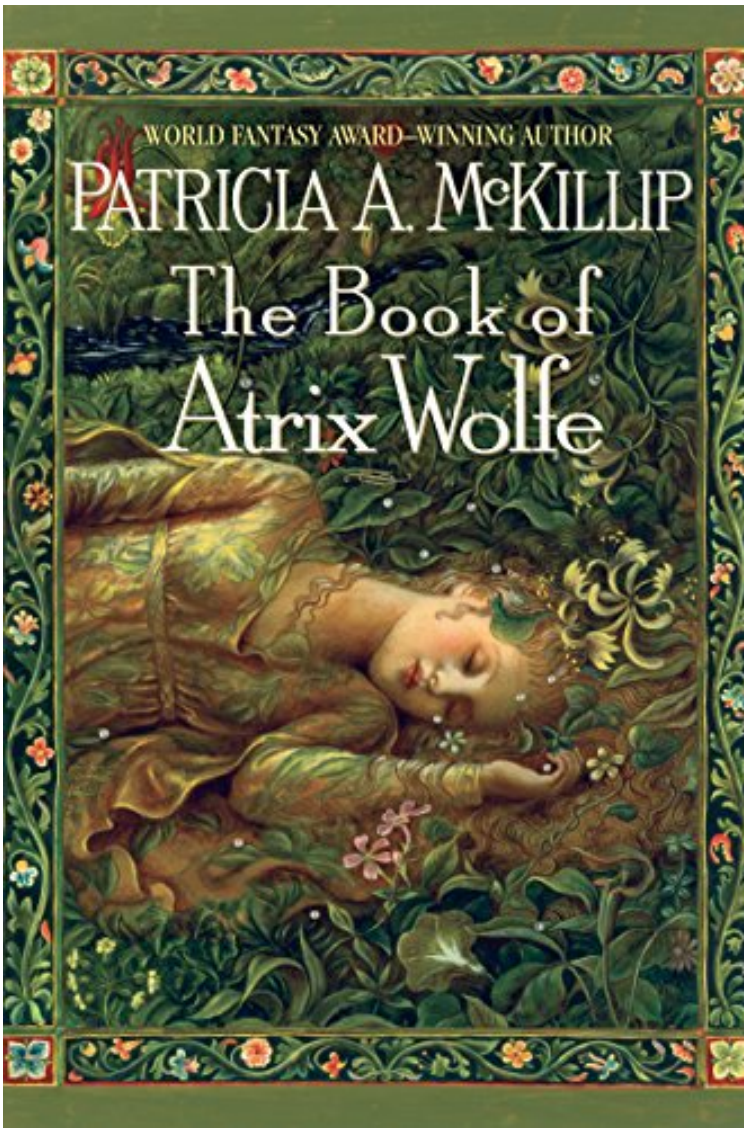


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# The Book of Atrix Wolfe



*Par Patricia A. McKillip*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTwenty years ago, the powerful mage Atrix Wolfe unleashed an uncontrollable force that killed his beloved king. Now, the Queen of the Wood has offered him one last chance for redemption. She asks him to find her daughter, who vanished into the human world during the massacre he caused. No one has seen the princess-but deep in the kitchens of the Castle of Pelucir, there is a scullery maid who appeared out of nowhere one night long ago. She cannot speak and her eyes are full of sadness. But there are those who call her beautiful.ExtraitNo writer has better captured the elusive power of language than Patricia A. McKillip. The Book of Atrix Wolfe is a shimmering tale of language, power, magic, and soul.Rambles.netOnce, Atrix Wolfe was a great and powerful mage. Then the invaders descended upon his kingdom. Defending his people through magic, Atrix Wolfe brought to life a legendary Huntera savage,

uncontrollable force that destroyed both armies and killed his beloved king. Now, after twenty haunted years among the wolves, Atrix Wolfe has been summoned to the timeless realm of the Queen of the Wood. She asks him to find her daughter, who vanished into the human world during the massacre he caused. No one has seen the princess but deep in the kitchens of the Castle of Pelucir, there is a scullery maid who appeared out of nowhere one night. She cannot speak and her eyes are full of sadness. But there are those who call her beautiful... Her words and images remain masterfully evocative as she manages to invoke great beauty using the simplest language. Connoisseurs of fine fantasy will delight in this expertly wrought tale. Publishers Weekly Steeped in medieval legends of the wild huntsman, living trees, and shape changers, McKillip's tale is decidedly atmospheric, complex, compelling, and filled with rich imagery. Booklist Praise for the novels of Patricia A. McKillip Solstice Wood McKillip conjures a world of secrets and ambiguities where the magical and the mundane constantly intersect... With a light touch, McKillip makes a plea for keeping an open mind and heart toward mystery, toward all that goes on in the shadows, the corners, behind and beneath what we expect to see. The Boston Globe With the same gentle elegance that she uses to craft her fairytale fantasies, McKillip infuses the present-day world with the elements of myths and the elusiveness of the supernatural. A superb addition to most collections. Library Journal Compelling contemporary fantasy... [a] multilayered tale. Publishers Weekly Od Magic McKillip demonstrates once again her exquisite grasp of the fantasists' craft... an otherworldly delight. Publishers Weekly Lyrical prose, well-limned characterizations, vibrant action, a sense of the wonder of magic, and a generous dollop of romance... a story that will bind readers in its spell. Booklist More enchantments and wonders from McKillip. Kirkus sA terrific fantasy tale starring a delightful protagonist, a vile villain, and an assortment of eccentric supporting characters, including the mysterious, wonderful Wizard of Od. The story line grips... mesmerizes readers until the final spell is spun. Midwest Book Alphabet of Thorn Patricia A. McKillip has given readers an imaginative world to escape to in Alphabet of Thorn. If you're a bibliophile who loves books about books, get entwined in this one. The Kansas City Star It was a pleasure to spend a few evenings with Patricia A. McKillip's Alphabet of Thorn... Her tales are invariably charming. This one is no exception... I was pleased with the ending. Analog Those who have bemoaned the death of the true fairy tale will be delighted by this charming foray from World Fantasy Award winner McKillip. She skillfully weaves together two eras and two sets of believable characters to create a single spellbinding story that brilliantly modernizes a beautiful old formula. Publishers Weekly (starred review) McKillip creates the atmosphere of a fairy tale with her elegantly lyrical prose and attention to nuance. Her characters are at once intimately personal and larger than life. Library Journal What a treat it is: Alphabet of Thorn is a masterpiece of complex plotting, deft characterization, and spare, lucid prose that sings like poetry... McKillip has struck a perfect balance between scene setting and action. This is character-driven plotting polished to perfection... In an era of sprawling megavolume epics, McKillip's ability to deliver a satisfying tale of wonder and enchantment in a single volume is truly remarkable. From beginning to end, Alphabet of Thorn is a Godiva truffle of a book. SFRevu In the Forests of Serre A hauntingly beautiful tale... The ever-masterful McKillip weaves yet another powerful spell. Booklist McKillip's luminous retelling of the Russian legend of The Firebird retains its fairy-tale feel while exploring the depths of the human heart. Elegant. Library Journal Ombria in Shadow Like the royal tutor (a key figure), the novel wavers between history and magic, and the ornate, occasionally mannered prose conceals both wit and intelligence. The Washington Post Book World The authors' graceful prose and remarkable depth of characterization bring to life a tale of love and loyalty that transcends time and space. Library Journal (starred review) Ace Books by Patricia A. McKillip THE FORGOTTEN BEASTS OF ELD THE SORCESS AND THE CYGNET THE CYGNET AND THE FIREBIRD THE BOOK OF ATRIX WOLFE WINTER ROSES SONG FOR THE BASILISK RIDDLER: THE COMPLETE TRILOGY THE TOWER AT STONY WOOD OMBRIA IN SHADOW IN THE FORESTS OF SERRE ALPHABET OF THORN OD MAGIC HARROWING THE DRAGON SOLSTICE WOOD Collected Works CYGNET The Book of Atrix Wolfe PATRICIA A. MCKILLIP Table of Contents Prologue The White Wolf followed the ravens down the crags of Chaumenard to the wintry fields of Pelucir. In wolf shape, among the wolves, he had scented danger sweeping toward the mountains he loved. His dreams turned dark with the coming of winter, chaotic, disturbed by fire, blood, the sharp, hoarse cries of ravens calling to one another, the cries of humans. Darkness rode a dark horse into the heart of Pelucir, wielding a sword of fire and bone that pierced the Wolf's dreams. He would wake suddenly in human shape, in a close tangle of fur and smells, trying to see beyond stone, beyond night, into the fire that burned toward Chaumenard. Finally, harrowed by dreams and unable to rest content in wolf shape, he ran to meet the dark rider in Pelucir. He

would stop it there, somehow, in the broad fields and gentle hills of the kingdom bordering Chaumenard, before the rider cast its blank, hungry eye into the land of mages and scholars and farmers who raised goats in the high peaks, and plowed a furrow from light into shadow down their sharply sloping sides. The mage was old, and lingered, every year, longer and longer in the mountains among the wolves. That year, he had forgotten it was winter and that he was human. Pulled so abruptly back into the world, he had not stopped to tell anyone where he was going. Nor did he know who fought in Pelucir. He ran, in wolf shape, faster than any wolf; he was a shimmer of icy wind blowing down the mountains flank, the white shadow of his own legend, barely perceptible, moving swiftly, silently, under the staring winter moon, toward the eye of the terrible storm: the castle of the Kings of Pelucir. He had seen Pelucir in fairer days, when the massive, bulky castle stood surrounded by flowering fields, the slow river running under its bridge reflecting such green that drinking it would be drinking summer itself. The ancient keep, a dark, square tower beginning to drop a stone here and there, like old teeth, faced lush fields and meadows that rolled to a rounded hill where an endless wood of oak and birch began. Now the trees stood stark and silvery with moonlight, and on the fields a hundred fires burned in the burning cold, ringed around the castle. The mage, still little more than a glitter of windblown snow, paused under the moon shadow of a parapet wall. Tents billowed and sagged in the wind; sentries shivered at the fires, watching the castle, listening. Wings rustled in deep shadow; a sentry threw a stone suddenly, breathing a curse, and a ragged tumble of black leaves swirled up in the wind, then dropped again. Another sentry spoke sharply to him; they were both silent, watching, listening. The mage drifted past them, searching; dreams and random nightmares blew against him and clung. Within the castle, children wrapped in ancient tapestries wept in their sleep; someone screamed incessantly and would not be comforted; young sentries whispered of fowl browning on a spit, of hot game pie; old men trembling in the ramparts longed for the fires below, the sturdy oak on the hill. On the field, men feverish with wounds dreamed of feet made of ice instead of flesh and bone, of the sharp end of bone where a hand should be, of a mass of black feathers shifting, softly rustling in the shadows, waiting. The mage saw finally what he searched for: a flame held in a mailed fist on a purple field, the banner of the ruling house of Kardeth. He had known rulers of Kardeth in his long life: fierce and brilliant warrior-princes who grew restless easily and found the choice between acquiring knowledge and acquiring someone else's land an arbitrary one. Scholars, they spoke with equal passion of the ancient books and arts of Chaumenard, and of its rich valleys and wild, harsh peaks. This ruler, whose name escaped the mage, must have regarded Pelucir as a minor obstruction between Kardeth and Chaumenard. But while his army ringed the castle, laying a bitter winter siege, winter had laid siege to him. He had the wood on the hill for game and firewood; he had only to sit and wait, starving the castle into surrender. But there was nothing yielding about the massive gates, the great keep with its single upper window red with fire, the torchlit battlements spilling light and the shadows of armed warriors onto the snow. In the wood, the game would be growing scarce, and what remained of it, thin and desperate in the harsh season. So the chilled, hungry, exhausted dreamers around the mage told him in their dreams. He took his own shape slowly in front of the prince's tent: a tall man with hair as white as fish bone and a face weathered and hard as the crags he loved. He wore next to nothing and carried nothing. Still the guards clamored around him awhile, shouting of sorcery and warding invisible things away with their arrows. The prince pushed apart the hangings and walked barefoot into the snow, a sword in one hand. The mage, noting how the prince resembled his red-haired grandfather, finally remembered his name. The prince blinked, his grim, weary face loosening slightly in wonder. Around him the guard quieted. Let him go, Riven of Kardeth said. He is a mage of Chaumenard. He opened the tent hangings. Come in. He nodded at a pallet where a man, white and dizzy with fever, struggled with his boots. My uncle Marnye. He was wounded last night. He took the boots out of his uncle's hands and pushed him gently down. His mouth tightened again. They come out at night the warriors of Pelucir. I don't know how. They have a secret passageway. Gates open noiselessly for them. Or they slip under walls, through stone. At dawn I find sentries frozen in the snow, dark birds picking at them. My uncle heard something and was struck down as he raised an alarm. We could find no one. That's why my sentries are so wary of sorcery. There is no magic in that house, the mage said. Only hunger. And rage. He knelt by the pallet, slid his hand beneath Marnye's head and looked into his blurred, glittering eyes. For an instant, his own head throbbed, his lips dried, his body ached with fever. Sleep, he breathed, and drew the word into a gentle, formless darkness easing through the restless, shivering body. Marnye's eyes closed. Sleep, he murmured, and the mage's eyes grew heavy, closed. Sleep bound them like a spell. Then the mage opened his eyes and rose, stepping away from the pallet. He said, his voice changing, no louder, but taut and intense with passion, This must stop. The prince, feeling the whip of power

behind the words, watched the mage silently a moment. He said finally, carefully, Thank you for helping my uncle. The ancient mages of Chaumenard do not involve themselves with war. You are threatening Chaumenard itself. I know Kardeth. You will crack Pelucir like a nut, take what you want. But you will not stop here. You will not stop until you have laid claim to every mountain pass and goatherders hut in Chaumenard. And every rich valley and every ancient book. Still Riven watched the mage; he spoke courteously, but inflexibly. Chaumenard is ungoverned. It is full of isolated farmers and wealthy schools where rulers send their children, and villagers who carry their villages around on their backs in the high plateaus. They will fight you. That will be as they choose. If you survive this place. The prince's eyes flickered. He drew breath noiselessly and moved, letting the weariness show in his face, in his sagging shoulders. He unfolded a leather stool for the mage, and sat down himself. He said, surprising the mage, Atrix Wolfe. Yes. How I saw you, when my grandfather ruled Kardeth. I was very young. But I never forgot you. The White Wolf of Chaumenard, my grandfather called you, and told us tales of your power when you had gone. He said you were the greatest living mage. I am nearly the oldest, Atrix murmured, feeling it as he sat. I questioned him, for such power seemed invaluable to Kardeth. As a weapon. The prince shrugged slightly. I am what I am. He said that such power among the greatest mages has its clearly formulated restrictions. Experience teaches us restrictions, the mage reminded him. They are not dreamed up in some peaceful tower on a mountaintop. If we involved ourselves with war, we would end up fighting each other, and create far more disaster than even you could imagine. Power is not peaceful. But we try to be. The rulers of Pelucir are not peaceful, either, he added, sliding away from the dream he saw glittering in the prince's eyes. This one will turn himself and his household into ghosts before he will surrender to you. I know the Kings of Pelucir. Go home. And you know the warriors of Kardeth. There was an edge to the prince's voice. We do not retreat. Your warriors are battling inhuman things. Pain. Hunger. Madness. Winter itself. Things without faces and without mercy. So is Pelucir. I know. They loosed their hunting hounds two days ago. The hounds howled with hunger all night long within the walls. So. His hands closed, tightened. Now they roam at night in my camp; they scavenge with the carrion crows. Among my dead. I will outwait winter itself to outwait the King of Pelucir. And then, in spring, I will march through the greening mountains of Chaumenard. Spring, Atrix warned, is another time, another world. In this world, you are trapped in the iron heart of winter, as surely as you have trapped the King of Pelucir, and unless you want to turn into an army of wraiths haunting this field, you must go back to Kardeth. There is no honor for you here. And therefore no dishonor in retreat. I will see spring in Chaumenard. The prince seemed to see it then: the green world lying in memory, in wait, just beyond eyesight. His eyes focused again on Atrix Wolfe, the fierce and desperate dream still in them. And the King of Pelucir will live to see it here. And so will his wife, and his heir and his unborn child. If. If. If you help me. \*\*\* In the green wood on the hill, within the endless dream of spring, the Queen of the Woods daughter paused to look across worlds, hearing the thin, wolf-whine of bitter winds, scraps of human words in a darkness she found both perplexing and tantalizing. There was a drop of human blood in her, and in her father, the Queen's consort; it brought both of them visions at times, living dreams of the world beyond the wood. Her father had learned to ignore them, for they meant nothing to him. She, still learning words for her own world, did not make such distinctions: Everything was new, everything spoke to her and had a name; she had not yet learned that something could mean nothing. Her mother, disconcerted by their visions, reined beside her. They sat, three riders on three white horses, two watching a distant world, the third watching their faces. What is it? her child heard her murmur. What do you see, Saro? Ilyos, what does she see? They did not answer immediately, lost in the peculiar vision of a white-streaked dark, trees as barren as bone under moonlight, fires blossoming everywhere on the white field. They were alike, the Queen's consort and her daughter: both with pale, gleaming, pearly hair and eyes as dusty gold as acorns. The child spoke first. Ravens. Her small body, supple and restless, tautened like a scenting animal. She shook her head a little, bewildered, and produced a human word. Sorrow. The Queen looked at her consort. Her long hair held all the reds and bright golds and yellows of autumn leaves; her eyes were dark and gold, owl eyes. Even in her wood, they could be troubled. You taught her that word, she said. I didn't. Ilyos. I am teaching her the language of power, he said absently. Her voice, sharpened, drew him back into the wood. Sorrow is a word that means nothing until it means everything. That, he said softly, is what makes it powerful. He looked at her then, and touched her slender, jewelled hand. Don't be afraid. Humans learn many words they never learn to use. But what is it? Saro asked, hearing voices now, more clearly, glimpsing dreams and nightmares, images that appeared and drifted apart like windblown clouds. She turned her head and saw the word in her father's eyes. So did the Queen; she turned her mount abruptly. You explain it, she said, and rode away from

them to a silver stream into which Oak, during one of the woods arbitrary seasons, had dropped gold leaves to lie like coins at the bottom of the clear water. Downstream, a white deer lifted its head, jewels of water falling from its muzzle, and looked at her fearlessly. Saros eyes followed her mother, watched her thoughtlessly a moment: how her long hair flowed like a fiery mantle down the deep green silk she wore; how the white deer and the white horse mirrored one another, their heads dropped to the silvery water to drink; how the oak beside her mother lowered a leafy hand to touch her hair. Death, said her father, and she turned her head, looked at him out of his own eyes. What is death? He could not seem to say; he tried, and then smiled a little, brushing her cheek gently with his fingers. Come, he said. We are troubling your mother. But the dark dream caught at her again, mysterious and urgent as it was. Her father did not move, either. She felt his mind, which flowed between them more easily than language, absorb itself in her curiosity, sensing what compelled her attention in the grim and dangerous human chaos. The Queen rode back to them, a disturbance of fretful thought. Why must she watch? she asked. Why do you let her? What fascinates you so? It is my heritage, Ilyos said apologetically. There is a force at work here; terrible as it is, it will do her no harm to recognize it now, so that she will not be troubled by it later. I hear hounds, Saro said suddenly. Hounds, she knew: her mothers were gold as sun, red as fire, white as bone. And I hear someone crying. Or dreaming about crying. She listened, picked out the snows voice, rustling dryly across the field, a ravens voice, a muttering that turned into a sudden shout, then subsided into muttering again, whispers, more weeping, some talking. She picked out a word. A wolf. A wolf is talking. Wolves dont talk, her father said. Yes. Not in that world. Listen. He listened. Saro, come, the Queen said, putting a hand on her daughters reins; the tiny silver bells sang. But Saro, immersed in the strange, unpredictable place, tried to see more clearly, pouncing, like a wild thing, on scents, movements, sounds. The sweet spring air grew misty; a wind tumbled over them, carrying hints of smoke, snow, into the Queens wood. Saro, the Queen repeated, alarmed. Ilyos. But her consort only watched, as entranced as his daughter, while, with her powerful, focused attention, she drew the dark world closer to them. A mage, she said suddenly, and looked at her father without seeing him. Like you. A mage is talking. I hear, he said. The Queen twitched her reins restively; sapphires sparked along the leather. Around them oak, flurried in the strange wind, moaned. The birds had already fled. But she could not leave them; she watched them worriedly. Both their faces, child and father, wore the same spellbound expression. And now someone is answering the mage. Hush, her father breathed. Listen. \*\*\*The Wolf was on his feet, pacing back and forth in the princes tent, agitated but unable to leave. The prince watched him. I cannot help you. Then we will all die here, the prince answered, eating our pride and stubbornness at the end, when we have nothing else to eat. You know I cannot use sorcery for Kardeth against Pelucir. Not if it will save our lives? The Wolf turned, his shadow splayed, looming across the tent walls. You dont need my help to stop this. Put down your arms. Pack your tents and go. I will help you with the wounded. I will not stop. The princes eyes followed the prowling mage; his face remained impassive. The warriors of Kardeth die before they retreat. Even from winter. This is between Kardeth and Pelucir. And will be between Kardeth and Chaumenard, when Pelucir falls. And still you expect me to help you! I will exercise so much restraint in Chaumenard, you will hardly recognize the army of Kardeth. I swear this. He held up a hand as the mage whirled. I swear it, he repeated softly. You will save lives here and in Chaumenard. No. Then the King of Pelucir and his heir and his unborn child will die here, and I will show even less mercy to the goatherders and wanderers of Chaumenard. The mage stood still, his eyes, the color of tarnished silver, suddenly expressionless, holding the princes gaze. Around them, shadows cast by nothing visible trembled in the air. I could force you to leave, the mage said. You would have to kill me. Dont tempt me. The mage was shaking, he realized, with a fury the wolf might have felt, caught in the iron teeth of a trap. The prince was very still, as if he feared a movement, an eyeblink, might spark the charged shadows around them. He said, again softly, very carefully, This is as close as I can come to begging. Please. Help me put an end to this. I cannot. The mage walked out into the snow. He moved blindly through the field, appalled by the landscape of war: the hunger and the nightmares, the bloody snow, the unburied, frozen dead, the terror, the pain, the howling, maddened hounds. The formless fury took shape in his mind then, into a vision more terrible than war or winter: something that both armies would end their war to flee from. He fashioned his making out of the black, endless winter night, the fire from burning arrows, the last words of the dying, the cries of dreamers, the images in their nightmares. He made it out of the bloody claw-print of a raven in the snow, out of the reflection in the eye of a warrior staring into the ravens eye, out of the hunger and cold and hopeless fury of those trapped within the castle walls, the cries of children wearing themselves to sleep, their dreams when they finally slept. He made it out of the wood on the hill. He found fearful memories there,

among the lean, exhausted animals, of gaunt hunters stalking them. Green, or a wish for green, colored the winter trees in their minds, or in his scenting mind. He scarcely noticed it, in his great anger and despair. Nor did he notice any faces that were not memories, or cries that were not quite human, nor recognize any power not his own. His power snagged a hunter out of a dream, turned his acorn eyes as black as ravens eyes, crowned him with an immense tangle of horn. Among the horns the mage set the moon that warriors most feared: the black moon that cast no shadows, under which anything might move. He took the fierce, starving hounds out of the field, turned them huge and black as night. He did not notice, as he took the memory of a white horse and turned it black, and set sparks of flame between its teeth, the reflection of green in its eyes. He made a warrior with no allegiance but to death, and when his own passion had exhausted itself, he saw it at the edge of the wood: the dark rider he had come to Pelucir to stop. He bade it come. In the Queens wood, seasons fought: Snow swirled across the torn boundaries of the worlds, clung to grass, oak boughs, the Queens bright hair. Saro, wraith-pale in the snow, watched streaks of light change the color of her fathers hair, change his shape, the expression in his eyes. He fought it until he could no longer move, until the strange power held him motionless. Saro! she heard the Queen cry, somewhere beyond the raging storm of snow and magic. Saro! Terror and wonder shaped and reshaped Saros face; the cold winds of power snatched away her voice, changed the position of her bones. She seemed to grow small in the chill world, hunched and helpless, like the animals she glimpsed in that frozen wood. Her mothers voice seemed very far away. Her father had vanished. A rider with the black moon rising among his burning horns looked at her without recognition. She tried to scream; no sound came. He turned away from her, rode out of the timeless wood into the human world. Opening gates spilled torchlight across the snow as the King of Pelucir led his warriors among the sleeping army of Kardeth for one final, desperate battle to end the siege. The dark rider met him on the field. One

The great mage moves, the mage Danicet said twenty years later at the mages school in Chaumenard, from moment to moment, from shape to shape, to meet the constant, ever-changing needs of life. From stone, to eagle, to healer, when stillness, flight, life are required, Those mages of greatest power must involve themselves in a continuing flow of power, for power unused, power neglected or refused, will find its own shape, its own destructive path in the world. So the greatest of mages, such as Atrix Wolfe, have written, out of their own vast and varied experiences. Each moment must concern itself with life, for the renegade mage who chooses to deal in death, will wear the face of death, and, in the end, become the motionless, powerless shape of death. She paused, searching the dozen faces in front of her for questions. Her calm eyes, Talis Pelucir noted, were the exact shade of blue framed by the broad window behind her. A question moved in his mind, and, somehow, into his face. She said, Talis? All the faces turned toward the prince of Pelucir, who had been born in the midst of a curious and deadly whim of a renegade mage. But his eyes, behind lenses reflecting the brilliant light above the mountain peaks, were opaque; his question was mild. What of Atrix Wolfe among the wolves? he asked, fascinated with the legendary mage. Is he neglecting his powers? The White Wolf is very old, Danicet said. Her face had changed, assuming the gentle, wondering expression the mages name evoked; the tone of her voice had softened. I believe that he is choosing his final shape among the wolves. Wind, stone Who knows, on the mountain he loves, what he will become in the end? I think, Riven of Kardeths youngest daughter, Lares, said abruptly, causing all the faces to swing toward her, that since war is part of life, that mages should concern themselves with that. Then the forces of the last battle between Pelucir and Kardeth would have been equal. The faces swung again, not toward Danicet, but toward Talis, who still studied the color of the sky. He and Lares had been at the mages school for two years, but the siege that Lares had laid to bitter memory seemed endless. He sat silently, unmoved, listening to Danicets answer. Mages do concern themselves with war, Danicet said simply, as was evidenced in Pelucir. I am only explaining the conclusions the greatest and most experienced mages have reached. You, of course, will make your own choices. Now. To continue practicing your shapechanging abilities, I want you each to hide somewhere within this part of the school. Lares will search for you. Lares, Talis thought wearily, watching her stiff shoulders beneath the fall of her heavy hair; as if she sensed him, her shoulders drew even straighter. He rose, left the chamber with the other students to fan through the corridors. A closet beckoned immediately; Lares would never look for him among mops. A clutter on a shelf caught his eye as he opened the door. Closing it, he smelled a mingling of beeswax, lamp oil, dusty cloths, old leather. While his eyes adjusted to a mages vision in the dark, he let his mind roam among the shapes on the shelf. He felt supple leather, fine parchment. Curious, he let his mind linger, and, following his curiosity, turned himself into a page within the book. Some time later he emerged, blinking in the dark, with a sense of having dreamed some very odd dreams. He pulled the book off the shelf and opened the door. The line of

windows along the stone corridor arched across a view of the highest peak in Chaumenard, where the trees fell away and the thrust of barren rock began. The windows were black now; the hanging lamps lit. He noted it absently, still chasing an image in his head, or perhaps a word, left by a dream. It eluded him. He leaned against the stone wall and opened the book. The spells in it seemed very clear, precise, fundamental, as if written by some great mage for beginning students. Their simplicity masked a broad experience and a powerful sense of order. Intrigued, he searched: There was no name anywhere in the book. He continued reading. The feeling grew stronger in him of some mystery, some ambiguity in the book, or perhaps in the writing of it, or perhaps that it was not a book at all, but something entirely different. So he felt, and turned pages, still caught in the odd sense of timelessness he had carried out of the closet, as if part of him still dreamed within the book. Talis Pelucir. In the distance, someone called someone. He pushed one hand beneath the circular lenses and rubbed his eyes. Then, still spellbound, he continued reading. He had his fathers height and ravens wing hair, his mothers cheekbones and her smile. This his older brother, Burne, among others, had told him; both their parents had died the night he was born. Talis. His attention wandered suddenly up the mountainside; he glanced up. But the windows were black; night hid whatever he had sought: a puzzle-piece of dream, perhaps an eagles swift flight up the granite face of the mountain, so swift that stones and trees blurred... Talis... He closed his eyes, trying to remember the strange, elusive dreams that seemed like someone elses memories.... Talis! Something loomed at him. Startled, he vanished and moved, then reappeared as quickly to catch the book before it hit the floor, ducking at the same time to avoid a darkness streaking through the air. He settled the lenses on his nose and eyed Lares warily, wondering what else she had in mind. She smiled tightly, with little pleasure and less humor; her eyes were chilly. Very nice. Thank you, he said politely. Ive been searching for you for hours. Ive been here. Why didnt you answer when I called? I didnt hear you. Her eyes darkened. He took a firmer grip on the book, prepared to jump into it again, flea-like, if she lost her temper. She had a precarious hold on it at best; just the sight of Talis caused it to flare sometimes in unexpected ways. She had been raised, as he had, listening to tales of Hunters Field, the only field which the entire army of Kardeth had ever fled. She bore her fathers shame, and blamed Pelucir for the sorcery, despite the fact, as Talis reminded her, that the sorcery had killed the King of Pelucir. Bitterness only fed her temper; courtesy and alacrity seemed the best defense against it. She said, You hid from me. We were instructed I mean deliberately. After I gave up searching for you. You must have heard me call. I didnt. He stopped abruptly, his brows puckered, hearing the echo of a name in his head. I did hear you call, he said slowly, his gaze directed into some nebulous realm of memory between them. It was as if I didnt recognize my name. She was silent, torn between temper and curiosity. Curiosity took precedence, briefly. Where were you hiding? I found everyone but you. In here. In a book? Her mouth tightened again; she said with irritation, The mages were beginning to worry. No one could find you. Its past supper, Im starving, and we were starting to think you must have climbed the mountain to hide among the wolves. He shook his head. I was among the mops. Im sorry, he added for safety sake, seeing her eyes narrow, as if the idea of mops was a personal affront. He said irrepressibly, weary of continuing a battle that had ended twenty years before, Its just as well your father failed to take Pelucir; the princes of Pelucir have so little dignity. And less honor, she snapped. Her words struck; his head went back a little. He felt his habitual patience founder suddenly against all the tales of horror and despair that had been his legacy. Why, he breathed incredulously, must we refight that battle every time we meet? I have told you and told you: Pelucir had nothing to do with the sorcery on Hunters Field. Your father ran from it, yes, but at least you have a father. Who would have died himself rather than ask a mage to fight his battles for him. And mine, of course, would have hired some sorcerer inept enough to kill him. And shrewd enough to run when he realized what he had done. Is that what they believe in Kardeth? he demanded, amazed. That some fly-by-night sorcerer worked such a deadly and terrible magic that has kept even a prince of Kardeth afraid to fight since then? My father is not afraid! she retorted furiously. His dreams were broken. In Pelucir. By the King of Pelucir, who was losing his land, and should have lost it honorably. He lost his life instead, Talis said bleakly, thinking of his brother, Burne, younger than Talis at the time, watching their father die. Your father lies to you, he added, reckless and depressed with the argument. He summoned the mage to the battlefield himself. Thats the shame he bears. He saw the blood flame in her face beneath her flaming hair. What she might have done, he never knew. The mage Hedrix stood with them suddenly, a small man with golden eyes and an owls tufted brows, his ancient, fragile voice making soothing noises, his hands patting the air around them, as if to calm the tension in it. No one knows what happened on the last night of the winter siege of Pelucir, he said gently. You could argue about it until the crags of Chaumenard crumble into the ground. No mage or

sorcerer has ever claimed the sorcery; the sorcery itself vanished with the dawn. Lares opened her mouth; he patted her wrist, still talking, and she subsided. All we know is this: The Kings of Pelucir have been through the centuries so oblivious of the magic around them that it is hard to believe they could summon up even the name of a mage, let alone summon a mage. So Lares began furiously. Hedrix shook his head, his frail fingers closing on her wrist. No. It makes no sense that your father would have been frightened off the field by something he asked for. Rulers of Kardeth are far too intelligent and experienced with various kinds of power. Then who? No one knows, he said simply. No one knows. He released her wrist. But you must stop blaming Talis, who was, after all, not an hour old when the battle ended. I cannot help it, she said, not looking at Talis. It's all I have heard since the day I was born. The tales of the winter siege. The betrayal and dishonor of the King of Pelucir. That's what I heard, Talis said softly. The only tales I was told as a child were of the horrors of Hunters Field, by those who survived it and could not forget. It's why Burne sent me here. Lares looked doubtful, but at least she was looking at him. Because of the siege? He smiled a little, tightly. To have some sorcery in the house, in case the King of Pelucir finds the rider with his hounds and burning horns and the moon that is no moon at his doorstep again. Burne thinks I could fight it. He leaned back against the wall, watching the expression change on her face. I know. Hedrix is right: The Kings of Pelucir have only the vaguest notions of magic. She was silent, her eyes hidden again, uncertain, he sensed, but, being of Kardeth, unwilling to yield a battlefield. The mage touched her lightly. You did well today; you found all the hidden magics, even Talis. He wasn't exactly hidden, she said tartly, but without her usual bite. He was standing here reading a book. The mage looked at Talis, then at the book in Talis's hands. His eyes seemed to grow paler, filmy with thought. And we could not find you... He took the book, opened it; Lares looked over his shoulder. It's nothing, she said surprisedly. Just a beginner's spellbook. Am I finished, Hedrix? Are there any more lost things you want me to find? Only your temper, he said mildly. She smiled. Talis watched her face change again, and thought ruefully, She would smile like that for me if... His eyes followed her down the hall, her long, lithe stride, her hair, straight and thick and of a red darker than fire, with mysterious shadows in it. Hedrix made a noise. What is it? Talis asked. I don't know whose work it is. Atrix Wolfe wrote something here years ago, when he came down from the mountain to teach a while. When? The name, Talis thought, was like a spell, something enchanted. Presentation de l'diteur Twenty years ago, the powerful mage Atrix Wolfe unleashed an uncontrollable force that killed his beloved king. Now, the Queen of the Wood has offered him one last chance for redemption. She asks him to find her daughter, who vanished into the human world during the massacre he caused. No one has seen the princess-but deep in the kitchens of the Castle of Pelucir, there is a scullery maid who appeared out of nowhere one night long ago. She cannot speak and her eyes are full of sadness. But there are those who call her beautiful.