wings.

He scuffed at the flowers as he crossed the stage; they were real and solid. He glanced around.

The five who had formed the inner circle — Innisfree, Wang, Kaye, Morgan, and Tanner — were still in their robes, but the props had vanished. He could see no sword, no staff, no bone, no bottle.

And there wasn’t any wind machine anywhere. He even glanced up at the catwalk, but no, that was empty.

The main fuse box looked just fine, but that was reasonable enough; it was designed for about 15,000 watts of stage lighting, could handle 20,000 in a pinch, and the work lights and a few special effects wouldn’t bother it.

Not unless the special effects were drawing a lot of current, in which case they’d be a serious fire hazard. Art frowned at the thought, then shook his head.

There weren’t any cords or cables; nobody was drawing extra current from this box. The work lights had their own two circuits, each with a thirty-amp screw-in fuse, and those weren’t smoked or hot, let alone blown.

If there’d been enough draw to dim the lights the fuses should have at least been warm to the touch, and they weren’t.

One of these days, Art thought, he’d have to talk his father into putting in circuit breakers; it was getting hard to find the old-fashioned fuses.

On the other hand, a circuit breaker didn’t get warm or smoked, did it? It was either tripped or it wasn’t, where fuses could show warning signs.

And he was thinking about this to keep from thinking about anything else. He knew he was doing it. The rest of it was too hard to deal with. Where had the wind come from? The flowers? The fox? Why did they want him in the building?

They weren’t drug dealers or white slavers, but they might still be cultists, and right now he wouldn’t put it past them to be using real magic and wanting him for their ritual sacrifice.

Except there’s no such thing as magic, he reminded himself. There couldn’t be.

It was just a lot of things adding up, all getting to him at once, that made him even consider the possibility of real magic, he told himself. He knew better than that. If he weren’t by himself in the theater, surrounded by weirdos, at night...

“Looks okay here,” he said.

“Isn’t there another fuse box in the cellars?” Maggie asked.

Startled, he turned to look at her, and found all twelve of the Bringers watching him.

“Yeah, there is,” he admitted. “I’ll go take a look.”

They watched him cross the stage, watched him fumble with the keys and get the basement door open; it was with a great rush of relief that he took the first step down, out of their sight.

He emerged into the passage at the bottom and was unable to resist the temptation; he turned right and slid the big door open and turned on the light in the big room under the stage.

Nothing had been disturbed; the traps in the ceiling were all closed, and showed no signs of recent use.

He shrugged and turned around.

The prop room looked just as he had left it.

The wardrobe room was just as he remembered; the black door was still there, still closed and mysterious.

He ambled down the corridor to the end, and turned left, into the narrow passageway where the water meter and the lobby fuse box resided. This space was in deep shadow; the only light came from the ceiling lights in the central passageway, and the last of those was about ten feet back from the corner. Art’s own body blocked out much of the light.

He could make out the pull-chain of the passage’s own light, though; he reached up and gave it a tug. The bare bulb that hung down a few inches above his head came on.

On the left was cracking plaster, painted white long ago, now faded to a dull gray; the lath beneath had patterned the gray with darker two-inch stripes.

On the right the wall was rough stone, the last remnants of ancient whitewash still visible in streaks here and there; black pipes emerged from the stone near the ceiling, turned a right angle, and descended the wall to eye level, where they connected to the rusted green metal box of the water meter. Farther in, near the corner, was the black steel of the fuse box, two thick metal-wrapped cables leading out the top and into the ceiling. The ceiling, far above, was bare planking, dark with age; the floor was gray granite.

And the far end of the passageway was another rough stone wall — but in this one was a door. A black six-panel door, full-sized, its ancient finish crazed and pebbled, speckled with the orange of old shellac.

“Oh, my God,” Art said, staring.

There had never been a door there before. He knew that. There were never any costumes stored here that might have hidden it.

He fished out his key ring, just in case, and stepped forward into the passage. With the ring in his left hand, he reached out with his right and gripped the blackened brass knob.

It turned. The latch clicked, and the door swung open.

And warm sunlight spilled into the corridor around him.

At 10 p.m., in a New England cellar, sunlight lit the passage, colored his sneakers with gold.

He blinked, and stepped through the door.

Chapter Fourteen

Maggie saw the light the moment she stepped into the central corridor.

“Art?” she called, as she made her way step by step down the passage. “Art, are you there?”

She hesitated at the corner, then turned, and found the open door.

And Art.

He was sitting in a meadow, surrounded by golden flowers and dancing butterflies. The sun hung huge and orange in the west; he was facing it, watching it.

Maggie approached cautiously, but he heard her somehow, and looked up, startled. He said something, but she couldn’t hear it — which came as no surprise, really. She had never seen such a door before, but she had heard of them and knew something about how they worked. The moment she had seen the meadow she had known what she faced, and that knowledge was itself something of a shock, but once that was past mere details were nothing.

She hesitated again on the threshold, then stepped through.

In an instant, the silence of the theater basement was replaced with the whirring of insects and the singing of the birds that pursued them. A gentle breeze rippled through the grass and flowers.

She turned quickly, and made certain that the door was still there, still open.

It was; its frame was part of a small, colorful little shed built against the side of a steep hill. The shed was enamel and gilt and painted porcelain, but through it she could see the rough stone and plaster of the basement corridor, the fuse box, the water meter, all of it sane and normal.

“Maggie,” Art said. “Sit down.”

“I don’t know if...”

“Sit down!” Art bellowed.

Maggie sat down quickly.

For a moment, the two of them sat there in the grass, staring at each other. Art’s expression was blank, and Maggie’s wary.

Then Art spoke, saying wearily, “Maggie, whoever you are, will you tell me something?”

“What?” she asked.

“What the hell is going on?” He waved an arm at the landscape, taking in the meadow, the sinking sun, the grove of trees nearby, the towers that glittered above the trees in the distance. “What is this place?”

Maggie sighed.

“I suppose,” she said, “that I’ll have to tell you everything.”

“Please,” Art said.

“I told you I’m a witch...” she began.

“No,” he corrected her, “you told me that your grandmother had been called a witch.”

“All right, you’re right, I did,” she agreed. “Well, whatever I told you, I am a witch. A real one, and the last real Scottish witch in the world.”

“Wiccan, you mean? There aren’t any in Scotland?”

“No, not Wiccan. They’re just pagans. I mean, some of them think they’re witches, but...” Her voice trailed off. She paused, then said, “Let me start over.”

“By all means,” Art agreed.

“This is magic,” she said, waving an arm to take in the entire landscape that surrounded them. “It’s real magic, the stuff that’s in all the old stories.”

“It’s not a fake, like the holodeck on Star Trek?” Art asked. “Or some kind of amusement park, or teleportation, or something?”

“No,” Maggie said. “It’s magic. This is Faerie.”

“I didn’t really think it was fake,” Art said. “It’s too real.” He plucked a blade of grass and crumpled it between his fingers.

A thought struck Maggie as she watched, and she asked him, “You haven’t eaten anything, have you? Chewed on a bit of grass or anything?”

“No,” he said. “It didn’t seem like a good idea.”

“Good. Don’t.”

Art nodded. When Maggie didn’t immediately continue with her explanation, he asked, “If this is Faerie, where are the fairies, or elves, or whatever it is that lives here?”

“Shh!” Maggie looked around, worried, but spotted nothing nearby save butterflies and flowers. In the shadows of the trees a few fireflies were rising, like sparks from a fire. The birds were settling in for the night. Nothing larger than a meadowlark could be seen moving.

Slightly reassured, she said, “I don’t know. I don’t want to know. I’ve never been here before, any more than you have; nobody’s been able to find a way into Faerie since long before I was born. Nobody knows what’s happened in Faerie since... well, since about the First World War, I guess. So maybe the locals are hiding, maybe they’ve forgotten what humans are, or maybe they’re just minding their own business. I don’t know. I haven’t been here, I’ve just heard about it.”

“So why have you heard about it, and I haven’t?” Art asked, a bit plaintively. “Why hasn’t anyone been here in so long? Why wasn’t that door ever there before?”

“Because...” She sighed. “Because magic is dying. Just like in the play.”

“Why?” Art asked. “Because nobody believes in it any more, like Tinkerbell?”

“No,” Maggie said, annoyed. “You’ve got it backwards, just like people always do. People don’t believe in magic anymore because there hardly is any magic to believe in. It’s wearing out, getting old and weak. It’s been declining for centuries, for millennia, maybe. Whether you believe in it or not doesn’t make any difference in whether it works, any more than it matters whether you believe in electricity when you turn on a light — the magic is still there, and still real. But you need to believe in it to control it, you need to know which switch to flip. And if you believe in it, it can control you, sometimes... it’s complicated.”

“So explain it. I’m listening.”

She glared at him, took a deep breath, and began.

“Magic comes from two things, from people and from places; everybody who knows anything about it knows that there are places of power, that magic works better some places than other, and everybody knows that magic works better for some people than for others, and the more you know about it, the better it works. That’s why the old wizards studied it endlessly. The people grow old and wear out and eventually die — they may stretch their time out with the magic, but they get older and weaker, like anybody else.

“Well, the places get old and die, too. The Valley of the Kings, in Egypt — it’s been dead for thousands of years, all that’s left is the memories. Mount Fuji’s been dead longer than that, no one even remembers why it was holy. Delphi’s gone, Angkor Wat is gone, Obersalzburg is gone. Stonehenge is just stones now, the magic there is an echo of an echo. And... well, I won’t go through the whole list, but there’s only one left, in Sedona, Arizona. All the magic that remains on Earth comes from the American Southwest — and that one’s old and weak, too. It’ll probably be gone by next year.”

Art started to say something, to ask a question, then thought better of it.

“The people have been getting scarcer and weaker, too,” Maggie continued. “With so few places to draw on, so little strength left, there can’t be many true magicians, and we can’t do as much. And now we’re all that’s left — just the twelve of us. All the others, the psychics and miracle-workers and so-called witches, they’re frauds and charlatans. There are just the twelve.”

“The Bringers of Wonder?”

Maggie nodded. “That’s what Myrddin calls us. Twelve of us left, in all the world.”

“Who’s Meer-Then?”

“Mr. Innisfree. Myrddin’s his real name.”

Art considered that, and accepted it. “And all the magic you people do is real?” he asked.

She nodded again.

“So why are you here?” Art asked. “I mean, why are you in Bampton?”

“To bring the magic back,” Maggie said.

Art blinked. “You can do that?” he asked.

Maggie hesitated, then answered, “I don’t know.”

Art waited.

“You see, there’s this spell,” she said. “Or sort of a spell. A ritual, anyway. Someone came up with it long ago — I don’t know exactly, some time in the Dark Ages, I guess.”

“What’s it supposed to do?”

“What it does — well, it creates a new magical place, a new source of power. Or opens one up, anyway — I mean, it doesn’t create the magic so much as it finds it and frees it. And there are only certain places that it can possibly work at any given time.”

“Like Bampton?”

She nodded. “Like Bampton. Right now, the block of Thoreau Street from Concord Avenue to Dawes Road, right here in Bampton, Massachusetts, is the only place on Earth with the potential to become a mystical power spot.”

“Seems pretty unlikely. I mean, why here?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? Magic doesn’t always have nice, tidy laws and reasons; it isn’t science. Right now, it’s here. We can tell that — or some of them can, like Myrddin and Dr. Torralva; I can’t do it myself, I don’t understand the techniques at all.”

Art was going to protest further when a blood-red butterfly landed on his hand, then flew away again. As he watched it go, he decided not to argue. Whatever the reasons, this was happening, wasn’t it?

And why not Bampton?

“So you people are here to open up this new power source?”

“Like digging a well,” she agreed. “Or planting a seed.”

“So you’ll do your ritual, and then you’ll all scatter again, and that’ll be it? There will be a little more magic in the world for you witches and wizards, but the rest of us can just go on as usual?”

Maggie hesitated, then said, “The others would probably want me to lie to you and say yes, but I’m not going to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s not that simple. I don’t think you understand the sort of difference we’re talking about here. There hasn’t been a new well of magic in thousands of years — not since Biblical times.”

“So?”

“So there won’t just be a little more magic in the world. There will be a lot. All the stupid little magical things people do that don’t work any more, the hexes and good luck charms — they’ll work. At least, the ones that are done right. There will be spontaneous magic, too, things that just happen. And wishing hard enough will make things come true, sometimes. Magic will be so easy that anyone will be able to learn it. Love will be magic again — you people all say it is, but it hasn’t really been, not for centuries.” She sighed. “We don’t know what it’ll be like; there aren’t any reliable records, and while some of us have been around a long time, none of us is that old. We don’t remember a world where magic was young.”

For a moment the two of them sat silently side by side, as Art considered this.

It sounded terrifying — all that magic would cause chaos, everything would be changed, everything disrupted. Somehow, though, it didn’t seem real. After all, magic?

Finally he said, “Sounds dangerous.”

“It probably is,” Maggie agreed.

“So why are you doing it?”

“Because the alternative is worse, of course. If we don’t do it, magic is going to die. Forever.”

“But can’t you open one of these wells any time you want?”

She shook her head. “No, of course not,” she said. “It takes magic to make it work, to plant the seed. When Sedona goes — that’s it. That’s all, for all of time; no more magic, ever. And the old ones, Baba and Myrddin and... well, really, everybody but me, magic is all that’s keeping them alive. When the magic goes, they’ll die, too.”

Art blinked. “They will?”

She nodded, not looking at him.

“Why’d they leave it until the last minute, then? Why didn’t they start a new one a long time ago? If it’s been thousands of years...”

“Well,” Maggie said, “there’s a trick to it.”

“What kind of a trick?”

“The spell we’re using, the play — it needs to include all of the surviving magicians in the world. If any magician, anywhere in the world, doesn’t take part, it will fail — not just big-shot wizards, if there’s anyone else, anywhere, using magic, then it won’t work. And there’s always been a holdout, some kind of a problem — some hedge witch or tribal shaman somewhere who wouldn’t go along, or someone who couldn’t come to the right place. That was the big problem, for about the last thousand years — Myrddin was imprisoned in a cave in England. It was just recently that the spell holding him got weak enough, and the rest of us got organized enough, that we could get him out.”

The idea of Innisfree being some ancient wizard who had spent centuries in a cave struck Art as patently ridiculous, and he snickered.

“Really!” Maggie insisted.

“He got that tan sitting in a British cave?”

“No, he got that tan in North Africa,” Maggie said. “First thing he did when he got out was go get warm and dry. Wouldn’t you? And that’s why he picked that name, Innisfree — he’s free again. That’s why he’s so cheerful about everything, and nervous at the same time — he’s glad to be out, but he doesn’t really understand how the world works anymore.”

“He hides it well.”

“It’s all bluster.”

Art still doubted the whole thing, but every time he looked at the world around him, at the black door in the hillside, the wildflowers all around, the huge sun settling on the horizon when he had already seen the sun set once that day, he had to believe that something utterly incredible was happening, and Maggie’s explanation seemed to make just as much sense as anything else.

Maybe it was real.

And if so, shouldn’t he be frightened?

“So let’s see if I have this straight,” Art said. “Magic is dying out, and there are only twelve real magicians left.”

Maggie nodded.

“You have a way to bring magic back, big time, but you have to do it before the end of the year, and here in Bampton.”

“Before the winter solstice, to be exact,” Maggie agreed.

“You found this theater sitting in exactly the right place, so Innisfree rented it, and you’re planning to stage your big ritual on the thirtieth, and for now you’re all practicing up for it. And you didn’t want any outsiders around because you didn’t want them interfering.”

“Right.”

Art nodded. “So if magic is so weak, what are we doing sitting in this field? Where’d that door come from?”

“Well, magic isn’t always linear,” Maggie explained. “It can spill back and forth through time. And it’s already started here, because we’re planning the ritual. Also, I think it started on Lammas Night, when you people put on that play, with the fairies in it — that play, on that night, in that place, it probably started loosening things up a little. And all those things in the cellars, charged with imagination and excitement and youthful fervor — the theater’s a natural storehouse for magic. Not to mention that it used to be a church. I’ll bet I’ve seen more real magic in the week we’ve been here than I’d seen in the last ten years.”

Art mulled that over, then asked, “So if it’s spilling back in time, does that mean you’re going to perform the ritual, and it’s going to succeed, and nothing can stop you?”

“No.” Maggie shook her head. “If something stops us, then that magic will all just be a fluke, a passing whim of the universe, a taste of what might have been. If we don’t perform our spell when the moon’s back in the same phase it was in on Lammas Night, then our chance is gone. I don’t know if we’ll have another before the solstice.”

“What’s Lammas Night?”

“August first. One of the four nights of power every year. Candlemas, Beltane, Lammas, and Halloween.”

“But if I leave you people alone, you’ll work your spell, and magic will return?”

Maggie hesitated, then said, “No.”

Startled, Art demanded, “Why not?”

“That’s why we needed you in the building, Art; that’s why we’re here now, I think. You’re all tangled up in the magic. Maybe it’s just because you were there when we started, or maybe it’s something more than that, some connection between you and the mystic-place-to-be, but our spells don’t work when you’re not here. If you aren’t in the building when we perform The Return of Magic, it won’t work. And it’s even worse than that, now that I’ve told you all this. It isn’t just all the magicians in the world who need to work the spell; it’s everyone who knows the spell is being attempted. You asked about magic and belief — belief isn’t all that important, but knowledge is. You know about it, now, and if you don’t participate, if you don’t act out your consent, it won’t work.”

She turned and looked him straight in the eye. “Now that I’ve told you, Art, it’s up to you. If you help us, magic will be loose in the world, new, fresh, powerful magic, magic everywhere, magic dripping from the eaves and shining from the windows of every house in Bampton, blossoming and singing, wild and uncontrolled.

“And if you don’t help us, all magic will be gone from the world forever, and eleven of us will die.

“So...” She swallowed nervously. “So, will you help?”

Chapter Fifteen

Art stared at her for a moment, then got to his feet. He brushed off the seat of his pants and looked around.

“What happens to all this, though?” he asked. “Isn’t this all magic?”

“Of course it is,” Maggie agreed, rising. “And if the ritual fails, it’ll be gone forever. I’m not sure if it will all cease to exist, or whether it has an independent reality of its own and will just be closed off from Earth forever, but whichever it is, the effect will be the same — that door there will be gone, it’ll just be a stone wall again, with nothing on the other side but dirt and granite.”

“You’re sure of that?”

She shrugged. “As sure as I can be,” she said. “’The essence of magic is deceit’ — that’s what Heliophagus of Smyrna said. I think maybe he overstated the case, but it’s a tricky business, and we’re hardly ever sure of anything.”

“So you aren’t sure that Innisfree would die?”

Maggie sighed. “Art,” she said, “Myrddin is sixteen hundred years old. It’s magic that keeps him young. When the magic’s gone, he’ll die.”

“How? Turn to dust, like in a vampire movie?”

“Maybe.” Maggie put a hand on his arm. “We don’t know. There’s always been magic in the world, ever since history began; how can we know what the world will be like without it?”

He turned to face her, startled. “You mean things could be different? For everybody, not just magicians?”

“Art, I don’t know.”

He looked her in the eye, and noticed that her eyes were deep and green. He pulled away.

“You can cast spells, can’t you?”

“Some,” she admitted. “More here and now than ever before.”

“And you want me to help you with this play of yours?”

She nodded.

“So why don’t you just enchant me, and make me do what you want?”

Maggie hesitated. “We could,” she admitted. “I could. But Art, magic isn’t like electricity or something, it isn’t all the same, regardless of where it came from or how it started. Each of the mystic places in the world has its own flavor — or had, anyway — depending on how it was created. And Art, we want this one to be clean and wholesome. We want white magic — and believe me, you want it to be white magic, if it happens at all. There’s been black magic in the world before, too much of it, too often. It’s gone now — the Sedona source is clean, almost pure white — but we know what black magic is, what it’s like. We don’t want that.”

“So what?”

“So if there’s dissension, if there’s coercion, the Bampton source will be tainted. It can never be better than gray, it might be black.”

“You don’t want that?”

“Well, most of us don’t.” She admitted, “I think a couple might not care.”

Art immediately thought of Granny Yeager; he doubted she would hesitate an instant over whether the magic was white or black.

“Besides,” Maggie added, “we’re not sure it would work. An enchantment isn’t really consent.”

Art nodded.

“Let’s go back,” Maggie said.

Art nodded again, and together they stepped back through the door into the theater basement.

Art paused, and turned back for a final look. The sun was almost down, the trees black silhouettes before it, the first star just visible in the east.

He closed the ancient door and felt the latch click into place. He stared at it for a long moment, ran a finger over the rough, crumbling finish.

“Hard to believe this isn’t real,” he said.

“It’s real,” Maggie said. “It’s magic.”

He glanced at her, then back at the door. “It looks so old,” he said.

“It probably is old,” Maggie agreed. “It was probably somewhere else before.”

“Is that how it works?”

She spread empty hands. “Who knows?” she replied. “The essence of magic is deceit.”

The cellars seemed exceptionally dank and gloomy after the fresh air and vivid sunlight of Faerie, and Art hurried to turn off lights and lock up, so as to get back outside. A hot New England night was scarcely going to be as pleasant as twilight in Faerie, but it would be better than the basement.

Maggie accompanied him silently.

There was no sign of the other Bringers when they finally made their way back upstairs; that was no surprise. Art set out to make sure that the air conditioning was turned off and everything as it should be.

When at last he was satisfied, he found Maggie waiting by the stage door. She looked troubled.

“Will you help us?” she burst out.

He stepped past her without answering and put his hand on the knob, then paused.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I need to think about it.” He turned the knob.

Light spilled in, and he blinked in astonishment.

He swung the door wide and looked out at morning light sparkling on the dew in the fields beyond the parking lot.

“We weren’t...” he began, but he could not finish the thought.

“You aren’t up on your fairy tales, are you?” Maggie asked. “Time in Faerie isn’t the same as time on Earth. That’s what the stories all say, and I guess they were right.”

Art looked at his watch, and found it was blinking “12:00” up at him. He stared at it.

Maggie noticed the gesture. Her mouth twisted wryly. “Digital watches, it would seem, don’t work in Faerie,” she said. “Nobody knew that before.”

Art looked at her. “They didn’t have digital watches last time anyone went there, huh?”

Maggie nodded. “I hope we only lost the night, and this is still Sunday morning,” she said, looking out toward Thoreau Street.

Art blinked, and stared out at the pale sky.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t eat anything,” Maggie remarked as she started down the porch steps.

“Why?” Art asked.

She glanced up at him. “Don’t you know?” she said, startled. “If you eat anything in Faerie, you can’t return. The door would have vanished, and you’d have spent the rest of your life there.”

“The rest...”

“Good night, Art. Call tonight is for seven again — at least, if it’s still Sunday.”

He stood watching as she stepped gracefully over a broken chunk of rock and vanished around the back corner of the theater.

A car cruised by, and in old man Christie’s field Spanner whinnied.

Magic, Art thought. Real magic. Witches. Fairies.

Real magic.

Real magic, either about to die forever, or about to be reborn.

He felt a chill of terror at the thought — and a stirring of something else, of excitement, of desire. He quickly suppressed it.

The whole situation was too much to absorb right away, he decided. He would, as he had told Maggie, need time to think about it.

He stared at his blinking watch as he descended the steps and started home.

Chapter Sixteen

He slept until 4:00 p.m.

When he finally came downstairs the radio was on, and a newscaster was describing the new comet that was gracing the southern skies, talking about how astronomers were puzzled by the suddenness of its appearance.

“Hi there, sleepyhead!” his father called.

Art waved.

“Those folks keep you up late?” the elder Dunham asked.

Art nodded as he passed through on his way to the kitchen.

“What time did you get in?”

“Seven,” Art said, as he got a gallon jug of milk from the refrigerator.

His father made a wordless noise of sympathy.

Art wasn’t sure just what meal he was eating, but whatever it was, breakfast or lunch or dinner or just a snack, he decided a microwave pizza would do just fine. He found one in the freezer.

He watched the timer on the microwave oven count down, square blue numbers changing as if by magic.

Microwave ovens were pretty magical, weren’t they? Art considered that.

His life was full of miracles, really — everyday, commonplace miracles he accepted without a second thought. Frozen pizza, microwave ovens, digital clocks, he didn’t know how any of them worked, they all might as well be magic. Why couldn’t he learn to live with a little more, if the Bringers brought their ritual off?

But those things weren’t real magic.

That fairy meadow was real magic.

At least, if all that had happened, if he hadn’t just dreamed the whole thing. He glanced through the living room door. The Sunday paper, immediately recognizable by the presence of four-color comics, was strewn about.

“It’s Sunday, right?” he called. “I mean, I didn’t sleep a whole day or anything?”

“It’s Sunday,” his father replied.

That was reassuring; it fit with his memories. He hadn’t lost whole days in Faerie — and he hadn’t dreamt all of Saturday, either.

At least, he didn’t think so. If he had dreamt it, wouldn’t it still be Saturday now?

But the whole thing was beginning to have the feel of a dream; that field, the long, slow sunset, the conversation with Maggie Gowdie, it was all starting to seem unreal, like a story he had once heard, or a daydream.

Was it real?

He slugged down milk, straight from the jug. The microwave beeped, and he found a potholder with which to take out the pizza.

The Return of Magic, they called it, and they meant just that — if it was all true. If Maggie hadn’t lied, if the conversation had happened, if the meadow was real, if the door was there, if he hadn’t imagined the whole thing.

He tried to straighten his thoughts as he ate, but they wouldn’t come straight. He couldn’t make himself certain of anything at all about anything that had happened since the end of July. The final performance of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the cast party, cleaning the theater — that all seemed real enough, there was no reason to doubt it, but then Mr. Innisfree had turned up...

A wizard, more than a thousand years old?

A dozen magicians, the last magicians in the world, come to Bampton to put on a play that would cast a spell — there was a pun in that, the cast of the play casting a spell.

“I think I’ll go over to the theater,” he said, brushing crumbs from his lap.

His father looked up. “Okay,” he said. “When’s call for tonight?”

“Not until six,” Art said, shading the truth, “but I wanted to look at something.”

“Suit yourself,” his father said, returning to his book.

Art took the keys from the hook and left the house.

The air had a heavy, damp feel to it as he clattered down to the sidewalk; he thought it might rain a little later, though you never knew.

The sky was darkening by the time he opened the stage door; rain was now clearly far more likely than not. He flicked on the light and stepped inside.

The chalk circles, white with red symbols, were on the stage, just as he remembered them; the Bringers of Wonder were real, not just a dream, then.

He found his way down the basement stairs, down the central passage, and around the corner at the end. And there, past the water meter and the secondary fuse box, was the door, black and ancient.

He stood in the passageway for a long moment, just staring at it.

Finally, he stepped forward and took the knob gingerly in his hand. He turned it and pulled, half expecting, half hoping, that it would be locked.

It opened easily and silently, and he found himself looking out at the meadow.

It was night in Faerie; the dim glow of the corridor light spilled past him onto dew-moistened grass. Stars shone above the meadows; he leaned forward for a quick look, then hastily pulled back.

Stars, millions of stars, more stars than he had seen since a childhood vacation in the mountains, the Milky Way a white path across the heavens — but all wrong, all in impossible places, the constellations twisted and distorted.

Slowly, carefully, he closed the black door.

It was real.

But was Maggie’s story, her explanation of what was happening, was that all true?

What if the Bringers were all the black magicians of the world? What if this was some plot?

What if it wasn’t really magic at all, what if they were extraterrestrials, and that door was some sort of teleportation device, and they were going to invade and conquer the world? After all, hadn’t someone said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic?

He reached out and ran his fingertips over the door, feeling the crazed and beaded finish. It felt like the remains of antique varnish, but maybe it was all really some sort of alien microcircuitry.

But the world beyond wasn’t alien — it was a meadow, with grass and flowers and insects, with Earth’s air and gravity...

Well, Earth’s gravity, anyway; the air might be a trifle richer, might have a different mix of inert gasses for all he could tell.

But what would alien invaders be doing putting on a play? Why would they conjure up birds and flames and winds and flowers? Why would their portal come out in a meadow, and not a city or staging area?

The alien-invader hypothesis had a certain appeal — Art had never even believed in UFOs or psychic phenomena or any of the New Age stuff, let alone full-blown traditional magic, witches and wizards and spells, so any sort of scientific explanation would be welcome, but still, he couldn’t really make himself believe it.

It looked like magic. It felt like magic. Even if it was really some sort of super-science, he might as well treat it as magic.

Slowly, thinking deeply, he turned away from the door and ambled back down the central passageway.

When he reached the prop room he glanced at the door, but didn’t open it.

The box of lost things — that was magical, wasn’t it? They were all things that had felt magical to him once, all things that had been inexplicably lost, and now magic had brought them back to him.

White magic, surely. Even when he had had no idea what was going on, even when he had been furious that someone was playing tricks on him with his own lost treasures, he had felt a reawakening of childlike wonder when he had handled those trinkets, all that outgrown junk.

The bone-handled knife — that must be magic, too. He frowned. A knife didn’t seem like a good omen.

He opened the sliding door and turned on the light for the big room, then stood there looking in, looking at all the fragments of old sets, at the wooden floor and stone walls.

Why here?

The other magical places he had heard of all had distinctive features to them — the standing stones at Stonehenge, the pyramids of Egypt, whatever. Was this new mystic power source just going to have a ramshackle little theater?

A theater with a mysterious pit under the basement? Maybe that was responsible for all this.

But really, it was just a theater.

It had been a church once, but it was a theater now.

He looked around at the stone walls with new insight. He had always known the building had its history, its idiosyncrasies, but he had always just accepted them. Now, for the first time, it occurred to him that the theater could be seen as a mysterious place, a magical place, quite aside from the plays performed there, and aside from the special, personal magic it had always held for him. Stone walls over a century old, an inexplicable and unexplored hole beneath it, a history that blended the sacred and the profane...

A few days ago, he knew he would have dismissed all that as nonsense, but now he wasn’t sure.

If he refused to join the Bringers in their ritual, if he let magic die out completely, would the theater still have that special magical quality, when he was here alone? Was that actually magic? Was it inherent in the theater, a trace of its magical potential? Or was it just in him, just a matter of psychology, something that had nothing to do with real magic and wouldn’t be changed?

A few days ago, he would have chosen the last without a moment’s hesitation.

Now, though — even if it was just psychological, even if no true magic was involved, what would he think if he let the Bringers fail, and eleven of them actually did die? Could this place still be magical for him?

Somehow, he didn’t think so.

He frowned. Did they have to die, then, if he didn’t help?

The answer to that depended on several other questions. Had Maggie lied? If she had said what she believed to be true, was it in fact true, or had she been misled?

And was his choice really a simple either/or, between eleven deaths and unleashing wild new magic on the world?

Whatever the truth, he wanted to think it over and decide for himself, without getting anyone else involved yet; even if he couldn’t settle the big questions, he could settle that. He really didn’t need to add any more complications, as it was all quite complicated enough.

And that, he decided, meant that he wouldn’t be calling Arnie Wechsler, or any other locksmith, in the morning; he wasn’t ready to find out what was behind that other door. If his father asked, he’d say that the door had turned out to be just a closet.

Maybe, when he was a bit more confident that he understood what was going on, he could get a locksmith out here and see what was in there, but there wasn’t any hurry. He really needed to think through what he had already learned. Whatever was behind the other door — Faerie or something else — was far more likely to provide more problems than to show him any solutions.

So it could wait. Everything down here could wait while he thought it all through.

He closed the sliding door and went upstairs.

He was sitting on the edge of the stage, still thinking, when the Bringers arrived.

That night he saw the play through, beginning to end, as the Bringers rehearsed. He saw them working their spells, warming up, practicing for the big night, when the moon and stars would be right, when they would have an audience, when they would have to perform the entire thing nonstop, without break or flaw.

Afterward he talked to Maggie, and to Myrddin, whom he had known as Merle Innisfree.

Everything Maggie had told him in the fields of Faerie was confirmed; if he did not participate, the ritual would fail. Magic would pass from the world forever, and all the magicians but Maggie would die.

“There’s no chance you could do it again in November?” he asked.

Myrddin and Maggie looked at one another. Then Myrddin shook his head.

“I shouldn’t think so,” he said. “I doubt there would be enough left of Sedona to serve our needs. And it wouldn’t matter, in a way — you’d just be putting it off. Lad, you’d still know about it. We’d still need your help — but instead of here, it might be in Antarctica, or Kathmandu, or the Amazon jungles.”

“Oh,” Art said.

“We need you, Art,” Maggie said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told you, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“But turning magic loose — you say yourself you don’t know what it’ll do.”

“It’s been done before, you know,” Myrddin pointed out. “The species seems to have survived.”

“Are you sure? When was the last one of these... these things created? How do I know it wasn’t magic that killed off the dinosaurs?”

Maggie looked startled; Myrddin said judiciously, “It might have been, at that, I suppose. And I’ve heard stories about Atlantis, of course. But Arthur, my lad, the Stonehenge power spot was only opened about eight thousand years ago, and Sedona probably a little after — though we don’t know who started Sedona, or how, or why.”

“Eight thousand years.”

“About that.”

“This hasn’t been done in eight thousand years?”

Neither of them answered that.

“That’s prehistoric. I mean, literally.”

Myrddin nodded.

“You said you needed my participation,” Art said.

“That’s right,” Myrddin replied.

“Participation, how?” Art asked. “The play’s got seven roles, and the rest of you are mostly just a chorus — would I be in the chorus?”

“I suppose so, yes,” Maggie said, with a glance at Myrddin. “I was sort of a late addition, and that’s where I am.”

“But I can’t sing,” Art protested. “I can’t do magic. I don’t act, you know, I never have — I don’t think I’d remember my lines.”

Maggie glanced worriedly at Myrddin, who smiled.

“Stage fright, lad? No need for that. You need to participate, true, but nobody said you had to perform.”

Art needed a second to think about that; then he turned and looked at the neatly shelved lighting instruments.

“I expect it’ll make the show look a little more professional, don’t you?” Myrddin asked, putting an arm around Art’s shoulders.

Chapter Seventeen

The temptation to tell Marilyn when they met in Dumfrey’s Antiques the next day was almost irresistible. The knowledge that she wouldn’t believe him helped considerably in fighting temptation, but then came the realization that he could prove it to her by taking her down to the door into Faerie.

And that would also prove that he wasn’t going insane, wasn’t imagining the whole thing. He didn’t really think he was deluded, but independent confirmation certainly wouldn’t hurt his self- confidence.

That thought gnawed away at his resolve, and he almost cracked at lunch, when Marilyn asked if he’d figured out what the people who had rented the theater were up to.

But if he told her, she would have to join the show. She might not mind — or she might.

And what if he decided against participating, and she didn’t?

She might blame him for eleven murders. She might blame him for wiping away the little magic that was left in the world — if that made any difference. Nobody knew if it made any difference, if anyone but the magicians would notice when it was gone.

And she might tell others, and each new person would mean a whole new debate.

“Oh,” he said at last, “they’re just doing a play, same as they said all along.”

“Really?” Marilyn cocked her head. “But you said they weren’t doing any preparation.”

“Well, they weren’t, but they are now. Got a slow start, that’s all. I’ll be hanging the lights tonight — or at least starting to.”

Marilyn nodded. “So did you ever find out anything about this, what was it, ’mystic classic of the stage’?”

He nodded. “Yup. Turns out it was written by some secret society back around the turn of the century, or something, so it’s always stayed sort of underground, never gotten wide distribution.”

“Oh, foo, that’s no fun, then! That takes almost all the mystery out of it!” She slapped at him gently.

“Sorry,” he said, smiling.

“I mean, what good are a bunch of mysterious strangers if they aren’t smuggling dope or something?”

“Not much,” he agreed.

“So are they planning to advertise this show of theirs? I haven’t seen any posters or anything.”

Art shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Hey, have you seen Susan around lately?”

The conversation wandered away from the theater, but Marilyn’s question lingered, and that night, as he pulled the first Fresnel off the shelf, Art asked Myrddin, “Do you guys want an audience for this thing?”

“Why do you ask?”

Art shrugged, and one of the shutters on the lighting instrument rattled. “Just curious,” he said.

“Well, as it happens, we need an audience — and we expect to have one,” Myrddin told him.

“Really? You haven’t done any advertising, have you?”

Myrddin grinned at him. “I never said the audience would be human,” he replied.

Art decided not to ask any more questions just yet.

He couldn’t stop thinking about it, though, as he clamped the lighting instruments in place.

He had decided on a simple design that would reflect the mystic circles that made up much of the play; a ring of Fresnels gelled warm gold and pale pink would flood the center of the stage with light, and an outer ring of licos gelled medium blue would provide background and accent. Specials were set for each upstage corner, for the scenes when characters popped up there unexpectedly. The downstage corners and the outer edges were left dark — they weren’t used, and he didn’t have the equipment to spare for them.

Never said the audience would be human, Myrddin had said. Art looked down from the catwalk at the Bringers in their places, running through the dialogue. They had never said the audience would be human, but there they were, going through their paces, untroubled by it. He looked at their shadows on the stage and remembered his business.

Real strip lights would have been nice, but the theater didn’t have them and he’d never gotten around to making any. If he got lucky, and didn’t need a week just to eliminate unwanted shadows, he might still have time to do something about that. For now, though, he expected he would have to resort to the same trick he’d been using for the past ten years, taping unframed gels over the onstage work lights and cutting a dimmer into the circuit.

If not human, then what? What else was there? As he climbed down the stage-left ladder a flare of enchanted flame lit the wall around him, which was no comfort at all.

Back at the equipment shelves he counted the Fresnels. He would have one left over; now, where could he put that to do the most good? He looked out at the stage as the magicians stepped back in simulated surprise at the High Mage’s anger.

Myrddin hadn’t meant magicians; all the magicians in the world were in the show, not the audience, and besides, they seemed human enough, generally speaking.

They didn’t really have a curtain-warmer; that should properly take at least three instruments, and he wasn’t going to have any leftover licos, not after he rigged the specials for the corners, but a lone Fresnel with the shutters wide open would be better than nothing, especially if he angled it across. He’d need to think about which side to put it on; the show was just about the most symmetrical he’d ever lit, which didn’t help. He slipped out onto the downstage corner to look the situation over, carefully avoiding Baba Yeager as she made her exit.

Here he could look out over the empty house, and wonder what would be in those chairs. Not magicians — what else, then? Magical beings of some sort?

He forced himself back to business. If he hung the Fresnel at stage left, it would partially light the steps at stage right; if he hung it stage right, they’d be in complete darkness. The show didn’t use the steps, so ordinarily he wouldn’t want to call the audience’s attention to them, but this wasn’t ordinary. He looked out at the house again.

He didn’t know what the audience would be. Gods? Demons? Fairies? Elves? Gryphons, dragons, unicorns? Would they care about the steps? Would the cast want to be able to see the steps in case something went wrong?

Elves, fairies — and there was a door to Faerie downstairs. Was that where the audience would come from? He looked out into the darkness and tried to imagine elves and fairies sitting out there.

Hang it at stage right, he decided. Whatever the audience was, he thought he’d be happier emphasizing their separation from the events onstage.

Separation — an idea stirred somewhere in the back of his mind as he went to the shelves and lifted down the instrument he wanted.

He stood for a long moment with the Fresnel in his hand, looking up at the iron lighting frame mounted to the right side of the proscenium, but the idea wouldn’t come clear. Instead, a question came to him.

Why was he doing this?

Why was he hanging these lights when he hadn’t yet decided whether he wanted to help out?

If he refused to go along, would they cancel the show, or would they try it without him?

Would just having hung the lights be enough cooperation?

Did he really want to unleash wild new magic on an unsuspecting world? As before, a surge of terror hit him at the thought — and something else underneath it.

Real magic.

Kier Kaye muffed a line and burst out laughing; Yeager called a rude comment, and Dr. Torralva gently reprimanded them both.

They didn’t seem worried by the prospect of dying before the year was out — but then, they expected the ritual to work.

Could they be so sure, though? Shouldn’t they be more worried than this?

Yeager was still in the stage-left wings; she wouldn’t reenter the action for a few minutes yet. With the Fresnel still in his hand, Art ambled over to talk to her.

“Go away, boy,” she told him.

“Ms. Yeager,” he began.

“Pah!” she snapped, followed by something in a language he didn’t understand. It sounded like Russian. It also sounded insulting. “If you must talk to me,” she said, reverting to English, “at least use my right name, now that you know who we are, and not that stupid lie they made up for me. It’s Yaga, not Yeager — I’m no damned German!”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“You should be.”

“I wanted to ask, though...”

“Then ask.”

“About this... this performance. What if it doesn’t work?”

She turned and stared at him, with yellowed and terrifying eyes. After a moment of silence, a moment in which Myrddin’s onstage dialogue could be clearly heard, she snorted.

“If it doesn’t work,” she said, “the world will be a sad, drab place, and I won’t much mind missing it.”

“Missing it?”

“Well, I’ll be dead and gone, won’t I, chick? We all will. By Christmas. They told you that, I’m sure — even if that little ninny who calls herself a witch forgot, Myrddin wouldn’t miss a chance.”

“You’re sure?”

“Are you questioning me?”

“Oh, no!” Art protested. “Nothing like that!”

“Well, then.”

“When you say the world will be sad... how do you mean that? What will change, really?”

Again, she took her time about replying.

“Having second thoughts, are you?” she demanded at last.

Art didn’t answer; he didn’t even try.

“Well, I’ll tell you, I don’t know what it’ll be like, really, any more than the rest of ’em. I don’t suppose it’ll be as different as all that — but who knows? You can’t use magic to see a world where magic isn’t possible. I suppose you people will go on just as you have these last few centuries. You probably won’t even miss it.” She grinned, revealing hideous teeth, yellow and sharp. “Or maybe you’ll all drop dead, or turn to apes — maybe your minds are all magical. Who knows?”

Art hesitated, trying to think what to ask next, while the old woman was in a reasonably talkative mood, but just then her cue came, and she turned away, returning to the stage.

Art stood for a long moment, holding the Fresnel, then headed out to hang it.

Chapter Eighteen

Four days later, on Friday, Art had the lights hung, aimed, gelled, and shuttered, and he had still not decided whether to go through with the ritual.

He had argued with Marilyn without really knowing why, and had left her on the verge of tears with no clear understanding of what she was upset about.

He had, however, retrieved the idea that had come to him.

The Bringers were supposedly doomed to die because the world would no longer have any magic in it — so why not find them another world?

If they all went through that door in the basement, stepped through into Faerie, and just stayed there when the door disappeared, wouldn’t they be safe enough? Faerie wasn’t going to vanish when the magic from Arizona died; Faerie must still have magic. How else could it be Faerie?

And the normal, everyday world would still be intact, without any wild magic turned loose. Bampton would still be a quiet little suburb. Art’s life could continue undisturbed, and there wouldn’t be any worries about New England becoming the next Atlantis.

He wished he had come up with this when he had still been working on focusing lights, using various members of the group as lighting dummies — that would have made conversation convenient and natural. Right at the moment, the Bringers were onstage discussing something among themselves — he couldn’t hear what, and although he was now allowed to watch rehearsals, and was accepted as a necessary part of the performance, he was still not a full member of the group.

Not that he particularly wanted to be. He was a techie, not a magician.

Well, sometime soon he and the director would need to sit down together and go over the lighting cues, and he could bring up his idea then.

“Arthur!” Myrddin called, almost as if he had heard Art’s thought. Art looked up from the lighting board, startled. “Arthur, lad, come here a moment, would you?”

Puzzled, Art came.

“We’ve been talking it over, the lot of us,” Myrddin explained. “We’ve been looking at the lights you’ve got up there, and we were thinking that it might be nice if we had some sets, as well — I mean, if we’re really going to do this up as a play, and not just use that as an excuse, we might as well get it right, eh?”

“But it is a play...”

“Well, I wrote it that way, but that was so we wouldn’t have any trouble over it. I wrote it up as a church service, too — if we’d come out with a place where there was a church available instead of a theater, we’d be doing that version.”

“Really?”

“Really. I wrote it half a dozen ways. Now, what do you think about some sets?”

“Well, but, I mean, the sets are all supposed to be in place before the lights go up — I’ll have to refocus everything.”

“Will you?”

“Yes!”

Myrddin looked up at the lights, then back at Art. “Well, that’ll give you something to do for the next two weeks, then, won’t it?”

Art’s mouth opened, then snapped shut.

So much for building proper strips. Maybe he could do that this winter, if there wasn’t enough snow to keep him busy.

“Anyway,” Myrddin went on, “we wanted to ask your advice. We don’t need new sets — Maggie tells us you have old ones in the cellars, same as you have those over there.” He pointed at the leftovers from A Midsummer Night’s Dream, which still hadn’t been moved to the basement.

“Well, yeah,” Art admitted.

“Splendid! We’ll just take a look at them, then, and choose the ones we want...”

“Mr. Innisfree,” Art interrupted desperately, “you don’t need to do that.”

“Ah, but we want to, lad! Add a bit of your stage magic to our own, we will — and all the better for making new magic, I’m sure!”

“You don’t need new magic, though.”

Myrddin stopped his speech abruptly and stared at Art; so did several of the others.

“What you say there, child?” Tituba Smith demanded.

“Art, that’s the whole point,” Maggie called.

“New magic for old, new magic for old!” Granny Yaga chanted, parrotlike, before bursting out in a raucous cackle.

“But you don’t,” Art insisted. “If the world loses its magic, you can all still go live in Faerie.”

Myrddin blinked solemnly at Art.

“How are we supposed to get to Faerie?” Morgan asked, her hands on her hips.

“Through the door in the basement,” Art replied, startled by the question.

Morgan glared, first at Art, then around at the others. “Is this true?” she demanded. “Nobody told me about any door in the basement!”

“We didn’t?” Maggie said, as startled as Art had been.

“Morgan,” Myrddin said, a hand raised in a calming gesture, “I’m sorry, I admit it, that was my doing. I didn’t trust you — you know why. I feared if you knew of the door that you’d leave us, and I don’t know if we could succeed without you at this point.”

Morgan glowered at him, and Myrddin faced up to it.

“I’ll not flee to the Other Realm,” Rabbitt announced. “This world is my own, and I’ll live or die in it.”

Several voices murmured, and worried eyes turned toward Morgan.

“Oh, I’ll stay,” Morgan said, “until the spell is cast. Then I’ll go back where I belong, where I should have been these past two centuries.”

“I’d prefer Earth, if I have a choice,” Kaye remarked. “But if anything goes wrong, I’d prefer Faerie to death.”

“What’s it like in Faerie, now?” Karagöz asked. “Who did you see?”

“No one,” Maggie said. “Just an empty meadow.”

An uneasy silence followed this, broken a moment later when Tituba asked, “You didn’t see no one? Not even off in the distance?”

“I thought I saw towers,” Art said. “Beyond the trees. And there were birds. And butterflies.”

“In all my years, I’ve never heard of anyone entering Faerie without encountering its inhabitants,” said Tanner.

“Maybe it is dead,” Wang suggested. “Maybe their magic ran out even before ours.”

That possibility had not occurred to Art.

“But the door...” he began.

“The door is in our world,” Rabbitt pointed out. “Conjured by the spells we’ve begun here.”

Art stared at the magicians. His great idea had not resolved his dilemma; instead it had created even more questions.

“We’ll have to explore,” Morgan said. When several voices started to protest, she raised a stilling hand and added, “Once the ritual is done, that is.”

“And if the spell fails, perhaps we can slip through before the door fades, as the young man suggested,” Wang pointed out. “That would surely be preferable to certain death.”

That evoked a general chorus of agreement — but Art noticed that Myrddin and a couple of the others didn’t join in. He stared at them all hopelessly.

Maybe he had found them a way out — but maybe he hadn’t.

And that meant he still didn’t know what to do, whether to help them unleash chaos, or to refuse and see what happened.

At least he’d reduced it from eleven murders to a mere gamble with eleven lives. He sighed. He’d tried — and they’d chosen to take the risks.

At that point Myrddin decided the time had come to drag the conversation back to its original track. He said, “Now, about those sets...”

Chapter Nineteen

The stage was a phantasmagorical clutter of mismatched elements, but that didn’t seem to trouble any of the Bringers of Wonder at all. A castle wall loomed in the upstage right corner, a flowering hedge upstage left, with an art deco triumphal arch, originally intended for a nightclub set, between them. The chalk circles had been redrawn on a sloping platform originally built for a production of The Roar of the Greasepaint that had been one of the first shows Art had worked on. Roman columns adorned either side of the stage, alternating with Victorian streetlamps, the entire array supporting a glittering mesh, draped in graceful swags in two long arcs, one on either side.

The whole effect was supremely weird — not mystical so much as just plain strange. It resembled an architectural warehouse more than a wizard’s laboratory.

For two weeks, Art had been desperately reworking his lighting to suit this new, cluttered stage, and all the while, as he worked, he was trying to decide, trying to think — and trying not to think.

He had not gone near the mysterious black door in the basement again, but some of the others had — Karagöz, Tanner, and Kaye had ventured in, in a cautious little group. Morgan had not accompanied them; everyone agreed that she knew Faerie better than anyone on Earth, but she had declined the invitation to join the exploratory party. She preferred not to risk the temptation she knew she would feel to stay in the Twilight Lands.

Upon their return the explorers reported that magic still worked in Faerie — but differently. They couldn’t explain that. And they hadn’t yet met any of the inhabitants. Due to the time differential between Earth and Faerie they had not dared venture far, lest they miss the performance — everyone knew that an hour or two in Faerie might easily turn into days or weeks back on Earth.

That left more mysteries, made every guess about the future more difficult.

And other manifestations of the supernatural had arisen to keep Art’s attention divided. Something was definitely alive in the pit beneath the basement, for one thing; Art could hear it snuffling and slithering about. Sometimes it thumped against the wooden floor.

It didn’t seem particularly annoyed or dangerous, though, and the thumps sounded more like random explorations than an attempt to break out. Art had told the others about it; no one had any idea what it was, and after much debate they had resolved to leave it alone.

Also, there were small glowing things that drifted about in the basement sometimes. Nobody had gotten a good look at one. They came in three colors, red, green, and gold, and they were beautiful. Art often glimpsed them from a distance, or from the corner of his eye, or vanishing around a doorway, and every time he stopped and stared, and every time they were gone before he could see more than a vague impression of colored light, of something small and delicate and graceful moving through the air, glowing brightly.

Art thought they might be fairies — after all, if the land beyond the door was Faerie, why not? Not the lordly fey folk of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, of course, but little winged creatures, the sort in Victorian children’s books, or Disney’s Fantasia. Why not?

The Bringers just shrugged; they didn’t know what the lights were, either. This didn’t trouble them; they expected new magic to be different from anything they’d known.

Art couldn’t get a good look at the things, couldn’t tell if they were fairies, or some sort of mutant firefly, or something else entirely. He felt as if he ought to be frightened by such things, but he wasn’t.

Fear came from threats, after all, from danger — or from the unknown. But the little glowing things posed no threat that he could see, and the Bringers assured him that whatever they were, they weren’t dangerous.

And they weren’t really unknown. They were magic. Raw magic, bubbling over, spilling back in time, shapeless and random — and harmless.

It was very odd, just how certain Art was that the lights were harmless. Sometimes that certainty troubled him slightly, but he was so sure he was right, what harm could it do that he didn’t know why he was sure?

And they were a distraction. He didn’t have time to worry about Faerie or the thing in the pit or the drifting lights, or the bone-handled dagger or the box of treasures or the locked door in the wardrobe room. He had lights to aim, cues to learn, and a vital decision to make.

Would he go through with the performance?

On Monday of the final week Marilyn knocked at the stage door around midnight to suggest a late-night snack together. He was distracted, not thinking, and let her in while he locked up.

The Bringers had departed a few minutes before, so it seemed safe enough. He left her staring at the muddle of sets while he checked the basement doors.

He wished he could have locked the door to Faerie, but none of the keys would fit.

As he was climbing the stairs again a flight of the glowing things cruised past him, vanishing around a corner under the steps. He paid no attention until he looked up and saw Marilyn standing in the open doorway, staring.

“What were those?” she asked.

He glanced down just in time to see the glow fade; as usual, he hadn’t gotten a clear look at them.

“Fireflies,” he said.

“I never saw fireflies like that,” Marilyn said. “Besides, it’s too late in the year, isn’t it? How’d they get in here?”

“Well, I don’t know, then,” he said, shrugging.

Marilyn stared at him, then down at the point where the lights had vanished.

“I don’t know,” Art repeated defensively.

“Okay,” Marilyn said. “I’m not arguing; you coming?”

The date was not a success; Marilyn made no further mention of the mysterious elfin lights, but somehow, after she had marveled at the bizarre stage set and Art had mumbled unresponsively in return, they wound up first discussing, and then arguing about, Maggie Gowdie. Marilyn managed to take offense at Art’s passing mention that Maggie’s grandmother had claimed to be a Scottish witch.

Art’s heart wasn’t in the argument, though; he was always thinking, underneath, about the big question.

Should he go through with his part of the performance?

Wednesday Jamie came back from California, broke and tanned and full of stories about L.A. — and curious about what was happening at the theater.

“A play,” Art told him.

“What kind of play?”

Art couldn’t answer that; his thoughts on the subject were too confused.

“You’ll have to come see it,” he said.

Instantly he regretted it. Hadn’t Myrddin said the audience wasn’t to be human?

He didn’t want to say any more, and did his best to steer the conversation back to Hollywood, where he could safely ignore it while he thought about his choices.

Then it was Saturday, and the point of no return was nearing. He had gone through lighting rehearsal, full tech rehearsal, dress rehearsal, without voicing his indecision, without saying anything to disturb the Bringers’ calm assurance that he would cooperate. And the performance was to be this evening.

If he was going to back out, he had to do it now, while there was time for the Bringers to flee into Faerie — those who preferred escape to death, at any rate. He guessed that would be roughly an even split.

He stood by his lighting board, checking how the blue wash at the edge looked on Rabbitt’s skin, and trying to make up his mind about two things at once: Should he do a last-minute gel change? Did he want to unleash magic on the world?

In the blue light Rabbitt looked even darker than he ordinarily did, but it was a healthy enough color; Art thought it would do.

No new gel, then.

But magic...

“Mr. Rabbitt,” he asked, “what’ll it be like?”

He had hinted at the question repeatedly, had even asked it directly, and had never gotten a good answer; he was making one last try.

The huge magician cocked his head in Art’s direction. “Do you mean, when the magic is come?”

“Yeah.”

Rabbitt smiled wryly. “In truth, lad, none of us really, entirely knows what will happen.” He waved theatrically. “It might be that unicorns will be reborn, that dragons will walk the mountains once again — or perhaps not, perhaps the magic will take new and strange forms.” He dropped his arm and shrugged. “Whatever unintended side effects we may achieve, we can be certain that magic will once again be so accessible that anyone with the will and belief will be able to use it, not just wizards and mages.”

“Anyone?”

“Oh, nearly.”

“Well, I mean... who?”

“You, perhaps.” He smiled again. “It’s said that young lovers will be particularly good at it. That’s if the stories are to be trusted, of course.”

“I’m not a young lover,” Art protested.

“Ah,” Rabbitt said, with a broad grin, “but perhaps you will be.”

Art frowned.

Something bright and green flitted across the periphery of his vision; he started and stared.

One of the mysterious lights from the basement, the fairies or will-o’-the-wisps or whatever they were, had ventured up the stairs and emerged onto the stage.

This was the first time one of the more obviously magical spontaneous phenomena, as opposed to the Bringers’ spells, had manifested itself anywhere except the basement.

And it didn’t vanish when he stared at it; it flickered, and darted about so that he couldn’t see it clearly, but it didn’t vanish.

He looked at his watch. Less than an hour before curtain.

He had to decide.

“Art?” someone called.

He turned and found Maggie beside him, and was oddly disappointed.

“Hi,” she said. “Hope I didn’t startle you.”

“Just pre-show jitters,” he said.

“Yeah,” she replied, forcing a smile. “Me, too. But anyway, I need the key to the box office.”

He blinked at her. “You do?” he asked stupidly.

“Well, yes, of course I do,” she said. “I’m manning the booth.”

He stared at her, uncomprehending.

“Selling tickets,” she explained. “Someone has to. People are coming to see the show, you know. Even though we didn’t advertise except the one poster out front.”

“They are?”

“Sure. A lot of your friends from Dream, for one thing — they’re all curious about us.”

“You have tickets?”

“Conjured them myself — with ten bucks at the local print-shop.” Grinning, she held up a stack of printed red pasteboard. “The key?”

“Uh.” He reached in his pocket, then stopped. “I’ll take care of it,” he said. “Someone needs to open the doors, too, right?”

She asked, “You don’t need to be back here?”

“Not right now.”

Together they walked up the aisle, and he stared out at the empty seats.

Somehow, he had become so involved with the ritual aspect of the play he had forgotten that it was a play, a performance people could watch and enjoy even if they didn’t know about spells or magic or other mysteries.

But it was a play, and there would be an audience, with real, everyday people in it.

In the lobby he unlocked the box office without a word, then crossed to the big front doors. He threw back the bolt and opened the right-hand door an inch or two, then peered out the crack.

Marilyn and Jamie were already waiting on the sidewalk, talking idly. They were standing apart; Marilyn’s hands were behind her, against a signpost, while Jamie’s were in the pockets of his cutoff jeans. They weren’t looking at him.

They were here to see the show.

At that moment, Art suddenly knew what he had to do.

It didn’t matter if it changed everything. It didn’t matter if it was dangerous — after all, what was life without a little risk? What was life without a little magic? He’d invited Jamie here himself. He couldn’t disappoint an audience.

After all, magic or no magic — the show must go on.

Chapter Twenty

Only about thirty citizens of Bampton were in the audience, yet when Art risked a glance around the curtain in the middle of the first act he saw no empty seats.

Just what was occupying the others he couldn’t really say. Some of them had faces, some didn’t. There were the mysterious cellar lights flitting here and there, too. And he could hear something thumping under the stage.

The Bringers of Wonder were untroubled by such details as they went through their performance.

Art had seen real magic in it before, in rehearsals, but nothing like what he saw now. Strange colors flickered in every corner; magic swirled in the air, surged back and forth in waves. He could feel it, like an impending thunderstorm, but a thousand times more intense.

He wondered what the humans in the audience made of it.

Then he heard his next cue coming, and he slipped back to the lighting board, and back to his work.

There was no intermission between acts; Art could feel himself that the magic wouldn’t allow it. It had waited, somewhere, for a very long time; now it was awake and eager, not to be held back.

The second act was brief and simple: in it the mage and his apprentices confronted the gods and demanded that magic be restored to the world; the gods considered the request, and then granted it, expelling the dragon that had kept magic confined — or perhaps instead freeing the dragon that was magic itself; the play was deliberately ambiguous.

In rehearsal, Al Tanner, playing the gods’ spokesman, had provided an illusion of a dragon for the climax, when the dragon burst forth from its cave; Art had considered it a rather unconvincing illusion and a weak ending.

As he felt the magical forces crawling across his skin and flashing through him, as he saw the light from his instruments bend and twist and change, he began to wonder whether Tanner’s illusion would work properly.

As the final scene began, Tanner did not raise his wand. The thumping from beneath the stage sounded again, louder than before. Art felt a sudden surge of panic.

By then it was too late to do anything; the floor burst open in a spectacular roaring explosion of flame and splinters, and the Dragon arose, spreading its wings.

Shining emerald green, wings lined with black and with colors Art could not name, the Dragon rose from the crypts beneath the stage and looked out at the audience with blazing eyes. The Bringers of Wonder tumbled back away from the monster, which seemed to fill the entire stage; the mismatched sets toppled and shattered, falling in fiberboard and plaster ruin. Art wanted to run away, to flee in terror; he wanted to run out onstage and do something to the Dragon, anything, to make it go away. He wanted to jump down into the audience and protect Marilyn.

What he actually did, though, was to bring up the center-stage ring of licos to full, and keep the blue background lights at half while dropping everything else to black. The Dragon was lit in a blaze of glory, the golden light glittering from its vivid green scales.

Cue 49. Myrddin had insisted on it, even though Art had said it wouldn’t look right on Tanner’s illusion.

Myrddin had been right.

Then the Dragon rose up out of the stage and vanished into the flies overhead, and Art looked up, astonished.

He saw only the catwalk and the lights and the ropes and the other normal overhead clutter. The Dragon was gone.

It was gone — but where?

Then he smiled, remembering. Illusion. The essence of magic is deceit. There was no dragon, really; Tanner had just done a better job with his tricks.

Then he looked out at the stage.

The lights were wrong; he’d missed his cue. Quickly, he went to Cue 50, and brought up #7 while slowly fading everything else.

Myrddin was out of position, knocked aside by the great beast — or by Tanner’s illusion, whichever it was. Now he scrambled across the stage to take his place under the spotlight for his closing speech.

Art watched, and saw him stumble as his foot came down on a board that gave beneath him; the floorboard had been broken by the dragon.

Then the magician was standing in his place in the light, declaiming his lines, and Maggie was hauling on the curtain, Dr. Torralva helping her. Myrddin spoke his final line, Art brought down #7 in a three-beat fade, and the curtain swung closed.

Applause swelled up from the audience, invisible beyond the closed curtain.

The show was over.

There were to be no curtain calls; in fact, Art realized as he brought up the curtain-warmer that several of the Bringers seemed to have vanished. None of the onstage or backstage lights were on, but an eerie glow seemed to suffuse everything; by it Art could see Maggie and Myrddin and Morgan and Dr. Torralva, and a fox was standing atop the stump of a papier-mâché streetlamp, but the others were gone.

Had the Dragon gotten them, eaten them, consumed them somehow?

But the Dragon wasn’t real...

But then what had wrecked the stage?

And had the ceremony worked? Myrddin and Morgan and Torralva were still alive, but what about the others? Maybe the whole thing had been a bust, and the others had died, had turned to dust and blown away.

No. He knew that wasn’t what had happened. He could feel the magic in the air, could feel it pouring up out of the hole in the stage, like cool air from a cave, like the electric tingle of static, like the heat from a furnace, all at once — and not really like any of them. The spell had worked.

In fact, he could almost see the magic bubbling and spilling out of the hole, in blue and purple and colors he had never seen or imagined before, like heat shimmer and sparks.

He really, really hoped that hole was an illusion, or just the traps opened.

But he still had something more immediate to worry about. The applause had become ragged and uncertain, but there was still an audience out there.

The show must go on. He had his job to do.

He brought down the curtain-warmer, waited a long five beats, and brought up the houselights. That should make it plain that the show was over.

Sure enough, the applause died away during the five beats of darkness, and was gone by the time the houselights were up full.

His job was done.

The show was over, and magic was loose upon the world — in theory. Whatever that really meant.

He couldn’t resist; he left the board, crossed to the curtain, and peeped out around the end.

The audience was beginning to drift out to the lobby.

Somehow, despite the feel of raw magical energy in the air, Art had assumed that when the play was done the various mysterious phenomena would cease, and the supernatural portion of the audience would vanish.

They had done nothing of the sort.

There were goblins bouncing on the cushions in several seats; translucent things that Art took for ghosts were floating up and down the aisles. The ordinary citizens of Bampton were all out in the lobby — the few faces Art could glimpse at that distance, through the doors, looked apprehensive.

All but one, that is. Marilyn was standing at the foot of the stage. She spotted him peering out, and waved.

He waved back, took a quick glance at the ruins, at the remaining magicians, and beckoned to her.

She hopped quickly up onto the stage and slipped around the end of the curtain.

“Art,” she said, “that was incredible.”

“Yeah,” Art agreed. He took a final glance out at the house, then stepped back to the board and turned on the work lights. He caught Marilyn’s hand, and together they looked at the damage.

The sets were shattered and scattered; bits of painted paper and wood were everywhere. Some of them were scorched and blackened.

And the stage was smashed open. There could be no doubt; it had not been an illusion.

Cautiously, the two of them advanced to the edge, not speaking, stepping carefully, testing each board before putting weight on it. When they neared the edge, Art leaned forward and peered down into the hole.

He could see the big basement room, the unused old sets, the stone walls, all lit by an eldritch red glow. The center of the wooden floor was gone, however, and he could also see down into the pit beneath, the pit that went down deep into the living stone beneath the theater.

That was where the glow seemed to be coming from.

All that should be down there, he knew, was old trash, but that was not what he saw.

Instead, he saw the Dragon, looking up at him, red eyes glowing in its shadowed face.

It was unquestionably the same dragon. There couldn’t be two like that.

“But it vanished going up,” Marilyn protested. “How could it be back down there?”

“Magic,” Art said.

“It is magic, isn’t it?” Marilyn said. “Those things in the audience — they aren’t just midgets in costume, or special effects, are they?”

“Is that what you thought?” Art asked, startled. He had become so accustomed to magic over the past three weeks that he had forgotten how this must all seem to Marilyn.

She didn’t answer. He sighed, and said, “I guess I’d better explain.”

“About time,” she told him.

By the time he finished telling her everything they were sitting on the porch steps outside the stage door and dawn was breaking in the east. Myrddin had interrupted them once to apologize. The old magician had then used his magic to repair the stage and clear away the destroyed sets and props — even he had been surprised by how easy the spell was — while Marilyn stared in wonder.

After that, any question she might have had about the reality of magic was gone, gone as completely as the hole in the floor.

When the repairs were done, Myrddin had departed.

All the Bringers of Wonder had departed. Art wasn’t sure how or where, or whether they might return, but they were definitely gone.

The magic spilling from the theater washed over Art and Marilyn like a warm summer rain as they sat and talked. When Art tried, he could see it rolling out across the parking lot, climbing the lampposts on Thoreau Street, spreading across the sky overhead.

Marilyn had not had a month of practice to become sensitized to it, but she, too, could feel it, and she had seen the play, had seen Myrddin at work afterward. When Art had finished his explanation she had no doubt of its truth.

Sunlight streaked overhead, tangling with the magic; for a moment, invisible colors spilled from the air. Marilyn and Art sat side by side on the steps, thinking, feeling the eerie new world, looking out at the transformed and familiar reality of Bampton.

Old Spanner was out in his field, but Marilyn noticed something different about him. She pointed.

“Look,” she said.

Art looked, as Spanner spread wide fine new wings. He flexed great white feathers and took to the air. As the two watched, the old horse sailed upward, sunlight gleaming from his flanks, tail flying in the breeze.

Tiny humanoid creatures, naked and shining, fluttered down from the theater eaves on dragonfly wings, to circle Art’s head and then dance away through the air.

“What are they?” Marilyn asked. “Fairies?”

“Who knows?” Art asked. “Sprites, elves, fairies — I don’t know the distinctions.” He got to his feet and helped Marilyn up.

“We’ll have to learn them,” Marilyn said.

“Or make them up,” Art replied. “These might be new, not the old things at all.” He grinned, and waved a hand, painting a polychrome glimmer in the air.

Together they walked across the parking lot, hand in hand, trailing rainbows, as gnomes peered from the mailbox on the corner, elves danced on the sidewalk, and the morning sun smiled down at them all.

Somewhere overhead, Spanner sang as his wings caught the jeweled breeze.

— End —