



Chapter Four

Tuesday morning came in a white aureole of mist. Stiff and sore, Edward found some vegetables and rice cakes for a cold breakfast and went down to the Station, where he secured a solar. He ran it to one of the tidal ponds. As the bright sun burned away the morning mist, Edward lay on the deck with his eyes closed, indifferent to his gauges and meters. Around him were the sounds of the marsh: a redwing's call, the harsh chatter of a grackle, the low, growling honk of a great blue heron. If he lay there long enough and still enough, the life of the marsh would resume around him. Curious minks, muskrats and otters would explore the solar, turtles would clamber onto the deck to take the sun, gulls would drop mollusks on the prow to break the shells, raccoons and possums would make nests, and minnows, hide in the shadow of the boat. Flies would be joined by vultures, both turkey and black, and in time, he and all his curious memories, even his love for Kara, would vanish an efflorescence of microbes. His flesh would be rendered to water and feed the marsh.

Edward opened his eyes to brush away a mosquito. He could understand the temptation to stay out here forever, away from the noise and complications of the city, away from the joys and sorrows of other people. He and the WaterPriest had certain disturbing points in common, and, floundering for a distinction, Edward wondered if that fanatical cleric had ever been on the marsh. Not lately, pale as he was; no love on the water for him, either. Never, Edward was sure of it, and in spite of miseries spiritual and physical, he smiled, remembering a marsh islet

hardly bigger than a rug, with a rock, a few scraggly bushes and a stretch of silky grasses touched with red. Late in the year, it must have been; the mosquitoes weren't bad, and Kara had agreed to paddle through the marsh with him. Early days for sure, when she was still well, when she wanted to know all about his work, about his life, about him. "My folks say I have water in my bones," he joked. "So you need to come out on the marsh with me."

She laughed, a soft, flirtatious laugh. Had there been, even then, something elusive about her? Something just beyond his ability to grasp? Edward couldn't decide. They had been cautious, the two of them, uncertain, not of their attraction, which had been almost immediate _ a kiss at a Circle arcing psychic sparks _ but of their seriousness. Curious, even then, how seriousness, permanence, had been an issue. In the relative freedom of real youth _ dancing, and sometimes more, but not too much, at the Youth Circles; parties on the river, tide runner trips to watch the SurferKlubs _ they had always been in groups, always, in one way or another, under adult or peer surveillance, whether in tiny parental apartments, on the boats, or in the streets. The chance of apartments, contingent on their employment contracts for 15 years in the CC, presented them with decisions. They were tempted both ways _ to leave for the Highlands (but could they manage to do that together?) to stay with new adult freedoms (but were they ready for all consequences?). Kara dithered, and Edward, crazy for her, suggested the afternoon on the marsh.

Where was that island? Not near the Hog, no, he thought on this side, near this pool. His heart began to hammer in his ears, setting his sore head and nose throbbing. How was it he had come here? Yesterday he had known, really known that he would find her if she was in the marsh. He had paddled himself to exhaustion in that conviction and then been sure, almost sure, she was elsewhere. But today _ he sat up, adjusted the sail, set the battery powered auxiliary and moved across the wide pool and along a passage in the marsh grass. Was that a shrub, a tree? Yes, a little bayberry, bigger than he remembered, still surviving: Get an elevation of even a foot or two above water, and you entered another ecosystem. He would have told Kara that, though what he said and what she replied were long lost to memory. Words are not, at such moments, of great importance, not when every gesture, every touch taps the springs of existence. Edward remembered that, and the sound of the reeds, and the way the wind lifted her fine, soft hair. Since her disappearance, he'd had difficulty bringing her features into clear focus, but now he saw her face with the dappling of freckles that gave her the look of some lovely wild thing and her smile under the wide straw hat set his heart to the old, dominating rhythm. This was the island. He was sure of it. He stopped the solar and heaved himself painfully over the side and onto the grass, causing the whole tiny islet to sway and dip at his step. Damper than it had been. Water was rising through the marsh, and though the gauges showed only the tiniest increases, Edward felt that more was coming, that they were due for a minor Rising. Soon. He thought soon. He struggled over the hummocks to the small bit of higher ground he'd remembered, rug-sized, the grass tinged with gold and rust, then stood, anxious, his rapid gaze searching the bushes and grasses, taking in bits of broken wood, a patch of glasswort, some sea lavender (check), a stray butterfly.

No sign of her; surely she would have been here. Surely, and in an intense spasm of Remembrance, Edward dropped to his knees. The warm breeze carried the smell of her perfume, and in some neglected corner of his mind's eye, he saw her long, straight hair spread against the grass and his hands reaching for her face, her breast. Then the darkness of passion obliterated detail; the body remembers in its own way. Edward shuddered and passed his hand over his face. They had been awkward and intense together and afterward there was blood on her thighs and on his penis. He'd held her in his arms and comforted her. Wiping away the blood, he touched the red tip of his finger to his tongue. "We've exchanged fluids," he said _ the words of Commitment.

"Yes," she said.

She should have repeated them, he thought. Then their union would have been valid even without witnesses. We have exchanged fluids; we have joined waters. The ritual of the WaterPriests, a legal form of Commitment since the earliest Risings. She had eluded him at that moment, and though they had signed to remain in the CC, though they were in and out of each other's apartments day and night, they remained UnCommitted; there were no children; they kept their lodgings. He loved his rooms on the marsh; she liked quiet, privacy, time by herself_ they each had excuses; each was content. Then she was afflicted, and amid the vastness of the marsh, Edward saw an escape, if he chose, from watching what Melankol might do to her.

"Not true, never," he cried to the marsh and pounded the spongy soil into a muddy crater that slowly filled with water. The little island was sinking. When he fell forward, Edward felt dampness under the dry fabric of the grasses and joined it with his tears.

Two days later Edward's Komunikator summoned him to the SafetyPoint on the dike, where he found Harris waiting for him.

"Have you news?" Edward was too overwrought even for a greeting. The SafetyMen had been on the marsh two days running. He'd seen them with Jonas in one of the bigger solars, searching in the familiar zigzag pattern. Even at a distance, Edward had seen the grappling hooks. "Has Kara been found?"

"Sit down," Harris said. "There is no news. That's good if you want to look at it that way."

Edward let out his breath. Kara was still missing; she was still potentially alive and well. "I'd seen you on the marsh. I thought_"

Harris reached for a slate. "You were in a Fraka the other day."

"I wasn't ticketed," Edward said quickly. "It was nothing."

"Let me decide that." Harris used his best Voice of Authority, and Edward had no choice but to recount the whole business.

"Have you evidence that Kara was influenced in any way by this WaterPriest?" he asked when Edward was finished.

“No, I’d have told you immediately. But her windows overlook the Raised Road and in her present state of mind_”

“Her state of mind would carry more weight,” said Harris, “if she had reported for treatment.”

“She was afraid. Her job_ her job was keeping her going financially and emotionally.”

“She might have moved in with you. Wouldn’t that have been possible?”

Edward slumped back in his seat. “Kata hasn’t been in my apartment for months. It overlooks the marshes. She can’t bear the open expanse, the water.”

Harris’s expression underwent a subtle modulation, reminding Edward that the SafetyMan was said to be a very clever interrogator. “So what makes you believe she would venture onto the marshes for this WaterPriest if she wouldn’t even visit your apartment?”

“Have you heard him, Harris? Have you? You should have seen the crowd. He had them here.” Edward closed his open hand. “It’s scary stuff. His voice is _ not attractive but incredibly insinuating. He promises that your troubles can be ended, that you can find peace _ he all but invites people to suicide.”

“Yet you do not think Kara is in the marsh.”

“I would have found her,” Edward said. “I have searched. I would have sensed where she was.”

Harris shrugged. It was true that Edward had a sharp eye and that he knew the marsh as well as anyone. By the same token, if he’d had anything to do with the woman’s disappearance, he would have known where to hide her body or, alternately, been wise enough to avoid the marsh altogether. Harris was unsure which was most likely and said, “There is something else. We are trying to trace all Kara’s contacts in the city.”

“I’ve given you every name I know.”

“Do you recognize this one?” Harris passed over a slip of paper.

“Alpon Wynd?” Edward shook his head, aware of the SafetyMan’s intent gaze. “Never heard of him. What does he do?”

“He is a Resurrector,” said Harris. “We hoped you could confirm our initial report. That might take the investigation in a new direction.”

“She had no contact with Resurrectors,” Edward said very positively. Here he hesitated, realizing something he had overlooked. “But she is a collector in a small way. She knows every antique dealer in the city.”

Harris nodded; he had been surprised at some of Kara’s possessions. “And where do dealers get their antiques?”

“But Resurrectors! Don’t all of them live by the river? Aren’t they working on the boats? It’s not possible. Kara walked blocks to avoid even a glimpse of the water. She was in bad shape except at work, Harris. I couldn’t risk reporting her. To lose her job would have killed her.”

“And yet she apparently knew Alpon Wynd.”

“Who says?” Edward demanded. “I want to hear this for myself.”

“You know I cannot tell you,” said Harris. “Not when you are last seen by, not anyway, but especially not you.”

Edward put his face in his hands. It took him a minute to control himself. To quarrel with Harris would be foolish, even dangerous. The Fraka was against him, and his suspicions of the WaterPriest, so logical and reasonable, had been turned inside out; he would have to think, think whom Kara might have trusted over him. No matter how painful_

He straightened up. “I will try to remember,” he said. “Perhaps she did mention this Wynd, perhaps she did.”

He was part way down the outside stair before his mind, slowed by grief and anger, brought up Baba. If anyone knew Kara’s friends, it would be Baba. He would see her tonight.

A misty rain began as Edward was finishing his paperwork at the marsh station, and the streets were dark early and slicked with water. The reflectors were almost lost in the fog, and when he set out for Baba’s apartment, even the building night lights provided only a thin, watery glow.

“Edward,” she said, surprised to see him and, he feared, maybe not pleased. He was last seen by after all and who knew what she, or indeed his other friends, might think?

“Can I come in?” It was windy and damp in the open corridor that ran along the side of Baba’s apartment. She stepped back, holding the door open for him. “Have you eaten?”

He realized he had not and hadn’t thought to buy anything, either.

“I’m just starting,” she said. “You can eat with me.”

“Baba, I’m sorry. This isn’t the right time. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Don’t be dumb. It’s only pancakes and dried fish. It was too wet to go shopping.”

Edward sat down at the small round table. Baba kept a pretty cloth on hers and bright plates. He thought of so many similar dinners with Kara, of her table in the same, soft concentrated light, of nights like this with rain outside and wind beating against the glass. For a moment, he could not speak. Then Baba brought out a pot of soup, vegetable with rice and greens, and gave him a cup. Edward drank it gratefully. “I forgot to have lunch.”

Baba raised her eyebrows.

“I had to see Harris.” Edward thought there was no point in delaying his question no matter what it did to the atmosphere. “Did you know Kara had contacts with the Resurrectors?”

Baba nodded. “Yes. That is, I guessed she did.”

“You might have told me; you might have warned me.” Edward felt his anger returning.

“I wasn’t sure. Then when I was questioned they asked about that Wynd.”

“Alpon,” Edward said.

“That’s right. And I realized that I knew the name, that she had mentioned him.”

Edward leaned forward. “When, when did she mention him?”

“It was just casually, in connection with about some little thing she’d picked up. A small metal dog, very old, very dark with traces of white paint? Did you see that?” She put down her fork and held her thumb and fore finger apart to indicate the size.

Edward tried to remember. “I’d have to look in her apartment. She had a lot of curios.”

“This one was special. Apparently Wynd has been prospecting down river. Near Higganum.” She didn’t need to add that Kara’s people had come from the town.

“Lots of deep water there. That’s no shallow water operation.”

“She mentioned, just in passing, how skillful Wynd was. He has a barge, lives on it much of the time, apparently.”

“What was she hoping for, Baba? After all this time? What was it she wanted?” He leaned across the table, searching Baba’s face.

“You and I know it wasn’t possible, but something, anything from the past, from the town.”

Edward leaned back so abruptly that his chair, which had been tipped forward in his interest and agitation, smacked down on the cement floor with a thump. He felt disgusted and frightened at the same time and surprised, too, which was foolish, because just about everyone at one time or another had felt the same craving for something from before the Risings. People bought house numbers if they matched an old address, sometimes for great sums, and there was a low end trade in architectural remnants, lengths of window trim, cornices, even door knobs.

“In long past they sold saints bones,” Edward said.

“She felt that she might still get well,” Baba said gently. “I remember her saying that it wouldn’t take much.”

Edward nodded. Kara had said the same to him. One of the most painful aspects of her illness had been her conviction that there was some token, some magic item that would lift her depression. Thinking about it now, Edward saw their many trips to the bazaar in a different light. Maybe it had never been just fun, just the pleasure of collecting, maybe she had always been searching, maybe she had feared Melankol from the start.

“She said one day she needed an anchor. An anchor in the past.”

“There is no past,” Edward cried passionately. “The past is gone beyond recovery and there is no anchor anywhere. The WaterPriests are right about that: There is only fluid and change and dissolution ahead for us all.”

Wynd’s barge was anchored on the north east side of the city, well past the cranes, jetties, and unloading ports. Overhead, a stiff wind was breaking up the cloud cover, and the rain had eased by the time Edward reached

the steps to the narrow quay. There was just enough moonlight for him to manage the steep and slippery descent. As Marsh-Keeper, he didn't work the river side, and he was surprised to see the great variety of buildings that had fastened onto the dike like swallows' nests or had taken advantage of the solid quay to balance, stork-like, on stilts. Thin plumes of smoke issued from stacks in the roofs; the Resurrectors, as collectors and scavengers, had ready access to fuel and were exempt de facto, if not de jure, from most of the pollution regulations. As Edward approached the first of the shadowy huts, a dog set up a chain reaction of barks and howls, but no one appeared except the water rat that darted across the path to rustle under a pile of debris. Even with the occasional friendly gleam of a lantern or candle, Edward did not feel quite easy. He wished he'd brought a marsh pole or a grappling hook with him.

Besides the shacks, many of which stood in their own pools of dirty water, progress was slowed by mooring posts and drying racks for fish and nets. There were tables and flat rocks used for cutting up fish, many stinking and ill-cleaned, and eroded places in the quay made the footing treacherous at night. Edward had walked far enough to wonder if he had taken the wrong stairs, before he saw a barge with a shed on its deck. A crane dominated the stern, and several sturdy row boats hung like giant mussels along the side. The barge was anchored well off shore, but it trailed an improvised pontoon jetty of boards laid over old metal drums. Edward spotted a light glimmering in the shed windows, and when he neared the side, a large and deep-voiced boat dog set up a warning.

"Hello, hello! Mr. Wynd," Edward shouted, unwilling to risk climbing up the ladder in the face of the snarling animal. "Hello. I've come to see Alpon Wynd."

A moment, then a rectangle of light opened in the shed and a man stepped out on deck. "Who's that?"

"Edward Nempf. I'm a friend of Kara Wistley."

There was no answer.

"Can I come aboard?"

"Too dark to see you," answered the figure.

"I'm a Marsh-Keeper. I have my badge."

The silence bespoke hesitation. Marsh-Keeper and Resurrectors had complex relationships, sometimes opponents, sometimes collaborators. Edward made it a practice to be on good terms with the ones he met regularly.

"I'll need to see it. And remember, the dog is fierce. Put your hand on anything that's not yours and she'll have it off."

With this kindly invitation, Edward started up the ladder, while the Resurrector, a wiry, stooped man with large, strong hands, restrained the dog. It was one of the old, special breeds, bigger than the typical water dog used in the marshes and on the river, with a large blunt head and a big, eager mouth. Edward kept well away from her, as he fished up the metal badge with his Marsh-Keeper's number on it.

“Who do you know?” asked the man in a voice made hoarse by fogs and damp. At close range, he looked not just old but ancient. This, Edward felt certain, was Wynd, himself.

He recited a list of Marsh-Keepers, Fishers, and Resurrectors, after which the man gave a grunt. He reassured the dog before releasing her to patrol the deck, then led Edward into the shed.

It was a better dwelling than he would have expected, constructed from old steel cargo crates fitted with salvaged wood and much larger than the tiny apartment and station rooms Edward frequented. The interior struts of the crates had been fitted with hooks and brackets to suspend the bags, sacks, boxes, and baskets, doubtless full of salvaged goods, that overhung the living space like a bank of storm clouds. Two men lay asleep in hammocks _ the Resurrectors kept, Edward knew, irregular hours _ and he could make out several more men and women around a table at the far end of the long shed. They seemed to be eating or playing cards, but he felt their momentary attention.

More than that, Edward could not perceive, for there was no electric, just a few lanterns that gave an orange glow to the lower part of the rooms and revealed his host’s lined and furrowed face. Wynd’s skin, naturally pale, had been burned and tanned to a dull sienna. His hair was short and white, his eyes, a pale blue. One of them had been overspread by a cloudy growth, but the other was burned bright and shrewd. He gestured to a chair and, after Edward sat down, said, “You forgot Harris on your list.”

His tone, if not actively hostile, was suspicious, and Edward thought it wisest to be candid. “I was getting to Harris,” he said. “Harris is why I’ve come. He thought Kara knew you, Kara Wistley, who has Disappeared.”

“I’ll tell you what I told him: I didn’t know her.”

“Yet, she knew you _ or knew of you,” Edward added tactfully.

Wynd raised his hands as if to say he was not responsible for his wide reputation. “I’m known as a careful man who can find goods.”

“She was looking for something, something she needed desperately.”

“You’d be surprised how many are in that position. For all the talk that all’s well and everyone’s recovered.” He coughed and spat on the floor to show what he thought of that notion.

Edward shrugged and kept silent. Besides their salvage operations, the Resurrectors were suspected of smuggling Forbiddens. He thought it unlikely that Kara would risk one of the powerful and erratic Mind Alternators, known to be full of dangerous impurities, but you never could tell what people in the grip of Melankol might try.

“You, you’re a Marksh-Keeper, an Aqua, right?”

Edward nodded.

“Odd breed, rarer than you’d think _ the genuine, I mean. Just to be born post-dike is not enough, eh? Your people Watermen?”

“No,” said Edward. “They were horrified when I applied.”

“Mine, Watermen since before the Flood. The First Flood, I mean. I’ve been on the river myself for near eighty years. Water’s been my livelihood. Higher the water gets, the more territory becomes mine. That’s the way it is; disaster is my opportunity. Makes a man sad, sometimes, and sad makes foolish. And foolish involves you with Authority.”

“She somehow made contact with you?”

“Might have. But that’s my business.” He had a way of shifting between hostility and sympathy like a deceptive current.

“Harris may make it his business.”

“The man’s entitled with his position. What’s yours that you come here in the night with questions?”

“We’d been together more than two years. She’d been unwell. I went to her apartment Sunday to find her gone.”

Wynd grunted. “Most go missing wind up in the marsh. Or the river.”

“She’s not in the marsh. I’ve searched. And Harris and the SafetyMen, too. The river _ I don’t know. She was terrified of water.”

“So you think she came here?” Wynd raised his head and his voice, too. Edward saw figures stirring in the hammocks. “Is that what you think?”

“No. No, I don’t think so. Not here, not at night, certainly. But she wanted something, didn’t she? Maybe from her old town?”

Before Wynd could answer, they were interrupted by light running feet. A girl no more than three or four appeared barelegged and shoeless in a short white gown. She was whimpering something unintelligible and rubbing her eyes, which seemed dazed by the light, the stranger.

“Just a dream,” Wynd said softly to the child. “It was just a dream.” He picked her up and set her on his knee. She put her thumb in her mouth and leaned confidently back against his shoulder.

“A fine girl,” Edward said, noticing her dark curly hair, supple feet, and sturdy legs.

“She dreams,” Wynd said a little sadly, “she dreams of water. Five generations on the river and this one dreams of water. You see time means nothing; one adapts or one does not.”

“Kara was her teacher,” Edward guessed.

“That’s right. And I never met her, no matter what your friend Harris thinks. She sent a note and some old aerial photos.”

“What did she want?”

Wynd hesitated; Resurrectors were secretive and pretended their work was confidential.

“It might be important,” Edward said. And then, when Wynd remained silent, “I need to understand. We

were so close and yet I didn't know what it was she needed so badly.”

“She wanted me to find their old house. She wanted to see it.”

It was as he and Baba had guessed, only worse: The desire to go home was a common, if a deeply irrational, reaction. Some Resurrectors traded on it and ruined customers with ever delayed hopes and ever larger bills. “How could she afford that?”

“She couldn't. That's why she sent me the aerals. She thought some weather vanes might still be available. Not likely,” Wynd said. “I told her that _ by message. Next thing I heard was Harris yelling from the pontoons, followed by yourself, disturbing the household, upsetting the child.” He stood up at this and called to one of the women.

“Might she have tried someone else? Was there anyone else working that area of the river?”

But now Edward had gone too far. “How should I know? The human mind has more mysteries than a dozen drowned towns. Now get off my barge.” Wynd gestured to one of the men lounging in the hammocks. “See Whistle doesn't have this one for a snack,” he said.

A much younger man swung his legs onto the floor. He was tall enough so that his features were shadowed; this Resurrector was big and dark, and he moved as if equipped with a great deal of muscle. Edward followed him to the door without protest. When the dog ran up, ears pricked, the man laid a hand on her massive head. “Thirty seconds,” he said.

Edward stopped with his hand on the ladder. “And Kara Wistley?”

“Would have been a good customer,” the dark man replied. The moonlight revealed a cynical, unpleasant smile. “She would have done just about anything for a glimpse of home.”

“What are you saying?” Edward demanded, fear and anxiety tipping him into anger. “What do you mean?”

The man gave him a shove, and Edward got in one wild punch before the dog lunged. He jumped backwards instinctively, grabbing for the ladder as he dropped, and wound up with a skinned palm and a handful of rust, feet dangling a few inches above the pontoon jetty. He dropped with a thump that set the contraption bouncing. The dog barked and snarled above, but though Edward shouted to the night and kicked the side of the barge, setting its metal plates ringing, there was no other response.

He controlled himself after a minute and started back along the squalid track, the gloom from the dike houses and the ramshackle dwellings and even his own leaping shadow concealing the debris and garbage and the many small depressions in the paving. He stumbled twice before he reached the stairs. Impossible to envision Kara in this place with the water rats, the stench, the cobbled together dwellings, the casual sanitation, and the river running fast and deep only feet away. And if, as Wynd's colleague had hinted, she had somehow, in the grip of her illness, come here _ Edward shuddered and ran up the steps to escape the thought, his feet slipping and sliding on the slick and slimy treads. He stopped when he regained the top of the dike and took a breath. With the rain cleared

out, he could see Wynd's barge lying far below him on the river, its dark shape a smudge on the silver water, an almost picturesque detail in the moonlight.

Up here there was no smell of fish, no wood and fat smoke on the wind, no river slime and worse underfoot, but his exit from the quay did nothing to lift his terrible recurrent anxiety. When he opened the door of Kara's empty apartment, he had crossed the threshold to foreign territory, to a land alien to the CC and the marsh and all he knew, a realm where anything might happen. That was what struck Edward most: Predictability seemed to have vanished and everywhere he looked, there was the possibility of some totally unexpected dimension to events. "She would have done just about anything," the man had said, as if he knew her price to the penny, as if the old man had deceived him, as if the old man didn't know everything that transpired on his barge.

Edward shook his head to clear his thoughts. He had to stick with what was logical and reasonable: Kara feared the river; therefore she had never walked the dark quay, never negotiated the pontoon dock, never climbed the rusting ladder to Wynd's domain. And beyond that, he had to hold to what he knew of Kara, whom he had loved for years, whom he had trusted. He understood that the poisonous doubt he'd felt at the first thought of the Resurrectors was the worst, the most dangerous aspect of the business. He had to stay with reason and experience, his experience with Kara. He repeated this to himself several times as he set out along the dark curve of the dike. This was the long way home _ and not the safest route, either _ but his mind was in such turmoil that he had reached the Quinnak crossing before he realized his route had taken him to where the Fisher lived. Lower floor; Quinnak and Dike. He was facing the house. Edward took a breath and tapped on the door.