

CHAPTER 1 DSHERESH VALE

Herra began to regain consciousness - or rather, she entered a period of pre-awakening awareness. She didn't know what had happened to her or even where she was. Panic flickered in her for only a moment then, instinctively, she sent adrenalin coursing round her body, increased the rate of her heartbeat and began to ready herself mentally and physically to face danger. But for once, even her well-trained body was sluggish in responding; for once, mists of disorientation blurred her awareness.

Only gradually did she begin to remember. She was Herra, Elder Sister of Temple Tenebrak. With a group of companions she had fled from the city of Tenebrak pursued by Those of the Serpent. But where was she now? And where were the others?

Dear Brother of the World, look down upon us! she prayed, eyes still closed, body motionless. She concentrated, straining to remember. The deleff had helped them to escape by pulling the two big trading wagons into a dark tunnel. Perhaps the deleff meant them no harm, but why had all the humans lost consciousness when they passed through the portal? And why had those strange beasts bothered to rescue them at all? They had done it several times now.

She frowned. There was something else. Ah yes, she remembered now. As they entered the tunnel a voice had told her that they were safe, a strange, alien voice that hissed its words at her.

She held her breath, listening carefully. Was anyone there? Did she dare open her eyes yet? No. Best to wait. Someone might be watching her. And she hadn't yet regained her senses fully. Her thinking was clouded and her body weak.

Through her blue Sister's robe, she could feel the roughness of rock beneath her. It was dangerous to wear the robes now in The Twelve Claims. Those of the Serpent killed Sisters

on sight. But after she and her Sisters had passed through the portal into the desert, they'd had taken their robes out of the secret compartments and started wearing them again. Perhaps they'd been wrong, but it had been so comforting to feel the familiar caress of silken material against skin. It comforted Herra now.

She was not, she decided, lying in the open air, but this didn't feel like a building, either. A cave, then? Yes, that would fit. She listened again and this time she could make out faint sounds of breathing nearby, but so slow and shallow that it took her a while to identify the sounds as belonging to several people. In the Sisterhood you learned to control your body in more ways than most people would have believed possible, but she knew of no Discipline which would enable a person to manage on only one slow shallow breath every few minutes.

Was she the first to awaken? Surely one of the younger folk should have woken first, unless - she tested the idea carefully - unless she had been woken on purpose. But if so, why was no one there to help her? Brother, how my thoughts are rambling! Forcing herself to concentrate, Herra worked on her muscles one by one. From their stiffness she judged that she must have been lying unconscious for several days. Who would have thought that creatures like the deeff, used everywhere in the world to pull traders' wagons, would possess such powers?

Should she risk opening her eyes? No, not yet. She must be patient. Her muscles were too stiff to function efficiently. Memories were still flooding back, especially of those dreadful days before they had fled from Temple Tenebrak. Those of the Serpent, always Those of the Serpent, bringing pain and evil to her world! Her loathing made her take a long shuddering breath. Brother, I have betrayed myself! She opened her eyes and quickly surveyed her surroundings, ready to roll to one side or struggle to her feet.

Yes, she was in a cave, a broad dark space with a rough-hewn ceiling. It was

inadequately lit by two flickering resin torches, placed in slanting holes gouged out of the rocky walls at about knee height. Within seconds of her moving, a high-pitched voice began chittering and hissing softly.

She tensed and raised her head to scan the cave, searching for the owner of the voice. It took her a moment to locate it - a large, spider-like creature, grey like the rocky walls. She only saw it because the thing stood up, if you could call that untangling of rope-like limbs standing up. It had a body twice the size of her head and it was staring at her out of huge multifaceted eyes positioned in the elongated upper part of its body. It was now waving two of its ten legs, but neither that movement nor the hissing, chittering noise seemed threatening.

It stayed half-way up the ramp, obviously keeping watch on them. How still it must have remained before! She'd heard no sound from it since she regained consciousness.

Noises from outside the cave made her sit up in alarm. Her head began spinning and the cave seemed to lurch around her. She could move no further, only stare around. To her relief, she could see all seven of her companions lying on the ground behind her, but she had no time to examine them because two other spider-creatures entered the cave at that moment. One was carrying a bowl, but neither seemed to be carrying weapons.

She forced herself to stand up, feeling shaky. The two newcomers scuttled part of the way down the ramp, then stopped and stared across at her. Well, she thought, narrowing her eyes in concentration, they obviously didn't mean her any immediate harm. Indeed, they were taking care to stay well out of her reach, as if they were nervous of her. She began to flex the muscles of her legs with slow and, she hoped, non-threatening movements.

One of them opened a mouth shockingly yellow against its grey-furred body and began to call, "No danger! No danger! No danger!" in a thin reedy voice.

Only when she said, "I understand. No danger," did the creature stop mouthing the words. Was it intelligent or not? Had it understood her?

When it fell silent, its companion began to chant, "Drink this! Drink this!" It set the bowl down at the foot of the ramp and retreated hastily to the top.

She took a deep breath to focus her will and managed to walk across the cave without falling. Still keeping an eye on the spider-creatures, she inspected the bowl, tasted a little and found it good. She sipped its contents slowly. Beringa sap, mainly. An excellent tonic. As a Healer, she often recommended it for those who had been ill or were run-down. The drink wasn't drugged, either. She'd have been able to tell.

When she set the empty bowl down, the second spider-creature began to chant, "Come this way! Come this way!" in a high, toneless voice, and to move away a few feet and back again in a suggestive manner. Its body hair had a more yellowish tinge than that of its companions.

"Wait! I must check that my friends are all right first." She couldn't tell whether the creatures understood, but she reasoned that even dumb animals could recognise a tone of voice and these bright-eyed creatures didn't seem stupid, although their knowledge of her language was severely limited.

She went to bend over the motionless bodies of her seven friends, and the first creature immediately recommenced its chant of "No danger! No danger!" She ignored it and continued to check their body processes, paying special attention to Davred who had come down from the satellite of the Galactic Confederation to join them on Sunrise and whose body might have reacted differently to these ordeals. She was relieved to find his condition appeared no different from that of the others. As the eighth Manifestation of the God their Brother, Davred was vital to their Quest.

When she stood up, satisfied that everyone was alive and well, even if functioning at a

much reduced rate, the chant of "No danger!" ceased and the other spider-creature started repeating, "Come this way!" in the same high, toneless voice.

With a reluctant last glance at Carryn and Katia, who were both pregnant and therefore the most at risk, Herra began to walk slowly towards the ramp. There was no benefit to be gained by staying here next to a line of unconscious bodies. She must go and find the deleff who had brought them through the portal to this place and communicate with them somehow. The drink had made her feel stronger, thank goodness, though she was still not herself. How long had they all been lying there?

I must try to understand the deleff better, she decided. Davred thought that they looked like a cross between an ox and a dragon from Old Earth; to Herra, they resembled giant sun lizards with longer legs. Why had no one realised before the powers the deleff possessed? And why had they posed as simple draught beasts for so long?

At least when she began to follow the spider up the ramp, it stopped repeating its monotonal command. The other spider pressed against the cave wall as she passed it, then pattered along behind her at a careful distance. The one which had been keeping watch settled down again half-way up the ramp in a neat coil of rope-like limbs, its bulging multifaceted eyeballs fixed unblinkingly on the line of unconscious bodies.

Near the top of the ramp was a square alcove, whose rear wall was uncomfortable to look at. That must be the portal we came through to get here, Herra reasoned, but she made no attempt to enter or examine the alcove. She didn't want to be separated from her friends.

The leading spider recommenced its chant of "Come this way!"

"Can you not be quiet?" she asked, weakness making her give way to her irritation. Her request had no effect. The spider continued its chant until she started moving again.

The passage led up into a larger cavern, which was both lit and ventilated by shafts in

the roof. Its walls were honeycombed with circular holes, which looked like the entrances to burrows. Although Herra moved quietly in her soft sandals, the minute she set foot in the cavern, spider-creatures appeared in at least half the holes. She could feel the rows of gleaming eyes following her progress. Had creatures such as these carried them all down to the lower cavern? They didn't appear strong enough. And where were the deleff?

At the other side of the cavern another well-worn ramp led upwards. Fresher air seemed to be blowing down it and Herra quickened her steps, eager to get outside again. But there was a third cavern to be gone through first, a kind of entrance chamber to the underground areas. This one was lined with rows of stalls, each separated from its neighbour by low walls and pillars of solid rock. In these stalls several types of four- and six-legged animals were being tended by yet more spiders.

She'd never seen their like, nor did she remember creatures like these being listed in the Sisterhood's extensive Archives back in Temple Tenebrak. Where could they have come from? Had they always been there on Sunrise, in these hidden lands far to the west of the wildwoods which surrounded the Twelve Claims? Traders said the deleff lived in the Lands of Nowhere.

The cave floor was crisscrossed by channels whose purpose she didn't immediately grasp until she heard the sound of water trickling along one wall. It required intelligence and considerable skill to design a set of stables such as these, and to bring water to them.? The deleff hadn't the dexterity for that, surely, and the spider-creatures looked too weak.

All the spiders stopped work to watch her pass, but the other animals ignored her and continued to chew their way through miniature mountains of hay-like material, which ranged in colour from pale beige to a very dark yellow ochre. Apart from its colour, the fodder all seemed to be from the same type of plant, a long, coarse grass, with occasional bulges on its stems, like bladders. The whole area was clean and sweet-smelling, the only

dung being that newly dropped by one huge beast.

Herra shook her head, worry fretting at the edges of her mind. There was still no sign of any deleft. Where were they?

At the far side of the stables lay the entrance to the caverns, a long low opening, whose roof was supported at intervals by stone pillars, each decorated with lines of geometrical carvings. Herra decided to stop when she reached the pillars and take stock of what lay ahead. She'd just escaped from one danger and didn't want to rush headlong into another. She slowed down as they approached the opening and although her guide instantly resumed its chanting, she ignored it.

A gentle wind moulded the long blue robe to her body and tugged at her hair. She would grow her hair longer again, she thought, running her fingers through it, once she no longer needed to disguise herself as a man. She sighed and shook her head angrily at this frivolous thought. Somehow she couldn't concentrate properly. Whatever had rendered her unconscious was still affecting both her body and her mind, and though the drink had helped, she would really have liked to lie down and sleep for a while.

She gazed down into a great semicircular valley, which had been terraced into several broad steps, each two or three hundred paces wide, rising up in tiers from an oval lake. So large was the valley and so regular in shape were the different levels that the landscaping must be artificial. How long had it taken to carve out terraces like those? At least as long, she thought wryly, as it had taken the Sisterhood to build their great temples in each claim. And it must have taken just as much dedication.

To her right a stream splashed down to the lake, not big enough to be called a river, but deep and swift-flowing. At the edge of each level it dropped over a weir in a froth of white and some of the water was siphoned off into large pools in a variety of shapes, whose purpose she couldn't even begin to guess. Some levels were planted with crops - here

grains, there vegetables, and directly below her, surely that was a whole expanse of glowberries? The coarse bladder grass that the animals had been eating flourished everywhere, even in nooks and crannies on the sides of the mountains that ringed the massive amphitheatre.

The various levels had only one thing in common: on each, there was a path of a glistening creamy colour. These paths met at the weirs where steps of the same creamy material led down to the next level. The bottom path circled the whole lake.

Here and there on the various levels Herra could make out groups of deleff, but nowhere did she see a deleff on its own. There were also a great many deleff around the lake, sunning themselves on the sandy shore or splashing in the water. It must be very shallow, for deleff were walking around over most of its great expanse as if it were a meadow.

Near one edge of the lake was what looked at first like a patch of mist, though how that could be on such a sunny day she did not know. As Herra studied it carefully, it seemed to her that the mist was concealing something more substantial - an island perhaps, or a peninsula.

One group of deleff was splashing through the water towards the misty area, beating the water behind them with their tails so that a line of white foam followed them like a ragged transverse wake. Herra blinked her eyes hard as the deleff seemed for a moment to disappear, then she realised that the water must have become deeper at that point, for the creatures resurfaced again after a moment or two and resumed their slow progress. Then the whole group of deleff vanished into the strange mist and, although Herra continued to stand there watching, she didn't see them reappear.

Her guide's chant had become hoarse and desperate-sounding, though the other spider-creature had remained silent, so she took pity on the poor thing and began to move

forward again. Immediately the noise ceased.

"Well, that's a relief, anyway," she said aloud. "Your conversation is somewhat lacking in variety, my friend."

The bulging eyeballs rolled around as she spoke, but the creature made no attempt to respond.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

More rolling of the eyeballs, then the yellow mouth opened and closed a few times. It was obviously trying to say something, but was finding it difficult. She waited patiently and was rewarded by "No ssspeak musssh."

"I see." So it was intelligent, even if it didn't speak her language! She gestured to it to lead the way again and strolled along behind, observing and recording in her memory everything she saw. She refused to hurry and the spiders had to keep stopping to wait for her.

On the next level down, near the spot where the river rolled over the edge, a small delegation was waiting for them in the shade of some low trees. So, Herra thought, as she moved carefully down a grey rocky stairway, now surely they will have to explain what has happened to us.

The delegation consisted of three more of the spiders, but these were much bigger than her guides, and the surface of their bodies was mottled with a yellowish pattern. One of them, the largest and the most yellow, stepped forward and Herra tensed. It was moving slowly and seemed to mean no harm, but who could tell with a strange species?

She noticed that her escorts had moved back and left her alone to face the new group, so she took a deep breath and held her head up. Brother, look down upon me! she murmured.

The large spider came to a halt an arm's length from Herra and very slowly extended

one of its thin fur-covered legs. "Welcome to Dsheresh Vale, Elder Ssisster."

Its voice was deeper than those of the other spiders, though still light-toned by human terms. She recognised it at once. It was the voice she'd heard while passing through the portal to escape from their pursuers, the voice she'd heard as she was losing consciousness.

CHAPTER 2 GIVER OF WORDS

The large spider-creature made no further move. It seemed to be waiting for some response from Herra.

She touched the limb it had extended and bowed her head in greeting. 'I thank you for your welcome.'

The creature flicked another leg towards the guides and sent them scuttling back up towards the cave, then it returned its full attention to Herra. 'Name iss SS'Habi,' it said in a sibilant voice, prefacing and ending its words with a hiss.

'SS'Habi?' she repeated. 'Is that a personal name, group name, or the name of your species?'

'SS'Habi.' The mouth writhed for a moment, as if it were selecting the words with great care. 'All are SS'Habi,' it hissed at last. 'Thiss one,' a leg indicated itself, 'iss Elder SS'Habi - like Elder Ssisster.' The word sounded more like Ssssissster, but was recognisable.

Herra nodded. 'Yes. I see.' She looked at the two others, who were standing motionless, watching her.

The leg pointed towards them. 'These are Senior SS'Habi. These,' the leg indicated the

fast-disappearing figures of the guides, 'are Habi. Not grown sspeech - not old enough - except to learn short messages.'

Herra nodded again. 'A very clear explanation, Elder SS'Habi. I thank you for it. But one of those two did manage a few words.'

The Elder SS'Habi was instantly alert. 'What say?'

'No ssspeak musssh.' She tried to capture the sound as accurately as possible.

'Iss good. That one iss nearly ready.'

'Ready?'

'To meet Giver of Words. Some Habi learn to sspeak, become SS'Habi; some not learn to sspeak much, become Sem-Habi. Iss difficult for us to cross barrier of sspeech.'

Herra tried to show a proper interest but couldn't help looking back towards the cave. 'What about my friends, Elder SS'Habi? Will they wake up soon?'

'When Giver of Words decides. Also, friends are younger than Elder Sister. Not as strong. Not as - ssss - not as much developed. Need to ssleep longer. Using this portal makes your people ssleep. Iss very big transition.'

A soft rush of sound, more like the swishing of tall grass in a breeze than speech, came from one of the Senior SS'Habi. It seemed to be reminding the Elder SS'Habi of something.

It turned back to Herra. 'Not sspeak more now,' it said abruptly. 'Not time. Go wash now.'

'Wash?'

'Must wash. Long journey.' A leg brushed for a moment against her crumpled robe.

'Wash clothes. Wash body. Wash strain of portal away.'

'I assure you that I feel little strain now . . . ' began Herra, but was not allowed to finish.

'All must wash. Wash very clean. Honour Giver of Words.'

It must be a ritual. Well, it could do no harm to humour them, and she did feel a little grubby, not to mention hungry. 'Very well.'

The Elder SS'Habi led her towards that level's chain of pools, whose contents were being constantly renewed by the river. She stared around. Everything was just too neat and well-ordered to be natural. The water entered the series of basins through shallow channels lined with black rocks. She dipped a finger in and found the water to be slightly warm to the touch. Unable to see enough from where she stood, she climbed on to a large rock from which she could look over the whole area. The SS'Habi made no protest, but waited patiently, chittering quietly to each other.

They were surrounded by about a dozen shallow pools filled with river water. At the far side the water passed out of the pools through a twisting series of channels, which were this time filled with vivid greenery. They looked like - could they possibly be filters? She remembered reading in the Archives that the Sisterhood had used such techniques at times.

A couple of the pools were already occupied by wallowing deleff, who were being scrubbed most assiduously by SS'Habi attendants - no, she corrected herself, Habi. They were smaller and completely grey in colour. Neither bathers nor attendants paid the slightest attention to Herra, but concentrated on the ablutions as if their very lives depended upon them achieving perfect cleanliness. She looked down at the SS'Habi, who were waiting patiently at the foot of the rock, and decided she'd better climb down again.

'I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I wished to see what this area was like.' She must be very careful not to offend local customs, but at the same time, she mustn't walk into a trap.

'Iss no problem. Iss natural to insspect new place.'

She was led along next to the creamy path, which, on closer inspection, turned out to be a mosaic of tiny cream and gold stones, arranged in swirling patterns that made her blink.

Somehow, she couldn't quite keep the patterns in clear focus. The Elder SS'Habi stopped and indicated a pool secluded from the others and fringed by bushes. 'Elder Ssisster wash now. This one take clothes. Bring clean clothes back.' It stood there, one leg extended, waiting for her to disrobe.

Herra hesitated, then began to remove her robe, telling herself firmly that this was no time for false modesty. The sight of her underclothing set the three SS'Habi twittering to each other, then their leader turned to face her. Two of its legs were twitching as if it were upset.

'Two clothes,' it said at last. 'Two clothes. Not got clean two clothes for you. Why two clothes? Body cold?'

How did one explain the concept of underclothing to a creature which wore no clothing at all? 'Er - we all wear two clothes. It's - well, it's our custom. We call these things underclothing.'

'This body not need great warmth,' persisted the Elder SS'Habi. 'Why two clothes?' The tip of one furry leg gently circled her wrist and Herra stiffened, but made no move to pull away.

'It's just our custom to cover some parts of our bodies twice.'

The leg holding her twitched again and there was an audible hiss before the Elder let go. 'Give two clothes to this one. Musst make more.'

A leg was extended for the underclothes.

'There's no need. I can wash these and put them on again damp. It's not cold.'

'No! Please give! Musst make more. These are wrong colour, wrong material. Wrong! Musst be clean, very clean.' The hissing was more pronounced than usual and the Elder SS'Habi was clearly upset.

Feeling slightly ridiculous, Herra removed the rest of her clothing and handed it over,

keeping only the tracer which Davred had asked her to carry. The SS'Habi had showed no interest in that whatsoever, which puzzled her - but then, a lot of things puzzled her here and she couldn't demand explanations for them all.

One of the Senior SS'Habi ran off with her underclothes at a faster rate than she would have believed possible for ten legs. As Herra turned back, the Elder SS'Habi touched her body gently with the tip of one leg. 'No hair here.' The leg that touched her was thickly covered in fine hair, which looked grey in some lights, yellow in others. The SS'Habi bent its head closer and Herra held her breath. What now?

'Little hair on legs,' it said, almost to itself. 'Very little hair. Not of use.' It seemed slightly disapproving, but not threatening. It touched her breasts. 'Female,' it said. 'Have young ones?'

'Yes. But a long time ago. They're grown up now. I'm - er - quite old, for one of my people.' Though her body had settled naturally to an appearance of forty or fifty years old, thanks to the renewal procedures.

'How old?'

'Well, two hundred and forty-three, actually.'

'Ssss. Iss very old. Learn much wisdom.'

Herra smiled. 'I've tried.'

It indicated itself. 'This one iss female also. And old. Seventy of your years. Not live much longer. Have many young ones. All have sspeech.' This was clearly a point for great pride.

Before Herra could speak again, the remaining Senior SS'Habi twittered. The Elder one stepped back. 'Wash in water now. Make clean. Very, very clean.' A leg reached out at the back of the SS'Habi's body, tore a few leaves from a bush and passed them round to a leg nearer to Herra. 'Use these. Rub on body. Make very clean.' She placed them in Herra's

hand, then pushed her gently towards the pool.

As the question of washing seemed of central importance to the SS'Habi, Herra walked into the water. It was pleasantly lukewarm, and she quickly abandoned her attempts to understand the puzzles around her and gave herself up to the luxury of a long soak in running water. The leaves gave off an astringent froth, rather like soap, and slightly perfumed. She rubbed herself, as instructed, until her body was tingling, then she rinsed off the froth. The pool was large enough to swim a few strokes and deep enough in parts to dive under the water. It had been years since Herra had enjoyed the sheer pleasure of such a frolic.

Eventually, however, she became aware that the Elder SS'Habi and her two companions were standing by the water's edge, holding some clothing. They were obviously waiting for her to finish, so she waded out of the water.

'Dry soon,' said the Elder, settling down in a tangle of legs and making no attempt to pass her the clothing. 'Sun make dry.'

Herra laughed and began to do a few breathing and limbering up exercises, not enough to raise a sweat, but enough to tone up her muscles as her body dried. Then she ran her fingers through her hair, wishing she had a comb. When she felt dry, she turned to the SS'Habi. 'I'm ready to dress now.'

One of them held out some pieces of soft cream-coloured material. 'Two clothes,' it said apologetically. 'Not same, but cover same parts of body.'

The material was, Herra found, slightly elastic, and each garment had holes in the correct places. There was no sign of seams. When she pulled them on, the garments moulded themselves to the contours of her body. She walked a few steps and found that they stayed put. They were, in fact, more comfortable than her own underclothing, if somewhat scantier, and she said so to her hosts.

'Iss better?' The Senior SS'Habi sounded surprised. 'Iss truly better?'

'Yes. I like them very much.'

The area around its mouth glowed more yellow for a moment. Was that a sign of pleasure?

One of the Senior SS'Habi stepped forward and held out a robe. It was as soft and silky as the underclothing, but finer, of a creamy-golden colour which glistened slightly in the sun. It took Herra a moment to realise the robe was exactly the same colour as the mosaics in the path. That must have some significance.

When she was dressed, she reached for the tracer and clipped it to her waist. 'I must carry this,' she explained.

'Yess. Iss known and iss acceptable to High Council.'

Now what did they mean by that?

'This material is very beautiful.' Herra stroked the robe. It was made in a style similar to a Sister's robe, though the skirt was fuller and the material finer. Like the underclothing, it had no visible seams. The sleeves just capped her arms and the neckline was high. It clung to her body from the neck to the waist, then it flowed to the ground in shimmering, almost liquid folds. 'It's much prettier than my other robe. Did your people make this?'

'Sem-Habi make,' the Elder said. 'Iss - special material. Wear now for speaking to Giver of Words.'

'I don't quite understand,' Herra said carefully. 'Who exactly is the Giver of Words?'

'Giver of Words iss . . . iss . . . ' The Elder consulted her companions, then launched into a maddeningly truncated explanation. 'High Deleffal iss Giver of Words to SS'Habi. Long time ago - had no words. All were Habi - no words. Like animals. Without words, not think clearly. Then Giver of Words honoured Habi. Gave us gift of sspeech. With words can think clearly. Iss - iss greatest gift possible. So now SS'Habi serve High Council,

honour Giver of Words. Learn more words all time - learn more ways of thinking. Live in peace together. Much peace.'

A burst of sound from the others stopped the conversation. 'Elder Ssister come now. Sspeak with Giver of Words. Great honour.'

Had she understood that correctly? Had the deleff really taken an animal, increased its mental capacity and taught it to speak and to think?