

WHEN WOMEN WERE WARRIORS

BOOK I

THE WARRIOR'S PATH



CATHERINE M. WILSON

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BOOK I

ALSO BY CATHERINE M. WILSON

WHEN WOMEN WERE WARRIORS
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BOOK I

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CATHERINE M. WILSON

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For my mother

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MERIN'S HOUSE

All the women of my family had gone to war. My mother's sisters, older than she, fought in the service of the Lady Abicel in the last war against the northern tribes. Their mother served the Lady's mother in wars told of in grandmothers' tales. As far back as our line was remembered, our family and hers stood side by side.

My mother too had served the Lady. Too young to bear arms in the last war, from within the palisade where she trained to take her place among the warriors, she heard the clash of arms and the screams of the dying outside the walls. She witnessed her three sisters carried lifeless from the battlefield, leaving her, the youngest, to be her mother's heir. By the time she became a warrior, the tribes had made an uneasy peace, a peace that so far remained unbroken.

Now my turn had come. In early springtime, when I was just sixteen, my mother took me to the house where she had won her shield so many years before. The Lady Abicel, long dead, had left her house and lands, along with her authority, to her only daughter, Merin. More than ties of custom, the closest ties of friendship bound my mother and the Lady Merin. Together they trained in the use of arms. Together they were made warriors. They remained shield friends, though my mother took a husband and returned to her mother's house. As my mother had been bound to the service of the Lady Abicel, so would I be bound to the Lady Merin's service.

On the day I left home, before I set foot across the threshold, my mother made me a present of new shoes. She put on her oldest pair, her journey shoes that had been from home and back again so many times they knew the way. I had meant to be mindful of my first step out the door, but when I turned to leave my little sister with some words of wise advice, I tripped over the stone doorstep and stumbled out into the bright day.

"Dazzle the eye of trouble," said my mother, to turn bad luck aside.

From the place where our footpath joined the road we took a last look back. My mother waved and blew a farewell kiss to my sister standing in the doorway. I waved too, though my thoughts were flying far ahead of me down the road to Merin's house.

The first day of our journey took us through country I knew well. My

feet had worn smooth every footpath through the pastures where we grazed our sheep. By midmorning of the second day we had left the world I knew behind. We walked through gentler hills than ours, through meadows bright with new grass where red cattle grazed. We never went hungry or lacked a place to spend the night. As we had cared for travelers who came to our door, so our neighbors cared for us. Every evening we sat by the hearth fire of a stranger. Even after so many years, their faces sometimes come to me in dreams.

On the fifth day, at midmorning, we crested the last hill, and the valley that is the heart of Merin's land lay before us. The river that watered it appeared so tranquil from a distance that I suspected my mother of exaggeration when she warned me of its treachery, of whirlpools and swift currents that would sweep the feet out from under the unwary. Flowing from north to south, it meandered past fields still winter-brown but shimmering with the green promise of a new year. While the part of me that was still a child already missed my home, the person I would become drew me into this new place.

I had heard so many stories of my mother's life here that I felt as if I too were returning to this land, though I beheld it for the first time. For a long while we stood silent, gazing down upon it from the hillside. I wondered what my mother must be feeling. Some of the happiest years of her life had been spent here, and some of her dearest friendships had been made here, but she had also lost so much here that it must have been hard for her to see this place again.

My mother took my hand and drew me down beside her in the grass. A thousand times I'd heard the story, but I listened with new ears as she retold it.

In ancient days, when only women were warriors, lived a queen whose lands were rich and whose people were content, and all under her protection lived in peace. One dark day, the queen's daughter, a young woman skilled in the hunt, rode out with her companions. All day they rode, past the time they should have turned for home, but they found no game, and the queen's daughter would not turn back. At last they saw a red deer at the edge of a wood, and they loosed their hounds to run it down. The queen's daughter, her hunting spear in hand, rode after it as it vanished among the trees.

The wood belonged to a tribe with whom the queen had once been at war, although many years had passed since there had been strife between them. On that dark day, the son of the queen whose forest it was also hunted there. He saw the red deer bound from between the trees and sent his spear after it. The deer leaped aside, and the spear struck the woman who pursued it.

Late that night her companions brought her body home, tied across her horse's back where they should have tied the body of the deer. For nine days the queen gave herself to grief. Then she prepared to ride against her neighbors, to take the blood that her daughter's blood demanded.

On the morning of the tenth day, the queen armed herself and called together the warriors of her household. As they made ready to set out, a young woman rode alone into their midst. At first they thought she was one of their clan, come to ride with her queen, but no one knew her, and she bore no arms. She dismounted and approached the queen. She knelt, as one of the queen's own warriors would do. When she arose, she lifted her cloak from around her shoulders, and by her clothing all could see that she was of the tribe that had taken the life of the queen's daughter. Her golden necklace marked her as the daughter of the queen against whom they prepared to ride.

As swords were drawn all around her, the girl stood still, never taking her eyes from the queen. "I have come to replace the one you lost," she said. "My mother sends me with this message: If your child's blood demands it, take the blood of this child of mine, but if you need a queen's daughter to succeed you, take my daughter for your own."

The queen drew her sword and set its point against the girl's breastbone and in her eyes saw her fear and her courage. Seldom it happens that wisdom will conquer anger or that grief will yield to compassion, but that day the queen's heart was satisfied. To spare another mother the grief she knew herself, the queen put away her sword and took the daughter of her enemy to be her own, and both tribes lived in safety and in peace forever after.

So it is the custom that a free woman leave her mother's house to bind herself and those of her blood to a neighboring clan, either by the sword or by the cradle.

###

When I was a child, my mother told me countless stories of the time she'd spent here. Not about the war. That was the one thing she wouldn't speak about unasked, and when I did find the courage to question her about it, her face grew so grim and her tone so solemn that I regretted asking. The tales she told were happy ones, of feasts and festivals, of youthful pranks and bold adventures.

The land was just as she'd described it, a patchwork of rich fields beside the river and pasture on the hillsides. The farmers' cottages nestled protected between the hills, and trickles of smoke from their hearth fires sifted up through the thatch.

A mist hid the land across the river. It was rocky land, my mother said, no good for farming. On our side of the river, trees grew along the riverbank. Here and there on the open hillsides stood the sacred groves, each a temple to one or another of the powers of life and death.

My mother pointed to a group of timber buildings, surrounded by a maze of earthworks, atop a hill close by the river.

"There is your new home," she said.

All that day we walked, down the hill, then north along a footpath that followed the river's edge. From time to time we stopped to rest in the shade of trees just coming into leaf. We met no other travelers, only farmers working in their fields or children driving animals to pasture. The sun was setting as we climbed the hill to Merin's house.

From the hillside where we sat that morning, the earthworks had appeared to be mere wrinkles in the earth. Now the embankments loomed high above our heads. Topped by a palisade, whose jagged silhouette against the reddening sky looked like a giant's teeth, they formed a maze all around the hilltop. My mother bore no arms, and we passed unchallenged through the maze. The few people we met greeted us, but no one recognized my mother, and she saw no one she knew.

Inside the fortress a stone walkway took us past pens where goats were kept for their milk and piglets fattened on the household's refuse. Then we made our way through a scattering of sheds. In one I caught a glimpse of a great loom. Another was a pottery, and another housed a forge.

Merin's house stood on the hill's crest. It was the largest house I'd ever seen. The timber walls towered over us, many times higher than the walls

of the stone cottage I grew up in. The massive door of hewn planks stood open. In the great hall the household had gathered for the evening meal. Trestle tables had been set out, and women and men, more than I could count, filled the benches.

At the far end of the hall, a fire burned upon an open hearth. Weapons of all kinds covered the wall behind it. Swords and axes hung there, and spears of the kind used in war, but it was the shields that drew my eye, each one painted with the device of the warrior who had borne it.

Before the hearth the high table stood. At its head the Lady Merin presided over the assembled company. She was as dark as my mother was fair and almost as beautiful. Across her pale blue gown she wore a sash of indigo, a baldric for her sword. When she saw us standing in the doorway, she rose and beckoned to us. My mother took my hand, and we approached her.

The Lady gazed at my mother for a moment, then turned to me. She drew her sword and set its point against my breastbone. I knew my part. I set my fear aside and met her eyes. Her eyes held mine, but it was not my eyes she saw. What her gaze rested on, only she could see. I thought I heard the din of battle, but how could I have known what that sound was when I had never before heard it. The smoke of burning homes and fields drifted before my eyes, and the smell of burning reached me on a sudden breeze.

The Lady put her sword away and smiled at me. The smoke vanished, and with it the smell of burning, and the only sound I heard was the voices of the people in the hall.

A servant led me to a seat at another table, where I joined a group of girls my own age. They talked and laughed together, and bit by bit they drew me into their conversation. I learned that they were the companions. Each girl served one of the warriors. Many were apprenticed to their warriors and would become warriors themselves someday.

"You won't be apprenticed," one girl told me. "You're too small."

"My mother is a warrior," I replied, "and she's no bigger than I am."

"Has she fought in battle?" the girl asked me.

I had to admit that she had not.

For a while I had been aware that I was being watched by the girl who sat across the table from me. She was long-boned and thin, and she would have been pretty if her expression were not so wary. She had not yet spoken to me. I caught her eye.

"I am Tamras, daughter of Tamnet," I told her. "Who are you?"

“Sparrow,” she said, and turned to talk to the girl sitting next to her.

From time to time I glanced back at my mother, who sat beside the Lady. She would spend the evening with her friend, and in the morning she would leave for home. It might be years before I saw her again.

###

My first night in Merin’s house I found it hard to sleep. The other girls treated me with kindness. They found me some bedding and made a place for me in their sleeping loft, but I still felt like a stranger. There were more people here than I had ever seen together at once. How would I be able to remember them all?

Everything about the place felt strange to me. Nights at home were quiet. Here there was a constant noise of people — moving, talking, coughing, sleeping. Cracking and creaking noises startled me, and the other girls laughed at me a little. They told me it was the timbers of the house settling against each other. Stone houses make no sound.

Even the smells were unfamiliar. The heavy smell of roasting meat hung in the air. We seldom roasted meat at home. In Merin’s house they set quarters of beef over open fires, and the fat fell uncollected into the flames.

Other smells tumbled together — wood smoke and the sap that oozed from the timbers, the dusty straw strewn upon the floors downstairs, the animals in the pens outside, and other things I didn’t recognize.

I tried to remember how I had felt at home when I was looking forward to seeing someplace new. Everything there was so familiar that I longed for something different. Now I longed for just one familiar thing. I felt like a bird, caged all its life, set free by an open window and cowering upon the windowsill.

COMPANION

In the morning the Lady Merin sent a servant to bring me to her private chamber. Then I learned that what I had been told the night before was true. I would not be trained in the use of arms. Instead the Lady made me the companion of a warrior, a woman who had been in the household only a short time.

Though I tried to hide my disappointment, the Lady understood what I was feeling. I was the first daughter of my house. The blood of warriors ran in my veins, and a warrior's place was my inheritance.

"For the time being," the Lady told me, "you can serve me best by doing what I ask. You have the right to refuse, but I hope you will stay with us. Your mother handled weapons well despite her size. One day you may be strong enough to inherit her sword."

So she didn't take my hope away from me, and I stayed with her.

###

The companions' loft was just a platform over the end of the great hall farthest from the hearth. It had no walls, only a railing to keep us from toppling over the side.

The warriors slept upstairs, above the kitchen, each in her own tiny room partitioned off from the others by flimsy walls of wattle.

One of the companions showed me to my warrior's room. She rapped on the doorpost, and before we heard an answer, she gave me a furtive look, then turned and fled back down the stairs. When there was still no answer to her knock, I pulled aside the curtain covering the doorway and went in.

My warrior was sitting cross-legged on her bed, the only piece of furniture in the room except for a small chest beside it. The morning light streamed in through the window and fell across her hands as she mended an old pair of boots. She looked up at me.

"I'm your companion," I said.

"I don't want a companion," she replied.

She glared at me with dark and angry eyes until I couldn't meet them anymore. When I looked away, she resumed her mending and paid me no

more attention. I felt like running out the door, but my feet refused to move. I stood silent before her as if turned to stone.

After a little while my curiosity overcame my fear. There was something odd about her. I couldn't think what it was. I'd had only one brief glimpse of her. Now the dark hair that tumbled loose over her shoulders fell forward and hid her face as she looked down at her work. Her dark eyes were all I could remember.

There was nothing unusual about her clothing. She wore a linen shirt the color of walnuts. Her trousers, like my own, were made of wool and dyed a darker brown. Her leather armor hung from a peg beside her bed, along with a sword in its scabbard and a shield, which bore no device.

She didn't speak again. When the boots were mended, she put them on. Then she took her armor from the peg, slipped it on, and buckled it. By the time it occurred to me to help her, it was too late. She pushed past me and was out the door so quickly that I had to run to catch her as she went down the stairs and through the great hall.

Once outdoors she turned to face me. Though her eyes were no longer angry, they warned me not to follow her. She turned and strode away. I followed her anyway, but at a cautious distance, as she crossed the yard and threaded her way through the maze of earthworks. Outside the palisade I stopped and watched her walk down the hill, until she disappeared behind a stand of trees.

###

By the time my first day in Merin's house was over, I was glad to see the end of it. The other girls told me that I would soon get used to life here, that the first few days are always hard, but I feared it might be many days before I felt at home.

Most of the companions came from households as large as this one. Just a few grew up in tiny villages like mine. As I listened to the talk in the companions' loft that evening, I began to understand how different this place was from the only other place I knew. Villages in the hill country have little to tempt thieves. Here there were raids against the farms, grain and cattle stolen, border skirmishes.

I had heard tales of war all my life, but I didn't realize that, even in a time of peace, there would be so much fighting. The warriors proved their value

constantly. Without them, all that the land yielded would be taken from us. Without them, other tribes would take the land itself.

Aside from the servants, everyone living in Merin's house was either a warrior or the companion of a warrior. The Lady kept the old traditions. Only women lived in this house. The men lived in a smaller house close by. They took their meals here and had the freedom of the great hall, but the rest of the house was forbidden to them.

The old women lived here too. They had been warriors once. Now, as members of the council, they served the Lady with wisdom instead of weapons.

I was afraid to tell the other companions that my warrior had refused me, but they already knew. They had expected it. They said I should just go about my work and pay her no attention. How could anyone pay her no attention?

###

Early the next morning I went to my warrior's room only to find her gone, so I did as the companions had suggested and looked around for things to do. I swept the floor and aired the bedding. I emptied the slop jar. I filled the lamp with oil and trimmed the wick. I found some dirty clothing, a few worn woolen shirts and a pair of woolen trousers, and took them downstairs to wash them. Late that afternoon, when I returned them to my warrior clean and dry, she accepted them without a word.

There was nothing else to do, so I returned to my place in the companions' loft. My heart was sore, and I had hoped to be alone there for a while, but I found Sparrow waiting for me. A year older than I, she was well-grown and strong enough to be apprenticed to her warrior. My face told her I was unhappy.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked me.

"I will be the first of my family without a shield," I said, "and my warrior has no need of me. If there's no place for me here, I might as well go home. At least I can be of some use to my family."

Sparrow frowned her disapproval. "Are you so easily discouraged?"

I understood her, and I was ashamed.

"Don't judge me by a handful of words," I said.

In time I came to realize that Sparrow meant well. Sometimes she said

hurtful things, but when the sting was gone, I saw that she was teaching me how to conduct myself in Merin's house. So as not to shame my family, I hid my disappointment and my loneliness and lived each day as it came. My grandmother used to tell me that was how to get through hard times.

A HEALING

My warrior's name was Maara, a name I had never heard before. No one in Merin's house knew anything of her family or where she'd come from. No one I asked had spoken with her beyond what was necessary for daily life. The few who had tried to befriend her she'd rebuffed, and now they had little good to say of her.

Every day I did my best at whatever work I could find to do, while my warrior did her best to stay away from me. She hardly spoke to me, and when she did, it was either to send me away or to find fault with me for something. None of the other companions would put up with her. They assured me that when I had mastered the duties of a companion I could choose someone else.

While I was grateful to them for telling me I was not at fault, I was young enough to believe that I might succeed with my warrior where they had not. It was hard to bear her treatment of me when I was still so lonely in that house, but I was determined not to fail at the only thing the Lady had asked of me.

###

As they did every year in springtime, cattle raiders came out of the north, and our warriors left Merin's house to guard our borders against them. The other warriors took their companions, but Maara made me stay behind. With her away there was even less for me to do.

I wasn't idle long. A few days later they were back again. They had caught a band of cattle raiders in the act of butchering a calf and engaged them in a skirmish. One of them had hurt my warrior badly. His blade glanced off her shield and bit deep into her thigh. When she fell, he tried to finish her, and the force of his blow on her shield broke the bones of her forearm.

It was evening when her comrades brought her home. In the fading light the litter on which they bore her was black with blood. I helped the tired warriors carry her upstairs. When we set the litter down beside her bed, my hands were sticky, red in the lamplight.

My warrior lay unmoving, her eyes closed. She looked as if she might

already be embarking on her journey to another world. We were about to put her on the bed when the healer came in to tend her.

"Let her bleed there on the floor," she said. So we left her there.

My mother was a healer. She had taught me the use of herbs, and I often accompanied her when she was called to tend someone. I had helped her set broken bones and stitch up cuts made by the slip of an ax or knife, but I had never seen a wound like this one. It gaped open and bled until I wondered how my warrior could have any blood left in her.

I helped the healer remove her armor and her clothing. Together we set her broken arm. Then I watched as the healer cleaned and closed her dreadful wound. When the healer had done all she could, we washed the blood from my warrior's body and put her into bed.

"I fear our work has been for nothing," the healer told me. "I'll brew something for her pain. Give it to her if she wakes tonight."

In a little while a kitchen servant brought a bowl of tea. I took a sip of it. Bitter hops masked the strong taste of valerian root. It was a potent sleeping drug that would let my warrior sleep away her pain. It would let her sleep away her life. I poured it out into the slop jar.

I had no reason to care about the woman who thought she had no need of me. Her refusal of me had stung my pride. Perhaps I saw my chance to prove my value to her or to put her in my debt. I wish I could say I nursed her out of kindness, but it wasn't true.

I waited until I thought everyone had gone to bed. Then I went down to the kitchen. The fragrance of lemon grass, just brought in to dry, led me to a little room behind the ovens. There I found what I was seeking. Herbs hung in bunches from drying racks. Shelves of pots, each containing a dried herb properly prepared, lined the walls. I soon found the ones I wanted — shepherd's purse to stop her bleeding, sage and bloodwort to restore her blood. I put them into the bowl in which the healer had brewed her tea. In the embers of the cooking fire was a cauldron of water hot enough to steep the herbs. I found a ladle and filled the bowl.

I returned to my warrior's room. After the tea had cooled a bit, I dipped a clean cloth into it and put it to her lips. The tea trickled into her mouth and down her throat. When I saw her swallow, I knew it was safe to give her more.

All night I sat beside her on the bed. Several times she woke, and I encouraged her to drink more of the tea. I doubt she was aware of me, but she was

thirsty, and she drank. Before the night was over, the bowl was empty.

At dawn I went to the window and took the shutter down. For the first time since they brought her home, I saw her clearly. Her pallor frightened me. I sat down again beside her and touched her brow. I had thought to find her warm with fever, but her skin was cold to the touch and damp.

All night her sleep had been fitful. Now she seemed lost in a deeper sleep. Whether it was a healing sleep or the approach of death I couldn't tell, but I had done all I knew how to do. I curled up at her feet and fell asleep.

###

The healer dipped her fingers into the bowl, pulled out a pinch of the spent herbs, and tasted them.

"You've done her no good by this," she told me. "You may have given her a few more days of pain. That's all."

I deserved her reprimand, and I accepted it.

"Have you seen wounds like this before?" she asked me.

I shook my head.

"In a day or two it will be poisoned. The poison will kill her, and her death won't be an easy one."

The healer's eyes held mine until she saw that I had understood her.

"She's yours to care for now," she said, and left the room.

Then I wondered if I'd done wrong. If I had been careless of my warrior's pain, I had done her a far greater wrong than she had done to me. What I knew to be true was that I had wanted her to live, not for her own sake or because I cared for her, but so that I might have the satisfaction of her knowing that she owed her life to me.

My pride may have done more harm than good, and for that I was sorry, but I was still proud enough to resist my guilty feelings. If my warrior died, the healer was right and I was wrong, not only in her eyes and my own, but also in the eyes of the entire household. It was a shame I would not bring upon myself willingly, even if I did deserve it.

The healer had given her to me, so I began to do everything for her I could think of. I brewed her bloodwort tea to renew her blood and tea of dried comfrey root to mend her bones. I asked Sparrow to dig some fresh comfrey root and gather leaves of comfrey, sage, and shepherd's purse. From the root I made a salve to treat her wound. The leaves I saved for poultices.

Day and night I stayed beside her. At night I lay across the bed at her feet and dozed, so that if she moved she would awaken me. Sparrow brought my meals to me. Sometimes she tried to persuade me to go to my own bed and rest. I refused. I believed that as long as I was there beside my warrior, death would not dare to cross the threshold, but that if I left her, she would leave me.

I had never tended anyone so ill. When she burned with fever, I bathed her with cool water and gave her a tea of willow bark. When she shook with chills, I lay beside her and warmed her with my body. I washed her wound with sage water and treated it with poultices to draw the poison out. I soaked bread in broth and fed her, though she would take only a mouthful at a time. I talked to her spirit. I named the colors of the world that I could see from the window. I reminded her of every good thing about living I could think of, so that she would be less willing to leave this world behind. Day after day went by, and my warrior didn't die.

I lost track of time. Later Sparrow told me it had been nearly a fortnight. Then one morning, just before dawn, Maara woke me. She was restless, and I worried she would hurt herself, so I lay down beside her to hold her still. She turned away from me onto her side and fell into a deep sleep. She felt warm, but not feverish. Her breathing was quiet and easy. It was the first time I had held her without feeling that my arms around her were all that kept her spirit trapped within her body. I knew then that she would live. I thanked the Mother for my warrior's life and followed her into sleep.

I woke to find her watching me. I had slept so soundly I hardly knew where I was. From the light pouring through the cracks in the shutter, I saw that it must already be midmorning.

I sat up and reached out to touch her brow to check for fever. She drew back and turned her face away from me. Instantly I was furious with her. All the bitterness I had ever felt toward her surged into my chest. For days I had contended with the Dark Mother for her life. I opened my mouth to tell her so and choked on my tears. As soon as I wiped them away, more fell. I didn't understand myself where those tears came from.

Then Maara looked at me. She spoke so softly I almost didn't hear her. "Sorry," she said.

###

The Lady Merin came into the room. When she saw that my warrior was asleep, she whispered, "The healer told me she would die."

"She very nearly did," I said.

"The healer says you saved her life."

I shook my head. I would not take credit for it. Whatever I had done had been done for the wrong reasons, and there was no merit in it.

"She's stronger than the healer thought," I said. "It was her own doing, not mine."

The Lady looked at me, surprised, but she left the room without saying anything more.

###

Maara was still too weak to do anything for herself. I fed her and bathed her and tended her wound, just as I had done before, but now she was aware of me. Every intimate thing I had to do for her she made more difficult. Her eyes never left my face. Her dark and solemn eyes followed me with questions, though she hardly said a word.

I no longer felt that I could lie with her in her bed, so I brought my bedding from the companions' loft and laid it out on the floor. All of this she watched. She'd slept for days. Now she refused to sleep.

Sleeping potions are so powerful that I was afraid to give her one until she grew stronger. Instead I bathed her with warm water and rubbed her back. I coaxed her body into sleep, and while she slept, I lay down on my own bed and got what rest I could.

After three days I could no longer bear her eyes. They watched me with a frankness I was unused to. Sometimes I thought I read in them an accusation. It must have been my own guilty conscience. She couldn't have known what I had done, and even if she did, why would she have faulted me for doing it? After all, she was alive. But I needed to set things right with her.

"Do you wonder why the healer hasn't come to you?" I asked her.

"I think you are my healer," she replied.

"No," I said. "I'm not a healer. I learned what my mother could teach me. That's all."

She waited.

"The healer believed you would die," I said. "She wanted to give you a painless death. I disobeyed her. I wanted you to live."

“Why?”

I wish I had heard her then, but I felt the color of shame rise into my face, and I wanted to say what I had resolved to say and get it over with.

“I was angry with you,” I told her. “I wanted to *make* you live, so that you would have to respect me and so that I would have a claim on you.”

I couldn’t meet her eyes. I had once envisioned her telling me that she was sorry for the way she’d treated me. Now she would have reason to believe I was unworthy of her.

She said nothing for a time, while my own words echoed in my head. What I had said was true, but I was beginning to believe there was a deeper truth that I was missing.

“You have what you wanted,” she said at last. “I owe you a debt, and I will be careful to repay it.”

Her words slid over my skin like ice. “I do not have what I wanted! I wanted an honorable place here, and I have disgraced myself in my own eyes. Now I’m disgraced in your eyes. You owe me nothing. I want nothing from you.”

Her dark eyes captured mine and held them. At first she seemed troubled, hurt perhaps, and angry. Then she cocked her head at me and pursed her lips and knit her brow into a puzzled frown.

“I’m not sure I understand you,” she said. “Are you telling me you saved my life because you were angry with me?”

The idea struck me funny.

“Yes,” I said, trying not to smile. “Furious.”

“Furious?”

“Enraged,” I said.

“Oh dear.” And then she smiled.

###

There was a lightness in my spirit that I hadn’t felt since I came to Merin’s house, and I had my warrior to thank for it. As I lay in my bed that night, I thought about her smile. I wanted to fix her image in my mind’s eye, so that the next time she gave me one of her scowls, I would have at least one smile to remember. Her smile told me, not that she forgave me, but that she found nothing to forgive. No matter the reason, she may have been alive that night because of me. It was the first time I had allowed myself to think it.

She may have been alive that night because I had cared for her, and whether or not I had cared for her when I undertook to save her life, I cared for her now. If anything I'd done had made the difference whether she lived or died, it was a gift I had given, not only to my warrior, but to myself.

###

The next day I went to see the healer. It was a cool day, and I found her sitting with several of the older women at a table in the kitchen. They were enjoying the heat from the ovens, sipping hot tea, and gossiping among themselves. When I approached the healer, they all fell silent.

"I need to speak with you," I told her.

"Speak, then," she replied.

The others started to get up, but I asked them to stay and hear me. They must know what I had done, and I wanted them to hear me try to make amends for it.

"I disobeyed you," I said to the healer. "I was wrong to do that. Even though my warrior didn't die, what I did was no less wrong."

The healer looked around at the others.

"What do you think?" she asked them.

They stared back at her with blank faces.

"I think," the healer said, and drummed her fingers on the table, "I think she should be wrong more often."

One of the women chuckled at that, then another, and soon they were all laughing. Although I didn't find it funny, I was glad to know I hadn't made an enemy.

That evening the healer came to my warrior's room and examined her.

"She's healing well," she said. She turned and met my eyes. "Now I think you understand what it is to take a life into your care."

STORIES

As she recovered, my warrior was more difficult to care for than she had been when she lay dying. She was so restless that she did herself no good. To keep her quiet and to help her pass the time, I told her stories. They were the tales I'd heard told beside our hearth fire every night of my childhood. To my amazement, she had never heard them.

"No one told stories much where I grew up," she said.

"Where did you grow up?" I asked her. I couldn't imagine a place where no one told stories.

"Far away from here," she said.

In her voice I heard, not only sadness, but a warning, and I was afraid to ask her anything more.

###

"In ancient days, when only women were warriors—"

"When was that?" she said.

"I don't know. A long time ago, I suppose."

"How long ago?"

"I have no idea. It's not important. It's just the way you start a story."

"Why?"

"All stories begin like that."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They just do."

"Oh," she said.

"In ancient days, when only women were warriors—"

"Were there once only women warriors?" she said.

"I don't know. I suppose so."

"Why was that, I wonder?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "It's just the way you start a story."

"Oh," she said.

I waited.

"Are you going to tell the story?" she said.

"Are you ready to listen to it?"

She nodded.

"In ancient days, when only women were warriors..."

I paused and looked at her. She shut her mouth tight and said not a word.

"In ancient days, when only women were warriors, lived a woman who had two daughters. One was tall, with hair like spun gold and skin the color of milk and eyes bluer than the sky. She sang so sweetly that when they heard her voice, songbirds fell silent. She spun wool into the finest thread and dyed it all the colors of the rainbow. She wove it into the most lovely cloth ever made by woman's hand.

"Her sister was as unlike her as it was possible to be. She was dark-haired, dark-eyed, brown-skinned. Though she was smaller than her sister, she was stronger. She had broad shoulders, and the muscles of her arms and legs were hard under the skin. She was a master of the bow. Her arrows could find a bird in flight or a deer in the thicket."

"I've heard this one before," Maara said.

She turned over in the bed so that she had her back to me.

"You have?" I asked her. "Where?"

"You must have told it already."

"I didn't."

"I don't want to hear it," she said.

###

"What story was it?" asked Sparrow.

"The one about the two sisters," I said.

"The fair and the dark?"

"Yes."

"You're an idiot," she said.

Sparrow shook her head at me. I had no idea what I'd done.

"Describe the dark sister," she said.

"Dark-haired, dark-eyed, brown-skinned. Strong. Broad-shouldered."

"Does that sound like anyone you know?"

It did. It sounded like my warrior.

"She thought you were making fun of her," Sparrow said.

"Why would she think I would do that?"

"She's from a clan of the old ones."

Sparrow's explanation made no sense to me. "We're descended from the old ones too."

"True," she said, "but the blood of many tribes runs in us."

"My mother's mother had a shield friend among the old ones."

"There are few of them left now. Your warrior's people are almost gone. The last tribes live far to the north. We hardly ever see them anymore. She's the only one I've ever known to speak to."

"But why would she think I would make fun of her?" I said. "My people have always honored the old ones. We tell stories about them, and when a child is born with midnight eyes, we give her one of the ancient names, because she must be one of our first mothers come back to us."

"Those traditions are dying here," said Sparrow. "More and more they give the dark ones back."

I had heard that expression only once before, and when I asked what it meant, I was told that some tribes take unwanted children and abandon them in the wilderness, to die of cold or hunger or to be taken by wolves. I couldn't imagine such a thing.

"Do you mean they let them die?" I said.

Sparrow nodded. She saw the confusion in my eyes. "Many tribes have much less than we do here. In times of hunger they can't feed all their children. They do what they must."

"But why the dark ones?" I asked her. "In my family we rejoice when one of them is born to us. They have special gifts. They speak with the gods."

"Nowadays no one has much use for the old gods or the old ways."

We heard the voice of Sparrow's warrior, Eramet, calling her.

"Talk to the old woman who sleeps at the kitchen hearth," said Sparrow. "She can tell you more than I can about how the world has changed."

For a while after Sparrow left, I sat in the companions' loft thinking over what she had told me. How little I knew of the world beyond my village. Even the people of this household, joined to my family by long tradition, seemed strange to me in their ways. What I had just heard shocked me. If people of the same tribe could believe so differently, how would I ever understand the world?

I returned to my warrior's room and sat down beside her on the bed. She was just as I had left her. Her eyes were closed, but I didn't think she was asleep.

"In ancient days, when only women were warriors," I began, "lived a

woman who had two daughters. One was tall, with hair like spun gold and skin the color of milk and eyes bluer than the sky.”

“I told you I didn’t want to hear it,” she said.

“It’s bad luck to leave a story partly told. It hangs in the air and echoes in your ears until you finish it.”

In ancient days, when only women were warriors, lived a woman who had two daughters. One was tall, with hair like spun gold and skin the color of milk and eyes bluer than the sky. She sang so sweetly that when they heard her voice, songbirds fell silent. She spun wool into the finest thread and dyed it all the colors of the rainbow. She wove it into the most lovely cloth ever made by woman’s hand.

Her sister was as unlike her as it was possible to be. She was dark-haired, dark-eyed, brown-skinned. Though she was smaller than her sister, she was stronger. She had broad shoulders, and the muscles of her arms and legs were hard under the skin.

She was a master of the bow. Her arrows could find a bird in flight or a deer in the thicket. She spoke with the spirits of the animals and learned their secrets. She knew the language of the four winds and the songs sung by rain. She could count the number of the days since the world was made.

When the time came for the sisters to marry, the fair one chose a man of her own people. She and her husband were happy together, but to their sorrow, she bore no child. The dark sister chose not to marry. She was content to live alone in the forest, and her sister saw her less and less as the years went by.

One day the dark sister heard her sister singing. The song was such a sad one that she left her forest home and traveled to her sister’s house.

“Why is your song so sad?” she asked.

Her sister said to her, “I have no hope of children. Our people will die with us, unless you bear a child.”

The dark sister had no desire for a child, but her sister’s sadness weighed on her heart. When she left her sister’s house, she wandered through the burial places of their people. She sat among the cairns and felt the sun warm across her back and the cooling breeze that caressed her face.

For the first time she understood that she had come out into the light for only a short while and that the day would come when her bones would rest in the dark under the stones. Who then would sit among the cairns on a bright spring day and remember those who had gone beyond the sunset?

The dark sister returned to the heart of the forest, to a grove where there rose out of a rock a freshwater spring. She knelt down beside it. Around the spring a pool of black water reflected her face back to her. She called upon the spirit of the spring to teach her what to do.

"How can I conceive a child?" she asked. "There is no man I would take to husband me, nor any I would lie beside."

A breath of air disturbed the surface of the pool. Before she could stop herself, she fell forward into it. Small hands took hers and pulled her down. In the dark water her eyes were blind, but she heard a woman's voice that calmed her and felt the woman's hands caress her face.

"Tell me why you ask for a child," the woman said.

"There will be no one to enjoy the world when we are gone," she replied. "When we are gone, there will be no one to remember us and no one to keep our stories alive in the daylight."

"Other children will tell other stories," the woman said.

"But not ours," said the dark sister, "and our stories reach deep, even to the roots of the world."

Then the spirit of the spring embraced her and kissed her mouth.

"Take this kiss to your sister," she said.

The tiny hands released her, and she floated up through the water until she broke the surface and found herself back in her own world beneath the trees.

The dark sister went at once to her sister's house, and when her sister came to greet her, she kissed her sister's mouth and conceived in her a child.

When the child was born, it seemed that sometimes she was dark like her dark mother, and yet at other times she was as fair as the one who bore her. She sang so sweetly that when they heard her voice, songbirds fell silent. She knew the language of the four winds and the songs sung by rain. She could count the number of the days since the world was made. Her children were many, and they filled the

land. They sat among the cairns in springtime and told the stories that reach deep, even to the roots of the world.

“How can a woman conceive by another woman?” Maara asked.

I shrugged. I’d never thought about it.

“I don’t think I understand your stories.”

“They’re not meant to be understood any more than the world can be understood.”

“What are they for, then?”

I thought for a moment before I answered her. I had been told stories all my life. I never stopped to wonder what they were for. I had heard them over and over, and every time I heard them, they kindled a warm feeling in the center of my chest, as if one of the puzzles of the world had just unraveled and made itself clear to me, although I could never have explained what the puzzle was or told its answer.

At last I reached out my hand and laid my palm over Maara’s heart.

“They’re meant to make you feel something here,” I said. “When I was a child, the stories told me that the world was as it should be, and that I was a part of it, and that every question has an answer.”

###

“Does she ever talk to you?” the Lady asked me.

“Sometimes,” I replied. “A little.”

“Does she talk of where she came from?”

“No,” I said. “Where did she come from?”

“She never told me,” the Lady said. “She came to me in wintertime. In weather no one should have traveled in, she came to my door. She asked me to admit her to my service. She claimed to have no family and no clan, and nowhere else to go. She was ill-clad and hungry. I couldn’t turn her out to die in the snow, so she made her oath to me, and I accepted it.”

“How can she have no clan?”

“They may all have died of disease or famine, or she may have been a slave. Perhaps her mistress freed her or she ran away.”

“Slaves can’t be warriors,” I said.

“No slave can be a warrior here. What others do, who can say? The customs of the northerners are not like ours. I believe your warrior used to

make her home among them, although she has never told me so.”

The Lady’s eyes caught mine then, and she leaned toward me.

“I need your help,” she said. “I know so little of her. There is always a chance that she has been sent by some northern tribe that would use her to learn our weaknesses.”

I stared at the Lady in disbelief. “She wouldn’t do that.”

“You know her very little. How can you be sure?”

I had to admit the Lady might be right. How well did I know my warrior’s heart?

“What can I do?” I asked.

“Listen to her. Try to discover more about her. Ask her about her people, about her home.”

I began to have an unpleasant feeling in my stomach.

The Lady saw my expression change, and she understood.

“I’m not asking you to misrepresent yourself,” she said. “You’re a young girl with little knowledge of the world. Curiosity is natural in the young. You would question her about these things in any case. I’m asking only that you tell me if something seems amiss to you. If you’re not sure if something is amiss or not, then you must let me know of it and trust me to deal honorably with her.”

###

When Maara was able to leave her bed, I took her outdoors to enjoy the springtime. One day we sat together on the hillside just outside the earthworks. Flowers bloomed all around us in the grass. The river sparkled in the sun. Above us the sky was a brilliant blue.

For a long time we were silent. I was not uncomfortable with her silence. I spent so much time with her that I had become used to it. Sometimes I would chatter away about anything that came into my head. She didn’t seem to mind, but that afternoon I was silent too. I was listening to birdsong and the sighing of the wind. Her sudden question startled me.

“Where do your people live?” she asked me.

I pointed to the southeast. “We live in the hill country, five days’ journey from here.”

“Your people are shepherds?”

“Much of the wool in the weaving shed is from our sheep.”

I was about to ask Maara where her people lived when I remembered that whatever she told me I was bound in honor to tell the Lady. It seemed a violation of my warrior's trust to do it, but it would be a violation of the Lady's trust if I did not. Only if Maara told me nothing could I keep faith with both of them.

LESSONS

Maara's broken bones healed straight and strong, but the muscles of her arm had wasted from disuse. One day she took me out to the practice ground, just outside the earthworks. There we found shields made of wickerwork and wooden sticks like the toy swords children use in games.

She handed me a stick and a wicker shield and showed me how to hold them. Then she began to spar with me. At first I felt awkward, and the blows of her stick would send mine flying across the yard, but each time she showed me what I had done wrong, and before long I was doing much better.

Every day we spent several hours on the practice ground, sparring with sticks until her arm grew strong again. Then one day she put on her armor and buckled on her sword. She borrowed a leather cap and a heavy coat of sheepskin for me, as well as a real sword for me to practice with.

The sword was so heavy I had to hold it with both hands. After only a quarter of an hour I could no longer lift it, so she had me sit down and watch while she sparred with Eramet. The next morning I was stiff and sore, and I had so much trouble getting up from my bed that Maara offered me her hand. When she had me on my feet, she lifted my arm and examined it.

"You have the bones of a bird," she said.

My disappointment that I would not be apprenticed came back to me all at once, so that I had to brush a tear from my eye before it spilled over and embarrassed me. She saw me and misunderstood.

"There's no shame in that," she said.

"I'm *not* ashamed," I said. My face was hot. "Someday I *will* be a warrior, bird bones and all!"

Maara laughed at my anger. "Someday you'll be what it's in you to be. It does no good to argue with the gods about it."

Every day she sparred with me, first with sticks and wicker shields, then with real swords, and every day I grew stronger, but I found it hard to believe that I would ever be strong enough to wield both sword and shield.

No one seemed to notice that my warrior was training me in swordplay. Because I wasn't her apprentice, she had no obligation to teach me. I wondered why no one commented on it. I didn't understand then that a warrior would do with her companion what seemed best to her, and no one would

think to interfere.

###

While Maara recovered from her injuries, the two of us were left alone to do as we pleased. Summer's heat made Merin's house too hot to sleep in, and after a few days of stifling weather, Maara told me to get ready to go out into the countryside. Sparrow showed me how to prepare a pack with the things we'd need—oil and flour for baking camp bread, dried meat and fruit, a round of cheese, water skins, a small tin pot, a scrap of blanket, a flint knife, firestones.

We traveled south along the river. It was my first chance to explore Merin's land since I made the journey with my mother. The fields that had been only bare earth then were now thick with growing grain, still green, with the heads just forming.

The country people were generous with us. When they saw us on the road, women came out of their kitchens with loaves of bread, warm from the oven. They pressed upon us jars of milk and little baskets with a few duck eggs wrapped in straw.

My warrior said not a word to them. It was up to me to thank them, but they didn't seem to mind her. They gave her sidelong glances, coy as maidens at the springtime festival.

When thunderstorms brought an end to the hot weather, we went back to Merin's house for a while, but Maara much preferred to live outdoors, and she took me out on expeditions whenever we could get away. Sometimes we explored the settled land along the river. More often we camped high up in the hills east of the valley. She taught me to make snares and fish traps, and we lived very well on the game and fish we caught, and on flat, round loaves baked in the ashes of our campfire.

Maara was a gifted teacher. She asked me questions and let me find the answers for myself. When she taught me a new skill—camp craft or the care of weapons—she first showed me what to do, then left me alone to fumble with my task. Though I often grew frustrated and impatient, I soon learned.

###

We had walked all day in silence. Several times I had tried to start a conversation. Each time she would say only a word or two and then fall silent. Sometimes in the evenings I could get her to talk a little as we sat together by our fire. Sometimes she would ask me for a story. Sometimes she just let me talk. That night she said nothing, and I had run out of chatter. The campfire had burned down to a bed of glowing embers. It gave just enough light to see her by.

"Why are you so quiet?" I asked her.

"Quiet?" she said. "Am I?"

"You never say a word unless I ask you something."

"What should I say?"

"I don't know. You could talk about the weather."

She laughed. "You can see the weather as well as I can."

"You could talk about where we're going then, and what we're going to do when we get there."

"I don't always know," she said. "Anyway, what difference would it make? We may end up where we were going, or we may not. And when we get there, there may be something else to do than what we thought."

I smiled at her before I could stop myself.

"What?" she said.

I couldn't resist teasing her a little.

"I've never heard you say so much at once," I said.

She frowned and looked away, and I remembered Sparrow's words and wondered if Maara thought I was making fun of her.

"I wasn't laughing at you," I said. "I smiled because I was happy."

She thought about that for a minute. "Why?"

"I like to hear you talk. It makes me feel less lonely."

"Lonely," she echoed back to me.

She seemed to turn the word over in her mind.

"Aren't you ever lonely?"

She didn't answer.

###

The next day we traveled higher into the hills in search of a breeze. The air, heated by a blazing sun, lay still and heavy on the ground. My pack chafed my shoulders, and my skin prickled with sweat. I was so uncomfortable that

all I could think of was a drink of water and a cool place to rest.

Maara stopped so suddenly I almost ran into her.

"Look at that grove of trees in the gully over there," she said.

I looked.

"Tell me what you see."

"Shade," I said.

"What else?"

"Nothing. Just some trees."

"Look at the grass around the trees."

I was in no mood for solving puzzles. I started to say something foolish when I saw what she meant for me to see. There was a trail of trodden grass leading into the grove. There was no trail leading out. I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck.

"Are there people under those trees?" I asked her.

"Maybe," she said. "Maybe cattle, although the grass doesn't appear trampled down enough for cattle. Whoever went under the trees could have left by the same way they went in, but I'd say there are people there, resting in the shade."

"I wish we were resting in the shade," I said.

Maara silenced me with a look.

"If an enemy were hidden in those trees," she said, "you could meet your death there in the shade."

###

That evening we made camp on a hillside, not far from the ruins of an ancient stronghold. Hardly anything was left of it. The sun, low in the sky, cast shadows of the old embankments on the ground.

"Who made this place?" I asked her.

"The old ones," she replied.

I hesitated. I could think of no better way to ask her about herself except just to ask.

"Sparrow said that you are of a clan of the old ones."

I waited for her to speak without looking at her, so that she wouldn't feel compelled to answer.

"I don't know," she said.

"What?"

"I don't know my clan."

"Everyone knows her clan."

"I don't," she said.

Although I heard the irritation in her voice, I persisted.

"How is it possible not to know the clan you were born to?"

"They all died when I was a child. There was no one left to teach me."

Then I understood that I had opened an old wound, and I didn't know how to help her close it again. If she had been one of us, I would have touched her as we do when we've caused someone pain without meaning to, but she seemed so different in her ways I didn't dare.

While I was trying to think of something to say to her, she wrapped herself in her cloak and lay down to sleep. It was a long time before she closed her eyes.

When I asked about her clan, I hadn't remembered my obligation to the Lady. Now I thought of it, and I lay awake, wondering whether I was bound to tell the Lady what my warrior had told me. All I had learned was that she didn't know her clan and that none of them were still living. The more I thought about it, the more I believed there was nothing to tell after all.

###

I woke just after midnight. When I glanced over to where Maara should have lain asleep, I saw that she was gone. For several minutes I waited for her to return. When she didn't, I got up to look for her. It was her voice that led me to her. She was sitting on the tumbled earth of the ruined embankments, talking to someone so softly that I couldn't make out what she was saying.

At first I thought a messenger from the household had come to find us and bring us news, but when I approached her, I saw she was alone. She paid no attention to me. She was speaking in a tongue that was like nothing I'd ever heard before. Though I couldn't understand a word of it, she put me in mind of a child talking to her mother.

Then it occurred to me that perhaps she was speaking with the spirits of the old ones. I felt the hair stand up all over my head. The places of the old ones were to be respected, not trodden over carelessly. While she may have been one of them, I was not, and they would surely see me as an intruder.

I was about to leave as quickly as I could when she lifted her face up to

the moonlight. She had a strange look in her eyes. It took me a moment to realize she was asleep.

She spoke one word that sounded like a name. She paused, waiting for an answer. She said the word again and held out her hand. I stepped forward and took it, and led her back to her sleeping place. Then I sat down and drew her down beside me.

“Lie down,” I said. “Close your eyes. Let sleep come.”

She lay down, and I tucked her cloak around her.

I lay awake for a long time, until at last I fell into a sleep so troubled by restless dreams that I woke in the morning hardly the better for it. I waited for her to speak of what had happened, but she seemed not to remember.

###

We were now high in the hills. The trail we followed was steep and difficult. Soon my lack of sleep caught up with me, and I began to stumble. Maara saw that I was worn out. In the early afternoon she found a place for us to camp in a grove of trees beside a stream.

That day was even hotter than the day before. We cooled ourselves in the stream as we bathed the day’s dust away. Then we had a bite to eat. The food and the heat made me drowsy.

Maara stood up and buckled on her armor. When I got up to help her, she motioned to me to sit back down and said, “Sleep for a while.”

“I’m not sleepy,” I said. “I’ll go with you.”

“Do what I tell you.”

Although it was not said unkindly, it surprised me.

“Wait for me here,” she said.

I watched her leave the grove and follow the footpath higher into the hills. Once I was alone, some instinct told me not to fall asleep. I had no reason to believe I wasn’t safe there. We were well within the boundaries of Merin’s land, but I remembered Maara’s words about meeting my death in the shade. Anyone who passed nearby would see the grove as a good place to shelter from the heat. If my warrior had been with me, I would have felt quite safe. Alone, I could not defend myself. I felt like the wildcat’s kitten, who knows enough to lie still in the tall grass while its mother hunts.

I sat cross-legged, so that if I fell asleep I would fall over and wake myself up. From time to time I went to the edge of the grove to watch, in case

someone was approaching. I was careful to stay under the trees, to avoid being seen.

All through the long twilight I waited. Darkness fell, and I began to be afraid. I worried that something had happened to my warrior.

It was a warm night, but I wouldn't have made a fire in any case, lest it give me away. I sat still and listened to the night sounds. A fox barked. A breeze rustled the branches overhead. Small creatures in the grass made enough noise for a pack of wolves.

I shouldn't have thought of wolves. This was not wolf country. It was too close to where cattle were pastured, and dogs would have harried the wolves out of it. Only in winter, when the wolves were desperate, would they come this close to humankind. So I told myself, but still my imagination tormented me with night fears. I peered into the darkness, trying to see with little light to see by. In a few hours the moon would rise. Now there was only starlight. In the grove, under the trees, the darkness was almost complete.

A faint light glimmered not far away. Was it the starlight reflected in the moving water of the stream, or could it be a reflection in an animal's eye? A dark shape rose from the darker earth. I tried to convince myself it was only the large rock I'd sat on earlier that day while I bathed my tired feet in the cool water of the stream. Something moved beside it. A frond of fern, I thought, waving beside the rock.

But my fearful heart saw a wolf's tail, and my mind created for itself the image of ears flattening against the head, the gleam of bared teeth. For a time that felt much longer than it was, the wolf created by my fear stood before me in the grove.

I closed my eyes and tried to think of something that would drive the fear away. The image of my warrior appeared in my mind's eye. At once my fears left me.

I heard a noise, a clicking sound, then just the slightest rustling in the grass. I opened my eyes and saw in the shadows a darker shadow moving toward me. By closing my eyes I had sharpened my night vision, but the effect lasted only for a moment. I closed my eyes and kept them closed for as long as I dared. When I opened them, I saw again the shadow moving toward me under the trees.

I felt no fear. Beside me was an ancient tree whose gnarled and twisted trunk I meant to climb. That tree would have been difficult to climb in daylight. Afterwards I had no idea how I climbed it in the dark, but without

knowing how it happened, I found myself among its branches.

I could no longer see the place where the shadow had moved under the trees, so I depended on my ears. For several minutes I heard only the sounds I had become used to. Then I heard a sound no animal would make. It might have been the sound of water trickling over rocks, but there was something familiar about it. It was a sound I had been hearing for weeks without being aware of it. It was the gentle clicking of a buckle. It was my warrior.

Still I didn't move or make a sound. I didn't understand why she hadn't called to me, why she had approached the grove so silently. Until I understood I would stay where I was.

"You can come down now," she said.

I didn't answer her.

"Were you going to stay up there all night?"

She struck a light from her firestones, and a spark fell into a nest of dry grass. In a few minutes she had a small fire burning.

"Aren't you coming down?" she said.

Climbing down was going to be more difficult than climbing up had been. "I think I'm stuck."

She came over to the tree and looked up at me.

"Do the best you can," she said. "I won't let you fall."

I couldn't see where to put my feet, but I managed to climb down part of the way. Then I came to a place where I could find no foothold.

"Slide your foot down the trunk," she said.

I did as she told me. When my hands were about to lose their grip, I felt her hand under my foot.

"Bring the other foot down," she said.

I rested as much of my weight as I dared on her hand while I searched for a new foothold. I thought I had found one, but when I put my weight on it, my foot slipped, my hands lost their grip, and I fell. She caught me as if I weighed no more than a sack of barley and set me on my feet.

I didn't know whether to thank her or be angry with her.

"Where were you?" I asked her.

"Are you hungry?" she said.

She found our pack and took from it the flatbread we'd baked that morning and some sour apples, picked from a wild apple tree. After we had eaten, she said, "Tell me what you learned."

Then I understood that by leaving me alone there, she had meant to

teach me something. I thought about what I had done, but first I wanted an answer from her.

"Where were you?" I asked her.

"Close by," she said.

"Where?"

"Within sight of this grove. I'll show you the place in the morning, if you like."

"You were watching me?"

"I saw you when you came out to look around. I couldn't see you when you were under the trees, but I could see the grove and anyone who might approach it."

I didn't understand then what I was feeling that caused me to question her, but I believe she did understand.

"I wouldn't have left you alone," she said.

Her words cut the string of doubt that bound my heart. My fear had made me feel that she'd abandoned me, and when I understood that she had been there all along, watching over me, I could have hugged her for giving me that reassurance.

"Did you sleep?" she asked me.

"No."

"Why not?"

"It felt dangerous."

"You have good instincts," she said. "What did you do?"

"What you saw. I watched for anyone approaching."

"What did you do when it got dark?"

"I sat still and worried that something had happened to you."

I saw a smile lift the corner of her mouth before she turned away.

"Is that all?"

I remembered my fear, and now it seemed so silly that I had to laugh at myself. "I watched my mind make a wolf out of that rock."

I pointed to the rock beside the stream and to the fern frond beside it.

"Look," I said. "It even has a tail."

"You saw a wolf there?"

"Yes."

"Is the wolf your guardian?"

I had never heard the word before. "My guardian?"

She shook her head at me and made a tut-tut sound. "You tell me I must

know my clan, and you don't know your guardian?"

"No," I said. "What's a guardian?"

"A protector, and something more. They remind us of what we once were, of what we still are."

"Is the wolf my guardian?"

"I don't know."

She sat gazing into the fire, thinking something over.

At last she said, "When you saw the wolf, were you afraid?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I tried to think of something else," I said. "Something that would drive the fear away. I thought of you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I feel safe with you."

It was the truth, and I didn't hesitate to tell her so, but it seemed to trouble her. A worry line appeared between her brows. Before I could ask her what was wrong, she leaned forward and threw dirt on the embers of the fire. Suddenly we were in darkness.

"Look for your wolf now," she said.

I watched the rock transform itself. The wolf's tail appeared, her eyes sparkled, and her ears flattened against her head. Her lip curled, to reveal the gleam of teeth. The wolf stared at me, and I stared back.

"Speak to her," Maara whispered.

I had forgotten she was there, although she was so close to me that I could feel the warmth of her skin and smell the apples on her breath.

"Ask her what she wants from you," she said.

I began to form the question in my mind, but almost before I asked it, I received an answer. As clear as Maara's soft voice beside me, the wolf spoke.

"No harm to me, no harm from me," she said.

She melted into the dark, and the rock was a rock again.

"She's gone," I said.

"Did she speak to you?"

"Yes, she said—"

"Don't tell me. Her words were for you."

I put my hand over the place in my chest where my fear had been. It felt

warm and full of light. It was not that I no longer feared the wolf. Wolves had haunted my dreams from childhood. In wintertime they came to take our sheep, and I had often lain in bed shivering with fear as I listened to their voices howling down the wind.

I had no desire to meet a real wolf, even if it was my guardian, but I also knew that some being that was not myself had spoken to me from the mind of the wolf I'd called out of the rock. I had never before experienced anything like it.

"Thank you," I said.

"I wanted you to learn to be alone and to be alone in the dark. It seems you've learned much more than that."

"I also learned that I'll have to redo the stitching on your buckle. That's how I knew you were here."

"I was wondering about that," she said.

###

"Does she treat you well?" Sparrow asked me.

"Of course."

"She didn't in the beginning," she reminded me.

That time seemed very long ago.

"What's she like?" Sparrow asked.

"She appeared a bit odd to me at first, but I suppose I must have become used to her."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Well," she said, "does she ever talk? Does she treat you like a servant? Does she punish you when you make a mistake?"

"She's always been kind to me. She's never punished me. And as for treating me like a servant, sometimes it's all I can do to persuade her to allow me to do things for her."

I thought I caught a glimpse of envy in Sparrow's eyes.

"Does Eramet punish you?"

She didn't answer me.

###

It was late. Maara and I had spent the evening sitting in the great hall. Few people ever spoke to her. It may have been because she was a stranger, though her manner also put them off. Whether she was aware of it or not, she tended to glower when she was in a crowd of people. That evening she was eavesdropping on a conversation about what had been happening along our northern border. When she saw me yawning, she sent me up to bed.

I slept lightly, and I woke as soon as she came into the room. I raised the wick in the lamp I had left burning, to give her more light, but when I started to get up, to help her get ready for bed, she told me to go back to sleep. She undressed and slipped into her sleeping shirt. Then she pinched out the flame of the lamp and got into her bed.

As I lay there in the dark, I felt Maara's presence in the room, familiar and comforting. When she was with me, the world was as it should be. I hardly remembered the woman with angry eyes who wouldn't have me near her.

"Why didn't you want me?" I asked the question the moment it came into my head. If I had stopped to think about it, I might have said it differently, or I might not have said anything at all.

For a time she didn't answer. I thought she might already be asleep, but at last she said, "I don't know what you mean."

"When I first came to you, you said you didn't want a companion."

"Oh." She was quiet for so long I thought she wasn't going to answer me. Then she said, "I was wrong to do that. I'm sorry."

"You must have had a reason at the time."

"If I did," she said, "I've forgotten it."

MISSING

All summer the northern tribes left us in peace. At harvest time their warriors came to raid the farms along our northern border. The time had come for Maara to take up her sword and shield and join our warriors on the frontier. She refused to take me with her.

“Why?” I asked her.

She didn’t answer me. She concentrated on the folding of her pack.

“Please,” I said.

“No.”

“Are you afraid you can’t depend on me?”

“No.”

“Why, then?”

“It’s too dangerous,” she said. “You’re not ready.”

“I thought I was doing well.”

She stopped what she was doing and looked at me.

“You’re doing very well,” she said. “Next year you’ll be ready, but not now.”

As disappointed as I was that she wouldn’t take me with her, this was the first time she’d ever praised me in so many words, and the pleasure it gave me stopped my protests.

“Let me go part way with you then,” I said.

“Maybe,” she replied.

In the morning we went north together. We stopped well before dark and made our camp. We were still a long way from our northern border, but we had gone as far as she would let me go. We ate our supper early. I had run out of things to chatter on about. I already missed her.

She asked me for a story. She took me by surprise, and I began the first one that popped into my head.

In ancient days, when only women were warriors, lived a young girl and her mother in a cottage at the edge of the forest. All around the cottage were meadows where they grazed their sheep, and in the springtime flowers of great beauty grew there. The forest was a dark and dangerous place, the abode of wolves. In wintertime, the

hungry wolves came in search of sheep, and every year they killed at least a few.

All her life the girl had feared the forest. One summer day, when the flowers in the meadow had all bloomed and faded, she sat near her flock in the shade of an old oak at the forest's edge. The day was hot, and soon she slept. The sound of singing filled her dreams. She awoke, and still she heard it. Sometimes one voice, sometimes many, echoed among the trees.

The girl followed the sound. Deep she went into the forest, deep into the dark beneath the trees, until she came to a clearing where flowers grew. They were all the colors of the night – the violet of twilight, the pale silver of the moon, the rose of dawn. In her delight, she fell to her knees and began to pick them.

She had forgotten that it was the song she'd followed, but when the singing stopped, she remembered. She stood up and put the flowers she had gathered into the folds of her tunic. Then she began to be afraid. She turned for home but could not find her way. Night was falling.

As the darkness deepened, she saw the amber eyes of wolves glowing in the shadows. The wolves drew near, until they were all around her. The whole pack of them pressed in on her, so that she could not tell one wolf from the other.

They began to run, and she had no choice but to run with them. It felt to her as if her body ran on all fours, as if she were gathering her arms and legs beneath her before springing forward with a power she had never had before. Her eyes could see as well in darkness as in daylight. Her ears attuned themselves to every sound. She heard the wings of night birds as they pursued their prey, the scurrying feet of mice, the beating hearts of hunted animals, and their last cries.

New smells too came to her on the air – the rotting of the forest floor, the breath of leaves, the bite of water as they passed a brook, the scent of each wolf, as distinct as the faces of the people she knew. She ran and ran until she had no memory of herself, and her waking life became a dream that shimmered at the edges of her mind.

In the morning the girl awoke beneath the oak tree. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she caught sight of a wolf as it vanished into the forest, but it may have been only the shadow of her dream.

She knew her mother would be worried, so she hurried home. Before she went into the cottage, she stopped by a brook to wash her face and hands. When she leaned over the water, out of the folds of her tunic fell flowers the colors of the night — the violet of twilight, the pale silver of the moon, the rose of dawn.

I must have scared myself with that story, or perhaps I was already afraid for my warrior, but that night I had bad dreams. I woke to see her sitting by the warm ashes of the fire.

“Were the wolves after you?” she said.

A little smile played around the corners of her mouth. I didn’t mind her teasing, and her smile lifted my heart.

In the morning she left me. I was in no hurry to go home. I didn’t want the others to see the tears that came too easily. I camped that evening not far from Merin’s house. It wasn’t until the next afternoon that I felt ready to face the household.

I tried to tell myself that I was only disappointed to be left behind, but at last I had to admit to myself how much I missed her. I had been alone in Merin’s house until my warrior needed me, and then I wasn’t lonely anymore.

###

The Lady was angry with me.

“Did you know she was going to the frontier?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “She told me she was going to join the others.”

“But she left alone.”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t think it strange?”

“No,” I said. “She told me —”

“Did it never occur to you that she might be lying to you?”

“No,” I said. “She doesn’t lie.”

The Lady shook her head at me. “You have no idea if she has lied to you or not. From what you’ve told me about her, she says so little that it would be difficult to catch her in a lie. And sometimes the greatest lies are found in what people fail to say.”

I was confused. “She told me she was going to join the warriors who went

north with Vintel a week ago.”

“And why did she not leave with them a week ago?”

I couldn’t answer her. I didn’t know.

“Did she tell you why she wouldn’t take you with her?”

“She said I wasn’t ready.”

“Well, that may be true enough,” she said. “Or it may have been an excuse to get rid of you, so that she could go back to wherever she came from.”

That possibility had never occurred to me.

“When did she leave you?” the Lady asked me.

“Yesterday morning,” I replied.

The Lady looked alarmed. “How far did she take you, that you were two days coming home?”

“She didn’t take me far.”

I wanted to reassure the Lady that my warrior hadn’t taken me into danger, but I was embarrassed to admit to her why I had stayed away so long.

“I turned my ankle a bit on the way home,” I said. “I rested it for a day so that I wouldn’t make it worse.”

Though it was true I’d turned my ankle, I had done it earlier that day, and it hadn’t bothered me much.

Suddenly the Lady’s face changed. She had been impatient with me. Now she smiled and put her arm around my shoulders.

“My dear,” she said. “You are so young. I know how she must appear to you. She is a warrior. She is strong and brave and skillful. She is everything you want to be, and she has been teaching you, although she has no obligation to.”

My mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Of course I knew about it,” she said. “There is little I don’t know about what happens here.”

The Lady put her hands on my shoulders and turned me to face her.

“Your mother is my dearest friend,” she said. “Your family and mine were the first to take this land. Together we have held it for many generations, and we will hold it for many generations more. I’ve put my trust in you, believing that of all the people in my service, you would not be turned against me.” She looked long into my eyes. “Do you belong to your warrior or to me?”

“To you,” I said.

It was the only answer I could give her, though it hurt my heart to say

it. I felt Maara's disappointment, as if she could have heard me, yet by her oath she belonged to the Lady just as I did.

The Lady smiled. "Good," she said.

"What do you believe she's going to do?"

"I have no idea," she replied. "Maara may be just what she claims to be, or she may not. If I had known she was leaving for the frontier, I would have sent someone with her, to see that she joined our warriors there. If you had come home yesterday, I would have sent someone after her, but as it is, all we can do now is wait for news. If she joins Vintel, I will know it within the week. If not, we'll have to wait and see what happens."

"I can't believe she would betray us. I would trust her with my life."

"And with all our lives?"

"She almost lost her life in your service," I reminded her.

"She made her oath to me. She did no more than keep it."

"Why did you accept her oath if you were so afraid of her?"

"I accepted her because she had nowhere else to go, and because I trusted my own feelings about her, but it's always wise to make sure that one's feelings tell the truth."

The Lady gave me a quick hug, the first she'd ever given me, and kissed my brow.

"I know you meant well," she said. "Try not to worry about this. There may be no harm done, and even if she does betray us to the northern tribes, we are much stronger than they. The knowledge of our strength should only discourage them from trying it."

That night I went to my bed in tears. I had failed in my obligation to the Lady. She had warned me not to be too trusting, but in all the time I'd spent with Maara, I never doubted her intentions for a minute. Now I didn't know if I had been right or wrong.

###

A week went by without news. After another week, we knew my warrior hadn't joined Vintel's band. The Lady said nothing more to me about it. She must have known how sorry I was that I had disappointed her, and she was wise enough not to humiliate me by saying, "I told you so."

My head and my heart could not agree. When I tried to convince myself that Maara had betrayed us, I could easily find evidence against her. We

had explored Merin's land together, and now she had knowledge, not only of the countryside, but of our defenses and our weaknesses. She had asked me many questions I couldn't answer since I too was a newcomer to Merin's house. Because I felt close to her, all the more so because she was close to no one else, I would have told her anything.

But my heart would not believe she had been false to us. My heart missed her and worried about her. My heart reminded me of the times I'd made her laugh and the times I'd seen her watching me with pride when I was learning something new. My heart remembered the kindness in her eyes. When I remembered these things, I forgot what my head told me. I believed my heart.

###

I moved my bed back to the companions' loft. I felt less lonely there, even though most of the companions, including Sparrow, were away with their warriors at the frontier. Every day I went out into the countryside to help bring in the harvest. It gave me something to do, and at night I was so tired that I fell into my bed and slept a dreamless sleep.

On my way to and from the fields, I stopped by the oak grove. It lay a short distance from Merin's house, just off the path that joined the river road. The ancient trees had once been part of the great forest that generations past had cleared for farmland. They had spared the sacred groves. The oak grove was sacred to the Mother, and every day without fail I left an offering. My mother always told me that a gift expects no return, so I never asked for anything, but I brought my warrior's image before my mind's eye, to remind the Mother to keep Maara in her sight.

INNOCENT

When the last sheaf of grain had been cut and bound and carried home, it was time to celebrate the harvest. The sheaf was laid upon the harvest table in the great hall, and the feast began. For a week we had the best of everything, as much as we could eat, and more barley beer than we could drink.

On the last night of the festival, the Lady took up the Mother-sheaf and carried it outdoors. The whole household followed her, through the maze of earthworks and halfway down the hill to the meeting ground, where the country people were assembled. Almost everyone who lived on Merin's land was there.

The Lady waited for the people to gather around her. When we were quiet, she began to speak. She spoke to us as a mother speaks to her children. She was in fact the mother of us all. This land was hers, and every soul that drew life from it was hers to care for. She spoke to us of our good fortune, of the plenty we enjoyed, of the Mother's many gifts to us. She thanked us all for our hard work, and she thanked the Mother for making it fruitful. When she spoke of the coming winter, her voice gathered our hearts around the warm hearth she promised us.

The sun was setting, and the whole sky was ablaze. The Lady's voice soothed me. All was well. All was as it should be. The warmth of the people gathered there shielded me against the growing chill. When the sun had gone and the fire in the sky began to fade, the Lady set the Mother-sheaf alight. We watched it burn until the last ember flickered out.

Someone slipped her hand into mine. It was Sparrow. She drew me away from the crowd and offered me her cup of ale.

The people were beginning to disperse. They wandered about aimlessly over the hillside, still under the spell of the Lady's voice. So was I too under her spell, and the ale made me lightheaded. Sparrow led me down the hill, away from the others.

"Where are we going?" I asked her.

She giggled. I think she'd had too much to drink.

"Just down the hill a bit," she said. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

She hurried on, until we were among the trees by the river. Sparrow sat down in the soft grass. When I sat down beside her, she edged closer to me and took my hand. I waited for her to tell me what was on her mind. Instead she looked down at my hand in hers. She turned it over and touched my palm.

“Such small hands,” she said.

I started to pull my hand away, but she took it between both of hers and held it fast.

“Do you miss her?” she asked me.

“Who?”

“Your warrior.”

Ever since the Lady had begun to speak, I hadn’t once thought about my warrior. Like the wind rushing into an empty house, my fear for her rushed back into my heart.

“Yes,” I replied. “I miss her very much.”

Sparrow had only just returned from the frontier, and I didn’t know if she had heard of Maara’s disappearance. I felt the less said about it the better.

“Do you ever sit like this with your warrior?” she asked me.

“Like what?”

Sparrow looked at me as if she thought I should have understood her. She saw that I did not.

“All those evenings when you were out in the countryside with her,” she said, “didn’t she ever approach you?”

I had no idea what she was talking about.

Sparrow’s fingers brushed my cheek. She smiled. “Surely you’re old enough for love.”

I was so surprised I didn’t know how to answer her.

She leaned toward me and touched my lips with hers. I began to feel warm all over, and my hand trembled in her hand. She leaned back and gazed at me.

“I do believe you are an innocent,” she said.

“I have never lain with a man,” I told her.

“Nor with a woman.”

“No.”

“Are all you country girls so backward?”

Her teasing embarrassed me, and my embarrassment made me angry. “If I’m backward, it’s no concern of yours.”

Sparrow laughed. "Not at all. You may keep your secrets."

She knew perfectly well that I had none to keep.

Now I understood why she had asked me if I missed my warrior, but the thought of Maara approaching me for love almost made me laugh. Sometimes I still had trouble getting her to speak with me.

Then I began to wonder why Sparrow would ask me such a thing. Why would she assume something that had never once occurred to me? In my mind, I answered my own question, and the answer made a little shiver run down my spine.

"Do all the companions here lie with their warriors?" I asked her.

"Not all," she said.

"Do you lie with Eramet?"

"When she wants me."

I heard the sadness in her voice. "When she wants you?"

"Tonight she's with Vintel."

"Vintel?"

All I could think of was that if Vintel had returned from the frontier, she might have news of Maara.

"Eramet was Vintel's apprentice," Sparrow said.

I was torn. I wanted to stay with Sparrow, to let her tell me what was troubling her. She had so often listened to my troubles. But I also wanted to hurry back to Merin's house to find Vintel. Then it occurred to me that if Vintel was with Eramet, I would be wise to wait until morning.

I turned my thoughts back to Sparrow.

"Do you mind?" I asked her.

"Mind?"

"That Eramet lies with someone else."

"I shouldn't," she said, "but I do."

I waited to see if she would tell me more, but she stood up and said, "We should go back. It's late."

She gave me her hand to help me up. When I was on my feet, she would have let go, but I kept hold of her. I held her hand all the way home.

###

In the morning I went to Vintel's room. When she answered my knock, I lifted the curtain and went in. She had stood up to greet me. Perhaps she

was expecting someone else.

Although I had seen Vintel almost every day in the great hall, I had never before spoken to her, nor had I ever been this close to her. A woman of impressive height and even more impressive presence, she filled the tiny room. When she saw me, she sat down, and the way she moved, graceful and sinuous, reminded me of a weasel. Her features were unusual, but not unpleasant. She regarded me with curiosity.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," I said, "but have you any news of Maara?"

Vintel shook her head.

I thanked her and turned to leave.

"Do you still expect her?" she asked me.

I nodded.

"I believe she will disappoint you."

Her words brought tears to my eyes. I bit my lip, to make them stop.

Vintel looked at me then as if she were taking my measure.

"You could go to the frontier with me," she said. "I'm going back tomorrow. I returned to Merin's house only to bring Maerel's body home."

Maerel had been Vintel's companion. I hadn't known her well, but the news of her death shocked me when I heard of it the night before in the companions' loft. They told me she didn't die at the hands of an enemy, but drowned when they made a river crossing. The Mother's river can be as dangerous as the northern tribes.

Vintel cocked her head at me. "Well?" she said.

I didn't know what she was asking me. I was still thinking of Maerel.

"Will you come with me or not?" she said.

"As your companion?"

"Of course."

It was a tempting offer. I would have jumped at the chance to go to the frontier with Maara, but it felt disloyal to companion someone else. And I was cautious for a reason I didn't understand until I had a chance to think about it. I was afraid of what Vintel would require of me.

I shook my head. "I thank you for the honor," I said, "but I believe my warrior will return."

###

That evening, just as the sun began to set, we laid Maerel's body in the

barrow. With her we put everything she owned except her clothing. There wasn't much. She was to have married in the spring, and she had a bride necklace her betrothed had given her. Her comb, her knife, and a small bronze mirror were laid beside her. Each of the companions gave her a grave gift. I set a pot of sweet herbs at her feet. Sparrow gave her a blue stone.

I had seen death before. Children die of fevers. Women die in childbed. I had lost childhood friends. This death, though, touched me in a way no other death had done. Maerel was a companion, as was I. She had awakened on the morning of her dying day as alive as I, and as certain she would rest that night in her own bed as I was certain I would rest that night in mine.

HOME COMING

It was Sparrow who told me my warrior had come home. She found me in the oak grove. Two months had passed since Maara left us, and most of our warriors had returned from the frontier. Soon only the winter weather would guard our borders. The gloomy day matched my mood. No one now expected Maara to return. The Lady had mentioned to me more than once that Vintel needed a companion. I hid, even from myself, how little hope I had of seeing my warrior again. When I heard Sparrow say, “She’s come back,” I felt as if the sun had come out from behind the clouds and brought the color back into the world.

Then I saw that Sparrow could hardly catch her breath, that she must have run all the way from Merin’s house. I thought she was just eager to bring me the good news. As soon as she could speak again, she said, “Come quickly, before they kill her.”

I left Sparrow, winded as she was, far behind. Even before I entered Merin’s house, I heard angry voices. Warriors filled the great hall. Some had drawn their swords, and for a moment I feared to see my warrior lying dead in their midst. Eramet stood facing them. Sword in hand, she blocked the narrow stairway that led upstairs. I pushed through the crowd.

“Where is she?” I shouted over the din.

“She’s with the Lady,” Eramet replied. She moved aside for me, but as I went past her, she caught my arm and said in a low voice close to my ear, “Tell the Lady I need her here.”

I ran on up the stairs and burst into the Lady’s chamber. Three faces turned toward me — Vintel’s, the Lady’s, and my warrior’s.

“Eramet needs you in the great hall,” I told the Lady.

The Lady turned to Vintel and said, “Stay with them,” before she left the room.

Maara’s sword was in Vintel’s hand. Her shield and armor lay beside her on the floor, along with the knife and hatchet she carried on her belt. As frightened as I was, I couldn’t help smiling at her. Her expression didn’t change. She looked defeated. She returned my gaze for a moment, then turned away, as if I meant nothing to her.

The Lady was gone no more than a minute or two. When she returned,

she told Vintel to lock Maara in the armory.

“Why would we disarm her only to lock her in with the weaponry?” Vintel protested.

The Lady had little patience left, but she gave Vintel an explanation, although she owed no one an explanation for her actions.

“Where else should I keep her?” she said. “I want her here in this house. No other place is safe for her. The armory is as hard to break into as it is to break out of, and if anyone does break in, the woman will be able to defend herself.”

The armory was downstairs, between the kitchen and the great hall. The heavy door usually stood open, but it could be barred from either side, so that the armory could also serve either to confine someone or as a refuge of last resort. It was filled with wooden chests and wicker baskets containing weapons of all kinds—swords, hunting spears and battle spears, and bows, with arrows for small game and big game, and for war. With the door closed, it would be hot and airless and uncomfortably small. I would have wished for my warrior a better homecoming.

Vintel made a gesture to Maara to go ahead of her. When I started to follow them, the Lady touched my arm.

“Stay,” she said.

The Lady drew her chair up to the small fire burning on the hearth and sat down. She gazed into the flames and was quiet for so long that I thought she’d forgotten I was there.

I shuffled my feet a little, and she looked up.

“Sit down,” she said.

Hers was the only chair in the room, and I didn’t like to perch on the edge of her bed, so I sat down on the hearthstone.

“Maara has brought me some disturbing news,” the Lady said. “If it’s true, many may owe their lives to her. If it’s not, we may waste our warriors on a diversion while our enemies take what we must leave unguarded.”

I didn’t know if she expected a reply or if she was just thinking out loud, so I held my tongue, although I was bursting with questions.

“Maara won’t tell me why she failed to join Vintel,” the Lady said. “I believe I know the reason, but I would like to hear her confirm it. I would find it easier to trust the news she brings me if I knew the truth about that.” She turned in her chair and looked at me. “Eramet just told me that Maara was wounded last spring because none of our warriors would stand with her or

leave their friends to help her.”

I could hardly believe my ears. When I understood her meaning, my anger loosened my tongue. “How could they be so cowardly!”

“Hush,” the Lady said. “We don’t yet know the truth of it. Eramet wasn’t with them, and I didn’t ask her how she knew, though I could guess.”

Vintel was one of the warriors who carried Maara home. Perhaps she told Eramet what had happened that day.

“If they wanted her dead, why didn’t they leave her to bleed to death?”

“It’s not that they wanted her to die,” the Lady said, “but it seems they saw no reason to risk themselves or their friends to help her. I won’t judge anyone until I know the whole truth, although I doubt that any of them will speak to me. Such matters are settled between warriors.”

I listened as calmly as I could. Later I would have to think over what she’d told me and try to find my own feelings about it. At that moment I had enough to do just to take everything in.

“If it’s true,” she said, “it’s no wonder that Maara didn’t join Vintel at the frontier. I don’t blame her for trying not to make the same mistake a second time.”

I realized then that, if Maara never intended to join Vintel’s band, she had lied to me, and I found the knowledge painful.

“Why didn’t she tell anyone what happened?” I said. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“If it’s true, she understood their reasons and accepted them. Otherwise she would have spoken to me or dealt with them herself.”

For the first time I understood how lonely Maara must have been in Merin’s house.

“Has she no friends here?” I spoke more to myself than to the Lady.

The Lady smiled at me. “Only you,” she said. “And possibly me.”

“Possibly?”

“I know you trust her, and I might trust her for my own life, but I dare not trust her for all the lives that depend on me. After I’ve had some time to think, I’ll speak with her again. I must be as sure as it’s possible to be that she is telling us the truth.”

“If I’m her only friend here,” I said, “then I should be the one to speak with her.”

“This is beyond your skill.”

“I know her better than anyone. I know how to talk to her. I know how

to get her to talk to me. If she tells me the truth, I'll know it, just as I would know a lie."

"She has already lied to you at least once," the Lady reminded me.

"I know."

The Lady weighed my words, then shook her head. "You're too young for this. I will talk to her. You can sit with us if you like, and if you notice something in her face or in her words—"

"No!" I said. "I won't be used against her anymore. If I'm her only friend, then I must be her friend and not use what I know of her against her."

The Lady frowned, and I thought she would remind me to whom I owed my loyalty, but she said nothing. Her silence encouraged me to speak my mind.

"Everyone insists on telling me how young I am, as if that makes me no more aware of what's going on than the dog lying under the table. I can't help being young, but I have eyes and ears, and I can understand, if anyone would bother to tell me things, more than you give me credit for."

I paused for a moment to catch my breath and to control my anger.

"There's another reason why I must be the one to speak with her," I said. "Maara won't explain herself to you. If she were lying, she would have an explanation for everything, to convince you she's telling you the truth. She would try to persuade you, and that would give her away."

"If what she says is true, why would she not try to persuade me of it?"

"Because she will do no more than simply tell the truth."

"So she will tell you the truth because you will believe her?"

"She will tell me the truth because she's truthful."

###

The Lady went downstairs with me. Outside the armory, Vintel stood guard. I made them both wait while I brought some cold meat and bread and a pitcher of ale.

When Vintel opened the armory door, I saw that Maara had no lamp. She had been lying on the floor in the dark, and when the light fell on her face, she sat up and shielded her eyes.

"I need a lamp," I told Vintel.

"What if she sets the house on fire?"

"Then we'll both burn with it," I replied.

"Bring a lamp," the Lady told Vintel.

Vintel brought a lamp and handed it to me. By the time I set it down in a niche inside the armory, Maara's eyes had grown accustomed to the light. She started to get up, but the flat of Vintel's sword on her shoulder stopped her.

"May I bring water to bathe her?" I asked the Lady.

She nodded.

"And some clean clothes for her?"

"Get whatever you need," the Lady said.

She waited patiently until I returned with a pot of soap, some clean cloths, a bucket of warm water, and a change of clothing for Maara. I went inside the armory and set everything down.

"Tomorrow morning," the Lady said, "I will call the council together, and we'll hear what Maara has to say. In the meantime, I expect no more trouble." She turned to Vintel. "I don't think we need a guard posted, as long as there is someone to let Tamras out when she's ready."

"No," I said. "I'll stay with her."

"As you like," the Lady said.

She nodded to Vintel, who shut and barred the door.

###

Maara reached for the cold meat. I pushed her hand away.

"Not until I bathe you," I said. "You smell like you fell into a bog."

"I'm hungry," she said, but she sat still.

I don't know why I was so abrupt with her. As glad as I was to see her, I had been very frightened, and I was in a hurry to put the world back the way it used to be, so that it would make sense to me again. I untied the yoke of her shirt and pulled it off over her head. She winced, and I saw a dark bruise covering the ribs on her left side.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She shook her head, as if it didn't matter, but after that I was more careful with her. I got her boots and trousers off and washed her as well as I could. She did little to help me. Her body hurt, and she was exhausted, but I felt something else in her that frightened me. I felt that she had abandoned herself, that she no longer cared what happened to her. I worried she might not recover her spirits before she had to face the council in the morning.

When she was as clean as I could make her, I dressed her, and then I let her eat. She offered some to me. I shook my head. She needed all of it.

There was just room enough on the floor of the armory for both of us to sit. While she ate I watched her, until I forgot my fear and my anger. My warrior had returned. I smiled at her.

"What?" she said.

"I'm glad you're home."

"Well," she said, "you're the only one."

She finished the last of the bread and washed it down with ale.

"Are you too tired to talk?"

"About what?"

I started with the thing that bothered me the most. "You lied to me."

Maara looked away.

"You never intended to join Vintel."

"No," she said.

"Will you tell me why?"

"No," she said.

"Eramet told the Lady what happened last spring."

"Eramet wasn't there."

Then she realized that she had confirmed Eramet's story.

"You should have told me."

At last she looked at me. "Why? What would you have done? Would you have told the Lady? Does a warrior need a little girl to run to the Lady with every wrong done to her?"

Her words stung me. "I would never have done anything you didn't want."

She looked away again. "It was between me and the others."

"Not when you made everyone believe you came here to spy on us. When you didn't join Vintel, they thought you'd gone back to your own people in the north, to tell them what you'd learned of us."

She didn't answer, and I thought she might have misunderstood me.

"Everyone but me," I said. "I knew you wouldn't abuse our hospitality."

"Well," she said, "you were right about that."

"I wish you hadn't lied to me."

I wanted her to tell me she was sorry. Instead she said, "Did you believe I didn't know you were the Lady's watchdog?"

Although it was not an accusation, she took me so aback that I couldn't

think of what to say. I had done nothing that would shame me in her eyes. How could I explain to her that she was both right and wrong?

"I have been a very poor watchdog," I told her.

She tried to smile. "You did make it much too easy for me to get away."

"I believed you," I said. "I trusted you. You told me you would join Vintel, and I never doubted that you would. That's why I didn't tell the Lady you were going to go alone to the frontier, although I should have."

Maara still wouldn't meet my eyes. I tried to make her understand.

"The Lady wanted to know more about you," I said. "She asked me to repeat to her anything you might tell me about yourself. Didn't you ever wonder why I never asked you where you came from or why you'd come to Merin's house? I couldn't break faith with the Lady by telling you what she asked of me, but I never broke faith with you."

Maara leaned her head back against a crate and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry I got you into trouble."

"I don't care about being in trouble!" I spoke so sharply that she opened her eyes and looked at me in surprise. "I care that you took advantage of my trust in you. I care that you had so little trust in me. What the Lady asked of me, I couldn't do. She asked it of me again tonight, and I refused her."

"I trusted you," she said.

"Then tell me why you lied to me."

"If I had not, my escape would have been your fault."

"The Lady blamed me anyway."

"Of course she did, but she never questioned your loyalty, did she?"

"No."

"If you had known that I was going to the frontier alone and that I had no intention of joining the Lady's warriors there, and if you had kept that knowledge from her until it was too late, what would that have led her to believe?"

She was right. The Lady had thought me too trusting to see through my warrior's words. She'd scolded me, but she had understood, and she had forgiven me at once. If Maara had told me what she intended, I would have had no choice but to break faith with one or the other of them.

There was something more. I felt it hang unspoken in the air. Before I had time to think about it, Maara spoke again.

"Why are you here? Did the Lady send you to question me?"

"No," I said. "She intended to talk with you herself. I convinced her to

let me talk to you instead.”

“Why?”

“It appears that I’m your only friend here.”

She gave a little shrug. She knew that without my saying so.

“Tomorrow the council will hear what you have to say. I know you as no one else here knows you. I trust you, and whatever you tell me, I will believe it, and I will speak on your behalf before the council.”

“It would be better for you if you were not my friend.”

“It’s too late for that,” I told her.

That made her smile a little. Then she took a deep breath, and her smile faded. “All I ask is that you convince your people that the news I bring them is true, and that if they disregard it, they will find they’ve made a costly mistake.”

“The Lady didn’t tell me. What news do you bring?”

“Do you remember the ravine?”

I nodded. I remembered the place well. A day’s walk south of Merin’s house, the valley narrowed where a range of hills reached almost to the river. A stream had carved a deep ravine through those hills, and on the hottest summer days, Maara and I had scrambled down the steep sides of the ravine, to find relief from the heat in the cool air that rose from the water.

“What lies south of the ravine?” she asked me.

“Farms,” I said. “The orchards. Granaries.”

She knew that as well as I did.

“If you wished to keep the warriors here from going into that country, where would you try to stop them?”

“Just there,” I said, “at the place where the stream flows out of the hills. It wouldn’t take many warriors to hold the strip of land between the hills and the river, and if anyone tried to cross the ravine itself, it would be so difficult a climb that a handful of people could turn them back.”

Maara nodded. “When the first snow falls, warriors will cross the river there. They will hold that narrow strip of land and take as much of the land to the south of it as they can. The granaries will supply them through the winter. In the spring, there will be a well-fed army to the south, and more warriors will come out of the northern mountains.”

Cold fear crept into my heart. “What will happen then?”

“I hope none of it will happen. The Lady must act soon to prevent it.”

That explained what the Lady had said to me. If this news was true, we

could send our warriors south to the ravine, to keep anyone who crossed the river there from gaining a foothold, but if the river crossing was a diversion, raiding parties from the north would find us vulnerable.

Then I remembered what had happened to Maerel.

"Aren't they afraid of the danger of a river crossing?" I asked.

"Desperate people lose their fear."

"How do you know so much about their plans?"

"I spent some time among the northern tribes."

Now I thought I understood where Maara had been all this time.

"You were taken prisoner," I said.

"No."

I struggled for a moment with the only other explanation. "Did you go among them as a spy?" I couldn't hide my disappointment in her. It was both honorable and courageous to go as a scout into the country of one's enemies, but to turn a false face to them and walk among them as one of their own was a shameful thing to do.

"No," she said. "I did not."

I waited. She said nothing. She pulled her knees up to her chest and laid her forehead against them, so that I couldn't see her face.

"I don't understand," I said. The skin on the back of my neck prickled with the fear of what she was about to tell me.

After a little while, she raised her head. Still she didn't look at me.

"Your people were wrong about me," she said. "I didn't return to my own people in the north. I have no people there. I have no people anywhere. In any case, I would never have betrayed the Lady's kindness. Nor did I intend to spy on the northern tribes. I learned of what they planned to do by chance. Then I had no choice. I couldn't let their plan succeed."

As I listened to her, strange thoughts wandered through my head. While the surface of my mind heard and understood her, a deeper part played idly with the thought that on this one night she may have spoken to me more words than I had ever heard her speak at once in the whole time I'd known her. Then I noticed how careful with her words she was, and while it seemed that she was saying a great deal, there was much she was leaving out. Then I understood.

"You weren't coming back here, were you?"

"No."

That one word took the breath out of my body. I couldn't speak. I could

only sit and look at her. At that moment she was more a stranger to me than someone I had never met. I was the only one who had believed she was coming home, and I was wrong. I could not comprehend it.

I stood up. I had to get away from her, but there was nowhere to go in that tiny room. If I beat my fists against the door, there was no one to hear me and let me out. Although I didn't cry, I wanted to. I wanted tears to dissolve the hot pain in my chest. I wanted time to flow backwards until those words were unsaid.

"There was no place for me here," she said. "No one wanted me here."

"I did."

I laid my forehead against the door. I was trapped in that room with her, and all I wanted was to get out of it. I heard her stand up behind me.

"You don't understand," she said.

I believed I understood her very well. From the beginning she had kept me at a distance. If she never intended to stay in Merin's house, it was no wonder she hadn't wanted a companion. I could only have been in her way.

She touched my shoulder, and suddenly I was angry. I whirled around and struck her arm away with my open hand. She stared at me, surprised, and rubbed her wrist where I had struck her.

She was standing very close to me. There was hardly room for her to move away, but I didn't think of that. I reached out both my hands to push her away. She caught my wrists, and I struggled to free myself. I broke one hand free and struck her face. She caught my arm again, and this time she drew me to her and wrapped her arms around my body, pinning my arms against my sides. I struggled in her arms. Though I tried with all my strength to free myself, she held me fast.

"Stop," she said.

I stopped. She loosened her grip, but she held on to me for a few moments more, until she felt my anger leave me. Then she let me go.

"Who is this wolf cub?" she said. "Why is she so angry?"

She was trying to make things easier between us. I refused to hear her.

"You never wanted a companion. I don't know why I believed you'd changed your mind."

When I started to turn away, she took me by the shoulders and gave me a little shake.

"Listen to me," she said. "If I had stayed, I would have kept you from having what you wanted."

"I don't understand."

"Aren't you already the companion of another warrior?"

"Of course not."

"Has no one asked for you?"

"Vintel has asked for me."

"Vintel is worthy of you," she said. "Vintel will make a warrior of you."

"She hasn't asked me to be her apprentice."

"She will."

"Would you ask me?"

"No."

The tears that wouldn't come when I wanted them now spilled down my face. Maara let go of me and sat down wearily on one of the crates.

"Who made you my companion?" she said.

"The Lady did."

"Yes, because she needed you to keep an eye on me, but she would never have made you my apprentice. Even if she were willing to bind you to a stranger, the ties of loyalty between warrior and apprentice are so strong that she couldn't have relied on you."

"I couldn't have been more loyal to you if I had been your apprentice."

"I know that," she said. "The Lady didn't understand your heart. By now I think she realizes her mistake."

The lamp must have been flickering for some time, although neither of us had noticed it. It sputtered and went out. I fumbled for it in the dark and found it empty.

"There's no oil left," I said.

"I can talk in the dark."

"What else is there to talk about?"

She didn't answer.

"Sleep now," I said. "There will be time enough to talk tomorrow."

Though I wasn't certain that was true, I could think of nothing more to say. I set the lamp down and felt my way back to her until I touched her arm. She put her hand over mine. I drew my hand away.

We lay down together on the floor between the crates. We were careful not to touch each other. She was so tired that she fell asleep as soon as she lay down, but I couldn't make my thoughts be still.

The most important thing was what would happen in the morning when we went before the council. I believed what she had told me about the

intentions of the northern tribes. She had been safely away from Merin's house, yet she had risked her life by coming back to warn us.

I didn't want to believe what she had said about the Lady. Perhaps it was true that the Lady would have made me an apprentice if she hadn't needed me to be her spy. She would certainly have made me Vintel's companion, and if Vintel were to ask for me as an apprentice, I doubted the Lady would withhold her consent.

Too painful to think about was the knowledge that my warrior had abandoned me. I understood her loneliness. I had been lonely too in Merin's house. I still believed that, given time, the others would have come to know her and to value her as I did. And it hurt to know that my friendship had not been enough.

Maara may have thought that what she'd done was best for both of us, but I could not agree. It was not the first time someone had done something for my own good that broke my heart.

THE COUNCIL

In the morning Eramet came to bring us before the council. She looked past me at my warrior and raised her eyebrows in surprise. When I turned to look at Maara, I saw that her lip was swollen where I'd struck her and blood had dried at the corner of her mouth. I pushed past Eramet and brought some warm water to wash Maara's face. I washed my own face too and brushed the dirt of the armory floor from our hair and clothing. When we were ready, Eramet took us into the kitchen.

The women of the council were seated around a large table. Although I knew each of them by sight and had spoken to one or two, at that moment they were a sea of grey heads and wrinkled faces. Only Fet and Fodla stood out from the rest. They were shield friends and had put away their swords and joined the council only the year before. Fet had taken to wearing a long gown like the others, but Fodla still wore her warrior garb of tunic and trousers. Neither of them looked old enough to be an elder, though they had been warriors in Merin's house when my mother was an apprentice.

The Lady sat, not at the head of the table, but among the other women as their equal. The ovens had been fired early, so that the older women wouldn't feel the cold. There was no place for my warrior and me to sit, but we wouldn't have sat down in any case, out of respect.

The women of the council had been talking quietly together. When we came in, they fell silent, and the Lady rose and addressed them.

"I'm sure you all remember," she said, "that last winter this woman came to us asking for shelter, and I admitted her to my service. Last spring she was wounded so badly that no one believed she would survive her wounds. Only her companion believed her life worth fighting for. She refused to let her warrior die."

I had been studying my bootlaces, but I looked up in surprise when I heard the Lady mention me.

"When Maara left us at harvest time," the Lady went on, "no one here believed she would return. Only her companion believed in her, and now she too stands before you, a witness to her warrior's truthfulness."

The eyes of all the women of the council turned to me. I suddenly felt very small.

The Lady faced my warrior.

"What have you to say to us?" she asked her. "Where have you been since you left us, and what news do you bring us?"

"I bring news of a threat to the safety of your house," Maara said. "I've been among the northern tribes and learned something of their plans."

My warrior's voice was calm and steady. While she spoke, she held the Lady's eyes. Then she paused and looked at each of the other women in turn, so that they could read her intentions in her face.

"The northerners are hungry," she said. "Life has never been easy in the north, and the last few winters have been hard. You've seen for yourselves how boldly they have come into your lands and how many lives they are willing to exchange for what they need."

Again Maara paused. Several of the women nodded in agreement.

"Now they've made such a bold plan that you may find it difficult to believe. They intend to attempt a river crossing. Even now a hundred warriors are traveling south on the far side of the river. At first snowfall they will cross the river south of here, at the ravine."

"How will they bring a hundred warriors across the river?" the Lady asked her.

"The river there is wide and smooth. Small boats they can carry with them might bring them across safely. They will count on having all the time they need to make the crossing. The winter mists will conceal them while they're on the water, and when the snow falls, the country people will bring their animals indoors and stay home by their fires."

Several of the women spoke among themselves for a little while. Maara waited for them to finish. She stood before them so patiently and with such dignity that my heart warmed with pride in her. While I might have stammered out a few ill-chosen words to the women of the council, my warrior spoke with ease and with an eloquent simplicity. If she saw my eyes on her, she gave no sign. She kept her gaze on the women of the council. When she had their attention, she spoke again.

"If the northerners gain a foothold by the river, your warriors will have all they can do to dislodge them. The farms to the south will be at their mercy."

She didn't need to tell these things to the women of the council. She was giving them time to consider the implications of this new threat.

"How did you come to hear of their plans?" the Lady asked her.

It was the question I dreaded.

"I understand the language of the northern tribes," Maara said. "In an ale house I overheard a boast that one man made, that he would bring his wife a copper cauldron from this very hearth."

Expressions of indignation erupted around the table at this bold boast, and the question of just how my warrior had chanced to hear it was forgotten, at least for the moment.

When the women were quiet again, the Lady said to them, "I must tell you that I find it difficult to take this threat seriously."

"Why is that?" asked Fet.

Fet and Fodla sat side by side. They looked very much alike. Both were small and dark, but they were opposites in temperament. Fet was quiet, and she could speak to anyone and not give offense. Fodla was loud and blunt and gave offense constantly.

"It seems a foolish plan," said the Lady. "River crossings have been tried before. None have succeeded. Why would they attempt something so dangerous? I'm inclined to think this plan of theirs is no more than a foolish boast, and many a boast never goes beyond the ale house."

"Or it could be a trick," said Fodla, "and Maara sent to mislead us."

"That is a possibility, of course," the Lady said.

"If we send even half a hundred of our warriors south," said Fodla, "we won't be able to defend the farms along our northern border."

The women murmured their agreement.

Fet made a small noise in her throat, and the other women all fell silent.

"What was Maara doing in an ale house among the northern tribes?"

Fodla turned to look at Fet. The others turned to look at Maara.

"I understand your doubts," Maara said. "You have no reason to place your trust in me. As the Lady said, when I left this place at harvest time, few believed that I intended ever to return to it."

All eyes were on her now, including mine. I knew what she was going to say, and I gave her a little shake of my head to stop her. She met my eyes and said, "The truth convinced you, little one. The truth will convince them too." Then she turned to face the council. "It is true that I did not intend to return to Merin's house."

Now all the women spoke at once. The Lady had to raise her voice to make herself heard. "Let the woman speak," she said.

"I'm grateful to you for giving me shelter when I had nowhere else to go," said Maara, when they were all quiet again, "but I don't belong here. I may never find a place or a people to belong to, although when I left here, I did intend to try. I followed the road taken by the caravans, far into the north. For a while I traveled in the company of traders who were glad to have another warrior with them. In a village where we spent the night, I heard of the northerners' plans. At first I thought, as the Lady did, that such boasts seldom go beyond the ale house, but I heard the same thing in more than one village, and I saw that they were making preparations to carry out their plan."

"So you came back to warn us," said the Lady.

Maara nodded.

Fodla, too agitated to sit still, got to her feet and faced the women of the council. "Why should she do that? By her own admission, she wanted nothing more to do with us. Why should she care what happens here?"

"If you can't believe I would repay your kindness if I could," Maara said, "then remember that I owe this child a life."

Fodla gave my warrior an appraising look. Then she sat down.

"I had forgotten that," she said.

"I had not," said Maara.

###

All morning the council argued. The Lady sent Maara back to the armory to wait. She told me to sit down on the hearth by the ovens in case someone wished to question me, but I think they soon forgot I was there.

Lying next to me on her pallet was Gnith, a woman so old and bent that she could no longer stand, but had to be carried from place to place. Her bones always ached from the cold, and she made her bed by the ovens all year round. Although everyone treated her with great respect, it was the general opinion that her wits had left her long ago. The first time I saw her, I would have mistaken her for a pile of rags lying on the hearth, but for her eyes, like black beads, shining in her wrinkled face.

At first the women of the council considered what was best to do. If Maara's warning was the truth, our warriors must go south to the ravine to prepare a defense. How many should we send? How long should they remain there? And how would we defend against an attack from the north?

Was Maara's news a trick? Where did the true danger lie?

Then they spoke about the river crossing. Some said that the Mother's river had always been the guardian of our western border and that the Mother herself would upend the boats and toss the enemy into the freezing water, as she had done once before, more years ago than most of them could remember. Others suggested that perhaps the northerners had learned to build better boats, or perhaps they were hungrier than they had ever been, as Maara had said.

Namet, a plump, rosy-cheeked woman with short, white hair that lay in soft curls around her face, told a story of a winter long past, when the enemies of her mother's house had sent their warriors out in wintertime. Her story shed only a little light on the current threat, and more stories followed from the other women that had even less to do with the troubles that beset us now.

I grew impatient. Then I grew bored. The next thing I knew, I awakened to find old Gnith's bony finger poking at my ribs and her face close to mine, grinning a toothless grin.

"Bunch of old women!" she whispered. "They'd put me to sleep too."

Then I saw that the Lady was looking at me. I scrambled to my feet.

"Did you talk with your warrior last night?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said.

"Did she tell you she hadn't intended to come back?"

"Yes."

In a soft voice, the Lady said, "That must have hurt."

"Yes."

She turned back to the elders. "Have you anything to ask her?"

"Do you believe the news your warrior brings us?" said Fodla.

"Yes," I said.

"Why?"

"My heart tells me."

"Your heart told you she was coming back."

"Yes," I said.

"So your heart was wrong."

"Not about this."

Fodla opened her mouth to speak again, but Fet, who sat beside her, brushed Fodla's cheek lightly with the backs of her fingers and shook her head, and Fodla said nothing more.

“Who else would question her?” the Lady asked them.

No one spoke. The Lady turned to Eramet, who had stood all morning by the doorway. “Bring Maara here,” she said.

When Eramet had gone, the Lady came over to where I was standing by the hearth. She took my chin in her hand and lifted my face to hers.

“I am going to ask something difficult of you,” she said. “You told me once that you would trust Maara with your life. Would you still?”

“Yes,” I said.

The women of the council were restless. They had looked at the situation from every angle and had talked over every possibility. They had shared their memories and their experience. Their part was over. It was the Lady who would do what needed to be done. Fet and Fodla seemed to be the only ones who were still paying attention. The others fell to gossiping among themselves in quiet voices. Someone mentioned that it was past time for the midday meal.

Maara came into the kitchen. The Lady turned to face her.

“I’m inclined to trust your good intentions,” the Lady said. “Even if the northerners’ plans come to nothing, I can’t ignore this warning. I will send warriors south to the ravine.”

I saw relief in Maara’s eyes.

“Lives depend on what you’ve told us,” the Lady said. “If it’s the truth, you will have a place here, and anyone who shows you disrespect will know my anger. But if you have been false to us, lives will be lost, and for that you will pay a price.”

“I understand,” Maara said.

“Is a life a fair price, do you think?”

My warrior nodded. “It’s no more than I expected.”

“Good,” the Lady said. She turned to the women of the council. “I give this woman the freedom of the house. If she proves treacherous, the life she pledged is forfeit.” She turned to Maara. “And if you leave this house, I will accuse you of treachery, and you will pay the same penalty.”

“Hah!” said Fodla. “Hard to kill her if she’s gone.”

“Her life is not the price,” the Lady said. “The child has put her life into her warrior’s hands.”

A silence fell that made even the mice in the grain bins grow still. No one spoke. No one moved. My heart leaped into my throat, then fell into my boots.

Maara stared at the Lady in disbelief. "No," she said.

The Lady turned again to face her. "If you have been truthful with us, what difference does it make whose life it is?"

I heard the whispered laughter of old Gnith. The Lady exchanged a few words with Fet, then left the room without a word to anyone else. The women of the council began to speak quietly among themselves. Servants went about their preparations for the midday meal.

I felt Maara's eyes on me and turned to meet them. She held my gaze for a moment before she turned on her heel and left the room. I would have followed her, but a bony hand wrapped itself around my ankle. When I looked down, Gnith beckoned to me. I knelt down beside her.

"She's caught her now," Gnith said. A gnarled finger waved in the direction my warrior had taken. "There'll be no more leaving for that one."

Her dark eyes sparkled with delight, as if what had just happened had been acted out for her amusement.

I was too distracted to pay much attention to her. I could hardly comprehend that I was now a hostage in Merin's house. The world that I had felt so safe in yesterday was gone. Nothing was as it should be.

Gnith's fingers were still curled around my ankle. I took her hand in both of mine to free myself. Her skin was cool and as dry as fallen leaves.

"How old am I?" she asked me.

"I don't know, Mother," I said. "Very old, I think."

She pulled her hand out of my grasp and touched my cheek with her fingertips. "Once I was like you."

The world shifted beneath me. My young eyes locked with her old ones, and my mind leaped ahead in time until I saw myself lying as helpless as Gnith upon this very hearth. I tried to look back on the memories I'd made, but the past was dark.

"What lies between, Mother?" I asked her.

"Lunch," she said.

"What?"

"Bring me some lunch," she said.

HOSTAGE

All afternoon I wandered through the house feeling like a ghost. When I approached a group of the companions in the great hall, they turned to look at me, and for the span of a few heartbeats no one said a word. Then they all turned away and resumed their conversations, as if they hadn't seen me at all. At last I took refuge in the companions' loft. The handful of girls who were there when I arrived left soon afterward. I was glad to see them go. I felt less lonely by myself than among people who wouldn't speak to me. Sparrow found me there.

"Are you all right?" she asked me.

I nodded.

"Why are you here alone?"

"No one seems to want to be around me."

"They don't know what to say to you," she said. "They'll get over it." She sat down next to me and took my hand. "Are you afraid?"

"No." I didn't feel any fear. I didn't feel much of anything.

"The Lady didn't mean it. She only wanted to see what your warrior would do."

"How do you know that?"

"It's what everyone is saying. The Lady set a clever trap. If Maara were guilty of treachery, why would she have been upset when the Lady made you her hostage? If anything she would have been relieved."

"Why?"

"The Lady left her free. She could escape any time she likes and leave you to bear the consequences."

"Oh," I said. Somehow I didn't find that reassuring.

"Now the Lady has one more reason to believe she told the truth, and now she also knows her weakness."

"What's that?"

"You," she said. "You're why she came back to Merin's house."

"No, I'm not."

"Others think differently."

I began to feel a little better. "What do you think?"

"I think there were many reasons for Maara to stay far, far away from

Merin's house."

The warmth of Sparrow's body was a comfort. I leaned against her, and she put her arm around my shoulders.

"All the same," she said, "if I were you, I wouldn't try the Lady's patience."

###

I found Maara in her room. She looked up at me when I came in, and her eyes opened wider in surprise when she saw that I had my bedding with me.

"May I stay with you?" I asked her.

She eyed me suspiciously. "Are you afraid I'll run away again?"

That made me angry. "No," I said. "Run away if you like."

"Are you so quick to throw away your life?"

"No one here will hurt me." I hoped it was true.

She looked away from me and said nothing.

"I'll go if you'd rather be alone," I said.

She didn't speak or look at me. I waited for a few moments. Then I turned to leave.

"Stay," she whispered.

While I made up my bed on the floor, I felt her watching me.

"Do you need anything?" I asked her.

"No."

"Have you eaten?" It was well past suppertime.

"I've had enough," she said.

I sat down on my bed. I couldn't think of anything to say. For the first time I found the silence between us awkward.

"You shouldn't have stood with me before the council," she said.

I shrugged. It was too late to change what I'd done, even if I wanted to. I didn't think I wanted to.

"You didn't have to come back," I said. "When I freed you from any obligation to me, I meant it."

"What are you talking about?"

"You told the council you came back because you owed me a life."

"That's not exactly what I told the council."

"Oh." I was too tired to think about it. "Why don't people ever say what

they mean?"

"Do you always say what you mean?"

"Of course I do." Then I stopped to think it over. "At least I try to. I think I do."

Her face softened, and a smile started in her eyes.

###

In the middle of the night, something woke me. It was so dark I couldn't see Maara's bed, but I didn't think she was in it. The room felt empty. I rose and groped my way to the door, along the narrow hallway, and down the stairs. In the great hall, by the light of the embers glowing on the hearth, I found Maara sitting on the hearthstone.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

She didn't answer me. She looked at me with eyes that saw nothing. I recognized the look. She was ghostwalking. I knelt down beside her and put my hand on her shoulder.

"Wake up," I said. I shook her a little.

Strong arms seized me and threw me backwards onto the floor. Before I had time even to cry out, I was lying on my back with my warrior's hands around my throat. Darkness wrapped itself around my eyes. I struck out blindly, and my hand met something hard. I heard the breath go out of her. She let go, and the darkness lifted.

"What's the matter?" she said.

She was sitting on the floor beside me, rubbing her jaw.

"You nearly choked the life out of me."

"What?" Then she saw where we were.

"You were asleep," I said. "You were ghostwalking."

I struggled to sit up. I was dizzy, and my throat hurt.

"Ghostwalking?"

I nodded.

"How did you know?"

"You've done it before."

"I have?"

"You did it once last summer."

"I don't remember."

"You never woke up that time."

“Oh,” she said.

She got to her feet and held out her hand to me, to help me up. She peered at me in the dim light. I still had one hand to my throat.

“Are you all right?” she asked me.

“I think so.”

My legs shook a little. I took hold of her arm, to steady myself. Then I remembered the companions’ loft at the far end of the hall. I glanced up and saw the silhouettes of several heads peering over the edge. I thought we’d been speaking too quietly to be overheard, but they must have heard the sounds of our struggle.

“Let’s go upstairs,” I said. “Quickly. Before someone thinks we’re trying to escape.”

“I’m hungry,” said Maara.

“I’ll get you something. Go on upstairs.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Fine,” I said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Go,” I said.

At last she did as I told her. I lit a lamp with an ember from the hearth and went into the kitchen. There I found a pot of barley soup. I put some in a bowl and set it in the embers of the kitchen hearth to warm it.

While I waited, I thought of old Gnith and wondered if, in her long life, she had gained a little wisdom, because I had questions only the wise could answer. Her pallet lay by the ovens at the other end of the kitchen. When I approached her, I was glad to see that she was awake.

“Can I bring you something, Mother?” I asked her.

“Nice hot tea,” she said.

I brewed her a tea of chamomile. I helped her to sit up and put the bowl of tea into her hands. Then I sat down beside her.

“Who are you?” she asked me.

“I’m Tamras, Tamnet’s daughter.”

“I don’t know you.”

“No, Mother.”

“Did I know your mother?”

“She was here once, long ago,” I said.

Gnith peered into her bowl and stuck her finger in the tea, to see if it was too hot to drink.

"I have a question, Mother," I said.

"Young ones full of questions," she muttered. "Full of questions. Never listen to the answers."

She sipped her tea.

"What is ghostwalking?" I asked.

"Ghostwalking?"

"Yes."

"Just what it sounds like."

"But it's the living who walk."

"Of course it is. The dead don't walk. But maybe their spirits come to their beloveds in their sleep. Maybe they try to lure them into the shadows."

"Do they ever succeed?"

"Sometimes."

"Can anything be done?"

"Leave her be," the old woman said. "Let the dead have her."

Her words frightened me. "I can't."

"Then you need a binding spell."

Although my mother was a healer, she had taught me nothing about spell casting. It was her opinion that such things go oftener wrong than right.

"I don't know any binding spells, Mother."

"Me neither," said Gnith. She knit her brows. "Can't be very hard."

She took a long drink of tea. Some of it ran down her chin. She didn't bother wiping it away.

"Tell you what," she said.

"What?"

"Bind her to someone living."

"Bind her?"

"Yes."

"With what?"

"A rope. A bit of twine. Anything."

"Tie her, do you mean?"

"Yes. Tie her. Tie her to the living. Someone she loves."

"I don't know if she loves anyone, Mother."

"Tie her to someone who loves her then," she said. "Can't see it makes a difference." She caught the doubt in my eyes and chuckled. "Someone doesn't want the dead to have her. Someone must love her at least a little."

Gnith yawned. She finished her tea, then set the bowl aside and lay back

down on her pallet.

"My mother told me stories at bedtime," she said.

She closed her eyes and smiled, as if she could hear her mother's voice, as I sometimes heard in memory my own mother's whispered good night.

Gnith opened her eyes and looked up at me. "Who are you?"

"Tamras," I told her. Then I remembered something I'd been meaning to ask her. "Were there once only women warriors, Mother?"

"Don't know."

"Oh." I started to get up.

"Makes sense," she said.

"Why?"

"Who else should take a life? No man ever brought a child out of his body."

Something about that explanation bothered me. "Do you mean that a woman may take a life because she can give life back?"

"No, no," she said. "Think of a woman whose body has made a child. Who gave birth to it. Cradled and nursed it. Loved it. She will hold life dear differently than someone who has not."

I wondered if once only mothers had been warriors.

###

While Maara was eating, I opened the chest beside her bed, took out several long strips of leather that I had cut for bootlaces, and began braiding them together. Maara watched me with curiosity. When I had a braided thong as long as I was tall, I made slipknots at each end. By the time she finished eating, the thong was ready. I slipped one loop over her hand and pulled it snug around her wrist.

"What's this?" she asked.

"It's a bad time for you to go wandering about," I told her.

I put the other end around my own wrist and sat down on my bed to make sure the thong was long enough. Whether or not Gnith's makeshift spell would stop Maara's ghostwalking, at least it offered a practical solution. Now she couldn't go anywhere without waking me up.

Maara seemed doubtful. "What if I take it off?"

"In your sleep?"

"Yes."

“Can you think of something better?”

She tugged at the braided thong, to test its strength. Then she gave the slipknot another tug.

“Don’t pull it too tight,” I said.

I got up from my bed and sat down beside her. The loop was so tight that it had already marked the skin on the inside of her wrist. I loosened it.

“There. Leave it alone. It’s tight enough.”

“Tamras,” she said. It was the first time she had ever spoken my name, and the sound of it went through me like a knife. I wished I could see her face, but she was gazing down at the thong around her wrist.

“Yes?” I said.

“Be careful how you wake me up.”

“I will. Don’t worry.”

She looked up at me. Her eyes were fierce. She grasped my wrist with a grip so strong my hand went numb. “I mean it,” she said.

The lid of the chest stood open. She reached into it and took out a small bronze knife. It had a walnut handle, bound with copper bands. The dark wood was worn smooth, and the copper had weathered to a color that was neither green nor blue, a color more beautiful than either. She handed it to me.

“Keep this by you,” she said.

I thought she meant that I should use it if I needed to cut the thong. I set it down beside my bed.

As I lay in the darkness with the thong around my wrist, I believed I understood Gnith’s spell. The thong was more than long enough, but every time Maara moved, I felt it move with her. It kept me constantly aware of her, and if a person’s thoughts are with someone, how can she break away to go with someone else? When I slept, my warrior walked in my dreams, and in my dreams, the thong that bound us was not from wrist to wrist, but from heart to heart.

###

When I woke, the first grey light of dawn was sifting through the shutter. I lay still and listened to the household wake. A winch groaned as one of the kitchen servants drew water from the well. Outside, the shouts of goatherds, muffled by fog, mingled with the anxious bleating of the goats

waiting to be milked. In the room next door, Namet let out a grunt as she hoisted herself up out of bed. I needed to use the privy. When I slipped the thong from around my wrist, instantly Maara was awake.

“What is it?” she said.

“Hush,” I told her. “Don’t get up. I’ll be right back.”

I slipped on my trousers and boots, and as an afterthought, gathered up a pile of our dirty clothes to take with me. Hostage or not, I still had chores to do. On my way to the privy, I stopped by the lean-to outside the kitchen that served as a laundry and put the clothes to soak. When I returned to her room, Maara, still in her sleeping shirt, was rummaging through her chest, looking for something to put on.

“What am I supposed to wear?” she asked.

“You might as well go downstairs like that. No one pays any attention to you anyway.”

“They would if I went down in my nightshirt. Maybe I could put my armor on over it.”

My mind made a picture of my warrior eating breakfast in that outlandish costume. I had to laugh, and she laughed with me.

Namet appeared in the doorway. “What’s going on?” she said.

The thought of telling her what we were laughing at made me laugh all the harder. Maara tried to achieve the look of dignity that was proper in the presence of an elder and failed. I collapsed on my bed and laughed until the tears rolled down my face. Namet began to laugh too, though she had no idea what we were laughing at. She shook her head at us and went back to her room.

Maara had no choice but to stay in her room until her clothes were clean and dry, so I went down to the kitchen, to bring her some breakfast. The porridge that morning looked grey and pasty and didn’t taste much better than it looked. A few bites of it were enough to satisfy my appetite. Then I filled a bowl for Maara. In one of the storage rooms I found baskets of dried fruit and a crock of honey. I stirred a few slices of apple and a handful of berries into the porridge and poured a thick layer of honey over it.

I brought Maara’s breakfast to her room. I was surprised to see Namet sitting at the foot of her bed. When she saw the bowl of porridge, she raised her eyebrows.

“No one ever brings me meals like that,” said Namet.

“Shall I get you something, Mother?”

“No, no, child. I’m going down to the kitchen in a minute.” She turned to Maara. “Let us get to know each other better, shall we?”

Maara nodded, and Namet got up and left us. I took her place at the foot of the bed.

“She was talking with you,” I said.

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“She said she was sorry I felt unwelcome here.”

At that moment, Namet became dear to me.

###

While Maara ate her breakfast, I went back down to the laundry to wash our clothes and hang them up to dry. Then I took a pail of warm water and a cloth upstairs. As I expected, Maara’s face and hands were sticky with honey. She let me wash her hands, as docile as a child, but when I tried to wash her face, she recoiled from my touch and took the cloth away from me. She held the warm cloth to her face for a moment. When she took it away, I saw that she had a lump on her jaw where I had struck her the night before, and the skin below her eye had begun to bruise.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” I said.

“I’m all right.” She smiled. “Just don’t make a habit of it.” She reached out and touched the side of my neck. The skin felt tender. “Your friends will wonder what we’ve been doing to each other.”

Ordinarily I would have enjoyed her teasing, but today it only made me sad. I felt as if I were in mourning, and in a way I was. I was mourning everything I’d lost. I had felt safe in Merin’s house. Now that feeling was gone. I had felt safe with Maara. Now I didn’t know if she intended to stay in Merin’s house or if she meant to leave me again. I started to ask the question, then stopped myself, in case I wasn’t strong enough to hear the answer.

I took Maara’s bowl back to the kitchen and brought her some hot tea. Then I swept her room and took her blankets downstairs to air. Nothing else needed doing, but I was reluctant to go back upstairs. When I understood that I was avoiding talking with her, I returned to her room and sat down at the foot of her bed.

I had expected her to wait for me to speak. Instead she said, “How can I protect you?”

I tried to reassure her, as Sparrow had tried to reassure me. “No one here will hurt me,” I said. “I know you told the truth to the council. I trust you won’t run away. Even if you did, how could the Lady harm the daughter of her dearest friend?”

I hoped I sounded more convinced than I was. In spite of Sparrow’s reassurance, I was beginning to believe that the Lady was capable of almost anything.

“All the same,” Maara said, “if something should go wrong, I want you to stay close to me.”

A shiver of fear ran through me. “What could go wrong?”

“The worst thing would be a raid from the north. The northern tribes don’t always act together. Just because some of them plan to cross the river doesn’t mean that others won’t do what they’ve always done before. A raid on the northern farms is what everyone fears, and when people are afraid, they’ll do things they wouldn’t do if they took the time to think it over.”

She saw that she had frightened me.

“Or perhaps nothing will happen,” she said. “Perhaps the northerners will change their minds about crossing the river once they’re faced with actually doing it. The Lady will be unhappy that she sent her warriors out in winter weather for nothing, but she can’t accuse me of treachery.”

Although I feared the answer, I had to ask the question. I needed to know if it was safe to care for her again.

“When all this is over, will you stay in Merin’s house?”

“That may not be possible.”

“Then take me with you.”

I hadn’t intended to say it, though I had thought it more than once since the council meeting. Every time the thought came into my head, I pushed it away. It was too terrible to think about. It made me a traitor, as much to my own family as to the Lady. I had just asked for something that would cost me the only place the world would ever make for me.

“I can’t do that,” said Maara. “I won’t. It would be the worst thing for you to do.”

I was close to tears. I had frightened myself with my own boldness, but once I’d said it, I refused to take it back. “When can I choose what’s best for me to do?”

“When you can choose wisely.”

I clenched my teeth on my anger. “I would leave a household where I’m held

as a hostage by those who should protect me. What's so unwise in that?"

I had never heard my voice sound as it did then. My words were brittle with resentment.

Maara lost patience with me.

"Stop," she said. "You have cause to be angry with the Lady, but don't be so quick to throw away everything you have."

At that moment I was aware only of my own grievances. I gave her my most sullen look. "I am a free woman. No one can force me to stay here."

"The life of an exile is not the life of freedom you imagine."

The meaning behind her words chilled me. "Are you an exile?"

"We're not talking about me," she said. But of course we were.

My fear and my resentment had kept my thoughts centered on myself. Now I considered her position and saw that it was much more difficult than mine. I started to tell her so, but she spoke first.

"If I can stay," she said, "I will, if only to save you from your own foolishness."

It was what I had wanted to hear her say, but I knew I was wrong to ask it or to try to keep her in Merin's house against her will.

"No," I said. "I won't hold you to a promise you may regret."

I wondered what I did have the right to ask of her. The only thing I thought of was that I had the right to hear the truth.

"I ask only that you tell me before you leave Merin's house again."

She shook her head, but before she could say no, I said, "I give you my word I won't try to keep you here. I won't follow you if you don't want me to. And I won't betray you."

She considered that for a moment, then nodded.

"All right," she said.

BATTLE

The next morning Sparrow woke me at first light. The thong around my wrist felt lifeless. I glanced at Maara's bed and was relieved to see that she was in it. She was awake and sitting up. The thong was no longer around her wrist.

"We leave in a few minutes," Sparrow said.

I was still gathering my wits together. "Who?"

"Vintel is taking half a hundred warriors to the ravine," she said. "Eramet is going, and she's taking me with her."

I heard the pride in her voice, that she had been asked to go.

"Take care," I told her.

"I will."

Sparrow touched my cheek. She hesitated a moment, then leaned over me and lightly kissed my lips.

###

The day was stormy. Dark clouds scudded across the sky, bringing squalls of driving rain. Our warriors would have an uncomfortable journey, and when they reached the ravine, they would find little shelter there. Ox-drawn wagons followed them carrying tents and supplies, but they traveled more slowly than the warriors, who would have to camp for at least one night in the open.

I worried about Sparrow. I also envied her. This encounter with the enemy would not be just a skirmish with a raiding party. If the northerners carried out their plan, there would be a battle when they came across the river. I wished I could be there to see it.

Maara was silent all day. I soon gave up trying to get her to talk with me. She would make some reply, but she was distracted, and her mind wandered. I had forgotten neither her hunger nor her weariness. I fed her until she complained I was going to make her sick. She was too restless to sleep, so I took her downstairs, where we could enjoy the warmth of the fire in the great hall. Even with so many of the warriors gone, there was a crowd gathered by the hearth. We found a quiet corner, where we sat for several

hours listening to scraps of other people's conversations.

When the servants set out the tables for the evening meal, Maara stood up. "I'm not hungry," she said. "Stay and eat." Then she went upstairs.

At supper the companions were so full of talk they forgot that not long before they hadn't known what to say to me. Some complained that their warriors had not been asked to join Vintel. Others hoped they might be sent out to the farms along our northern border. It was the first I'd heard of plans to send warriors out to the farms. The Lady was guarding against every possibility.

Some of the companions questioned me, thinking that my warrior must have told me all about her journey north. I had to tell them I knew no more than they did, but I don't think they believed me.

After supper I went to Maara's room and found her asleep. The thong was around her wrist.

###

The longest fortnight of my life went by. Then one morning I awoke to find Maara standing at the window, gazing out at the first snowfall of winter. I got out of bed and joined her, and she stepped back so that I could stand in front of her, to watch the world turn white.

Snowflakes wafted gently down in the still air. Sometimes the lightest breath of wind would send a flurry of them dancing for a moment before they drifted down again. I remembered how silent winter is.

When we went downstairs, I felt the tension in the air. Everyone knew that the northerners had chosen the first snowfall as the time to carry out their plan. There was nothing to do but wait for word of whatever might happen, but today there were more whispered conversations, more furtive glances at my warrior, more sudden silences when we approached, than there had been since she returned to Merin's house.

The Lady kept to her chamber. Every morning messengers left the household, going both north and south, and every evening the messengers who had left the day before returned with news. From time to time a warrior or an elder would be summoned to the Lady's chamber, but she never asked for me, and I never asked to see her.

We all knew that, even if the northerners had crossed the river, word wouldn't reach us until the next day. All the same, no one could do anything

but wait. After breakfast people lingered at the tables, reluctant to leave the hall. An older man whose name I didn't know picked nervously at his fingernails. His brow was furrowed with worry, and when the man next to him made an offhand remark I couldn't hear, he gave him a sharp answer. One of the younger warriors furrowed her brow with impatience. She could not sit still, and her fidgeting annoyed her neighbors.

Fet and Fodla sat at a table near the kitchen. Fet gazed into her bowl of tea, while Fodla carried on several conversations at once with the people around her.

I thought everyone might sit like that all day. At last one of the men got up and said, "I'm going to have a look around. Who'll come with me?" and several of the men got up and left with him. After that, the people drifted in and out of the great hall. No one wanted to be too far away in case something happened, but the waiting set their nerves on edge.

Maara touched my arm and stood up. I was getting up to follow her when I heard a man's voice speak loudly enough to be heard by all the people in the hall.

"Not much longer now," he said. "Soon enough we'll know what this stranger has brought upon us."

It was the man who had looked so worried. When Maara turned to face him, he stood up.

I was furious.

"Soon enough you'll owe her more than just an apology," I told him.

"Hush," my warrior said.

Fodla got to her feet.

"Sit down, Lorin," she said, "and hold your tongue. We may soon have enough to do without also fighting among ourselves."

Lorin sat down.

###

It snowed all day. In the short winter twilight, I watched from Maara's window as blue shadows deepened quickly into black and a few stars twinkled out between the clouds. I loved the coming of winter. My mother used to tell me it was because I had been born in wintertime and my first glimpse of the world was still hidden deep inside my eyes.

"Close the shutter," Maara said, "before you catch your death."

She was sitting up in bed, huddled under a blanket. I put the shutter up.

Nothing is more tiring than waiting. Worry had worn me out, but my thoughts would not be still, and I lay awake for a long time. Winter had come, and we should have been preparing for the celebration of midwinter's night, looking forward to the feasting and merrymaking, the singing and storytelling. Instead many of our people were making a cold bed in their winter camp while we waited anxiously for news.

###

My warrior and I were sitting in the great hall when a messenger arrived at midmorning. He spoke to no one, but went directly to the Lady's chamber.

Maara tugged at my sleeve and gestured to me to follow her. She found us another place to sit, by the hallway that led to the kitchen. She leaned toward me and said in a low voice, "If we hear bad news, run into the armory and bar the door." When I opened my mouth to object, she frowned and shook her head.

Word traveled quickly in that household, and soon everyone had gathered in the great hall. We waited in silence to hear the news the messenger had brought. At last the Lady came out to speak to us. She came halfway down the stairs and looked out over the assembled crowd.

"Where is Maara?" she said.

All eyes turned toward us. Everyone knew where we were.

"Come forward," she said.

Maara stood up and went to the foot of the stairs.

"We are in your debt," the Lady told her. To the people in the hall she said, "Yesterday everything happened as this woman said it would. Hidden by the snowfall, warriors of the northern tribes crossed the river. Our warriors too were hidden by the snowfall, and they captured the boats of the northerners as they came across. After a dozen boats made the crossing, we had taken two score of their warriors. No more came. We may have captured all of them, or perhaps the rest awaited a signal that it was safe for them to cross, or perhaps they had no more boats. Some of our warriors will remain there until the river starts to freeze, but most of them will be here this evening, and their prisoners with them."

She paused. For the briefest moment, all were silent. Then everyone began to speak at once. Lorin came forward to stand at the foot of the stairs.

"Lady," he called up to her. "Has anyone been hurt?"

The Lady looked down at him.

"My son is with them," he said.

"Two of our warriors were wounded," said the Lady. "Neither of them is your son."

The people grew quiet again when she mentioned the wounded.

"Breda has a head wound," she said. "Eramet was struck in the side by an arrow. One of the wagons will bring them home."

That afternoon many of the warriors sought Maara out to thank her for the warning she had brought us. No one apologized for having doubted her. It was prudent of them to doubt her, but once her loyalty was proven, their gratitude was sincere. Lorin gave me a little smile as he made an elaborate apology to my warrior for his hasty words the day before. I will admit that I enjoyed hearing it.

###

It was late that afternoon when we heard that our returning warriors were in sight. Maara put on her armor and took up her sword and shield. When we went downstairs, I saw that the other warriors had also armed themselves. Even a few of the apprentices bore arms.

"Why does everyone look like they're going into battle?" I asked Maara.

"To show the enemy our strength," she said.

With the others we went outside the earthworks to wait. The air was clear and cold, and we saw in the distance, dark against the snowy landscape, the column of weary warriors coming home. Though they were still far away, the trees that lined the road were leafless now and could not conceal them.

The younger men hurried ahead of the others. When they started up the hill, the waiting warriors drew their swords and beat them upon the leather covers of their shields, a steady marching cadence to lighten the steps of the men trudging up the hill.

When they reached us, cups of ale were brought out to them. They were eager to tell everyone about the battle, but they all spoke at once, and each one told only what had happened to him and to his comrades beside him.

I gave up trying to make sense of all their stories.

When they ran out of listeners, they went indoors to warm themselves before the fire.

The rest of our warriors, encumbered by their prisoners, were still far away. Namet came and stood beside me. She shaded her eyes with her hand and peered into the distance.

"What do you see, child, with your young eyes?" she said. "I can hardly make them out."

The glare of sunlight on the snow made my eyes water, and I was having trouble seeing them myself.

"There's a large group of them, all walking close together," I told her. "They seem to be bound together, so I suppose those are the prisoners. Our warriors are behind them."

"Are there any wagons?"

"No, Mother."

She must be thinking of the wounded. Then I thought about the similarity of her name and Eramet's.

"Is Eramet kin to you?" I asked her.

"Eramet is my daughter," she replied.

"Oh," I said. "I'm sorry she was hurt."

Namet slipped her arm around my shoulders. Tears glistened in her eyes that were not from looking at the snow.

As the prisoners drew near, I saw that they were loosely bound with rope that looped around their upper arms and behind their backs. When they reached the bottom of the hill, our warriors again drew their swords. This time they didn't beat a marching cadence. They pounded on their shields and raised their voices in a battle cry. Their breath hung like smoke in the cold air. The voices of the men deepened the cry into a roar. It was a dreadful sound.

The din continued until our warriors and their prisoners had climbed the hill and stood before us. I was amazed to see that almost all the prisoners were men. I saw only two women among them, though they might have been beardless boys. All of them wore tunics and trousers of fur or skins that gave them a ragged look. Long hair straggled out from under their fur caps. They had no boots. Their feet were wrapped in skins bound about their feet and legs with leather thongs. Although their beards hid their faces, I could see that their cheeks were hollow and their faces gaunt.

They were taken to the men's house, where a place had been made for them in the common room.

For several hours the healer kept me busy. There were no serious wounds to tend among our own warriors, only some slight cuts and bruises and a little frostbite. A few who were feverish with winter sickness were warmed and put to bed. If any of the prisoners needed tending, it was not our place to do it. They would have to tend their own or do without.

###

Long after the household had gone to bed, I waited. Maara waited with me, although I had told her more than once to go on to bed. We sat together by the embers of the fire in the great hall. Namet had gone up to her room, but I doubted she was asleep.

Sparrow hadn't come home with the warriors. I didn't expect her to. She would be with Eramet.

"They may have stopped for the night," Maara said.

"They won't stop," I said. "They'll bring her home."

I heard the groaning of axles and the tread of oxen's feet when they were halfway up the hill. By the time they drove the wagon in through the cattle gate, Maara and I were waiting for them. The night air was so cold it made my eyes ache. When the wagon stopped, we pulled back the covering of ox-hide that was stretched between the high sideboards of the wagon. A young warrior and his companion sat behind the driver. The warrior's head was wrapped in a bloody bandage, but he seemed to be already on the mend.

At first I saw no one else. Maara brought a torch, and when she lowered it closer to the wagon bed, I saw them. On a pile of empty grain sacks, Sparrow lay with Eramet in her arms. She looked up at me. Her eyes were wild.

"She died," she said.

The wagon driver got down from his seat and pulled the tailboard off the wagon. I jumped in and knelt down next to Sparrow. I touched Eramet's face. It was as cold as the night air.

"Come inside," I said.

Sparrow didn't move. I felt Maara get into the wagon. She knelt beside me and tried to lift Eramet, but Sparrow's arms tightened around her and wouldn't let her go.

"We have to get you both inside," I said.

I don't think Sparrow heard or understood me. She was very cold. She had been lying with Eramet's body in her arms for half the night, and Eramet's blood had frozen on her clothing.

Maara handed me the torch and moved behind Sparrow, so that she could slip her hands under Sparrow's arms and lift her away from Eramet. She set her by the tailboard of the wagon and jumped out. Then she took Sparrow up in her arms and carried her into the house.

There was no doubt that Eramet was dead. Her arms and legs had begun to stiffen. Her skin was white and hard, and a dusting of frost lay over her hair and eyebrows. There was nothing I could do for her, so I went inside, to do what I could for Sparrow. Maara had set her down on the hearthstone and was building up the fire.

"We need to warm her," she said.

I brought a wooden tub from the laundry room and set it by the hearth. While I brought in buckets of warm water to fill it, Maara got Sparrow out of her frozen clothing. We put her in the tub and poured water over her until she was warm again. Then Maara carried her upstairs.

I stayed behind to clean up the mess we'd made. When I went upstairs, I found Maara in Eramet's room. She had put Sparrow into Eramet's bed and was standing in the doorway looking like she didn't quite know what to do. Sparrow lay on her side facing the wall, with both arms over her head as if to ward off a blow. She was making a soft keening sound.

Maara said in a low voice close to my ear, "I'll go see to Eramet," and left the room.

I didn't know what to do for Sparrow. I sat with her a while. Then I took off my boots and trousers and slipped into the bed beside her. I put my arms around her, to warm and comfort her. Soon her keening stopped, and she fell asleep.

GRIEF

When I woke in the morning, Sparrow was still asleep. She was hot with fever. I got up and dressed myself, and still she didn't wake. Before I went downstairs, I stopped by my warrior's room. There was no sign she had been there. I found her in the kitchen, sitting at a table with Namet. She looked like she'd been up all night.

I had forgotten about Namet.

"I'm sorry for your grief, Mother," I told her.

"Thank you, child," she said.

She too looked as if she had not yet been to bed.

"Can I get you something?" I asked her.

She shook her head.

I turned to Maara. "Sparrow has a fever."

"I can fend for myself today," she said. "Do what you can for her."

I made Sparrow a bowl of soft porridge and milk, something she could swallow easily, and brewed her a tea of willow bark and rose hips. When I returned to her room, she was awake. She lay in the bed staring up at the ceiling.

"She died," she said.

"I know."

"She died."

This time it was a whisper. It was as if, by saying so, she might convince herself that it was true.

I sat down beside her and handed her the bowl of tea. It seemed such a small thing to offer her.

###

I looked in on Sparrow as often as I could that day. When I found her sleeping, I didn't wake her. To let her sleep was the kindest thing I could do for her. Whenever I found her awake, I brought her soft food and tea and sat with her a while. Although she didn't want to talk, she seemed to take some comfort from my presence. I stroked her hair and rubbed her back until she slept again.

Maara slept for several hours that morning. She had been up all night with Namet, listening to her stories of her only child. She would say no more to me than that about it.

While Maara was sleeping, I went to the companions' loft. I hoped I hadn't missed hearing about the battle, but I shouldn't have worried. The companions who had been there were delighted to tell the story over and over again to anyone who cared to listen.

"The snow began three days ago."

"I thought it was two," I said.

"No. Three."

"It began day before yesterday here."

"Well, it began three days ago at the ravine," said Taia.

Taia was an apprentice. In another year, she would be a warrior. Her green eyes and copper hair set her apart from the others even more than her height, although she was the tallest woman in Merin's house.

"Vintel had our warriors strung out up and down the riverbank for over a mile," she said, "but we waited all day for nothing. They never came."

"You should have heard the fights that night around the campfires," said Bec with glee. Bec loved a fight.

"Some said there was no need to freeze there by the river for another night," said Taia, "that the northerners weren't coming. Others said we should wait and see."

"If the strange one had been there," said Bec, "they would have had the truth out of her one way or the other."

It was the first time I had heard my warrior called 'the strange one.' I was indignant. "They had the truth out of her already."

Bec brushed a shock of thick, black hair out of her eyes and gave me a scornful look. "Well, we know that now, but how were we to know it then?"

"At any rate," Taia said, "the next morning Vintel sent everyone back to their places to wait. We couldn't see a thing. The mist was so thick you could have walked off a cliff before you knew it. My warrior and I were hidden in a copse not ten paces from the river, and we couldn't see where the water met the shore."

"We heard the sound of the oars long before we saw the boats," said Bec.

"And someone almost made a bad mistake."

Taia glared at her, and Bec's face turned red, whether from embarrassment or anger I couldn't tell.

"We thought they'd seen us," she said. "The first boat landed next to us. We heard them talking to one another, though we couldn't make out a word of what they said. They walked right past us. I was sure they'd seen us, and my warrior gave the curlew's call. That was our signal. The northerners must have heard it, but they went by us in the mist."

"Vintel thought they would send just one boat at first," Taia said, "to scout our side of the river and let the others know it was safe to cross. Vintel was right. After they'd been ashore a while, we heard them call to their friends across the river. By the time the next boat arrived, Vintel and Eramet had taken everyone in the first boat prisoner."

"We captured six of them," Gnata boasted. "There were only four of us, two warriors and two companions, and we captured six of them."

Gnata was younger than I and had always seemed to me to be rather frail. It surprised me that her warrior had taken her along.

"How were they to know there were only four of you?" said Taia. "The mist was so thick that a score of warriors could have been right behind you."

"But there weren't. We captured six of them all by ourselves."

"How did you take them without a fight?" I asked Taia.

"We waited for them to get out of their boats," she replied. "Before they could send the boats back across the river, we walked out of the mist and told them to surrender their swords."

"They did too," said Bec smugly. "They had no stomach for a fight."

"They had our swords at their necks before they knew what was happening," Taia said. "What else could they do?"

"They were too cowardly to fight," said Bec.

Taia turned on her. "Give them an even chance and see for yourself how cowardly they are. I doubt you'd stand long against any of them."

Bec scowled. If Taia had been smaller, Bec might have challenged her, but she thought better of it and held her tongue.

Little by little they pieced together the story for me. I couldn't imagine how the northerners had carried boats with them. I was thinking of the boats made from hollowed logs used by the fisher folk who fished with nets on the calmer stretches of the river. Taia explained that the boats were made of oxhide stretched over a framework of willow branches. The hides they could have carried with them, and willows grew everywhere along the

riverbank.

After our warriors had captured a dozen boats, no more came. From time to time they heard voices calling from the other side of the river. None of the prisoners dared answer. Then one of them broke free of his captors and ran to the water's edge. Before he could scramble into one of the boats and make his escape, our warriors pursued him and struck him down.

Finally I asked them how it happened that Eramet was wounded. I couldn't help being curious, but I didn't like to ask Sparrow about it. They were all quiet for a moment. The reminder of a life lost spoiled their delight in the story.

"Two boats came across close together," Taia said. "Vintel and Eramet took the first one. They didn't see the other so close behind it, and there was an archer in that boat. We heard the sound of the arrow as it left the bow. Then Eramet fell."

"Where was Sparrow?" I asked.

"Right beside Eramet," said Taia.

"Sparrow caught Eramet as she fell," said Bec, "or Eramet might have drowned, even in the shallow water by the shore."

No one else was eager now to add to the story. Only Bec still relished the telling.

"Vintel waded into the water up to her waist," she said. "The archer shot half a dozen arrows at her before she reached his boat, but she caught them all on her shield. She put her sword through the oxhide cover of the boat. When it capsized, she seized the archer and dragged him ashore."

Bec stopped and looked around at the others to make sure she had their attention. Gnata's eyes slid away from her, as if by not looking she could avoid hearing what Bec would say next.

Bec lowered her voice to a whisper. "Then Vintel struck off his hand."

The thought of it made me queasy.

"Where is Sparrow?" Taia asked me.

"She's feverish with winter sickness. She's in Eramet's room, asleep."

"Is she all right?"

"As all right as she can be."

They all knew, as I did, that Sparrow loved Eramet.

"How many of the northerners were killed?" I asked.

"Only the one, that I know of," Taia said. "The one who tried to run."

"What about the man who lost his hand?"

"Still alive, I suppose."

I thought about the pain that man must be suffering and wondered if the northerners had brought with them any medicines to ease it.

"Did any get away?" I asked.

"Vintel didn't think so," said Taia. "By midafternoon the mist lifted enough that we could search up and down the riverbank for several miles. There was no sign that anyone else had come ashore."

"Will they try again?" I asked.

"They might," said Taia. "A score of our warriors are still at the ravine. When the river starts to freeze, they'll come back home."

"What if the northerners walk across the ice?"

Several of the girls laughed.

"When the lakes at home freeze," I said, "we can travel over the ice more easily than we could walk through the snowdrifts on land."

Taia was patient with me. "Mountain lakes are calm," she said, "and the water freezes smooth and solid. The river is always moving. Only the water along the shore freezes. The swifter water in the middle breaks off chunks of ice from the edges and carries them along. Even the solid ice is always moving. It opens and closes and the cracks can lie unseen under the snow. Once the river starts to freeze, no one can cross it."

I thought of the ragged men who had dared to cross that river.

"What will happen to the prisoners?" I asked.

Taia shrugged. "That's the Lady's business."

"If there had been a fight, we wouldn't have the trouble of keeping so many," said Bec.

"If there had been a fight," Taia replied, "we would mourn more than Eramet." She turned back to me. "We might ransom them back to their people, I suppose."

"Their people have nothing. That's why they came here."

"We could sell them as slaves," said Bec.

"We could," Taia said, "but then we'd have to feed them all winter before we could get rid of them."

"The Lady will think of something," said Bec.

The fate of the prisoners held less interest for them than the part each girl had played in their capture. I stayed and listened to their stories for a while longer. The more I heard, the more relieved I was that I had stayed at home. At first the thought of warriors from the north invading Merin's land had

frightened me, but once I'd seen them, they looked so thin and ragged that I was moved with pity for them. Even the death of Eramet couldn't make me hate them. I felt troubled in my spirit for what they had to risk just to live. Why couldn't the Mother keep us all?

###

Late that afternoon, the household assembled for Eramet's burial. The healer closed her wound, so that she would be whole again. Namet and Vintel prepared her body. They washed her and wrapped her in a shroud of white woolen cloth. Then they tied her onto a small sled, so that we wouldn't have to carry a litter through the snow. Vintel sent me up to Eramet's room to get what personal belongings I could find. Sparrow was awake.

"What would Eramet want to have with her?" I asked.

"Are they taking her for burial?"

I nodded.

"Where are my clothes?" She started to get out of bed.

I had burned the bloody clothes she came home in. The rest of her things were in the companions' loft, but I had no intention of letting her get dressed.

"You can't go outside," I told her. "You have a fever. You'll catch your death."

Sparrow paid no attention to me. She wrapped herself in a blanket and reached for a tunic of Eramet's that hung from a peg on the wall.

"If you go down, Vintel will only send you back to bed."

She stood still for a moment, undecided, then left the tunic where it was and opened the chest that held Eramet's belongings. She took from it the things Eramet would need, wrapped them all in a piece of linen cloth, and handed them to me.

"Will you take my gift for her?" she asked.

"Of course."

She took a token from around her neck. It was a dark stone, caught in a copper cage that hung on a leather thong. The stone held a flash of fire deep inside it. It was the only thing of value Sparrow owned. She had worn it the whole time I'd known her.

Before I took it from her, I asked her, "Are you sure?"

"If I could," she said, "I would give you my heart to lay beside her."

###

Because I had brought Sparrow's gift, Vintel let me go with her and a few others into the barrow. There was hardly room for a handful of people inside, so the rest of the household waited by the entrance.

I had been inside the barrow once before, for Maerel's burial. Maerel's body had been put into the large, central chamber with many others, but Eramet was a warrior, and she would lie by herself in a small chamber with her weapons and her grave goods.

From the outside, the barrow looked like any other hill. Only the ditch around it and the stone that sealed the entrance marked it as a burial place. The walls of the passageways inside were lined with roughly cut stone, and great slabs of stone lay across them to keep the roof from falling in. The air inside was warm, compared to the wintry air outside, but it was heavy and hard to breathe. We carried oil lamps with us. Torches would not stay lit inside a barrow. Torchlight is too bright for the eyes of the dead.

Vintel and Laris, Taia's warrior, carried Eramet into the barrow and laid her in the place they had prepared for her. The rest of us gathered at the entrance to the chamber. Vintel laid Eramet's sword and shield beside her. Whatever her grave gift was, she must already have given it. One by one, the rest of us gave our gifts. I laid Sparrow's token on Eramet's breast, over her heart. Namet was the last to give her gift. She knelt by her child's body and began to sing. It was a cradle song.

SPARROW

Late that night, after I had seen my warrior to bed, I went to say good night to Sparrow. Her fever was gone. Her grief was not, but she was no longer inconsolable. She was wearing a sleeping shirt that was too big for her. Maara had put her naked into bed. The shirt must have been Eramet's.

"Will it upset you if I talk about it?" Sparrow asked me.

"No," I said. "Won't it upset you?"

She shook her head. "I want to."

I sat at the foot of the bed and wrapped myself in a blanket, while Sparrow snuggled down under the covers. After the snowfall, the weather had turned very cold.

"Did you hear about the battle?" she asked me.

I nodded. "The companions talk of nothing else."

"I was carrying her shield. I had it slung over my shoulder. If I had been between Eramet and the other boat, she would still be alive."

"If you had been between Eramet and the other boat," I said, "the archer would have waited until you were not or chosen you as his target."

She looked up at me, surprised. "I didn't think of that."

"It wasn't your fault. Don't make it worse than it is."

I was thinking of my mother, who sometimes blamed herself for the death of her sisters. She would say to me, "If only I had been stronger," or, "If only I had been more skillful." She meant that if she had been a warrior, if she had been beside them on the battlefield, they might not have died.

Then I would remind her that they might all have died, and neither my sister nor I would have been born.

Sparrow wiped her eyes with a corner of her blanket.

"I know," she said. "There's no putting spilled blood back."

I had heard my grandmother say the same thing many times. Now it was no longer just a figure of speech to me. No matter how many ways one might think of for things to have happened differently, nothing could change what had already happened.

I thought of the blood on Sparrow's clothing, the clothing I had burned. I thought of Sparrow's words to me at the harvest festival, when she first showed me her love for Eramet, and of her words to me earlier that day,

that she would have given me her heart to lay beside her warrior. I thought of the people I loved, of my mother and my sister and my warrior, and the shadow of grief fell upon my own heart. It was a grief that waited for me, as grief waits for everyone who loves. I was in no hurry for it to find me. I regarded Sparrow with a new compassion. While she would live on to love someone else, she would always carry this grief with her.

I didn't know what else to say to her. I saw that her hair was in a wild tangle.

"Shall I comb your hair?" I asked her.

She touched it absentmindedly and nodded. She sat up and reached into the chest by the bed for a comb.

"This was Eramet's," she said. "Do you think Eramet would mind if I kept some of her things?"

"Of course not," I replied. "She would want you to have anything of hers you wished to keep."

"Everything will be different now," she said.

I took the comb from her and had her sit up, to make room for me behind her at the head of the bed. Her hair was so tangled that I had to work the knots loose with my fingers before I could get the comb through it. Though I had no words that might help to ease her pain, I believe my touch did comfort her. When I finished with her hair, I put my arms around her. She leaned back against me, and I held her for a while. I felt her breathing change. She was crying.

I began to rock her and to make the little comforting noises my mother used to make to me when something had hurt me. She stiffened a little, as she tried not to give in to her tears. Then she turned in my arms and put her arms around my neck and cried. Some of her pain must have spilled into my own heart, because an ache began in my breast as I held her, and I took comfort from her body in my arms, even as I tried to comfort her.

I held her and rocked her and stroked her back until she was quiet. Then I worried that she was getting cold.

"Get under the covers," I said. I lifted up the blankets for her.

She did as I told her, but when I started to get up, she took hold of my hand. "Stay with me," she said.

I got into the bed with her, and she came into my arms.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's all right."

“I miss her.”

“I know.”

I stroked her back lightly with the tips of my fingers and felt her relax against me.

“That feels good,” she said.

She lay so quietly in my arms that after a few minutes I thought she had fallen asleep, but when I tried to shift her weight off of me so that I could get up, she reached for me, and her fingers brushed my cheek.

“Stay,” she whispered.

She pressed her body against me. I felt her breath on the side of my neck just before her lips touched me there. Her fingers stroked my face, then pressed against my cheek to turn my face toward her. Her thumb brushed my lips, and her lips found the corner of my mouth.

A sweet ache began at the top of my spine and spread over the back of my head and down my neck. Her touch on my face made my skin tingle. When her fingers drifted down the side of my neck, I heard myself take a quick breath. It took me a moment to understand what she was doing, and when I did, my body had already taken me beyond a boundary I didn't know existed until then. Her lips found mine. This time it was not the light and teasing kiss she had given me at the harvest festival. This kiss had fire in it. It caught the tinder around my heart. The aching grief that lingered there began to burn.

I must have responded. I know I didn't pull away. The tenderness in her touch made me want to cry. Every disappointment, every fear that had cast its shadow over me, she drove away. Only the feelings she created in me mattered. I felt her lips on me, and her hands, and every place she touched began to burn, until my body moved with her, wanting more of the sweet fire.

She began to rock against me. She slipped her leg between my legs and pressed against me until I felt the fire begin there too. Nothing about this feeling was familiar.

“Touch me,” she whispered.

She took my hand in hers and brought it under her shirt, between her legs. When I touched her, she sighed softly and opened to me. I had never touched anyone but myself like that, but she was not made much differently from the way I was made, and she showed me what she needed by the way she moved. As I touched her, I felt the echoes of the pleasure I gave her in my own body. At last her body stiffened, and she put her hand over mine

and pressed my fingers hard against her. Even when it was over, she kept my hand where it was for a while. Then she reached for my belt.

I almost stopped her. If I could comfort Sparrow's heart by comforting her body, I was glad to do it, but I remembered that not long before, she had lain in this bed with Eramet, and I could never be Eramet to her.

Sparrow felt me hesitate. "Please. Let me touch you."

"I'm not the one you want."

"You're my friend," she said. "Eramet is dead. Tonight you are the one I want."

I let her slip my trousers down. She touched me gently, too gently, but when I tried to press myself against her hand, she pulled away from me.

"Don't be in such a hurry," she whispered into my ear.

I heard the smile in her voice. Her breath on my face sent a shiver of pleasure down my spine.

Sparrow understood pleasure. She knew it was my first time, and she was careful with me. If she wished for Eramet, I never knew it. She took her time. She gave me time to get used to feelings that were new to me. She took me to the brink and let me fall, willing to let me find my own way, in my own time. With Sparrow I was safe, as I would be with no one else, because I didn't love her, and she didn't love me.

Afterwards we lay quietly together. My feelings surprised me. As a child, I had played with other children the games all children play when they begin to discover their own bodies, but I had never had a sweetheart. I'd always thought that what Sparrow and I had given to each other was something only lovers shared. Now I knew differently. While Sparrow's grief still awaited her, as my loneliness awaited me, for a little while we found respite in each other's arms.

###

We woke early. Sparrow gave me a shy smile.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"What for?"

"For being my friend."

The room was freezing, and neither of us was in a hurry to get out of bed. We snuggled down under the covers and huddled together like children.

"Today will be better," Sparrow said.

I waited to see if she would tell me what she meant, but she was already thinking of something else.

“Did I ever tell you how I became Eramet’s apprentice?” she asked me.

“No.”

“She stole me, right out from under the nose of my mistress.” Sparrow chuckled at the memory.

“Your mistress?”

“When I was a slave in Arnet’s house.”

She said it so casually that I thought I must have misunderstood her.

“What?”

“When I was a slave,” she said. She saw my confusion. “You didn’t know?”

“No.”

“I thought everyone knew. I’m the only person here without a name.”

I had thought Sparrow was a childhood name, the kind of name that sticks to a person no matter how many names she may have been born with or earned for herself afterwards.

“My mother was a slave,” she said. “I was born in Arnet’s house.”

“Who is Arnet?”

“Namet’s older sister. Eramet and I were children together.”

I was still trying to make sense of what she’d just told me. Sparrow misunderstood my silence.

“I thought you knew.” A chill had crept into her voice, and she turned away from me. “I should have known that Tamras, Tamnet’s daughter, would not befriend a slave.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve never known anyone who was a slave, but it makes no difference to me. You’re my friend now.”

Sparrow wouldn’t look at me. Her face had the same closed expression I remembered from the day I arrived in Merin’s house, when I first told her my name. I fumbled under the covers until I found her hand and held it tight in both of mine.

“Forgive a backward country girl her ignorance,” I said.

In spite of herself, Sparrow let a smile lift one corner of her mouth. “Not so backward anymore.”

I felt myself blush. “Tell me about Eramet,” I said.

Sparrow’s body relaxed, and her eyes gazed past me, seeing not this little room, but another place, another time.

"I knew her all my life," she said. "I can't remember a time when I didn't love her. When she left Arnet's house to be fostered here, I thought I was going to die of loneliness."

"How old were you?"

"Eleven or twelve, probably."

"Were you lovers then?"

"No," she said. "I wasn't old enough to understand those feelings yet. I wish I had been."

I smiled at that, but a troubled look came into Sparrow's eyes.

"After Eramet left," she said, "the Lady Arnet's son began to make use of me. I was too young, and it hurt."

And there it was—a glimpse of the two faces of life. As with so many things, so it was also with desire. While one face of desire gave great pleasure, the other gave great pain.

"Oh," was all I could say.

"Never mind," she said. "It was a long time ago."

She was eighteen years old. How long ago could it have been?

"It didn't go on for very long," she said. "When I began to become a woman, the Lady Arnet took a fancy to me. She refused to share me with her son." Her eyes gleamed with mischief. "Then I got my revenge. I made his life miserable."

"How did you do that?"

"I knew him very well. I knew all the things he wanted. Those things I got his mother to deny him. I even knew the woman he wanted, and I told my mistress things about her that made her believe the girl was quite unworthy of her son."

I thought about Namet, who was now an elder. If Arnet was Namet's older sister, she must have been very old when she took Sparrow into her bed.

"How old was Arnet then?"

"As old as Namet is now, I imagine."

"And she took a child for her lover?"

"I wasn't her lover," Sparrow replied. "I was a slave. I was there for her pleasure, not my own, but at least she never hurt me."

"What about Eramet?"

"Eramet was my lover," she said.

I heard her voice catch, and I was sorry I had reminded her of her grief, but she went on with her story.

“Two years ago Eramet returned to Arnet’s house a warrior.”

“Was that when she stole you?”

“She didn’t steal me exactly,” Sparrow said. “She tricked the Lady Arnet into giving me to her.” Sparrow smiled a little secret smile. “When Eramet came home, she took one look at me and took me to bed.”

“What did the Lady Arnet think about that?”

“She didn’t know about it.”

“What did you think?”

“I was happy.”

For the first time that morning, tears came into Sparrow’s eyes. She brushed them away.

“The Lady Arnet owed a warrior’s service to the Lady Merin. She asked Eramet to perform that service, so that she could keep her own daughter at home. Eramet had served in Merin’s house as an apprentice. The Lady Arnet hoped she wouldn’t mind going back.

“It’s the custom in Arnet’s house for a warrior to receive a gift when she performs such a service. Eramet said she would be glad to go, and she asked the Lady Arnet if she could choose her gift. The Lady was so pleased that Eramet was willing that she said to her, ‘Choose what you will.’ The Lady expected that she would choose one of the fine swords hanging in the warriors’ hall or perhaps a little piece of land, but Eramet chose me.”

“Wasn’t the Lady Arnet angry?”

“She was furious, but what could she do? She couldn’t take back the word she’d given.”

Something occurred to me that frightened me a little. “What will happen to you now? Did you belong to Eramet?”

“No,” said Sparrow. “Eramet took me as her apprentice, and slaves can’t be made warriors in Merin’s house. By taking me as her apprentice, she made me a free woman.”

I saw how many things had bound Sparrow and Eramet together—the ties of a shared childhood, the loyalty between warrior and apprentice, the bonds of love, and the gift of freedom. How would Sparrow ever undo the tangle that tied her to the dead?

Something else occurred to me. “Will someone here apprentice you, do you think?”

Sparrow frowned. “I hadn’t thought about it. Vintel needs a companion, but you’re the one she wants.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

“I thought she asked you.”

“She did,” I said, “but it was after Maerel died, and I had no one to companion while my warrior was away. I was the only one handy.”

Sparrow brushed my cheek with her fingertips. “Vintel isn’t blind.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t know?” She took my face in both her hands and kissed my mouth. It was a sweet kiss. “You’re lovely.”

I was embarrassed. “No I’m not.”

“You are,” she said. “If you ever grow a little, you’ll be quite a beauty.”

I heard a noise behind me and saw Sparrow look up at something over my shoulder. I turned to see Maara standing in the doorway.

“The Lady wants you,” Maara told me.

THE QUEEN'S MIRROR

The Lady smiled at me. "Sit down," she said. She was sitting up in her bed, wrapped in a blanket. Although a fire burned brightly on the hearth, the room was very cold. The Lady's servant had been combing her hair. It lay loose over her shoulders, dark as a raven's wing. When I came in, the Lady dismissed her.

I hesitated, unsure of where to sit, until the Lady patted the edge of her bed. When I sat down, she handed me a blanket. I was glad to have it. I had put on two pairs of trousers, my warmest shirt, and a woolen tunic, and I was still cold.

"Your warrior was right," the Lady said.

"Yes."

"You never doubted her?"

"I never doubted that she told us the truth," I said.

"So you never feared that you would pay the price of treachery?"

I didn't know what to say to her.

"Did you believe I could do you harm?" she asked me gently.

I chose my words carefully. "My warrior told me that people may do a thing when they're afraid that they wouldn't do if they thought it over."

The Lady knit her brows in a troubled frown.

"You have nothing to fear from me," she said.

"Why did you hold me in my warrior's place?"

I was relieved to hear no hint of petulance in my voice. It sounded like the most innocent of questions.

"I couldn't have kept her locked in the armory week after week. How else could I have held her here?"

The Lady was watching me closely. Perhaps she was trying to learn how I felt about what she'd done, or perhaps she was trying to create in me the feelings that would best suit her.

"Your warrior expected me to ask her to offer her own life as a guarantee," the Lady said. "Sometimes it's best not to do what someone expects."

"I wish you had spoken to me about it afterward." It was the plain truth, simply said.

The Lady's face put on an injured look. "You should have come to me

with your worries. I would have been glad to ease your fears.”

It was all very well now to say I should have come to her, but at the time I didn’t feel that she would welcome me. I knew it would be unwise to show the anger I still felt toward her or the distrust that came from my anger.

“I thought you would do what was best,” I told her.

She seemed pleased with my answer. The injured look disappeared, and I saw the woman I believed her to be, the woman who would do whatever was necessary for the safety of her people, even if some of her people paid too great a price.

“If there is ever anything you wish to ask me,” the Lady said, “you must not hesitate.”

I nodded.

“Do you have any questions for me now?”

I shook my head. What good would it do me to ask a question when I couldn’t trust the answer? Then I thought of something.

“What will you do with the prisoners?” I asked her.

“The prisoners? What do you think I should do with the prisoners?”

The amusement in her voice told me that she didn’t expect an answer. I gave her one anyway. “I think you should let them go home.”

“Go home? Why would I do that?”

“To show them we have no fear of them.”

“So I should take them to our northern border and turn them loose?”

“Yes.”

“If I were to do such a thing, what guarantee would I have that they will leave us in peace?”

“Give them food to carry with them. Enough to see their families through the winter. Why would they trouble us if they had all they could carry?”

“Should I also give them back their weapons?”

Her words mocked me, but I answered her with sincerity.

“No, Lady,” I said. “That would be foolish.”

“Tell me again why this is a good idea.” This time her voice had less amusement in it and more curiosity.

“Sometimes it’s best not to do what someone expects. Besides, what else can you do with them?”

“I could send them to the mines in exchange for salt or copper.”

“When?”

“Next spring, when the caravans arrive.”

"Then you will have to keep them through the winter."

"Yes."

"So you'll have to feed them anyway. And the men will be unhappy to have the trouble of watching them."

"It will give the men something to do," she said.

"And many of the prisoners are in ill health. They may spread disease among us."

The Lady's eyes grew dark. "I would be within my rights to kill them all."

I think she meant to frighten me. I had been frightened enough already. I would not frighten again so easily.

"You could do that," I said, "but I've heard stories about the blood of the slain poisoning the ground. And when their people hear what became of those men, they will be angry."

"No," she said. "They will be afraid, and they will leave us alone."

"If as many of your warriors were taken alive from the battlefield and then put to the sword, what would you feel?"

I saw the answer in her eyes.

"These men have people at home who love them," I said.

"Yes," said the Lady. "Just as Eramet had people here who loved her."

"The man who killed her was defending his friends." I hoped Sparrow would forgive my speaking for him. I hesitated for just a moment before I said, "He has already lost his hand because of it."

"What?"

"Has no one told you?"

She said nothing, but her surprise revealed the answer. I wondered why Vintel hadn't told the Lady what she'd done.

The Lady got up from the bed and went to stand before the fire. For several minutes she was silent, preoccupied with her own thoughts. Then she turned back to me.

"What has your mother told you of the war?"

"That her sisters died," I said. "And I've heard the songs sung about it."

"The songs are sung to heal our hearts, but they never do. All they do is cause the young to believe that war is a glorious adventure."

"I never believed it."

"No," she said. "I can see you don't believe it, and that is your mother's doing."

I supposed it was. For all my dreams of becoming a warrior, war had never seemed a glorious adventure to me. All my life the shadow of war had lain over my mother's heart.

"The last thing I want is another war," the Lady said. "When I was young, I learned the ways of war, but no one taught me how to keep the peace. If anyone knows how to do that, she must be the wisest woman in the world."

###

A fire roared on the hearth in the great hall. It was the warmest place in the house except for the kitchen, and almost the entire household had gathered there.

I didn't see Maara at first. I finally found her sitting on a bench in a dark corner. As crowded as the room was, no one was sitting near her. I was not at all surprised. Her arms were folded across her chest, and her face wore a fierce expression. I knew her well enough to know she meant nothing by it, but I understood how she must appear to other people.

"Have you eaten?" I asked her.

She nodded without looking at me.

I'd had no breakfast, and I was hungry.

"I haven't," I said. "Shall I go now?"

"Yes, go ahead."

She sounded impatient with me. Before I could ask her why, I saw Sparrow coming down the stairs. I waved to her, and she saw me and waved back. Maara seemed lost in her own thoughts, so I said nothing more to her and went with Sparrow into the kitchen. We filled our bowls with porridge and sat down on the floor in a corner of the kitchen where we wouldn't be in the way.

"What did the Lady want?" Sparrow asked me.

"I'm not sure."

I had a bit of a guilty conscience about speaking for the prisoners. After all, it was Sparrow, not I, who had been injured by them. Though I didn't believe for a minute that the Lady would consider seriously anything I'd said, I didn't like to keep what I had done from Sparrow.

"Do you hate the man who killed Eramet?" I asked her.

She had been about to put a spoonful of porridge into her mouth. She

stopped and set the spoon down in her bowl.

"Why?" she said.

"I told the Lady what happened to him."

Sparrow frowned. "Vintel shouldn't have done that."

I was surprised to hear her say so. "Why not?"

"Because he was helpless, and because his cry is still ringing in my ears. I wish the man had never been born, but I don't wish him dead now."

"Vintel never told the Lady what she did."

"No, she wouldn't. Vintel has her own way of doing things, and she sees no need to explain to anyone what she does or why she does it."

I wondered if Sparrow knew that Vintel and the warriors with her had once failed to protect Maara, and if she knew Vintel well enough to tell me why.

"Why did you tell the Lady about it?" Sparrow asked me.

"I asked her what she was going to do with the prisoners," I replied. "She asked me what I would do with them, and I told her I would let them go home. She reminded me that one of their warriors had killed one of ours, so I told her the price he had already paid for it."

I watched Sparrow's face, to see if she objected to what I'd done, but she only nodded and took a spoonful of porridge.

"Do you think I did wrong?"

Sparrow shook her head. "Did the Lady summon you to ask your advice about the prisoners?" Now she was teasing me.

"No," I said. "I doubt she'll pay any attention to my advice."

"What did she want, then?"

"She asked me if I was frightened."

"Because she took you hostage?"

I nodded. "She said I had nothing to fear from her."

"I didn't think so," Sparrow said.

"I think she wanted to make sure of me. I think she wanted to draw me close to her again. She wanted to know if I still trust her."

"Do you?"

Ever since the idea came into my head of leaving the Lady's household, I was cautious about revealing my thoughts to anyone. I trusted Sparrow, but I knew better than to tell her I was contemplating treachery. I nodded, and it occurred to me that I was lying to Sparrow as much to protect her as to protect myself. It was the same reason Maara had lied to me.

"I don't believe the Lady ever meant to harm me," I said. That much was true.

The healer came into the kitchen.

"There you are," she said, when her eyes found me.

Sparrow and I stood up to greet her.

"I need your help," she said to me. "One of the prisoners is badly injured. The Lady has asked me to tend him."

Sparrow and I glanced at each other. I thought I knew which prisoner it was, and I was certain of it when the healer said, "I hope you have a strong stomach."

"There are some things I need to do," said Sparrow. She gave me a sympathetic look and left the kitchen.

I helped the healer make a poultice. I set a cloth to soak in sage water while she crushed a collection of herbs in a mortar. She pounded them vigorously, muttering to herself all the while. I think she didn't care much for the idea of tending strangers.

She laid out the cloth and spread the crushed herbs over it. Then she folded it over several times. She searched through the contents of a basket, drew out a flint knife, and tested its edge. While she was gathering what she needed, I slipped into the drying room and wrapped a generous handful of valerian root in a clean cloth.

###

The men's house smelled strange to me. I looked around with curiosity. It was half the size of the main house, and the entire downstairs was one large common room. The prisoners were crowded together at the end farthest from the fire. Half a dozen armed men guarded them, though it was hardly necessary. They seemed to have no inclination to resist their captivity. Many of them were asleep on the floor. All of them looked worn out. They had been fed, and scattered around them were empty bowls that had been licked clean. Not a crust of bread remained among them. I saw a few men pick crumbs from their clothing, or even from the floor, and put them into their mouths.

The injured man lay moaning in a corner. He burned with fever and was unaware of us until the healer touched him. Then he threw out his uninjured arm and would have knocked her over if the man beside him had not

caught it first.

The healer called for several of the prisoners to come and help her. She motioned to them to hold his arms and legs while she carefully unwrapped the makeshift bandage from his injured arm. The smell turned my stomach. Although I tried not to look, my eyes glanced at his mangled flesh against my will. Some of it was black. The healer took out her flint knife to trim it away.

The man beside him shouted at her and took hold of the hand that held the knife. Two of our warriors had come to stand beside us while we were among the prisoners, and one of them would have struck the man, if the healer hadn't stopped him. She understood the man's fear for his friend and showed him by signs what she was going to do. He nodded that he understood. Then she began to trim the injured man's blackened flesh away. He screamed once and struggled for a moment. Then he grew still.

"Is he dead?" I asked the healer.

"No," she said. "His spirit left his body for a while, because of the pain."

I had recovered from my revulsion, and I watched, fascinated, while the healer worked. Now that the man's spirit had fled, she cut more deeply into his flesh and pulled slivers of broken bone from the wound. Then she freed a flap of skin large enough to cover the raw flesh. She had the wound stitched up and the poultice applied to it before the man's spirit returned.

"I wish I'd brought something for his pain," she said.

I reached into the pocket of my tunic and drew out the package of valerian root. She smiled and took it from me.

"You have a healer's heart," she said. She took one of the empty bowls from the floor and handed it to me. "Fill this."

I went to the hearth, where there was a cauldron of hot water. I dipped some into the bowl and took it back to the healer. She showed the injured man's friend how to measure out the powder in the palm of his hand, so that he didn't use too much of it. Then she stirred it into the hot water. When it had steeped a while, she gave some to the injured man.

As we left the men's house, several of our warriors gave us puzzled looks. I didn't mind. I felt much better about everything.

###

That evening, when the household gathered for the evening meal, the Lady rose from her place at the high table and stood patiently until the hall was quiet. She gave no introduction. She spoke plainly what was in her mind.

"There are many here who remember the war."

She paused to look around the room at the faces of the people. The young ones waited expectantly for her to go on, but the ones with wrinkled faces and grey showing at their temples grew solemn at her words.

"For the first time in many years," the Lady said, "strangers have set foot upon our land. They have come, not because we have done them an injury or because they seek adventure, but because they are hungry."

A few puzzled looks appeared on the faces around me.

"Today I was reminded of a story my mother used to tell me. I'm sure you have all heard it. It is sometimes called 'The Queen's Mirror,' and it contains a wisdom I'd forgotten. After I thought about that story for a while, I called together the women of the council. They agree with me that we should allow the strangers to return to their homeland."

The Lady waited for the protests she evidently expected, but no one said a word. I think everyone was too surprised to speak.

"Out of the bounty the Mother has given us this year," she said, "I will send with them two dozen of our cattle and all the grain they can carry."

I hardly saw the stunned faces of the people around me. I was too stunned myself to see them. I couldn't comprehend what I had done. Letting the prisoners go was an idea that had just come into my head. Now it had become real. Now it was going to happen.

"I wish I could explain to you the wisdom of this plan," the Lady said. "I can't. But one thing I do know. If these men are lost, more will take their place. Then they will come, not for food alone, but also to avenge their dead, and they will take our blood to ease their hearts."

The Lady paused for a few moments to study the faces around her. I think she was surprised that the silence still remained unbroken.

"There is one thing more we must decide," she said. "We have lost one of our own. Those to whom she belonged have a right to ease their hearts with blood. I want any person here who feels that injury to tell me now, will you give up that right or will you demand a life?"

Namet, who sat next to her, stood up. "I give up my right," she said.

The Lady looked around the room until her eyes found Sparrow, who was sitting next to me at the companions' table.

Sparrow stood up and said, "I give up my right."

The Lady's eyes went next to Vintel, who sat gazing into her bowl, as if she was thinking only of her supper.

"Vintel," the Lady said at last. "Do you give up your right?"

Vintel looked up. "Eramet did not belong to me," she said.

Although there was no longer a formal bond between them, Eramet had been Vintel's apprentice. From what Sparrow had told me, I knew there was still a bond of love between them, and from Vintel's actions at the river, it was plain that she felt the injury keenly, whether or not she claimed her right to feel it.

Vintel said nothing more.

"Then we are agreed," the Lady said.

She sat down and motioned to the servants to bring the evening meal.

###

The companions had little to say about the Lady's plan. They were surprised, but what happened to the prisoners was the Lady's responsibility, and they only shrugged their shoulders and went on to talk about things they found more interesting.

I looked around the room and saw doubt in many faces. Some of the older people clearly had misgivings. A few spoke quietly among themselves. Perhaps they would protest privately to the Lady, but none of them would challenge her in front of the household, especially as she had the consent of the council.

Sparrow leaned close to me and whispered, "I'll be sleeping in the companions' loft tonight."

I nodded.

"Are you still sleeping in your warrior's room?"

"Yes," I said.

"Too bad. I'll miss you."

I blushed.

"That's all right," she said. "I understand."

###

After the evening meal, Maara went upstairs. I followed her, and from

the landing at the top of the stairs, I saw her stop in the doorway of Namet's room. She said a few words I couldn't hear, then went on into her own room. When I joined her, she was coiling the braided thong around her fingers.

"I suppose we don't need this now," she said, and handed the coiled thong to me.

As I took it from her, I felt a pang of regret.

"Do you know the story?" she asked me.

"What story?"

"The story the Lady was talking about."

I nodded. "I was the one who reminded her of it."

"I thought so," she said. "The Lady told me her plan was your idea."

"She did?"

"She spoke to me this afternoon. She seems to think I know all about these people."

"Don't you?"

"I have some knowledge of the northern tribes, but I don't believe these men are northerners, although I think they have been used by them."

"What did the Lady say to you?"

"She asked me what I thought of your idea."

"I never thought she'd pay any attention to my idea. What if it's a mistake? What if they come back and do us harm?"

"The Lady must bear the responsibility for that," she said. "The Lady and the council. It was their decision."

"But it was my idea."

"It was a good idea. What made you think of it?"

"I don't know," I said. "They just didn't seem that dangerous to me."

"They are very dangerous, but your plan will make them much less so."

Her approval reassured me. All the same, I resolved not to be so quick to open my mouth the next time someone asked me for advice.

Maara settled herself on her bed. "Tell me the story," she said.

In ancient days, when only women were warriors, lived a race of magicians and sorcerers who wielded great power. To defeat their enemies, they had no need to resort to arms. Their seers saw from afar any army that marched against them, and their sorcerers wrapped their lands in a mist in which their enemies would wander, lost and afraid.

But when strangers came in peace, the people made a feast for them. Venison from their forests and game birds from their meadows filled the bellies of their guests. Then singers and poets and musicians entertained them, until, overcome by these delights, they closed their eyes and slept. When they awoke, they would find themselves encamped on the borders of the lands from which they'd come, and by each of them would be a gift according to the deepest wish of each one's heart.

In a far country lived a queen whose lands were rich and prosperous and whose people never lacked for any of life's necessities or comforts. Her own wealth was great. She ate from golden dishes and drank from silver goblets. Around her she kept things of beauty, so many that she never wanted for something to delight the eye. She too had musicians to fill her ears with sweet sounds and poets to fill her heart with stories of love and war.

One day a woman and her two daughters came to the queen's household. They asked for hospitality and were made welcome. The queen invited them to dine with her. She served them the best she had to give. Meat and bread and fruit and wine she offered them. After they had eaten their fill, the queen had her musicians and her storytellers entertain them. When her guests grew sleepy, she showed them to a room in which there was a soft bed for each of them and bade them each good night.

In the morning the queen and her guests broke their fast together. Before they left her to continue their journey, the woman and her daughters thanked the queen and praised her generosity, saying that with only one exception they had never enjoyed such hospitality anywhere.

The queen wished to know whose hospitality surpassed her own. Her guests assured her that none but a mysterious race of magical people could rival her. They told her of the strange land that vanished from the sight of those who intended to do harm, but whose people practiced the greatest generosity toward all who came in friendship. They told her of the wonders they had seen there, and they showed her the gifts they had been given. The elder daughter had received a sword. The younger had received a bow and a quiver of arrows. Both of these weapons were enchanted, for the sword moved on its own

and would prevail over the most skilled opponent, while the arrows never failed to find their target. Their mother had been given only a dream, but she was the most pleased with her gift, because the dream promised that her wish for grandchildren would come true.

The queen asked her guests where she could find this enchanted land.

"Follow the setting sun," they told her. "It is farther than you can imagine, but nearer than your heart's desire."

After her guests had gone, the queen thought about what they had told her of the land of sorcerers. She saw that she could spare her people much grief in time of war if her warriors possessed enchanted weapons. And if dreams that could foretell the future were within the gift of these magicians, any threat to her people could be foreseen and perhaps forestalled.

The queen had her servants make preparations for a long journey. Then she called together the warriors of her household. She told them of the enchanted land and asked which of them would accompany her there. All of them were eager to go with her, and the next day they began their journey.

They traveled for many days, until they came to the land of which they had heard such wonderful tales. They were invited to a feast, and it was all they could have wished. Dishes were served to them that they had never before tasted, and sweet wine was given them to drink. Songs were sung and stories told that spoke to each of them and brought back into memory the enchanted tales of childhood and the heroic deeds of youth. When their hearts were so full that they could listen no more, they fell asleep. In the morning they awoke on the border of the queen's own lands, and each of them had received a gift. Although there were no enchanted weapons among them, each one was delighted with the gift she had been given.

The queen's gift was a mirror of polished silver set in a golden frame. When she looked into it, she saw a faithful image of herself reflected back. The queen was not pleased with her gift, for she already possessed mirrors just as fine. She asked her warriors to show her what they had received, and not one of them had been given an enchanted sword or bow. None had had a vision of the future or any other thing the queen had hoped for.

When she thought of the long journey they had made with so little to show for it, the queen almost regretted having gone at all, but her warriors were happy with their gifts, and it had been a good adventure, so she hung the mirror upon the wall of her private chamber, to remind her of her own foolishness.

The next year the queen's daughter wished to marry. She had come to care for a man who cared very much for her, although he had little else to offer her. The queen wanted a better alliance for her daughter, and she refused to consent to the marriage. When next she passed by the golden mirror, she thought she saw, out of the corner of her eye, not the familiar features of her own face, but the beaked face and the cold eye of a bird of prey. When she stopped and looked again, her own familiar face looked back at her.

Not long afterward, a neighbor with whom the queen had had a long alliance asked to share in the bounty of one of the queen's forests. The forest lay far from the queen's household, and her people seldom hunted there. Nevertheless it had belonged to her family for many generations, and she was reluctant to allow others to hunt there, lest they come to regard the forest as their own. The queen refused the request, but she sent a gift of game to her neighbor's household, to lessen the sting of her refusal.

That evening, when she prepared for bed, the queen caught a glimpse of the golden mirror. She thought she saw within it the image of a bear, its belly full, standing over the body of a deer, unable to eat more but unwilling to allow another bear to eat. When the queen turned again to the mirror, she saw only her own familiar face.

The following year an army marched against the queen. She sent her warriors out to meet it, and they fought well, but in the end neither side could prevail against the other. She called upon her neighbor to send warriors to her aid. Her neighbor refused her request but sent a dozen fine swords back to her, to lessen the sting of her refusal.

Knowing that she was not strong enough to drive the invaders out, the queen offered to come to terms with them. They sent a young man to speak with her, the very man her daughter had wished to marry. He asked for gifts of grain and cattle and swore that she would then be left in peace. That much the queen was prepared to give, but he asked also for her daughter, and to that request the queen would not

consent. They talked long into the night without coming to an agreement, so the queen offered him her hospitality, and he accepted.

Late that night, as she prepared for bed, the queen conceived a plan. She convinced herself that the young man had dishonored her daughter by asking for her as if she were no more than property, and that this dishonor released the queen from the obligations of hospitality.

As she turned her treacherous plan over in her mind, a flash of light flew out of the golden mirror. It blinded her for a moment, and she shielded her eyes against it. When her sight returned, she looked into the mirror and beheld the image of her home and all her lands on fire. She rubbed her eyes and looked again, but the mirror reflected back to her only her own familiar face.

The queen thought about the vision the mirror had shown her, until at last she convinced herself that the flash of light must have been only the reflection of a momentary flare of torchlight and the images of fire the product of her own imagination. She gazed again into the mirror, but she saw nothing more to alarm her.

The next day the queen met with the young man again. This time she consented to the marriage. She asked that the wedding take place within her household on the following day, and she invited all the warriors of the invading army to attend it. Protected, as he thought, from treachery because he was her guest, the young man came the next day to be married, bringing with him the warriors of the invading army. The queen's warriors, who were unarmed, met them and made them welcome. They invited their guests to relieve themselves of the weight of their own weapons, and this they did.

The wedding took place, and the feast began. When their guests were in their cups, the queen's warriors took up their arms from where they had been hidden in the hall. The wedding guests fought back, but they were quickly overpowered, and every one of them was put to the sword. The floor of the hall was covered in their blood. It ran out the door of the house and soaked into the earth and still more blood flowed. It ran like water over the queen's rich farmlands and through her forests and into her lakes and streams and rivers. Then a flame sprang up from the heart of the dying man who loved the queen's daughter, and the blood began to burn. The fire spread in all directions, even to the crops in the fields and to the trees in the forests. Flames

danced upon the water in the lakes and streams. When it reached the borders of the queen's lands, the fire spread no farther.

When she saw her home and her lands on fire, the queen remembered the vision in the mirror. She ran to her bedchamber to look within it one last time. She saw her own familiar face reflected back to her, and as she watched, the flesh softened and fell away, until in the enchanted mirror she saw the face of death.

For a hundred years, nothing would live in the land that had once been the queen's. No crops would sprout; no trees would grow. Fish would not spawn in the lakes or streams. Animals would not thrive there. No child would be born there. No living thing dwelt in that place again until the queen's name had been forgotten.

"I think I'm beginning to understand your stories," said Maara.

"Maybe you could tell me what it means, then."

The story troubled me. When I mentioned it to the Lady, I was thinking only of the part about the blood of the slain, of those whom the queen's warriors had murdered. I had forgotten there was so much more than that in it.

"How had the queen received her heart's desire when she received the mirror?" Maara asked me.

"She didn't understand its power," I replied. "She wanted dreams that would foretell the future, but she failed to read the future in her own face."

"If the Lady had such a mirror, would she have the wisdom to use it well, do you think?"

"I don't know," I said. "The Lady is clever, but I'm no judge of wisdom."

Maara's eyes held mine. She had a strange expression on her face, as if she was seeing something unexpected.

"The Lady may well have such a mirror," she said.

MIDWINTER'S NIGHT

Our prisoners were sent away with the Lady's gifts of grain and cattle. Maara found a few among them who spoke the language of the northern tribes, although, as she suspected, these men were not northerners. I would not soon forget the expressions on their faces when she made them understand that they would be taken to our northern border and allowed to find their own way home. Vintel and her band of warriors escorted them. She didn't ask my warrior to go with them.

As I had hoped, the warriors of Merin's house began to take notice of Maara, and a few of them offered her their friendship. Laris, Taia's warrior, sought her out more than once after the evening meal and brought her into the circle of warriors gathered around the hearth. While apprentices were tolerated in these gatherings of warriors, companions were not. I tried not to mind too much.

###

Sun's light. Moon's light. Lamplight and firelight.

Love's light. Light my way through the longest night.

On midwinter's night we sang the song that every one of us had known from childhood—everyone but Maara. The singing surprised her. From where I sat with the other companions, I could just see her, sitting beside Namet, who had drawn her out of a dark corner and seated her among the other warriors. Maara had once said that no one told her stories when she was a child, and now I suspected she had never heard a group of people sing together. Her eyes, wide with wonder, went from face to face. I'd never seen her look so young.

We had no poets in the household, no bards or singers, no one who played the pipe or harp. At holiday times we made our own music, as my family had done at home. Some of the elders had lovely voices. Fet, who was ordinarily so quiet, had a fine, clear voice that fell over us like a gentle rain. Her shield friend, Fodla, had to be urged to sing, but when she did, her deeper voice supported Fet's and wound around it, until their two voices blended

perfectly into one.

Long night. Soft dark. Sleep, sleep in Mother's arms.
Silence holds us. Love enfolds us. Safe from harm.
Sun's light. Moon's light. Lamplight and firelight.
Love's light. Light my way through the longest night.

The rich smell of nuts roasting in the ashes of the fire mingled with the scent of hot cider and the pine branches that hung all around the great hall. I sat with the other companions on the floor, while the warriors, both women and men, sat on benches or stools close by the hearth. Outside the night was cold. Inside we basked in the warmth of firelight and friendship.

Days longer. Light stronger. Nights warmer. Hope clearer.
Life longer. Love stronger. Hearts warmer. Day nearer.
Sun's light. Moon's light. Lamplight and firelight.
Love's light. Light my way through the longest night.

I closed my eyes and thought of home. This midwinter's night was the first I had ever spent away from my family. I missed them, and in my mind's eye I pictured them around me. I saw the faces of my mother and my sister, and I saw too the faces of the dead. I saw my grandmother's face and heard her voice, singing a song she used to sing. I saw my father's face, although I thought I had forgotten it. I felt again as I used to feel while we watched together through the night. I was safe within the circle, as long as I had my mother's arms around me.

When I was a child and afraid of the dark, my grandmother once told me, "In the dark we were made. In the dark we rest as in the Mother's womb, and there she recreates us before she brings us out again into the light." After that, when I lay in my bed in the dark, I would fall into sleep believing that I fell into the Mother's arms. Midwinter's night was a night to fall into the dark.

We fall, trusting, into sleep, believing that morning will come and we will wake again. We fall, trusting, into the endless dark of midwinter's night, believing that light will come again into the world.

All around me the companions slept, their heads pillowed on their arms or on each other's bodies. Sparrow lay beside me, fast asleep, her head in

my lap, and I lay back against Taia's shoulder. The last thing I saw before I slept was Maara's face.

###

The drum woke me. Steady as a heartbeat, I almost mistook it for the beating of my own heart. The lamps had all gone out, and the fire had burned low. The room was dark. The girls around me began to wake. So slowly we hardly noticed it, the drum began to beat a little faster, a little louder. Before long everyone in the great hall was awake and stirring.

Pah *pom*. Silence. Pah *pom*. Silence. Pah *pom*.

This time the silence remained unbroken.

We made ready to go outdoors to greet the sun. The Lady and the elders went first, then the warriors with their apprentices, then the companions and the servants. Wrapped in cloaks and blankets, huddled close together, we faced the east and watched the mountains' silhouette emerge against the lightening sky, until at last the rim of the pale sun peeked over the earth's edge. We watched as the whole body of the sun revealed itself, and the light of the midwinter sun fell over us like a blessing. Then we hurried back indoors.

The Lady knelt by the hearth and struck a spark into dry tinder to make a new fire. The first spark caught. It was a good sign. With her breath, the Lady encouraged it to grow into a bright flame. From that flame, she lit a torch to carry the new fire to every hearth in the household.

###

Sparrow and I sat side by side at the companions' table. The feasting had gone on all day, and we were too full to move. Around us people talked quietly together or listened as someone told a story. Sparrow handed me something wrapped in a piece of cloth.

"What's this?" I asked her.

"Look and see," she said.

I unwrapped her gift. It was a brooch, made of dark wood, carved to look like a circle of braided cord, with a pin of lighter wood to fasten it. It was beautiful.

"It belonged to Eramet," Sparrow said.

I had no cloak, so I was not in need of a brooch to fasten it.

"How shall I wear it?" I asked her.

She unfastened the leather belt I wore over my tunic and removed the plain wooden buckle. Then she did it up again, using the brooch to fasten it.

I had prepared a gift for her too. When I left home, my mother gave me a token to wear. It was a bit of amber with an insect's wing inside it. I had worn it for a while, but having something around my neck bothered me, and I put it away. Earlier that day I'd put it on again. Now I took it off and gave it to Sparrow.

"This is for you," I said.

She was as pleased with my gift as if it had been made of gold. She held it up to the firelight, and the flame shone through the amber, golden as the summer sun.

###

By bedtime I was already half asleep. It was all I could do to get up from the table and follow my warrior to her room. As she usually did, Maara stopped in the doorway of Namet's room, but Namet wasn't there. She would still be with the elders, who had spent the day apart from the household, conducting the midwinter ritual. Every season of the year offered its own wisdom, and when the seasons turned, the Mother's hand would sometimes fall upon one of them, so that she might catch a glimpse behind the veil and learn something to help us understand the things that would happen in the coming year.

I helped Maara prepare for bed. I was just about to get undressed myself when the Lady appeared in the doorway.

"Come with me," she said.

I followed the Lady to her chamber. There was a good fire burning on the hearth. She sat down on the hearthstone and motioned to me to sit down beside her. I put my hand over my mouth to cover a yawn.

"I know you're tired," the Lady said. "I won't keep you long. I have good news for you."

"Good news?"

"Vintel has asked for you." The sparkle in her eyes told me there was more. "She wants you, not as a companion, but as her apprentice."

I hardly knew what to think. It was not the custom to take someone as an

apprentice right away. A warrior would first take a girl to be her companion, and later they would both decide whether they would be bound together as warrior and apprentice. The expression on my face gave me away.

"Why does that not please you?" the Lady asked me.

"I already have a warrior."

"You're only her companion," she replied. "I know that she has treated you as an apprentice, and she's taught you well, but the time has come for you to take your own place among us."

I could think of nothing to say.

"I understand that your time here has been difficult for you," the Lady said. "You've been tested, and you haven't disappointed me."

She put her arm around my shoulders and drew me close against her side. "Because you are your mother's daughter, you will always have a place here. For her sake, I would regard you as my own child. But today I offer you a place that you have shown yourself worthy of. Although you are small in body, you have shown me that you have courage and loyalty and strength of spirit."

Her arm around me was warm and gentle. She caressed my shoulders and my back with her open hand, much as my mother used to do.

"Vintel is my right hand," she said. "She is the first among all the warriors of this household. She honors you by asking for you."

"I know," I said.

"Why do you hesitate?"

I didn't know what to tell her. I didn't care for Vintel as I cared for Maara. I didn't trust Vintel as I trusted Maara. My head told me I couldn't ask for a better apprenticeship than the one the Lady offered me, but with all my heart I didn't want it.

"Change is always difficult," the Lady said. "It may feel strange to you at first, but you will grow as used to Vintel as you are now to Maara. In fact, I would be surprised if you didn't come to feel even closer to her. Vintel is one of us, while Maara is a stranger here. She is welcome to stay with us, of course, for as long as she chooses, but she can never be as one of our own."

The Lady was telling me that I should choose a warrior who was one of our own people, who would offer to me and to my family valuable friendships and alliances and ties of obligation. Maara could offer me only herself. She had nothing else.

I thought carefully before I spoke. "I will thank Vintel for the honor," I

said, “but I can’t accept her offer.”

I felt the Lady stiffen. She was watching me closely, and I was too tired to try to conceal from her what I was feeling, so I simply told her the truth.

“My warrior has treated me well,” I said. “She has taught me, though I’m not her apprentice. She risked her life to return to a place where she felt both unwelcome and unsafe, not because she owed us anything, but because she cared for us more than many of us ever cared for her.”

The Lady frowned, but she waited for me to finish what I had to say.

“I know the value of what Vintel offers me, but you have praised my loyalty, and my loyalty is to Maara, for as long as she wants me.”

“And if she doesn’t want you?”

It was a cruel question and one I couldn’t answer.

“If she cares for you at all, she will want you to do what’s best for you.”

Everything the Lady said was true. Everything she said was reasonable. The right thing for me to do was plain for anyone to see, but my heart refused to see it.

“What is best for you is, I think, best for her as well,” she said.

My heart fell.

“Maara has spoken of finding a place where she belongs, just as you belong to us. Maybe this year, maybe next, she’ll want to leave us. It would be wrong of you to hold her here.”

Then I knew I was defeated. The Lady felt the fight go out of me, and she was wise. She didn’t press me any further. She left me to make the decision for myself.

“Take some time to think,” she said. “Speak with your warrior and with Vintel. I trust that when you come to a better understanding, you will do what’s best for everyone.”

###

I went back to Maara’s room and found her asleep. I reached my hand out to awaken her, but just before I touched her, I thought better of it. I was troubled and afraid, and more than anything I wanted to be comforted. I wanted Maara to listen to my troubles and reassure me that all would be well. While that might have made me feel a little better, it would not help my situation. What I needed to do was think, and consider what, if anything, I could do about it.

I went downstairs and sat down on the hearthstone in the great hall. A few people were still lingering there. Some were talking quietly together. Others nodded over mugs of hot cider. No one paid any attention to me.

I saw what was going to happen. I would be apprenticed to Vintel. Maara might stay with us, but when I was no longer her companion, the tie between us would be broken, whether she stayed in Merin's house or not. The companions would all envy me. As Vintel was first among the warriors, so Vintel's apprentice would be first among her peers. In due time I would be made a warrior, and I might aspire to be the Lady's right hand someday, as Vintel was now. It was everything I thought I wanted. That night it meant nothing to me.

Tears filled my eyes. I was ashamed for anyone to see me crying, so I retreated into the friendly darkness of the kitchen. I thought I was being quiet, until I heard a whisper in the dark.

"Has Rumbles had her kittens or is someone crying?"

"Someone is crying," I said.

I felt my way over to Gnith's place on the hearth and sat down beside her.

"Who is it?" Gnith asked.

"Tamras," I said.

Gnith's bony fingers found my hand and held it in a grip that was very strong for one so frail.

"Do I know you?"

"Yes, Mother," I said. "I'm Tamras, Tamnet's daughter."

"You stood before the council."

"Yes." I was amazed that she remembered me.

"Have you lost your sweetheart?"

"No, Mother." Although a few tears still trickled down my face, I couldn't help but laugh a little.

"Hmm," she said. "You must not have a sweetheart. Not so funny to lose a sweetheart."

"No, Mother."

"No sweetheart."

"No."

"Too bad," she said. "A young girl should have a sweetheart."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"Did someone die?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"No sweetheart and no one died?"

"No, Mother."

"Perhaps you are crying because you have no sweetheart."

"I'm not crying."

"No," she said. "Not anymore."

The laughter in her voice told me that she had been teasing me away from my tears.

"There is something troubling me," I said.

"What would that be?"

"The Lady wants to apprentice me to someone, but I don't want to be her apprentice."

"Then say no."

"I don't think I can."

"Of course you can."

"The Lady isn't making it easy for me."

"I wonder why," she said.

"She wants me to be bound to one of our own people."

"Ah," said Gnith. "You are the stranger's gage."

I had never heard the word before. "What is a gage?"

"A gage is like a pledge," she said. "Something a person would leave with another as a guarantee. Of her word. Of a promise or the payment of a debt."

"Oh," I said.

"That changes things."

"It does?"

"Oh, yes. That changes things."

Gnith handed me a lamp. "Bring some light," she said.

Not far away, embers glowed on one of the open hearths. I lit the lamp and brought it back to Gnith.

"You don't want to leave your stranger, do you?"

"No."

"Does she want to keep you?"

"I don't know."

"You must ask her." Gnith shook her finger at me. "That's important. Make sure that you are what she wants. As she is what you want. Will you?"

"Yes," I said. "I will."

Gnith's eyes sparkled in the lamplight, and her mouth widened in a gleeful grin. "I think I can help you," she said. "Yes, yes, I think I can."

She motioned to me to lean closer to her. "Listen," she whispered. "The Lady can use every one of us as she will. That is her right. Just as her care of us is her duty. You understand?"

I nodded.

"But sometimes when she uses us, she may incur a debt."

I didn't understand.

"You stood in your warrior's place," said Gnith. "That was a gift to your warrior. But you were also a pledge of safety to the Lady. An extraordinary service it was that you did for her. I think you might ask a gift."

"A gift?" I said. "What gift?"

"What is it that you want? What is it you were crying about just now? What do you want to happen? What do you want not to happen?"

I thought about it for a minute. "I don't want to be Vintel's apprentice. I want to be Maara's apprentice, but I don't know if she'll accept me. Still, I would rather be her companion than anyone's apprentice."

Gnith chuckled. "You're a strange girl, Tamras, Tamnet's daughter. You don't want what you ought to want, but you know what it is you do want. I suppose that counts for something."

"What is it that I ought to want, Mother?"

"Not for me to say," she said. "People want what they want. Sometimes they get it. More often they don't. And if they do get it, they may be sorry."

Gnith took my hand again and looked into my eyes. "Make sure of what you want, and when you get it, don't complain."

###

I was awake at first light, and by the time I had dressed myself, Maara was also awake. I felt her eyes on me as I pulled on my heavy boots and my warmest tunic.

"I need to speak with you," I said.

She blinked sleepily at me. "All right."

"Now," I said.

"All right." She sat up in her bed and looked at me.

"Not here."

"Oh," she said.

I helped her dress. Then I took her cloak from where it lay covering the foot of her bed and put it over her shoulders.

"Where are we going?" she asked me.

"Outside."

"Oh," she said.

She followed me down the stairs and through the kitchen. We went out the back door and through the kitchen yard. I didn't want to run into anyone, especially the Lady or Vintel, before I had a chance to talk with Maara.

The air was cold, and voices carry in the cold. I wanted to get well away from the house, where no one would overhear us. There were few places where we could talk unheard and unobserved, so I took Maara down to the oak grove. The sun was low in the sky, and the long shadows of the trees stretched out over the snow.

The oak grove was a good choice. The ancient trees reassured me. They made a strong circle around us. I turned to face my warrior.

"There's something I need to say to you," I said. Even though we were alone, we were in a sacred place, and I kept my voice low.

She met my eyes and waited. She looked as if she expected to hear bad news.

"The Lady wants to apprentice me to Vintel."

I watched her, to see if she would show me how she felt about it. She looked away. "That would be a good thing for you," she said.

"Why?"

She looked back at me, surprised. "I thought that was obvious."

"It seems to be obvious to everyone but me."

The night before, I did as Gnith had told me. I thought long about what I wanted and why I wanted it. Because of that, and perhaps because of where we were, my words had a power they'd never had before.

"I'm going to tell you what I want," I said. "Then you must tell me what it is that you want."

Her face closed a bit. She waited.

"I want you to accept me as your apprentice."

She closed her eyes for a moment. I thought I saw a look of pain cross her face, but it vanished so quickly I couldn't be sure.

"The Lady would never give her consent."

"I'm telling you what I want," I said. "Right now, the only thing that matters is what I want. And what you want."

Something new came into her eyes. I couldn't name it. It was more than curiosity, more than surprise. A window had opened, and for a moment she was unguarded.

"I want to be your apprentice," I said. "I understand that someday you may want to leave this place for a place where you will feel more at home, and if you do, I will release you from your obligation to me. If you're still unwilling to take on the obligations of apprenticeship, then I would rather remain your companion than be apprenticed to Vintel, or to anyone else.

"Last night I asked myself why I feel this way. Many would see my choice as foolish. I realize that. But what I want to be has more to do with the things you've taught me that were not about swordplay or camp craft or any of the things that any other warrior could have taught me. I don't have the words to tell you what those things are."

I cast about for a way to make her understand. "You've taught me how to build a warrior's body. You've taught me how a warrior handles weapons and how a warrior walks in dangerous places. Any of the warriors here could teach me those things, but you have shown me a warrior's heart, and every warrior's heart is different. If I ever do become a warrior, I want to have a warrior's heart like yours."

Time stopped. Silence fell over us. We looked at each other, and I knew that she had heard me.

"I've told you what I want," I said. "Now I want you to tell me what you want. Do you know? What is it that you want?"

"What do I want?"

"Yes."

"I want to go home," she said. "I can't. So I don't suppose it matters where I go."

As much as her answer surprised me, I saw in it a way to speak to her.

"What would home be like?" I asked her.

"I don't know."

"Then how would you know if you found it?"

"Home would feel different. Home would feel like..."

"Like what?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know what home feels like to me?"

She shook her head.

"Merin's house is my home," I said, "as much as my mother's house is my

home, but sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. Sometimes I feel as if no one here will ever see me as I am. They all see Tamnet's daughter, who has a place within the circle. The threads of my life are tangled in the web of all the other lives here, and sometimes I want to tease them out and weave a pattern of my own, rather than fit myself into a pattern made by others.

"But on midwinter's night, I was glad to have a place within the circle. I felt comforted and safe. I knew the songs we sang and the stories we told and how we would greet the sun in the morning. Some things in Merin's house are different from the way things were at home, but mostly this place feels familiar. There's something comforting about things that are familiar."

Maara had been listening carefully to everything I said. "What does any of that have to do with me?"

"If you take me as your apprentice," I told her, "you will begin to tangle the threads of your life with the threads of my life and with the web of all these other lives. In time this place will become familiar to you, and the day will come when no one will remember that you were once a stranger here."

Suddenly Maara smiled. "When did you grow such a golden tongue? I think you could talk the birds down out of the trees this morning."

I smiled back. "Have I persuaded you?"

The smile left her eyes. "What difference does it make? The Lady has other plans for you."

"It may make no difference at all," I said, "but I intend to ask the Lady for what I want, and before I do, I need your consent."

Maara frowned. "Have you cast an enchantment over the Lady? She seems to do everything you ask of her. I don't doubt that it's because she sees the wisdom in what you ask, but sometimes I believe things happen for you just because you want them to."

She took a step closer to me and put her hands on my shoulders. She looked deep into my eyes, as the Lady had looked into my eyes when I first entered her house. This time I saw no visions. This time I saw only my warrior's face, as familiar to me as the palms of my hands, and in her eyes I saw a promise.

"You have my consent," she said. "You would honor me if you would become my apprentice."

###

As we walked back up the hill, I thought about Maara's words. *I want to go home*. Such a simple wish. I remembered how eager I had been to get away from home, but my home was still there waiting for me, would always be there waiting for me, while Maara might walk from one end of the world to the other and never find what she was seeking.

I felt Maara's eyes on me. "Are you having second thoughts?" she said.

"No," I said. "I was thinking about you." I stopped and faced her. "You gave me what I wanted. I wish I could give you what you want."

"You gave me something I didn't know I wanted," she replied. "No one else has ever asked me what I wanted."

VINTEL'S APPRENTICE

Sparrow was eating her breakfast in the kitchen. I sat down beside her, leaned close to her ear, and said, "Do you want to be Vintel's apprentice?"

Sparrow scowled at me. "Didn't your mother teach you how to say good morning?" She sounded out of sorts.

"Good morning," I said. "Do you want to be Vintel's apprentice?"

"Too late," she said.

"What?"

"Vintel says that you will be her new apprentice."

"Vintel is wrong."

"She's already spoken about it."

"To you?"

"To everyone."

"I haven't accepted her."

"Apparently she thinks you will."

"I won't," I said. "Especially not now."

I thought I understood what Vintel was doing, or perhaps it was the Lady's idea. Once something had been spoken of publicly, it was a thing that was accomplished in everybody's mind. In order to undo it, I would have to go against the ideas of everyone in the household. It would put me in a bad light, and it would also shame Vintel. If Vintel had taken it upon herself to speak without my consent, it was a shame she deserved to bear, but not if the Lady had assured her that I would do what she wanted me to do.

"Answer my question," I said to Sparrow.

"About being Vintel's apprentice?"

"Yes."

"Why would she accept me?"

"Let me worry about that," I said. "Just tell me if it's what you want."

"Of course," said Sparrow. "It would be an honor."

"So they tell me."

"You're a fool to turn her down."

"They tell me that too."

When I started to get up, Sparrow caught my wrist and held me there.

She looked around to make sure we couldn't be overheard.

"You be careful how you cross Vintel," she said.

But now I was angry. "Vintel had best be careful how she crosses me."

"By the Mother, hush," said Sparrow, "or I'll find your little body lying in a snowbank."

"Why would you bind yourself to someone who would do that?"

Sparrow thought for a minute before she spoke.

"I know Vintel," she said. "I've known her since I came to Merin's house, and I knew of her from Eramet. She's a skillful warrior and a powerful leader. She is strong-willed and must have her own way in things, and people don't always like Vintel's ways, but every girl here would put up with her failings for the sake of learning from her."

"Is she such a fine teacher?"

"She made Eramet a fine warrior, and she's loyal to her friends, and generous." Sparrow regarded me intently. "I want you to understand what you're turning down. If she's pleased with you, Vintel will be your ally and your friend. She's from a house as great as this one. She can always go back to her place there, taking with her anyone she chooses. She can offer you an important place, either here in Merin's house or in her own. She can be difficult too, although that shouldn't bother you. Your warrior is worse on her good days than Vintel is on her bad ones."

I started to tell Sparrow that my warrior wasn't at all difficult, but she put her fingers on my lips to stop me.

"I know," she said. "You're used to her now, but when I see her glower in a corner and refuse to speak with you, I wonder how you put up with her."

"She doesn't mean it," I said.

Sparrow laughed. "Why in the world Vintel would want you when you're soul-spliced with that stranger, I'll never know."

Now she was teasing me. I didn't know what she meant by the word 'soul-spliced,' but I felt the truth in it. While I should have given a great deal of thought to this decision, I had discovered that it was made already. It seemed as if everyone was making it as difficult as possible for me to do what I knew was right for me, but the more difficult they made it, the more determined I was to have my own way.

I smiled to myself.

"What?" said Sparrow.

"I was just thinking that I seem to seek out the hardest thing to do."

Sparrow grinned at me. "I had noticed that," she said.

The Lady came into the kitchen. Fodla was with her. Then Namet came in with three other women of the council. Although Sparrow and I were at the far end of the kitchen, the Lady must have seen me out of the corner of her eye. She turned and beckoned to me.

"You're up early," she said, when I stood before her. "That's good. I'm about to meet with the council. Among other things, we will consider your apprenticeship."

"I need to speak with you, Lady," I said.

She was beginning to move away from me, her attention distracted by the arrival of two more of the elders.

"There's no time right now," she said. "After the council meets, you can breakfast with me."

I knew what would happen at the council meeting. The more my apprenticeship to Vintel was spoken of, the more real it would become, until no one would remember that I had not given my consent.

In a low voice I said, "Lady, you must speak with me now."

She had already taken several steps toward the women of the council. I dared to take hold of her arm.

"You must hear me, before something happens that will shame Vintel."

The Lady's eyes came back to me, and I let go of her.

"I mean no disrespect," I said, "but I can't accept Vintel. I have not given my consent, although she evidently thinks I have, because she has spoken publicly about it."

The Lady drew me away from the people around us. "To whom has she spoken?"

"Sparrow heard her, and so have others."

She took me gently by the arm and pulled me close against her side. Arm in arm we walked to the farthest corner of the kitchen, far away from any who might overhear us.

The Lady sat down on a large covered basket. One of the servants ran to bring a stool for her, but the Lady waved her away.

"Let me understand you," she said. "You intend to refuse Vintel. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"We will speak about that, but not now. Perhaps you could tell me why Vintel believes you've given your consent."

"I have no idea."

"You haven't spoken to her?"

"No."

I believed then that the Lady hadn't encouraged her to speak, but that Vintel, thinking no one would refuse her, didn't hesitate to let others know of her decision to apprentice me. Then I remembered that the important thing was not that Vintel had spoken carelessly. The important thing was to make the Lady understand that I would not do what she wanted.

"I've thought long about this," I said. "We can speak about it all you like, but I will not change my mind. I will not accept Vintel, and I think she's mistaken to ask for me. There is someone else she should be thinking of."

"Who is that?"

"Sparrow served two years as Eramet's apprentice. She is much more fit than I am to be apprenticed to Vintel."

"Sparrow would be a good choice for her except for one thing. She has no family. She brings nothing to Vintel."

"She brings herself," I said. "She brings all she learned from Eramet. And I've been told that Vintel is from a strong family. Is she in need of another alliance?"

"Probably not," said the Lady, "but you are hardly in the same position. An alliance with Vintel would be of great benefit to your family."

"That's not enough."

"I don't understand. Why you would refuse her?"

"Because Maara has asked me to be her apprentice, and I have accepted."

The Lady's eyes grew cold. A chill settled around my heart, but I had dared to speak, and I would not unsay what I had said.

"Whatever was she thinking?" said the Lady. "Did she believe that I would give you to a stranger?"

"She's a stranger to whom you owe much, but I don't mean to misrepresent her. She doesn't expect you to consent."

The Lady gave me a shrewd look. "But you do. Why is that?"

"One of the elders told me that because of the service I have done you, I might ask a gift."

"What service have you done?"

"I was a guarantee of safety for you. For you and for your house."

I glimpsed a flash of anger in the Lady's eyes. "Should I ask which of the

elders gave you this advice?"

When I didn't answer her, she said, "No, I suppose not."

She took a deep breath and watched her hands play with a bit of loose embroidery on her gown. "And if I refuse you this gift?"

"I will stay with my warrior as her companion."

The Lady raised her eyes to my face. This time I saw a real concern in them and a wish to understand. "Why would you throw away your future?"

"Lady," I said, "I can't explain why I must stay with Maara, any more than I can explain why I wanted you to let the prisoners go."

She said nothing. I wondered if she had given in or if she was trying to think of another way to persuade me.

"Why do I have the right to refuse Vintel?" I asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"There must be a reason. I have the right to refuse, so there must be a reason."

"You have the right to refuse to do anything that anyone asks of you, but that doesn't mean that to refuse is always wise."

"But I have the right to be unwise, isn't that true?"

"Yes," she said. "You're a free woman. We are all free women here. Freedom is important, just as obedience is important. Each has its place."

"And in this I can exercise my freedom."

"Yes."

All the women of the council were seated around the council table. They had been talking quietly together, but they were silent now, and they were watching us.

"The council is waiting," I said.

"Your warrior has accepted you?"

"Yes."

"And if the time comes when she wants to leave this place?"

"I have promised to release her."

"And she is the one to whom you choose to bind yourself?"

"Yes."

The Lady sighed. "All right. Let's see if we can bring this about without doing too much damage."

The Lady took her place among the women of the council. She turned to Laris, who was waiting in the doorway, and said, "Bring Vintel." Then she turned to me. "Sit down there on the hearth and wait."

The eyes of all the elders were on the Lady. They must have felt that something unexpected was about to happen. I sat down on the hearth next to Gnith. Her blankets hid her face, and she was making a snuffling sound that told me she was asleep.

Sparrow hadn't moved. She was still sitting at the table where she'd eaten breakfast, far enough away not to call attention to herself, yet close enough to hear everything that was said.

After a few minutes, Vintel followed Laris into the kitchen. She saw me sitting on the hearth and smiled at me. I nodded to her, but I didn't smile.

The Lady stood and faced Vintel. "I think we should give some more thought to your situation. I think we should reconsider what is the best thing to do."

Vintel glanced at me, then turned back to the Lady.

"It's time I had a companion," she said.

"Indeed, it is," the Lady replied, "and today, if my proposal pleases you, you shall have one." She turned to face the women of the council. "We have two things to consider today. One is the matter of Vintel's companion. She has, in fact, asked me for an apprentice. I believe there is one here who will suit her very well, but I believe it is not someone she has considered yet herself, and she may need some time to think it over."

Vintel looked confused. "I thought we had decided on someone."

"I have thought again," the Lady said, turning to Vintel, "and I think there is a more suitable arrangement."

"I was happy with the arrangement we had," Vintel said.

It seemed to me that the Lady warned Vintel with her eyes. Whatever Vintel saw in them, it was enough to convince her to say, "Of course if you've thought of something else, I will consider it."

The Lady turned back to the women of the council. "There is another matter for us to consider. We have with us someone who has done us a great service. If she had not warned us of the strangers who came across the river, we might at this moment be embattled at the ravine. Instead we spent mid-winter's day untroubled and at peace."

"She may have done us a service," Vintel said, "but she hasn't always dealt honestly or honorably with us."

The Lady turned to her. "I know of nothing dishonorable that she has done, and I'm aware of the reason why she left us."

I was afraid to look directly at Vintel, but out of the corner of my eye

I saw her recoil from the Lady's words. The Lady must have seen it too, because she turned away from her and faced the elders.

"Maara felt unsafe with us," the Lady said. "The reason doesn't matter now, and I won't speak of it again. When she stood before this council, I told her that if she proved trustworthy, she would have a place here. I have yet to honor that promise."

I watched the faces of the elders. Namet was smiling, and I believed she was glad that Maara's service to us would be recognized. Fodla looked thoughtful, but I didn't think she disapproved of the idea. The others seemed more curious than anything, wondering what the Lady had in mind.

"Maara has skills we may find useful," the Lady said. "She knows the country of the northern tribes and speaks a little of their language. I've spent some time with her, and she is interesting to talk to, although her manners are not what we are used to. Our warriors might learn from her, if they would take the trouble to get to know her a little."

I felt Vintel's impatience. She stood with her arms folded across her chest. She was never tolerant of long-winded speeches, especially if they appeared to have nothing to do with her.

The Lady turned to me and motioned for me to stand up. "You all know Tamras, the daughter of my shield friend. She has been with us for almost a year, and she has done well."

I blushed at her unexpected praise.

"She too has done this house a service," the Lady said.

"What service has she done?" said Vintel. "She's just a child."

"She guaranteed our safety," the Lady told her. "She pledged her life for our safety, and that is no small thing."

Vintel would have said more, if the Lady's eyes hadn't stopped her.

"Tamras has asked a gift for her service," the Lady said, turning back to the women of the council. "I believe that what she asks will be good for her and for this house. Maara has asked for her as an apprentice, and Tamras has accepted. The gift she asks of me is my consent, and I have given it."

Vintel's mouth dropped open. She was more surprised than angry, but anger would soon follow.

Fet stood up. "Will you give us your reasons for believing this plan is best for everyone?"

"First, the two of them are strong together. Maara cared enough for her companion to bring us a warning of the danger that threatened us."

"She gave us another reason," said Fodla.

"She may have had many reasons," the Lady told her. "She gave you the one you understood."

Fodla nodded. She was satisfied with that explanation.

"And Tamras cared enough for her warrior to stand beside her when no one else in this household would even listen to her. Second, it is what they wish, and it strikes me as mean-spirited not to honor their wish, considering what we owe them. Third, I believe we would be well served if Maara were to stay with us. If she is bound to us through her apprentice, she may feel more at home here and less inclined to leave us."

The Lady would have said more, but Fet raised her hand to stop her.

"That's enough for me," she said, and she sat down.

Vintel could not keep silent. "I took your warriors to the ravine, while this child and her warrior stayed at home."

"Vintel," said the Lady, "you are the first of all my warriors, and upon you the burden of leadership falls. You have no need to perform any special service to ask a gift of me. If there is anything you want, you need only ask."

The thing Vintel wanted, of course, was me, and I was now spoken for.

"There is something I hope you will consider," the Lady went on. "Eramet, whom you made a warrior, has left us her own apprentice. Eramet valued her highly, so highly that she didn't mind that she had no ties of blood or friendship to bring with her. I want you to consider taking Sparrow as your apprentice."

By now I think Vintel realized that it was time for her to make the best of things. "I might take her as a companion," she said.

"If she consents, I won't oppose it. Just remember that in the spring there will be other warriors coming to this household who may be glad to apprentice someone who already has some training and experience and who has also proved herself on the battlefield. You told me yourself that she has shown both courage and ability."

I glanced at Sparrow out of the corner of my eye. She sat unmoving, her eyes on Vintel. I had an idea that, under the table, she had her fingers crossed for wishing.

"Give me some time to think it over," Vintel said.

"Of course," the Lady said. "Take all the time you need."

Vintel turned and left the room without looking at me. After she left, the Lady motioned to me to sit down, and I went back to my place on the

hearthstone.

The women of the council began to speak of other things. I didn't hear them. All I could think about was that I was going to have everything I wanted. I would stay with Maara, and she would stay with me. I would be apprenticed, and someday I would be a warrior. Someone took my hand. When I looked down, I saw the twinkle in Gnith's eyes.

###

After the council meeting, the Lady took me aside.

"It's not too late to undo this if you change your mind," she said.

"I won't change my mind."

"For one so young, you seem quite sure that you're not doing something foolish."

I didn't know what being young had to do with it. It seemed to me that older people could do foolish things just as easily as young ones. I had certainly seen older people do some very foolish things.

"I thank you, Lady," I said, "for giving me what I asked of you. I know you don't believe my decision is a wise one. I hope that in time you'll see the wisdom in it."

"Yes," she said. "I hope so too." She touched my cheek with the backs of her fingers and gave me a reluctant smile. Then a troubled look came into her eyes. "I think we had best seal your apprenticeship as soon as possible, so that no one is tempted to try to undo what we have done this morning." She meant Vintel. "Take this news to your warrior, and tell her I wish to speak with her."

THE WARRIOR'S PATH

Maara was with the Lady for a long time. When she returned, she looked so solemn that I feared she was bringing me bad news.

"Did she talk you out of it?" I asked her.

"She didn't try. She wanted to be certain that I understand my obligation to you."

Now I thought I knew what had taken so long. The lists of obligations sometimes seemed endless. Many stories included a recitation of one list or another. They were important. They defined what was expected of the parties to an apprenticeship or an alliance or a marriage. Still, they were the bane of storytellers, because they would put their listeners to sleep.

I smiled. "I'm surprised you weren't there all day."

Maara smiled back at me. "I've heard the list of obligations before. They're not so different here from what they were where I became a warrior."

I almost said, "Where was that?" It was on the tip of my tongue, but I didn't say it. It didn't seem right to ask for more than I'd already been given that day. It seemed too greedy. Instead I said, "I promised to release you from your obligation to me, and I will, if you ever change your mind."

Maara shook her head. "No one should undertake an obligation she doesn't intend to honor. It may be that circumstances will prevent me from fulfilling my obligation to you, but that is possible in any apprenticeship."

I thought of Sparrow's apprenticeship to Eramet.

"Things may happen here that will make it impossible for me to stay," she said, "so you've taken a risk by choosing me. The Lady is concerned about that. You're important to her, and she wants the best for you."

I started to roll my eyes, but I stopped myself, because I didn't want to appear disrespectful of the Lady. Maara read my expression anyway and understood what I was thinking.

"Today," she said, "the Lady gave you what you wanted against her own better judgment. She could have withheld her consent and forced the issue between you, and you would have had either to obey her or to sacrifice your opportunity. She knew you would not obey her, and while someone else might have tried to punish you for that, she is trying to make the best of it. Few would have set aside their own feelings as the Lady has."

Maara was right. I resolved that the next time I had a chance to speak to the Lady, I would thank her with more sincerity than I'd felt when I thanked her earlier that day.

"Someone will come for us this evening," Maara said. "Until then, I think we should stay out of harm's way."

"What will happen this evening?"

"Tonight your new life will begin. Tonight your old world will be shattered, so that you can leave it behind."

"How will it happen?"

"I couldn't tell you even if I knew. It's something no one speaks of, and you must never speak of it to anyone except for those who will be there."

"Who will be there?"

"I will," she said, "and one of the elders."

I remembered the time when I became a woman. The women of my family shattered the world of my childhood when I began to bleed. It was both a sad and a joyful thing. It was a simple ritual, but when it was over, I knew there was no going back.

"Will it be like the end of childhood?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know how these things are done among your people."

"What was it like for you?"

She shook her head. "Everyone's experience is different. You will stop being one thing and become another. That's all I can tell you about it."

Suddenly I realized that everything was going to change. I had been living with uncertainty for so long that I should have been more prepared, but I had been thinking that things would go back to being the way they used to be, to the way that had been comfortable and familiar. Now I knew that could never happen, any more than I could be the same person tomorrow that I was yesterday.

###

Maara and I kept to her room all day. We didn't talk much. We were both still tired from the celebration of midwinter's night, and we slept for several hours in the afternoon. The rest of the time I kept busy trying to make a shirt for myself, without much success.

Maarel's clothing had been shared out among the companions. Although

she had been bigger than I was, I found an old shirt of hers that fit me fairly well. Since it was almost worn out, I decided to use it as a pattern to make myself a new one.

Namet gave me a bit of linen cloth. I carefully picked apart the stitches of the old shirt and laid the pieces out on the new cloth, but there wasn't quite enough of it.

"Maybe you could make the sleeves shorter," said Maara, who had been amusing herself by watching my clumsy efforts.

"What good is a shirt without sleeves?"

"It might be nice in summer."

"It will look silly."

"Probably." She smiled.

I picked up the pieces of the shirt and laid them out differently. Once again they failed to fit. I was about to try something else when Sparrow appeared in the doorway. When she saw what I was doing, she made an impatient noise and sat down next to me. She picked up the shirt pieces and tucked them around each other so cleverly that everything fit perfectly.

"How did you do that?" I asked her.

"I learned in Arnet's house."

"Thank you."

She had started to get up, but she stopped and knelt in front of me.

"Thank you too," she said. "For speaking for me."

"I hope it's for the best." I had my doubts about Vintel.

Sparrow grinned at me. "Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

I nodded, but I couldn't manage a smile.

"Listen," she said. "If Vintel accepts me, my place here will be secure. If she doesn't, and if no one else will take me, I'll have to go back home. I will still be a free woman, but I'll never be more than a servant in Arnet's house. I have every reason to try to please Vintel."

I understood, but I couldn't help saying, "You deserve better."

Sparrow smiled. "I've had better, but now Vintel will do."

###

By the time I finished cutting out the pieces of the shirt, the light had begun to fade. I was just putting everything away when Namet appeared in the doorway.

“Come with me,” she said.

Namet took us outside, to the kitchen yard behind the house. It was full of the debris of housekeeping—piles of wood and peat to fuel the fires, storage sheds, a place to butcher animals. Two sheds stood close together, with only a narrow alleyway between them that appeared to dead-end against a fence of palings. When Namet slipped between the sheds, I noticed a well-worn path between them.

Maara and I followed her. When we reached the fence, we squeezed through a narrow opening behind one of the sheds and emerged into an empty space enclosed by palings. The area within the fence was the size of a circle made by a dozen people joining hands. I never knew that space was there. None of the windows of the house overlooked it, and it was impossible to see into it from ground level. If I had ever noticed the tops of the palings, I had probably mistaken them for part of the palisade.

Namet slipped off her shoes. She opened the front of her gown and let it fall to the ground. She wore nothing underneath. Maara followed Namet’s example. She pulled her boots off, slipped her shirt off over her head, and dropped it next to her. Then she undid her belt and stepped out of her trousers. She motioned to me to do the same. The hair on my body stood up in the cold air, and the frozen leaves of grass tickled my feet.

At the center of the circle was an opening in the earth. The top of a ladder protruded from it. Namet went down the ladder, and Maara and I followed her. We found ourselves in a small, round chamber that appeared to have been hollowed out of the hilltop. Above us a framework of hewn beams, covered with a lattice of poles and woven mats, supported the earthen roof. A score of people could have fit easily inside the chamber. The opening through which we’d entered it was several feet above our heads. Inside the air was warm, and although I was naked, I wasn’t cold.

At the center of the chamber was a hearth, where a fire was already burning. From the pile of ash around it, I guessed it had been burning for several days. The elders must have conducted their midwinter ritual here.

Namet motioned to us to sit down beside the hearth. The floor of the chamber was roughly paved with large, flat stones that held the heat. Their warmth made them comfortable to sit on.

Here the sounds of everyday life could not be heard at all. I was so used to the noises of the large household that I never noticed them anymore. Now I noticed their absence. We had dropped out of the living world above into

a space between the worlds. I looked up at the small circle of sky. The stars were twinkling out. Soon it would be dark.

A stone table stood against the wall of the chamber. Two upright stones, half-buried in the floor, supported the slab that served as its top. Namet went over to it and stood with her back to us. She appeared to be preparing something. When she finished, she didn't turn around. She stood very still. She was so quiet for so long that I was afraid to move. I felt a slight chill in the air and heard a whisper of wind above my head. I caught a whiff of lavender.

Namet turned around. She was no longer the plump and smiling red-cheeked, white-haired woman who felt as comfortable to me as an apple dumpling. Her hair was the color of moonlight. It stood up all over her head and shone as bright as if she herself had become the moon. Her face shone with the same silvery light. Her features were Namet's features, but Namet's spirit no longer peered out at me from behind her eyes. Instead another being of great power beheld me. She frightened me.

She approached me and handed me a bowl of some strange-smelling liquid, and I drank. Then she took the bowl from me and handed it to Maara, and Maara drank. In a minute or two, whether from the heat of the fire or the effects of the drink, I began to sweat. I looked at Maara. Sweat gleamed on her shoulders and her arms. It beaded on her forehead and trickled down her body. I felt my own sweat running down my sides.

The woman who was no longer Namet brought another bowl and took from it a handful of black powder. She opened her hand and blew into it, and a cloud of dust enveloped me. I had to close my eyes. When I opened them again, the dust had settled over my body. My sweat dissolved it, so that it gleamed as red as blood. She turned to Maara and blew a handful of dust over her too, and we both looked as if we had been bathed in blood.

The woman who was no longer Namet returned to the table. For several minutes she was busy preparing something. Then she approached me carrying another bowl. She knelt down in front of me, and this time she took a handful of white powder from the bowl. She opened her mouth and tilted her head back as a gesture to me to do the same. When I did, she blew the powder into my nose and mouth. At first I thought it would make me sneeze, but the powder lay on my tongue as light as rain. It had no taste, only a slight aroma that reminded me of damp places.

The woman who was no longer Namet returned to the table and brought

me back a bowl of tea. She made a sign to Maara not to drink any of it, and Maara nodded. She brought another bowl of tea and handed it to Maara. Then she climbed the ladder and drew it up after her. My warrior and I were alone.

Maara motioned to me to drink some of the tea. It tasted familiar, but I couldn't recall its name.

The sky was dark. Only a scattering of stars reminded me of the hole through which we had descended into the earth.

Maara took a few sticks of wood from a pile that lay next to the hearth and laid them on the fire. I watched them catch and start to burn. Colors I had never seen before danced over the surface of the wood. One piece had a bit of flame dancing up and down it. I heard the music of the dance as I watched the dancing flame.

Then Maara moved. I had forgotten she was there. I turned to look at her. For a moment I thought I saw my father. Then I saw her breasts, and I laughed at the idea of my father having breasts. When I heard my own laughter, I was afraid, because the sound came from far away. I tried to speak. The voice I heard was mine, but the words were nonsense.

Maara began to sing. I had never heard her sing, nor had I ever heard a song like the one she sang to me that night. The colors of the firelight flickered in her eyes. I forgot to be afraid.

She made me drink more of the tea. She held the bowl for me as I drank. Then I was lying down, looking up at the hole in the sky where another world looked down at me. I tried to raise my arm, to point something out to Maara, but my arm would not obey me, so I gave up trying and lay still.

There were living beings in the air. Some of them noticed me and spoke to me. I understood them, but after a time I had forgotten what they said.

I opened my eyes. Maara made me sit up and drink more of the tea. Although she was touching me, she looked far away.

As I watched her, she began to change. A coat of dense fur sprang out all over her body. Her head grew large. She opened her mouth and bared her long, sharp teeth at me. She touched my face. Her long, sharp claws drifted over my skin. She did me no harm, and I knew that she would not. I forgot to be afraid.

I was cold. I tried to make her understand. She looked so far away. I reached out for her, and she embraced me. Her dense fur warmed me. I rubbed my face against it. It was soft.

"Maara is a bear," I said.

I heard the words, but I didn't understand them.

Someone was crying. The world was dark. I heard someone crying.

"Who is crying?" I asked.

"You are," came the answer.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Someone who cares for you," came the answer.

I sat up. I forgot that I was cold. The bear was gone.

Someone touched me. I couldn't see who had touched me. I looked at the fire and watched the world shatter into pieces and fall at my feet. The pieces sprang up and rearranged themselves and made a picture that I understood for a moment. Then they shattered again. I closed my eyes.

Someone was singing. I forgot to be afraid.

Someone gave me more to drink. Someone touched me. Someone was singing. Someone held me. Someone kept me safe.

I leapt into the air and flew.

I looked down and saw myself lying in someone's arms asleep. Someone cradled me as a mother cradles her child. She was not my mother.

I flew with the beings in the air. One of them began to tell me a story. I was too impatient to listen. I liked flying. I flew to the hole in the sky, but before I could fly through it, something stopped me. I flew with the beings in the air.

I began to hear the words. They were spoken. They were sung. They were the words that had been spoken to every woman who would become a warrior. They were the words of courage and of caution, the words of hope and the words of doom. They were the songs sung for warriors, for a warrior's birth and for a warrior's death. Every one of them was new to me, and every one of them touched a place deep within me that remembered them. For a time that may have been a moment or a lifetime, I listened to the warrior songs.

A hole opened in the sky, and a pale light sifted in. Through the hole in the sky, I watched the stars fade against the growing light. Through the hole in the sky, light poured in.

I grew tired of flying. I drifted down and settled beside the fire. I saw myself in someone's arms. She cradled me like a child. I couldn't see her face.

Someone appeared in the hole in the sky. Someone came down from the

sky and touched the woman who held me. She looked up, and I knew her. She was my warrior.

The sky woman helped my warrior lift me from her lap. She bent over me and touched my face, while my warrior stood up and stretched her arms and legs until they worked properly again. All of this I watched from where I sat beside the fire.

I watched myself asleep. I was curious to see if what Sparrow said was true, if perhaps I might be beautiful. I gazed at my sleeping face, but I couldn't tell if I was beautiful or not.

My warrior picked up my sleeping body, put it over her shoulder, and followed the other woman up the ladder. When she reached the hole in the sky, something pulled me, and I fell upward into the dark.

I opened my eyes. I was lying naked on the frozen ground with daylight all around me. Namet was standing over me. Maara knelt beside me. I forgot to be afraid.

VINTEL

All I remember of that day was the cold bath. They insisted on washing me with cold water. They washed me there outdoors, where Maara had put me down on the frozen ground. After the bath, she put me to bed, and I slept through most of that day and night. Sometimes she woke me to give me something to eat or drink. I could hardly keep my eyes open. I slept, but I didn't dream.

The next morning Namet came to see me. Although I had been awake since dawn, I didn't feel like moving. Maara must also have been awake, because she got up right away when Namet came into the room. Namet knelt down beside me. She searched my eyes and touched my face and hands.

"How do you feel?" she asked me.

"Fine," I said, "but I'm not sure I can stand up."

"Like a newborn child," she said, "you have just set your feet on a new path. You'll find your legs soon enough."

Namet stood up and moved aside so that Maara could help me up out of bed. She had me sit down on her bed while she and Namet dressed me. Then we went downstairs. We all three broke our fast together. It felt strange to me to sit with the two of them, a warrior and an elder, at the same table, but it was a sign to everyone that I was now a warrior's apprentice.

After breakfast the three of us settled ourselves by the fire in the great hall. Although I was still tired, I didn't feel like sleeping. I had begun to remember what had happened to me, and I wanted to try to understand. I remembered the beings in the air, but I couldn't remember the stories they had told me or the songs they'd sung to me.

"May I ask you something, Mother?" I said to Namet.

"Of course, child," she replied.

"Maara told me I should speak of what happened only to someone who was there."

"Yes," said Namet, "and you should speak of it as little as possible."

"Why?"

"Because what happened can't be spoken of. No one can tell you what it means. No one else can know that."

"How can I understand it then?"

“What is it you feel you need to understand?”

“There are things I can’t remember,” I said. “Songs were sung to me, and stories were told to me, and I can’t remember any of them.”

“Your spirit remembers,” Namet said. “From time to time you may remember something. Each memory will come to you when you need it, or perhaps you won’t remember, but you’ll know what to do without knowing how you know.”

Namet’s words reassured me. I already knew that there was a voice within me wiser than my understanding. When I chose Maara over Vintel, I didn’t know how I knew it was the right thing for me to do, but I could not have chosen otherwise. It made sense to me that the part of me that had heard the warrior songs would remember them and would help me to act from the wisdom that was in them.

“What will happen now?” I asked.

“What you were is gone,” said Namet. “You have declared your intention to become a warrior. You can’t go back to being what you were before. The path you’ve chosen will take everything you can bring to it, and death may be the price of failure.”

I didn’t know whether the feeling in my stomach was fear or excitement.

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

“No,” said Maara. “You will do whatever is necessary.”

###

That evening Sparrow found me in my warrior’s room. Maara was still downstairs with Namet. She had seen me nodding and sent me up to bed. Sparrow handed me a linen shirt. It was the same shirt I had cut out, but it was finished. It was beautifully done. The stitching was tight and even, and the sleeves had been perfectly set. I couldn’t have done it half as well.

“When did you do this?” I asked her.

“Last night,” she said. “It didn’t take long.”

“It would have taken me weeks.”

“You mean it would have taken you weeks to get around to it.”

I laughed. “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

She smiled at me. “I’m glad you like it.”

We looked at each other for a moment. Then I took her face in my hand

and kissed her.

###

I woke up feeling well and rested. As I often did, I woke before my warrior, and while I waited for her to wake, I thought about all that had happened since midwinter's night. Only three nights had passed since I watched Maara's face as she sat with Namet among the other warriors. Even then, the fear that she might leave me had cast a shadow over my heart. Now I was her apprentice, bound to her, as she was bound to me, by ties that would be difficult to break. I hardly understood how it had happened.

A little flame of happiness kindled in my breast. I let it grow. Only a few days before I wouldn't have indulged it. I hadn't dared to be too happy. I had been afraid that something would go wrong, but surely nothing bad could happen now.

I was too happy to lie still. I got up and dressed without waking Maara. I went downstairs and out the back door.

Dark clouds gathered in the eastern sky, and the rising sun turned them as red as blood. The beauty of the sunrise touched my heart. The beauty of the world around me reflected my happiness back to me. I went outside the earthworks so that I could have an unobstructed view. A gusting wind blew out of the northeast, carrying winter's hard and bitter scent.

I heard a sound behind me. I smiled. Maara must have been awake after all and followed me. I turned to greet her. It was Vintel. I was too surprised to speak, and a fear I didn't understand prickled along my backbone.

"Have you not the manners to say good morning?"

Vintel smiled at me, but her smile never reached her eyes.

"Good morning," I said.

"You rise early."

"Yes."

"Earlier than your warrior."

"Sometimes."

She looked me up and down.

"You're very small," she said.

She looked at me as she would have looked at a fish she'd caught that was too small to keep. Her look made me feel small.

"Merin can be persuasive," she said. "I think your foolishness has saved

me from making an unfortunate mistake.”

I had no time to think about her strange remark. She was still smiling, a sly and dangerous smile. When I first saw her, she was standing at least ten paces from me. Now she drew closer, her steps slow and deliberate, as a wolf approaches a sheep that it has brought to bay. I resisted the urge to back away from her.

“I see that you’re also a thief,” she said.

What in the world could she be talking about?

“I am not a thief.”

Her eyes went to my belt. “Then how did you come by that brooch of Eramet’s?”

“It was a gift.”

“A gift? Who gave you such a costly gift? I think that Eramet did not.”

“No.”

She waited for me to tell her who had given me the brooch. I said nothing. I didn’t want to cause Sparrow any trouble with Vintel, but there was another reason I didn’t speak. Whether or not Vintel believed I’d stolen the brooch, the accusation was a deliberate insult, meant to humiliate me. An angry little flame began to burn inside my chest.

“If you can’t name the giver of the gift,” she said, “then I must believe that you took it from Eramet’s things when I sent you for her grave goods.”

“I did not,” I said.

A sudden gust of wind blew something into my eye. I ignored it. I didn’t want Vintel to think she’d made me cry.

“I gave that brooch to Eramet,” she said. “It should have come back to me. Give it to me now, and I’ll say no more about it.”

She reached out her hand. I didn’t move. I knew that I should give her the brooch, that once I’d given in her pride would be satisfied, but I couldn’t do it. I was too angry.

“You truly are a fool,” she said. She took another step toward me. “In that case, I’ll take back what belongs to me and whip the puppy that ran off with it.”

It was not her words that frightened me. It was her eyes. She was so close now that it was no use trying to run away, even if I could trust my legs to carry me.

Vintel saw my fear, and she enjoyed it. I braced myself to endure what was about to happen.

I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. Vintel saw it too. She turned in time to see my warrior step out from behind a stone wall that reinforced the earthworks. Maara's hair lay loose over her shoulders, and the gusting wind whipped it across her face. She tossed it back with a motion of her head that looked like a challenge.

"Whose puppy were you going to whip?" she asked Vintel.

"I believe it's yours. Would you prefer to whip it yourself?"

"What has she done?"

"She stole a brooch."

"I don't think so," said Maara.

"How did she come by it, then?"

"Perhaps I gave it to her."

"So," Vintel said. "You are the thief."

Maara smiled. "Will you accuse me before the household, or do you only insult people privately?"

Vintel opened her mouth, but she had no answer.

"Have you run out of insults already?" Maara said.

Vintel shut her mouth and glared at Maara. She grasped the hilt of her sword, but before she could draw it from its sheath, my warrior's body changed, like the body of a hunting cat that spies its prey. Vintel hesitated.

"Yes," said Maara. Her voice was low, and it vibrated with controlled anger. "Draw your sword. My sword has been hungry for your blood since you let mine be shed."

Although she wore no armor, my warrior's sword hung from her belt. For a time that seemed very long to me, she and Vintel faced each other. Vintel's knuckles went white as she grasped the hilt of her sword, but she made no move to draw it.

"What's this?"

It was a man's voice, coming from somewhere above our heads. I looked up and saw Lorin standing atop the earthworks.

"Is there going to be fight?" he said. He squatted down and looked at them appraisingly. "Vintel is bigger, but I think the stranger may be more angry. If you're going to fight, why not come back inside? It would be a shame for a good fight to go to waste."

"I don't intend to fight for your amusement," Vintel replied. Then she faced my warrior. "Don't tempt me again." She turned on her heel and went

back inside the earthworks.

Maara looked up at Lorin and gave him half a smile. I glanced at him just in time to see him wink back at her.

"Come," Maara said to me, and started down the hill.

"A storm is coming," I said, as I followed her.

"We'll go back inside in a little while. Let's give Vintel time to control herself."

We walked in silence until we reached the river. The memory of Vintel's contempt and my own fear followed me, and my cheeks burned with anger and humiliation. I thought of several things I wished I'd said to Vintel now that it was too late. I hoped Maara would think it was the cold wind that was making my eyes water and my cheeks red.

Maara brushed the snow off the trunk of a fallen tree and sat down on it. She made room for me, and I sat down beside her. I wondered how she felt about her confrontation with Vintel. She was gazing at the river. She didn't seem to be at all upset.

"Soon our warriors will return from the ravine," she said.

"What?"

"Look. The river has begun to freeze."

I stared at her in amazement. How could she be thinking about the river? Had she forgotten about Vintel?

"Aren't you angry?"

She turned and looked at me. "No. Why should I be?"

"Vintel insulted you."

"Did she?"

"She called you a thief." My heart burned with the injustice of it.

"Yes," Maara said. "I suppose she did." She drew her legs up onto the log and turned until she sat cross-legged, facing me. She gave me a long look. "You're angry."

"Of course I am."

"Why?"

How could she fail to understand something so obvious?

"Because Vintel insulted you. And she insulted me."

I turned away from her as I blinked back tears.

"What did she say to you?"

"She said I was small."

"You are small." Her reply took me aback. "Why were you insulted by

the truth?"

"It was the way she said it," I told her. "It was meant to be an insult. And she called me a thief, too."

"Are you a thief?"

"No."

"So you felt insulted by something that was true and by something that was not true."

"I suppose so." I didn't understand what she was getting at.

"Why do you care about Vintel's opinion?"

"I don't!" I said. "I don't care what she thinks!"

"Of course you do. Why else would you be angry?"

I couldn't think of a good answer.

"Shall I tell you why?" she said.

I nodded.

"Because you didn't know you had a choice."

"What choice?"

"To be angry or not."

It was the silliest thing I'd ever heard. "That's not a choice."

"Yes," she said. "It is." She waited patiently for me to understand.

"How could that be a choice? When someone insults me, it makes me angry."

"If that's true, then your feelings will always be at the mercy of others."

That had never occurred to me.

"Oh," I said.

In Maara's face I saw no sign of anger.

"Did you choose not to be angry at Vintel?"

"I didn't think about it. I was too busy trying to keep something bad from happening."

"Is that how you kept from being angry?"

"No," she said. "I wasn't angry. It took me a long time to learn that I didn't have to feel what someone wanted me to feel, but once I learned it, it became a habit. It's a useful habit. Because I wasn't angry, I was able to think clearly about what was the best thing to do."

She saw that I was still confused.

"Think," she said. "A short time ago we were in a difficult situation, one that could have turned out very badly. Now we're safe and sound sitting here by the river. What happened to bring that about?"

"Lorin showed up."

"Think back a little further."

Then I knew, and the memory of her words to Vintel chilled me.

"You challenged her," I said.

"No," she said. "Vintel challenged me. She put her hand on her sword, and I tried to convince her that she was doing what I wanted her to do."

"Didn't you want her to draw her sword?"

"No," she said. "That was the last thing I wanted."

I was confused again.

"Vintel wanted to make me feel fear or shame or anger," Maara said. "It would have been a victory for her. Instead she allowed herself to be goaded into anger, and her anger made her do something foolish. She knew it was foolish, but she didn't know she had a choice."

"What if she had drawn her sword?"

"She didn't."

"But what if Lorin hadn't come along?"

"She would have found another way not to fight."

"But what if she couldn't do that?" I insisted. "What if she had made you fight her?"

"Then I would have called on my anger, and I would have defended myself until someone stopped us."

"I thought it was wrong to be angry."

"No," she said. "Not wrong. I would have used my anger to give me the strength and the courage I needed. Vintel couldn't control her anger, and because of that, it would have been useless to her, just as your anger was useless to you, because it blinded you to what you needed to do to get out of a bad situation."

I thought about why I had resisted Vintel.

"No," I said. "I knew what I should do, but my anger kept me from doing it."

"What was that?"

"I should have given her the brooch. That would have satisfied her pride. Then she would have been able to forget that I refused her, and she would have left me alone."

"Why didn't you give it to her?"

"She made me angry."

Maara's face grew thoughtful. "You may have used your anger well

after all.”

I waited for her to explain.

“Vintel thought you would be so afraid of her that you wouldn’t give her any trouble,” she said. “Instead you showed her that she would have to make good on any threats she made to you. You forced her to respect you.”

“Respect me?” I said. “She was about to take the brooch away from me and punish me for stealing it.”

“She might have taken the brooch, but I don’t think she would have done you any harm.”

I remembered the look in Vintel’s eyes, and even as I sat there, safe beside my warrior, I felt an icy shiver slide down my spine. “I’m not so sure about that. I think she was looking forward to it.”

“I imagine she was looking forward to making you feel how powerful she is. She might have caused you pain, but she wouldn’t have caused you harm. There’s a difference.”

Suddenly she chuckled.

“I doubt Vintel would have found it satisfying.”

“Why not?”

“She could have forced your body, but your spirit would never have submitted to her.”

I heard in Maara’s voice that she was proud of me, and I felt a glow around my heart.

The sun was well up by now, but it was hidden behind masses of dark clouds. The wind gusted stronger and scattered rain around us.

“We should go back,” she said.

We started up the hill. Although we tried to hurry, we had to fight against the wind. By the time we reached the hilltop, we were breathless. Before we went inside the earthworks, Maara stopped and turned to me.

“Stay out of Vintel’s way if you can,” she said, “but don’t make it obvious that you’re avoiding her, and don’t show any fear of her.”

I nodded.

“And don’t go anywhere alone for a while.”

Then I suspected that Vintel had been waiting for an opportunity to confront me. She may have seen me go outside that morning and followed me. But how had Maara known about it?

“How did you know I was in trouble?” I asked her.

“I knew,” she said.

###

After breakfast I found Sparrow alone in the companions' loft and told her about my encounter with Vintel.

"Eramet gave me that brooch," she said. "I didn't take it from her things. She gave it to me, along with an old cloak of hers. It belonged to me. It was mine to give."

"I don't doubt it," I told her, "but I wanted you to know what happened. I don't want to be the cause of trouble between you and Vintel."

"What in the world could have gotten into her? I've never known her to do anything like that before."

"She's angry," I said. "She spoke too soon about my becoming her apprentice. Maybe she feels a little foolish."

That I had chosen Maara, someone Vintel regarded both as a person of no importance and as an adversary, must have made my refusal of her even more humiliating. I didn't know if anyone had told Sparrow how my warrior had come to be wounded or of Vintel's part in it. I had no intention of telling her myself. It wasn't my story to tell, though sometimes I was tempted. If Sparrow was going to be Vintel's apprentice, she should know the worst about her. On the other hand, Sparrow had little choice but to accept whoever was willing to take her or risk being sent home. What good would it do to spoil her opinion of someone to whom she might owe her loyalty?

Sparrow didn't question my explanation. "Your warrior showed up just in time?"

I nodded.

"And challenged Vintel?"

"Yes."

She grinned a wicked grin. "I would have liked to see that."

Sparrow was cleaning the armor of a warrior whose companion was ill. She had been trying to make herself useful, especially to the warriors who had not yet chosen an apprentice, although we both knew that her best chance was still with Vintel. For a time I watched her work, and the things Maara had said to me that morning came back into my mind.

"What kinds of things did Eramet teach you?" I asked Sparrow.

She shrugged. "All the usual things, I suppose."

"Did she teach you about anger?"

"Anger?" She thought for a minute. "Eramet never said anything about

anger, as far as I can remember.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Why?”

“Maara says that anger is a choice.”

Sparrow laughed. “I hope she teaches you more useful things than that.”

###

From the companions’ loft I had a good view of the great hall. Maara had been sitting with several of the other warriors before the hearth. When preparations began for the midday meal, she got up and headed toward the stairs. I got up too and went to meet her, in case she needed me. She asked me to find something for us to eat and bring it to her room. In the kitchen I found stew simmering in a cauldron. I took a bowlful for each of us and half a loaf of bread and went back upstairs.

When I handed Maara her bowl, I said, “Are we hiding from Vintel?”

She laughed. “Not exactly.”

Maara finished first and set her bowl aside. My eyes had been bigger than my stomach, and I’d taken more than I could eat. I offered her what was left of mine. She smiled at me and took the bowl.

“I’ll never be hungry again,” she said, “as long as you’re around.”

Her words both pleased and pained me. In a teasing way, she was thanking me for taking care of her, but her words cast a dark shadow. I heard in them that she had been hungry in a way I’d never been, and I was sorry it was so.

My face must have shown her what I was feeling.

“What’s troubling you?” she asked.

I shrugged, reluctant to tell her the truth. No one wants to hear that she inspires pity.

“Are you still worried about Vintel?”

I nodded, glad that she had provided me with another answer to her question. In truth, several things still puzzled me.

“Do you truly believe I was right to resist her?”

“What do you think would have happened if you’d given in?”

“I thought that if I made a gesture to satisfy her pride, she would stop being angry with me.”

"Most people would be satisfied with such a gesture," Maara said, "but I think that to Vintel it would have been a sign of weakness." She propped her elbows on her knees, rested her chin on her hands, and gazed at me. "What if I had handed her your brooch and promised to punish you for stealing it? That ought to have satisfied her pride."

The thought horrified me. I couldn't imagine her doing such a thing. It would have hurt my trust in her, no matter her intentions. She saw in my face what I thought of the idea.

"If I had given her the brooch," she said, "the gesture would have been more than just a sign of weakness to Vintel. It would truly have weakened us, because to you it would have been a betrayal."

I nodded that I understood.

"And if you had given her the brooch," she said, "the gesture would have weakened you, because that would also have been a betrayal. It would have been a betrayal of yourself. I think that's what your anger was telling you. Sometimes the ability to make such a gesture is a sign of strength and making it can make you stronger. But not this time."

I wondered then why she hadn't questioned me about the brooch.

"Why didn't you ask me where I got it?"

"I didn't need to," she replied. "I knew you didn't steal it, and Vintel would have enjoyed watching me question you about it. Instead I showed her that I would defend you, whether or not you'd done something wrong. She knew I hadn't given you the brooch. She knew I had no idea how you came by it. Now she knows I'll stand by you. And now you know it too."

"I never doubted it," I said.

Maara smiled. "Looking back on it, I think we've done well today."

I had a different opinion.

"It seems to me that things have gone from bad to worse," I said. "Now Vintel is our enemy. Now she has another grievance against us."

"Vintel has always been my enemy. At least now her hatred is out in the open."

"But why does she hate you for something she did? She owes you an apology for what she did."

"Vintel hates me for who I am," she said. "What she did came from her hatred. But what she did was wrong, and she believes she'll lose face if she admits it. She's right. It's too late now to admit to what she did. Now she has to live with it, and the sight of me can only remind her of her own

cowardice.”

Maara’s words frightened me. She was telling me that Merin’s house would be dangerous for her as long as Vintel was in it. It had never occurred to me that I might be endangering her by keeping her with me. I felt I had been very selfish.

“The Lady was right,” I said. “I should have let you go.”

For the first time that day my warrior was angry with me. “Have I no will of my own?”

“Of course you do, but I never thought about how dangerous this place still is for you.”

“All the world is dangerous for me,” she said. “At least here I have a friend or two.”

That made me feel a little better, but there was something I needed to hear her say. “Will you tell me again that this is what you wanted?”

She sighed. “If I do, will you never ask me again?”

I nodded.

“I regret nothing,” she said. “And I hope you never have cause to regret your choice.”

“What have I to regret? I have what I wanted.”

“Today you stood with me against Vintel. She won’t forget it. Vintel is something you will have to learn to live with.”

An idea came to me. “Maybe I should put the brooch away, so that it won’t be a reminder to Vintel.”

Maara shook her head. “If you put it away, it will seem as if you’re trying to hide it from her, as if you are truly guilty of the theft.” She thought for a moment. “I have a better idea.”

She got up, took her heavy cloak from its peg, and put it on.

“Give me the brooch,” she said.

I took it from my belt and gave it to her, and she used it to fasten her cloak. It looked handsome against the dark green cloth.

“Put on something warm,” she said. “We’re going outside.”

Wind-blown rain rattled against the shutter.

“Outside?”

“Yes,” she said.

I put on a heavy tunic, and Maara handed me an old hood of hers to put over my head.

“We’re going to have to get you some winter clothes,” she said.

We went downstairs and out through the great hall. Although it was only midafternoon, it was almost dark outside. Black clouds loomed over us, and the cold rain stung our faces. Once we were outdoors, I meant to ask her what she had in mind, but the wind blew my words away.

I followed Maara through the maze of earthworks and down the hill. The wind blew right through the fabric of my trousers. By the time we reached the river, my legs were numb. We took shelter by a tree whose bare branches couldn't stop the rain, though the trunk broke the wind a bit.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"This is far enough. We can go back now."

"What are we doing?"

"We're getting wet," she said. "Now we're going to go back to sit beside the fire and dry off. And we're going to give everyone an opportunity to admire your brooch."

"What about Vintel?"

"She'll either challenge my right to it or she won't. I doubt Vintel wants to take the matter any further, and she certainly doesn't want to do it in public. But if she doesn't challenge me, she will have missed her chance. Once people have seen me wearing it, they will remember the brooch as mine."

We returned to the house and sat for the rest of the afternoon beside the hearth. Maara kept her cloak on. Even after it was dry and she began to be too warm, she only tossed it back over her shoulder, so that the brooch stayed in its place.

When people admired it, she told them it belonged to me.

Vintel came into the great hall for the evening meal. She saw us sitting by the hearth, and she could not have failed to see the brooch, but she ignored us, and she never said another word about it.

JEALOUSY

During the night the storm turned into a blizzard that lasted for a week. There was little else for the people of Merin's house to do but huddle around the hearth in the great hall. The only thing that relieved our boredom was an occasional spat caused by our being so weary of one another's company.

Maara didn't like sitting in the crowded hall, but her room was too cold for anything but sleeping. The wind drove the snow in through the cracks in the shutter, and when we awoke in the mornings, our hair was stiff with frost. She would find us an inconspicuous place at the back of the hall, where we could have some peace and quiet.

It was impossible to avoid Vintel, although she hardly seemed to notice us. She treated us as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened between us. She was no more friendly with us than she had ever been, but she sometimes spoke to my warrior or to me in passing. I found it difficult to understand.

One thing had changed, and it was something that pleased me very much. The warriors who had once avoided Maara now began to seek her out. One or another of them would leave a warm place beside the hearth and join us. Some would stay only for a moment, just long enough to let her know that they accepted her as one of them. A few would sit with us through the long afternoons and talk with her as if they had known her all their lives. I imagine that it was most often curiosity that drew them to her. She was never talkative enough to satisfy them, but I hoped they would see that she was more like them than she was different.

###

On the fourth night of the blizzard, I awoke shivering in the middle of the night. I was sleeping in my clothes with the covers over my head, but it did no good. I couldn't get warm. At last I got up, still wrapped in my blankets, thinking I might go downstairs and sleep by the warm ashes of the hearth. On the way I changed my mind and stopped by the companions' loft. I felt my way over to where Sparrow slept, but her place was empty.

Someone whispered my name. I turned to see Taia open her blankets

for me. I added my blankets to hers and lay down beside her. Soon I was warm enough to sleep.

In the early morning, as I was returning to Maara's room, I saw someone at the far end of the upstairs hall. I wondered who else could be up so early. On such a cold morning, no one would be in any hurry to get out of a warm bed. I was curious enough to linger in the hallway until I could see who it was.

In the dim light I couldn't see her face. I recognized Sparrow by the way she moved. I thought she might have been looking for me, so I waited for her. I expected her to stop and speak with me, but she brushed past me without a word. I caught only a brief glimpse of her face. She looked as if she had just played a clever trick on someone and was making her escape before her prank could be discovered. When I turned to speak to her, she put her finger to her lips and beckoned to me to follow her.

We went down to the kitchen. A few of the servants were already up, and the fires had been lit. Sparrow and I sat down in the warmest corner we could find. She was fully dressed, as I was, but it was still cold enough that we were glad to pull my blankets around our shoulders.

"Where were you last night?" I asked her. "I looked for you in the companions' loft, but you weren't there."

"When was that?"

"I woke up freezing in the middle of the night. I went to see if you'd share blankets with me."

"I'm sorry I missed you." She sounded sorry.

Then she said, "I was with Vintel."

I could hardly believe my ears. "Has Vintel accepted you?"

"Not yet, but I think I made a good impression."

Sparrow saw my blank look, and her eyes twinkled with amusement.

"What an innocent you are," she said.

I was too curious to be annoyed at her teasing.

"Tell me what you're talking about," I said, but before the words were out of my mouth, I understood that she had spent the night in Vintel's bed.

"Oh," I said.

I wasn't innocent enough to believe that they had only been sharing blankets, or that what had happened between them had anything to do with love. It seemed at first glance not much different from what had happened between Sparrow and me, but at once I saw the difference. Sparrow and I

loved each other, even though it was not the kind of love that lovers share. When I thought about her touching Vintel as she had touched me, I got a sour feeling in my stomach.

Sparrow understood, and her eyes grew cold. "When I'm a warrior, I will let my heart choose. Until then, necessity chooses for me. I learned many things in Arnet's house, and if I must, I will use them all."

I didn't know what to say to her. Her words revealed her anger at her situation and her determination to improve it. I both admired her and pitied her, and I began to understand a little of the way life must feel to her. While I sometimes felt pushed in directions I didn't want to take, I had always had the right to choose my own way in life. As the Lady said to me, I had the freedom to choose unwisely.

When I was younger, I sometimes wished that others would choose for me and relieve me of the responsibility, but Sparrow had fought all her life for every choice she'd been allowed to make, and many times it must have been only a choice of evils.

I took her hand in both of mine. "I understand," I said.

She turned to look at me. "Yes, I think you do."

She ran her fingers across my brow, to brush away the worry lines.

"It's not as bad as all that," she said.

As swiftly as it had come over her, her dark mood vanished. Once again mischief twinkled in her eyes. She seemed very pleased with herself.

"I do believe," she said, "that I will soon be Vintel's apprentice."

###

Sparrow was right. Within a fortnight, Vintel accepted her. I thought about the night of my initiation and asked Sparrow if she would have an initiation with Vintel.

"I've already started on the warrior's path," she said. "That can happen only once. This time Vintel and I will go before the council. Vintel will announce her intention to apprentice me, and the Lady will give her consent."

"That's all?"

"Yes," she said, "and for me it's more than enough."

I heard in her voice the relief she felt, that her future would no longer be in doubt.

"I wish you could have waited for the warriors who'll be coming to

Merin's house in the spring," I said. "I can't imagine that none of them would take you."

"And with them will come the girls to be fostered here. Vintel could have her pick of them."

I understood. Sparrow was wise to secure her position with Vintel as soon as possible. I tried to set aside my misgivings.

At the next meeting of the council, Sparrow and Vintel were bound together. While I knew I should be happy that Sparrow had what she wanted, my heart refused to feel what I thought it should. I told myself that my concern was for Sparrow's welfare and that it came from my own distrust of Vintel, but my warrior saw what I did not.

###

One morning a pale sun rose into a cloudless sky. Although the air was cold, the sunlight fooled us into feeling warmer than we were. Maara hurried me through breakfast so that we could go outdoors and enjoy the day. We went down by the river, but instead of going south along the riverbank, where people and animals had made a path through the snow, she turned north.

Merin's house stood at the northern end of the valley. The land to the north of it was hilly, and the path we followed wound between the hills. We had to break our own trail through snow that lay knee-deep in places. The exertion warmed us, but after several hours, I was having trouble keeping up with Maara. At last she stopped and waited for me.

"We've spent too much time sitting by the hearth," she said, as I caught up with her. "Where I was made a warrior, we never sat indoors all winter."

"What did you do in the wintertime?"

"We hunted. We fished through the ice. We set out traps."

"Traps?"

"For fur," she said.

The men who had come across the river had been dressed in skins and furs. The legs of my woolen trousers were soggy from walking through the snow, and while I had thought those men ragged and ill-dressed, that day I would have been glad to wrap my cold legs in fur.

We had stopped at the edge of a wood a short distance from the river. Maara led me in among the trees, where we would have a little shelter from

the wind. She cut some pine boughs and laid them down for us to sit on. From a pocket in her tunic she took a handful of tinder and her firestones. In just a few minutes, she had a fire started. She fed it with pine twigs, then with larger branches, but she kept it small, so that we could huddle close to it.

Maara sat across the fire from me, her arms clasped around her knees, and gazed into the flames.

"Vintel has taken Sparrow as her apprentice," she said. Of course we both knew that. Everyone knew that. I waited for her to tell me what was on her mind. Suddenly she looked up at me. "Is that hard for you?"

I shrugged. "I wish Sparrow could have found someone better."

"That isn't what I asked you."

Too late I realized I hadn't been paying enough attention. I heard in her voice my warrior's disapproval. It had been there when she complained that I couldn't keep pace with her, but I hadn't taken it to heart. Now I thought about her question and tried to give her a truthful answer.

"It's hard for me to know that someone I care about has had to accept less than she deserves," I said.

"She has what she wanted, doesn't she?"

"Yes," I said. "At least, she has all she dared to want."

"If she has what she wanted, then you must learn to accept it."

"I do accept it. That doesn't mean I can't have my own opinion about it."

Maara's eyes reproached me. "What good will your opinion do you? What good will it do Sparrow? Things are as they are."

She seemed almost angry with me. A sharp retort was on the tip of my tongue. I bit it back. I studied her face, trying to understand what she was telling me.

"What have I done wrong?" I said.

She looked away from me and shook her head. "You've done nothing wrong. Not yet. But I see a danger you don't see, and I wouldn't have you walk blindly into it."

"Into what?"

"I didn't want to have to speak to you about this. It's none of my business, but I know that you and Sparrow are close, and now things will have to change between you."

She was starting to frighten me. "What things?"

"Vintel won't share her with you. You already know too well Vintel's

jealousy over things she believes are hers.”

“Sparrow is not a thing,” I said, “and Vintel doesn’t own her.”

“Sparrow is bound to her, and to Vintel that amounts to much the same thing.”

“Sparrow is bound to her as I am bound to you, but I belong only to myself.”

At last she looked at me. “I’m not Vintel,” she said.

I was afraid of what she was asking of me. If I had kept Sparrow’s gift only to lose the giver, I had made a very poor bargain.

“What am I supposed to do?” I said. “I can’t stop being Sparrow’s friend because of Vintel’s jealousy.”

“I’m not telling you that you can’t be her friend, but you can’t be more than that.”

We stared at each other across the fire. It took me a minute to understand that she thought Sparrow and I were lovers. At first I was relieved that I could still be Sparrow’s friend and that this whole conversation had come from a misunderstanding, but before I could explain, she said, “I believe you when you tell me you want the best for Sparrow, but don’t deceive yourself. You must know in your heart that you’re going to lose what you had with her, that Vintel is going to keep at least that much away from you. It’s your own jealousy that hides behind your protest that Sparrow deserves better than Vintel.”

Her accusation stunned me. Then I was furious with her, furious that she had presumed to tell me that my feelings were not what I believed them to be, that she was, in a way, calling me a liar.

“You’re right,” I said. “This is none of your business.”

I started to get up. She reached across the fire and took hold of my wrist, twisting it in a way that forced me to sit back down.

“Don’t be stupid,” she said. “If you’re going to disregard my advice, at least do it when no one but yourself will have to bear the consequences.”

Although I knew that we were talking at cross-purposes, I was so angry with her that I didn’t try to make her understand. I glared at her and waited for her to release my arm. When she did, I got up and brushed the snow from my trousers. Without another word to her, I started back to Merin’s house.

My anger blinded me as I blundered back along the half-broken trail we’d made that morning. Soon I was gasping for breath, and the cold air made

my chest ache. I had to stop, and when I did, the pain that so often follows anger caught up with me. I tried to nurse my anger, to keep the pain away, but Maara's words echoed in my head, and my anger yielded to the pain of knowing that she believed me guilty of both jealousy and self-deception.

Anger. What had she tried to teach me about anger? Her words came back to me. *Why do you care about Vintel's opinion?* Once I realized I didn't care, Vintel's insults had no power to hurt me, but I did care about Maara's opinion of me. I cared very much. Nothing she had taught me about anger would help me this time.

I looked back down the trail. I had assumed that Maara would follow me, but I didn't see her. I waited for several minutes while I caught my breath. She didn't come. When I looked for the smoke of her fire, I could neither see nor smell any trace of smoke in the air.

Fear fluttered in the pit of my stomach. I tried to reason it away. The fire was too small to smoke. She was giving me time to think over what she'd said to me. I didn't dare to wonder if she had no intention of coming home with me, but suddenly I knew I had to find her. The fact that I had more to fear from being alone in the winter woods so far from home never occurred to me.

I quickly retraced my steps. I was relieved to find her where I'd left her. She looked up at me, her face expressionless. It was up to me to heal the breach between us.

"I care what you think of me," I blurted out. "I can't pretend I don't. It hurt to think I might have lost your good opinion."

She looked surprised. "It would take more than a little disagreement to do that."

Before I heard or understood her, I tried to explain, to her and to myself, why I had been so angry with her. Words tumbled over one another in my mouth. Even I couldn't make much sense of them.

"Tell me later," she said. "Sit down. Let's just be quiet for a while."

"I need to tell you—"

"Hush," she said. "You won't find the truth in so much talk."

When I stopped talking, my trapped thoughts flew around like dry leaves in a whirlwind. A few times I forgot what she'd told me and opened my mouth to speak only to shut it again, until at last my mind began to let go of the thoughts that only chased their own tails inside my head.

For a while I watched Maara out of the corner of my eye. Then I began

to pay attention to the world around me. It was quiet. No wind stirred the trees. No birds called. No trickle of running water, no scurrying feet of forest animals broke the silence.

I thought of Sparrow, and my heart grew heavy. Our friendship began when she was Eramet's apprentice. As close as she had been to Eramet, she had made time for me. Now she was apprenticed to someone who might not allow her even to be my friend.

In a way, Maara was right. I was afraid of Vintel's power over Sparrow. I was jealous that someone who valued her so little should have such a claim on her, while someone who valued her as I did should have none at all. I sat an arm's length from the woman who had risked so much to become my teacher and felt bereft.

If I had been sitting with Maara in her room or in the great hall, I would have questioned her about what she'd said to me. There in the silent woods, I let my new knowledge of myself sift through my mind and settle around my heart. While Maara may have misunderstood my relationship with Sparrow, she understood my feelings better than I did myself.

The shadows of the trees grew long. The light began to fade. I worried that we would have to walk home in the dark. As if she had heard my thoughts, Maara said, "The moon will rise early tonight. We'll walk home by moonlight."

After the sun had set, I began to feel the cold. We were both wearing heavy tunics, which were warm enough as long as we were walking and even while we were sitting by the fire in daylight. Now that the sun was gone, I started to shiver.

Maara had brought her winter cloak, rolled into a bundle slung over her shoulder. She unrolled it and draped it around her shoulders. Then she lifted one side and looked at me. I didn't need a second invitation. I took the place she offered me.

Our bodies warmed each other as the dark closed in around us. I closed my eyes. We were in the armory, where I couldn't run away from her. I wanted to. *Don't run*, she said. How could I? But I had, hadn't I? I had run from her, was running from her, running through the snow. It was dark, and I blundered off the trail. I stopped and fell to my knees. She lifted me up.

You are bound to me by an oath, she said.

Yes.

But it's not the oath that binds us.

What binds us?

"It's time to go," she said.

She got to her feet and took my arm to help me up. I stumbled against her, still half asleep. The moon had risen, giving us light enough to retrace our steps back home.

###

I woke to find Maara kneeling next to me, her hand resting on my shoulder.

"Are you going to sleep all day?" she said.

She had taken the shutter down, and light poured into the room. Cold air poured in too. I sat up in my bed and pulled my blankets up around me.

Maara was already dressed.

"Well?" she said. She stood in the doorway waiting for me.

I stayed where I was, reluctant to exchange my warm blankets for the clothing that had hung out all night in the freezing air.

"Are you tired? Shall I bring you something to eat?"

I shook my head and got up. Maara waited while I got into my clothes. They were as cold as I thought they would be.

While I dressed, Maara stood leaning against the doorpost, gazing past me out the window at the bright snowy world outside. I thought about our moonlight walk, about sitting with her in the woods, sharing her cloak and the warmth of the fire. I hadn't felt a distance between us then, but I did this morning.

"We didn't talk yesterday," I reminded her.

Her eyes turned to me. "I thought we might have talked too much."

I was thinking of the silence we had shared, and of how an understanding of my own feelings had come of itself, clear and true, into my heart. How had she known that would happen?

"You were right," I said. "I was jealous of Vintel."

I wanted to say more, but I couldn't find the words for what had been so clear to me the day before.

"You don't have to explain anything to me," she said. "I wanted you to be aware of something that could bring trouble to both you and Sparrow. Now you're aware of it. What you do about it is up to you."

Then I remembered that I hadn't told her the most important thing. I

hadn't let her know that what she believed about my relationship with Sparrow wasn't true.

"There's something else," I said.

"What's that?"

"Sparrow is my friend." I had intended to add, "not my lover," but a sudden shyness stopped me. Instead I said, "That's the most important thing to me."

"You won't lose that," Maara said. "Sparrow will honor your friendship whether Vintel approves or not. Vintel can't command her feelings."

I didn't know how to talk to her. I felt awkward and bashful, and the look of caution, almost of dread, on Maara's face stopped me from saying more. Some things are just too intimate to talk about, even with the person closest to you.

And how could I explain what Sparrow was to me? How could I deny she was my lover? It had been only the one time, but it had happened, and ever since, I had felt a new tenderness for her. I had never been close to anyone in the way I was close to Sparrow. It all seemed much too complicated to explain.

SECRETS

While the good weather lasted, Maara and I went out into the countryside almost every day. She showed me how to make snares from twisted strands of the inner bark of a certain bramble and how to set them out on a rabbit run. We caught a number of rabbits that way, and from the skins she made me a pair of leggings that covered my legs from the ankle to above the knee.

I heard a few unkind remarks about how odd they looked, but I didn't mind. I could walk all day through the snow, and my legs stayed dry and warm.

Once, when we went to check one of our snares, we heard a rabbit scream in terror. A fox had discovered the rabbit helpless in the trap and was too preoccupied with it to notice our approach.

Without taking her eyes from the fox, Maara knelt down and felt the earth beside her, until her fingers found a stone. With a sidearm throw I'd never seen before, she sent the stone at the fox's head. The fox fell, stunned, and she ran over to it and slit its throat.

She skinned the fox and dressed its body as if it were a rabbit. Then she made a fire and cooked it and gave me some to eat. The meat was tough and stringy, with a strong, bitter taste. I didn't like it, but I believed she was testing me, and I forced myself to eat more than I wanted of it.

She scowled at me.

"If that had been the rabbit," she said, "you would have eaten twice as much."

"I like rabbit," I said.

"Food is the distance you can travel in a day, and the cold you can withstand at night."

Reluctantly I reached out my hand for more.

###

Winter was coming to an end. As the days grew longer, our walks took us farther and farther from home.

Maara saw it first, a dark, lumpy thing lying in a snowbank. At first I

thought it might be one of our cattle, winter-killed, but when we drew near, I saw that it was the body of a man, clad in animal skins, lying face down in the snow.

Maara turned him over. The sight sickened me. Animals had gnawed his face and hands. I thought that was why his hand was missing, until I saw the remnants of the bandage I had helped the healer to apply.

“Oh,” I said. “He died.”

“No,” said Maara. “Someone killed him.”

The front of his leather shirt was stained a rusty brown. She pulled it up and showed me the wound under his heart, just a small cut where the blade went in, hardly enough, you would think, to kill a person.

“Why did they kill him?” I asked her.

My voice came out a whisper, although I hadn’t intended it to.

She didn’t answer right away. She was searching through his clothing. In the pocket of his tunic she found a pouch that contained a set of firestones, some flint arrowheads, and a little carved statue of the Mother. Another pocket held a heel of bread.

“Was it because he was hurt?” I asked. “Because he couldn’t keep up?”

“His own people didn’t kill him.”

Then I remembered the Lady asking Vintel if she would give up her right to take blood for the blood of Eramet. In my mind’s eye I saw Vintel’s face as she denied the bond between them.

Maara continued her examination. From beneath his body she drew out a long, thin object wrapped in leather. The wrappings fell away to reveal a piece of dark wood, intricately carved and highly polished. It was a bow, only a little over half my height, while the bows I’d seen before were as tall as I or taller. It might have been a child’s bow except that it was much too heavy for a child. It was broad above and below the grip, tapering at the ends, and made of layers of wood and horn, all glued together. It had no bowstring but seemed none the worse for having spent the winter in a snowbank.

Maara smiled. “Look,” she said. “Someone has left a gift for you.”

She handed me the bow. Then she put the man’s pouch back into his tunic and turned him over, so that he lay as we had found him.

All I could think of was that I held the bow that had killed Eramet. I handed it back to Maara.

“I don’t want it,” I said.

She frowned at me, but she didn’t ask me why. She took the bow and

wrapped it carefully in its leather cover. Then we started for home.

We weren't in the habit of talking on the trail. Maara walked ahead of me, because she was armed and I was not. When we were within a few miles of home, she stopped and made a fire. We had found a rabbit in one of our snares early that morning. She spitted the meat and set it over the fire. Then she sat back on her heels and looked at me.

"Tell me what you're thinking," she said.

"Vintel killed that man."

"Yes, I believe she did."

"Should we tell someone?"

"Is there someone you want to tell?"

I thought about it. "We ought to tell the Lady."

"Why?"

"Because she sent those men home under safe conduct."

Maara nodded. "You're right," she said. "The Lady should know." She turned the meat on the spit. "What about Sparrow?"

"Do you think I should tell Sparrow?"

"I want to know if you think you should tell her."

"No," I said.

Maara looked surprised.

"Sparrow owes her loyalty to Vintel," I said. "If I told her what we found, it would put her in a difficult position. She'd have to tell Vintel about it, and then Vintel would know that we know what she did."

"Why would Sparrow tell her?"

"If someone told me something like that about you and I kept it to myself, wouldn't that be disloyal?"

She nodded. "It would, but it might be something you should know. What if the person who told you had only your well-being in mind?"

Maara understood my dilemma.

"I've already made that decision once," I said. "I never told Sparrow what Vintel did to you. Sparrow had no other choice but to bind herself to Vintel. I couldn't tell her something that would cause her to think ill of her warrior."

Maara thought that over for a minute.

"That was well done," she said.

Her praise surprised me. Before I could think of a reply, she said, "It's possible that Vintel told Sparrow she killed that man."

"Why would she tell anyone?"

"Eramet belonged to Sparrow too."

"Sparrow didn't want him dead. She told me so."

"Would she have said that to Vintel?"

Probably not. I shook my head.

"Do you think that what Vintel did was wrong?" Maara asked me.

"Of course," I said. "Don't you?"

"Vintel took what she believed she had a right to."

"She should have claimed her right before the Lady and the council."

Maara gazed into the fire. "Among my people no one, not even a council of the elders, would ask someone to give up her right to take blood for blood."

"Why not?"

"Because grief demands it."

She took a piece of meat from the spit and handed it to me. The memory of the dead man's body had stayed with me all afternoon and I didn't have much of an appetite, but I accepted what she gave me.

"Would you have done what Vintel did?" I asked her.

"Yes," she said.

It was not the answer I expected. I waited for her to explain. Instead she began to eat. She motioned to me to do the same, and while we ate, she watched me, as if she could see my thoughts. When we had finished our meal, she said, "Has anyone ever taken someone from you?"

I shook my head. I was about to ask her the same thing when I remembered that she had lost her family, her entire clan when she was just a child. I wondered if she remembered them, if she remembered losing them.

"Will you tell me how you lost your family?"

She shrugged.

"Don't you remember?"

Her eyes searched for something far away, as she looked back through time.

"Running feet," she said.

"Running feet?"

"And the noise. The outcry and the crackle of fire. I was choking on the smoke. When I ran outdoors, I saw torches lying on the thatch. People were running all around me. Someone ran into me and knocked me down. All I could see was running feet." Her eyes came back to my face. "People

were shouting, calling to their families, to their children. I listened for my mother's voice but never heard it. A man, a stranger, grabbed me by the hair and put me over his shoulder. I bit him, and he hit me."

I waited, but she said no more.

"What else?" I asked.

"That's all."

"What happened to you? What did the man do with you?"

"I don't remember."

"Who took care of you?"

"No one took care of me," she said. "I learned to take care of myself."

"But you couldn't have survived without other people."

"There were other people."

"I don't understand."

"I lived in a village," she said. "Maybe several different villages. I don't know. I was too young to be useful to anyone. Maybe the man who took me gave me to his wife. Maybe she had no children. Maybe I was not the child she wanted."

I heard the impatience in her voice, but I wanted to hear it all. I had never before dared to ask her about her past. It was painful for her to talk about, and no wonder. I didn't know if I would ever have the courage to ask again.

"What happened to your family?" I asked her.

"A long time afterwards, someone told me they'd killed everyone but me. I don't know if it was true."

"When you speak about your people, who are you talking about?"

"My people?"

"You said a little while ago that among your people, no one would interfere in a blood debt."

"When I was old enough to work, I was sold—or given—to a household much like this one. That's where I became a warrior."

I opened my mouth to ask her where they were and why she'd left them, but she tossed a few handfuls of snow onto the fire and stood up.

"It's almost dark," she said. "We should go."

###

That evening after supper Maara took me with her to the Lady's chamber

to make her report. She told the Lady only that we had found the body of the prisoner who lost his hand and that he had died, not of his injury, but of a knife wound in his chest.

The Lady wasn't happy with our news.

"Where did you find him?" she asked.

"Well within our northern boundary," Maara replied.

"So he was killed before our warriors left them?"

"I would say so."

"You know these northerners," the Lady said. "Does it seem likely to you that his own people killed him?"

Maara shook her head.

"Then it was one of ours." Maara said nothing, but the Lady didn't expect an answer. "I imagine you have drawn your own conclusions."

"We haven't come to you to make an accusation," Maara said. "Tamras thought you should know that someone had dishonored your promise."

The Lady glanced at me and smiled. Then she turned back to Maara. "Who else knows of this?"

"No one else."

"Good," she said. "I think this news is best kept between the three of us."

Maara nodded and turned to leave. I started to follow her, but the Lady called me back, and Maara left me there.

The Lady looked me up and down.

"You look well," she said.

"I am very well."

"If a little oddly dressed."

I had forgotten the leggings. Now I wished I had taken them off before we went to see the Lady. For the first time they embarrassed me.

"Never mind," she said. "I'm sure they're very practical."

I nodded.

"Well," she said. "Is she what you expected?"

The question made no sense to me. Maara was exactly what I'd expected. She was the woman I had always known her to be.

"Her ways must seem a little strange to you," the Lady said, and glanced down at my legs. "They're certainly a little strange to me."

There was something in her tone I didn't like, as if she was waiting for me to find some fault with my warrior. I remembered Gnith's words. *Make sure*

of what you want, and when you get it, don't complain. Even if I'd had something to complain of, I would never have given the Lady the satisfaction.

"I'm used to her ways," I said.

The Lady put her hand on my shoulder. "Just don't forget the ways of your own people."

"I won't."

"Let me give you a word of advice then," she said. "Don't let your warrior keep you to herself. You need to find friends here. The friendships you make now will last you all your life, and each one will be a gift to your family."

"I have friends here."

"If you mean Sparrow, you have misunderstood me. You need friends whose families you can count on. Your mother is depending on you."

I knew what she meant. My mother had made many friends in Merin's house. They never failed to come to us when we needed help, and the Lady Merin herself was always the first among them.

"I understand," I said.

"Good." She slipped her arm around my shoulders and drew me close to her. "You did well today."

I forgot that I had been annoyed with her for speaking as she did about Maara. My heart was pleased by both her praise and her affection.

"You gave up a powerful ally when you refused Vintel. You don't need to make an enemy of her. Do you understand what I mean?"

I nodded. Of course the Lady didn't know that Vintel was my enemy already. Even so, there was no point in making matters any worse.

"Go on back to Maara then," she said, "and tell her what we've talked about."

STRONG FRIENDS

I found Namet in Maara's room. She got up to leave as soon as I came in. After she'd gone, I asked Maara what she wanted.

"Nothing in particular," said Maara. "I think she just stops by to remind me of her friendship."

The irony did not escape me that my warrior, a stranger in Merin's house, already had a friend from a strong family, while I did not.

"The Lady told me I need to make more friends," I said.

"Oh?"

"When I chose my friends here, it seems I thought more about their hearts than about their families."

I slumped down on the foot of Maara's bed, my mind still preoccupied with what Vintel had done. I tried to understand why Maara believed she had a right to do it. The Lady didn't seem to think so. Making powerful friends was the last thing I wanted to think about just then.

But Maara was already thinking about it.

"The Lady is right," she said. "You need friends with strong families as much as you need friends of the heart."

"I suppose so," I said.

I began to undo the thongs that bound my leggings.

"You won't make many friends if you spend all your time with me."

A ripple of anxiety went through me.

"It wouldn't hurt to spend some time with the other apprentices," she said gently. "They must wonder why you avoid them."

"I don't avoid them."

"It may seem that way to them."

"I suppose."

"You could start by eating supper at the companions' table," she said.

"We're never home by supertime."

"Perhaps we should be."

I nodded, but an anxious feeling had begun in the pit of my stomach. Something had changed too quickly, and I didn't understand how it had happened. I loved the feeling of freedom I had when I was alone with Maara. We were used to coming and going as we pleased. Would we now

stop whatever we were doing and rush home to supper like children who must be home before the sun goes down?

I would have been happier about joining the companions for supper if I had known that Sparrow would be there, but she was staying as close to Vintel as I usually stayed to Maara, and she seldom ate with the companions anymore. Then I remembered that I was supposed to be making other friends.

Just as I began to resign myself to this new idea, Maara said, "Maybe you should sleep in the companions' loft."

I felt as if she was sending me into exile.

"No," I said.

"You need to show the Lady that you're taking her advice seriously. How are you going to get to know anyone if you see the others only at supper-time?"

My mind knew she was right, but my heart couldn't keep up with her. Angry tears started in my eyes. To cover up my feelings, I busied myself with undoing my leggings.

"You don't have to go tonight," she said.

"Perhaps I should."

"I'm not sending you away. I'm trying to do what's best for you."

I took a deep breath. "I know."

The ties of my leggings were in a hopeless knot. I tugged at them in frustration and only made the tangle worse.

"Stop," said Maara.

She came to sit by me at the foot of the bed and began to work on the impossible knot.

"A lot has happened today," she said, "and we're tired, and it's dark."

"What does the dark have to do with it?"

She glanced into a corner of the room that was beyond the reach of our flickering lamplight. "The dark changes things."

"How?"

"You know how things look in the dark."

"I suppose so," I said, although I wasn't sure what she was getting at.

"In the dark, you can't see more than a little piece of anything, and most of what you see in the shadows might be things your mind makes up."

"Oh," I said.

She smiled. "Didn't your mother ever say that things always look better

in the morning?”

I had to smile too. “Everybody’s mother says that.”

“Then it must be true.”

She undid the last knot and pulled my leggings off. She looked at them for a moment. Then she said, “You don’t have to wear these.”

I took them from her. “I’m the only person in this house whose legs are always warm. If people look at me strangely, it must be only jealousy.”

Maara smiled at me. “Go to bed,” she said. “Tomorrow is soon enough to decide what you should do.”

###

Things did look much better to me in the morning. I was surprised to find myself looking forward to having supper with the companions. I remembered how reassuring it was to be one of them, and now that I was an apprentice, I was more than just one of them. I was a person of some importance. Those who were not yet apprenticed looked at me with envy mixed with a touch of awe, and the other apprentices accepted me as their equal. I no longer had to find an empty place for myself at the table. Someone would always make a place for me. Sometimes two or three of them at once would invite me to sit beside them. I had remembered none of those things the night before. Maara had been wise in what she said about the dark.

The day was drizzly. Ordinarily that wouldn’t have bothered us, but Maara suggested that we spend the day indoors, and I was more than willing to keep warm and dry.

I had awakened with new questions about what we had seen the day before. While I helped her dress, I asked her, “Why did no one try to stop Vintel from killing that man?”

“Vintel is their captain. Who would have dared?”

“I don’t mean our own warriors. Why did his friends do nothing? Why did they let it happen?”

“They aren’t savages,” she said. “They understand a blood debt.”

The prisoners may have understood, but I didn’t understand at all. A man had died, yet Eramet still lay in the barrow, none the better for it. Was Vintel’s heart any lighter? Was Namet’s heart? Was Sparrow’s?

###

That afternoon Sparrow found me in the laundry.

"Where have you been?" she said. She sounded cross with me.

"I've been right here all afternoon," I told her.

I hated doing laundry, and Maara and I had once again run out of clean clothes.

"I don't mean today," she said. "You've hardly been home for weeks on end. Where in the world has your warrior been taking you?"

"We go out walking. She thought we were getting too soft sitting all day long by the fire."

"So all you do is walk?"

"No," I said. "She's teaching me."

"Teaching you? What could she be teaching you?"

"She's taught me how to set snares, how to travel in cold weather, how to find food and make a shelter if a storm should overtake us. Lots of things."

"Did your warrior trap the furs for those things you've been wearing on your legs?"

"Leggings," I said. "She made them for me from the skins of rabbits we caught in our snares. They're warm."

"I wish I'd had leggings at the ravine," she said.

I smiled at her. Somehow Sparrow always said the right thing.

"It sounds like she's teaching you the old ones' ways," she said.

"Do you think so?" The idea appealed to me.

"It stands to reason. She can teach you only what she knows."

I had finished rinsing the clothes and wringing them out. Together we began to hang them up to dry.

"Have you ever known any of the old ones?" I asked her.

"Not really," she replied. "There was a woman named Bren in Arnet's house whose mother was one of them. Bren worked in the kitchen. She used to mumble nonsense words over every animal she butchered and paint her face with its blood. She frightened people."

I remembered that, after Maara killed the fox, there had been a smear of blood across her forehead. I had thought it was from the blood that spurted out when she cut its throat.

"Why did she do that?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but it seems to be traditional among them. I've even seen one or two of our own warriors mark themselves with the blood of a warrior

they've killed in battle. Laris marked herself at the ravine, when she killed the man who tried to escape."

No one in Merin's house had fairer hair than Laris.

"Laris isn't one of the old ones," I said.

"No," said Sparrow. "But I think she'd like to be."

Laris was one of the warriors who had sat and talked for hours with Maara in the great hall.

"Is that why she so often sits with Maara?"

Sparrow chuckled. "Partly, I suppose, but mostly I think it's because she and your warrior have something in common."

"What's that?"

"They're the only people here who have ever challenged Vintel."

"Laris challenged Vintel?"

Sparrow hushed me and lowered her voice. "Last spring they had a falling-out. I don't know what it was about, but they almost came to blows. No one but Laris has ever had the courage to challenge Vintel, not that I know of. Not until your warrior did."

"How would Laris know about that?"

Sparrow laughed. "Everybody knows about it. Lorin was telling the story behind his hand to anyone who would listen before the day was out. And if he hadn't, I would have had to tell somebody, even if it was only the companions. It was too good a story not to tell."

"Would you have been that disrespectful to Vintel?"

"Disrespectful? That story isn't disrespectful. It's the simple truth. Vintel leads because people will follow her. People will follow the best leader they can find, but how can they know who that is? Only by seeing how people conduct themselves. If your warrior were not a stranger here, I would say that Vintel should beware of her if she wants to keep her position."

"Maara isn't a stranger here anymore," I said.

"Not to you," said Sparrow, "but she doesn't mix with the others much, and part of the strength of leadership is the number of strong friendships one can call on. Anyway, it's just as well for her that Vintel doesn't see her as a rival."

"What about Laris?"

"Vintel is wary of Laris. Laris is from a strong family, but she has too few friends here to challenge Vintel's leadership."

We had finished hanging up the clothes. I was about to take the tub of

dirty water outside to empty it when Sparrow put her hand on my arm and said, "Your warrior doesn't do anything so very strange, does she?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Like what?"

"I've heard some strange things about people like her. Bec says that when they kill an animal they cut the heart out and eat it raw."

"She's never done anything like that," I said.

Of course I had never examined the entrails of the animals Maara killed to see if the hearts were missing. Sometimes she had given me some of the liver to eat, but she had always cooked it first.

"It's probably just an old wives' tale," Sparrow said. "People will say anything."

Then I knew where Sparrow's questions came from.

"What are people saying?"

"Nothing you should worry about. They're curious, that's all. They've never known anyone like her before. Neither have I, except for old Bren, and she was a lot more peculiar than your warrior."

"What are they so curious about?"

Sparrow hesitated. "Well," she said. "You've been so late coming home sometimes. They wonder if she's not out dancing to the moon."

I burst out laughing at the absurdity of the idea. "She does nothing of the kind."

Sparrow looked relieved. "Don't pay any attention to them then. They have nothing better to do than gossip."

I began to see the wisdom of spending more time in Merin's house. As much as I loved the time I spent with Maara out in the snowy countryside, it was time for both of us to make a place for ourselves within the household. It was as important for my warrior as it was for me.

###

In the days that followed, whenever the weather allowed, Maara took me outdoors during the day, but we were always back in time for supper, and I began to look forward to telling the companions what we had done that day. They listened with fascination to my tales of our adventures in the wilderness. I didn't tell them everything, but I told them enough to make them understand that I was learning useful skills, not some kind of ancient superstitious nonsense, as they had suspected.

One morning, while we were preparing to go out and check our snares, Laris asked Maara if she and Taia, her apprentice, could join us. Maara made them welcome.

Laris took great interest in everything Maara did, but Taia seemed bored and indifferent until she saw Maara make a fire. Maara had an uncommon skill with fire. Even in wet weather she could always find something that would burn. She would gather the down of cattails or pull the bark off a piece of deadfall and scoop out the dry heart of the rotting wood to use as tinder. There was no mystery in what she did, but Taia would watch her with delight, as if Maara had conjured the flame from the palms of her hands.

Although I too admired Maara's skill with fire, I had spent much of my childhood herding sheep and had made camp in all kinds of weather. I could do what Maara did, if not quite as easily. I wondered who Taia's people were, that she hadn't learned such a simple thing.

One evening Maara stayed downstairs talking with Laris and Namet, while I went up to the companions' loft with Taia. It had been a long time since I'd sat among them gossiping and telling jokes and stories. I found I couldn't tear myself away. When I grew sleepy, Taia shared her blankets with me.

In the morning, when I returned to Maara's room, I worried that she had wondered where I was. Instead she smiled at me and said, "Have you found your friends?" That night I moved my bed to the companions' loft.

A BAND OF WARRIORS

Though snow still dusted the hilltops, it had melted from the valley floor. The river ice had begun to break up weeks ago. A soft breeze blew warm out of the south, and the earth began to bloom. Our cattle, kept sheltered through the winter, were now pastured on new grass. Cattle raiders would soon come after them. It was time for our warriors to go north to guard our borders. Laris was to take her band of warriors into the hills northeast of Merin's house. She asked my warrior to go with them.

###

Maara had cured the pelt of the fox she killed. She had left on it both the head and the brush, and over several long evenings she had fashioned a carrying bag out of it. She took great pains with it. The fox's head formed the flap of the bag, and the tail slipped through a loop under the jaw to hold it closed. The legs overlapped around the sides, the black claws sketching a clever pattern against the fur.

The evening before we were to leave with Laris, Maara brought the bag downstairs. She sat down by the hearth, in the midst of a group of warriors, to put a few finishing touches on it. Several of the men admired it. Breda took it from her and turned it over and over in his hands. He was clearly quite taken with it.

"Would you make me one like it?" he asked her.

"Catch me a fox," she said, "and I will."

His face fell.

"Or you could have this one, if you have anything to trade."

"I have a good knife."

"I already have a knife."

He thought for a moment. "A pair of boots?"

She moved her foot over next to his and smiled. His feet were much larger than hers.

Breda made an impatient gesture. "What do you want, then?"

Maara gazed into the fire as if she were giving it some thought. Then she said, "I could use a cloak."

"A cloak?"

"Yes," she said. "A good thick winter cloak."

Breda hesitated before he said, "I have an extra cloak."

"Let's see it then."

He got up to bring it from the men's house.

"Not that old tattered one," she said. "It's worn so thin I could put my fingers through it."

"I won't trade my new one," he said, and sat back down.

"All right," she said.

Breda watched in silence while she braided a cord from strips of rabbit skin and attached it to the bag. He fidgeted a bit when another man took the bag from her for a moment and admired it. When she had almost finished with it, Breda got up and left the hall. A few minutes later he returned with a heavy winter cloak, made of wool in sunset colors, dark reds and browns with bright streaks of flame all through it.

Breda handed the cloak to Maara. She looked it over carefully, taking more time than she needed to check for worn and raveled places. When she was satisfied, she looked up at him and said, "Are you sure you want to trade this?"

Breda had been shifting impatiently from foot to foot while she examined the cloak.

"I'm sure," he said. "It's springtime now. I can get another before winter comes again."

He held out his hand, and Maara gave him the fox bag.

###

It seemed as if we had been up for hours. We'd had our breakfast. Our pack had been ready since the night before. Now we had nothing to do but wait in Maara's room until Laris told us it was time to go.

Maara sat quietly on her bed, but I was too impatient to sit still. Every few minutes I got up and glanced out into the hallway to see if the others were ready.

Maara watched me with an amused smile.

"They won't leave us behind," she said, when I had gone to the doorway for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"I know." I sat down again.

"Are you afraid?" she asked.

I took the time to give some thought to my answer. I wanted to be sure that what I told her was the truth.

"I don't think so," I said at last. "I just hope I don't do something wrong."

"Do what I tell you to do," she said. "That's all you can do until you have more experience. If mistakes are made, they'll be mine, not yours."

"Are you afraid?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Cattle raiders come to steal, not to fight."

"They fought last year," I said, although I knew she didn't need to be reminded of it.

"We caught them while they were butchering an animal. They wouldn't leave the carcass until we drove them off."

I hoped she would tell me more about what had happened the day she was wounded, but we were interrupted by a commotion in the hallway as Cael and her apprentice, Alpin, barged past our door. They too were to go with Laris.

"It must be time," Maara said. "Help me with my armor."

I was glad to have something to do. I buckled her into her armor and fastened her sword to her belt. Then I took her new cloak down from its peg and began to roll it into a bundle for her to carry over her shoulder with her shield. She stopped me and handed me the dark green one she'd worn all winter.

"This one will do," she said. "Help me put it on."

It wasn't cold enough that she needed it for warmth, so I laid it around her shoulders and pulled one end around her body, under her right arm, and draped it over her left shoulder, with the end hanging loose down her back. When Taia appeared in the doorway and told us it was time to go. I picked up our pack and started to follow her, but Maara put her hand on my shoulder and turned me around. She was holding her new cloak.

"You'll need this," she said, and she draped it around my body as I had draped hers. Then she took my brooch from my belt and fastened the cloak with it.

Maara's cloak was a good one, but it was worn in places, not as thick as Breda's, and not nearly as beautiful. As the soft warmth of the new cloak enveloped me, I said, "You ought to wear the better one."

"Among my people, when a warrior takes an apprentice, it's her

responsibility to provide her with her clothing and her weapons, with everything she needs. For now, this is the best I can do.”

I saw that it was a matter of pride to her.

“I’ve never had a finer cloak,” I told her.

###

I thought we looked quite fierce as we set out from Merin’s house. The warriors’ painted shields hung from their shoulders, and their cloaks billowed in the breeze. I felt a new strength in my body as I strode down the hill after them. Splendid in my new cloak, proud of my warrior, proud of myself, strong in my companions, I felt capable of anything.

There were five warriors in our party, three women and two men. It was the first time I had traveled with a band of warriors, and I looked to Taia to show me what to do. The warriors led the way, with Laris at their head. The apprentices followed a little way behind. There were only three of us—Taia, Alpin, and me. Neither of the men had brought an apprentice. Kenit, the younger man, had been Donal’s apprentice until a few months before, when he received his shield.

Although I had seen the two men in the great hall many times, I had never spoken to either of them. Donal was an enormous man with flaming red hair. His beard was just as red, and freckles covered his face and arms. Kenit was dark, with a mane of curls so thick they seemed to be trying to make up for the fact that he had no beard to speak of. He appeared small standing next to Donal, but he too was a big man, taller than any of the women with us. He was also a handsome man, and more than once I caught Taia watching him out of the corner of her eye.

Cael was a newcomer to the household. Like Donal and Kenit, she was from the house Laris came from. Her apprentice Alpin had come with her. Alpin was a cheerful, talkative girl who delighted in the prospect of any new adventure. She reminded me a bit of myself as I had been the year before, except that she was already an apprentice. She had known her warrior almost all her life. She shared her warrior’s room and probably her bed as well. The only times I’d had a chance to talk with her had been at suppertime at the companions’ table. The rest of the time she clung to her warrior’s side like a limpet to a rock. I liked her cheerful disposition, and I looked forward to making friends with her.

We started north, following the path Maara and I had taken so often that winter. At midday we turned aside onto a faint trail that led higher into the hills to the northeast. Although the trail wasn't steep, it was a steady climb, and I was the only one of the apprentices who wasn't out of breath. I thanked Maara silently for our long walks through the snow.

We were traveling through some of the best grazing land I'd ever seen. Lush grass sprang out of the soil. Stands of trees offered shelter from spring rain and summer heat. Red cattle, shaggy in the remnants of their winter coats, dotted the hillsides, too many to count. I wondered how our little band of warriors would be able to protect them all.

Late that day we arrived at a farmstead, where the people welcomed us with food and a place of honor at their hearth. That night we slept in heaps of soft hay in their byre.

By the next morning neighboring farmers had heard of our arrival and came to greet us. They told us there had been rumors of cattle raids farther to the west, but so far none of the raiding parties had come anywhere near where we were.

Taia explained to me that it would be our task to keep watch. Not far from the farmstead was a hill called Greth's Tor. From its rocky peak we would have a view of the surrounding countryside, and we were to take it in turns to watch for the approach of strangers. Laris would take the first watch. She asked Maara to go with her. Taia and I accompanied them.

It was midafternoon when we started up the hill, and we reached the top with daylight to spare. No trees grew there, but outcroppings of rock gave us shelter from the wind and hid us from view. We made our camp a little below the hilltop, on the southwest side of the hill, where the stone hearth and ground worn smooth showed that many had camped there before us.

We made a small fire and cooked our supper before the sun set. After dark we would have no fire. Even hidden as we were among the crags, firelight, reflected from the rocks or from a cloudy sky, might give us away.

In the fading light of evening, Laris found vantage points for Taia and for me where we could lie unseen and keep watch on the eastern hills. Laris and Maara took up positions a few dozen yards away, where they could watch the rolling hills to the north. While it would soon be too dark to see anyone approaching, the glow of a campfire or the flickering light of a torch would be visible for miles.

It seemed that we watched for a long time, but it may have been only an

hour or two, when Laris called us back to our campsite.

"There's no point in watching any longer," she said. "If there were strangers nearby, we would already have seen their fire."

"If they dared to have a fire," Taia said.

"Would anyone travel at night?" I asked.

"They might," said Laris, "but if they do, we won't be able to see them, so there's no use in wearing ourselves out watching. We'll see them in the morning, if they're there."

Laris and Maara settled themselves by the ashes of our campfire to talk a while, but Taia was exhausted, and I was beginning to yawn. Taia found us a soft patch of grass nearby. We snuggled together, wrapped in our cloaks. I listened to the murmur of my warrior's voice as I drifted off to sleep.

###

I awoke before first light and managed to get up without waking Taia. I went a little distance down the hill to relieve myself. Then I decided to go back up to my vantage point to watch until the others were awake. I thought about the raiders Laris spoke of who might have traveled through the night. If there were any about, perhaps I would be the first to see them.

As I went up the hill, I passed by our campsite. Maara lay near the hearth asleep, wrapped in her cloak, and beside her, under the same cloak, was Laris, her fair hair bright against Maara's back.

I didn't stop. I went up to the hilltop and lay down among the rocks to watch. What I had seen disturbed me, and I had no idea why it should. I had shared the warmth of my cloak with Taia as a matter of course. Why should I mind that Maara had done the same with Laris?

I gazed out over the countryside, but if an army had been marching up the hill below me, I would have missed it, so preoccupied was I with my own thoughts.

At first I tried to convince myself that I had nothing to be upset about. I should be happy that Maara might have found a friend in Laris. That would be a good thing for both of us. Laris's friendship would strengthen us against Vintel, and the Lady would have less to complain of if my warrior had a few strong friends among us. I should be delighted that someone like Laris courted Maara's friendship. Instead, burning in my chest was a growing anger toward her. The more I tried to convince myself I shouldn't

feel it, the more it grew.

At last I gave in to it, and my resentment found words so bitter that I could only speak them to myself in silence. Where was Laris when I stood beside my warrior before the council? Where was Laris when my warrior needed friends in Merin's house? It was I who had brought Maara within the circle, who had persuaded the Lady to make a place for her, and I had risked my own place to do it. If anyone belonged beside her, I did. I had earned that place.

Even as I indulged my angry thoughts, I knew they were unjust. Laris had done nothing wrong. I suspected my anger masked something else—hurt feelings, perhaps, or fear. Maara and I were bound together in a way that I had thought would prevent my losing her, and while I was in no danger of losing her altogether, something was taking her away from me in small ways, a little at a time.

"What's the matter?" Maara said, as she sat down beside me. "Have you and Taia had a falling-out?"

I hadn't heard her approach, and I gave a start when she spoke to me.

"No," I said.

Then I felt the tears trickling down my cheeks. I brushed them away.

Maara said nothing, but I felt her eyes on me, and I heard her unasked question. I was too ashamed to meet her eyes. I watched the silhouette of the hills emerge against the lightening sky.

"I'm all right," I said.

"No," she said. "You would be dead by now."

"What?" I looked up at her in surprise.

"We're in harm's way here. You didn't hear me approach you, and I wasn't trying to be quiet. A warrior seldom survives such a mistake."

I braced myself and waited for her to scold me. Any other warrior would have scolded me, but Maara chose another way to teach me.

"Tamras," she said gently, "these are the things you're here to learn."

Then I wished that she had scolded me. A scolding might have made me angry. Her kindness made me feel like bursting into tears. My lower lip began to tremble.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?"

I shook my head.

"Homesick?"

"No."

"Is it your time to bleed?"

I heard the smile in her voice, and I couldn't help laughing a little at her teasing.

"No," I said. I waved one hand in the air, as if to wave away her concern. "It doesn't matter. It's not important."

"It matters," she said, and her voice was grave again.

Just then the sun began to rise. Its first rays dazzled me. I tried to shield my eyes, but the light was too bright, and I had to turn my face away. Maara slid farther down behind the rock that sheltered us and leaned her back against it. She patted the ground beside her as an invitation for me to sit there.

"You won't be able to see anything until the sun is higher in the sky," she said. "You might as well rest your eyes."

I turned away from the rising sun and sat down beside her.

"What does a warrior need most of all?" she asked me.

I could think of many things a warrior needs. Weapons. The skill to use them and the strength to wield them. But all these things were useless without courage.

"Courage," I said.

"There's something even more important."

What could be more important than courage?

"Most of all," she said, "a warrior needs discipline. Do you know what that is?"

Of course I did, I thought, but when I opened my mouth to tell her, I couldn't put it into words.

"Discipline is simply self-control," she said. "If a warrior can't control her feelings, she can't control her actions, and if she can't control her actions, she may blunder into a serious mistake."

I thought of the mistake I'd made only a few minutes before.

"A warrior's mistake can have dreadful consequences," Maara said. "A warrior's mistake may cost, not only her own life, but the lives of many others."

I had never been more discouraged. I felt that I had undertaken an impossible task and that it might be best if I went home to herd sheep for the rest of my life rather than assume such a terrible responsibility.

"A warrior who has learned self-control can't be manipulated or provoked," Maara went on, "and she can use her feelings to lend power to her actions, instead of allowing them to push her into acting blindly."

“How does a person learn self-control?” I asked.

“By making a habit of it. If a warrior has no self-control when she’s sitting quietly at home, how will she suddenly find it on the battlefield? Every day will give you another chance to learn.”

I began to feel a bit more hopeful. “How long will it take?”

“All your life.” She saw my dismay and smiled at me. “Don’t worry. By the time you become a warrior, you will have learned enough.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I intend to teach you. When I was learning self-control, my teacher was relentless. I intend to be just as relentless with you.”

“Who was your teacher?” I asked her.

“Life,” she said.

###

That morning Laris and Taia watched with us for an hour after sunrise. Early morning and late evening were the most important times to watch. In the morning chill, travelers would want the comfort of a fire, and in the evening they would need the firelight, as well as a hot supper. Fires were easy to see in the half-light of dawn and dusk. So were shadows. The rising and setting sun cast long shadows that could be seen even when the people who cast them were too far away to see.

During the day two people could keep the watch well enough. Laris and Taia went back down to the farmstead, leaving Maara and me behind. Cael and Alpin would come up the hill that evening. They would stay on the next day, and Laris and Taia would come up again to replace Maara and me. In that way, all the women would take it in turns to watch, with each pair of us spending two nights on the hilltop and one at the farmstead.

The men would not stand a watch. They were our strength, and they were to be always ready to confront any strangers who approached Merin’s land.

While we kept watch I had a lot of time to think. I understood why Maara had spoken to me about self-control. She had found me in tears for a reason that seemed foolish to me only a few hours later. Foolish or not, my anger and hurt feelings had caused me to make a dangerous mistake. If I hadn’t been so preoccupied, my attention would have been on the world around me, instead of on myself.

“How can I keep from having feelings?” I asked Maara, as we were

eating our midday meal.

"You can't," she said. "And you shouldn't."

"But if I'm upset, how can I have self-control?"

"You need to learn to use your feelings as they should be used."

I wasn't sure what that meant.

"Your feelings tell you many things about the world," she said, "but people seldom listen to what their feelings tell them. It's much more satisfying to indulge one's feelings than to learn from them."

As I had indulged my anger at Laris that morning, I thought to myself. I had to admit that there had been a certain satisfaction in it. But what could my anger and hurt feelings have taught me about the world?

"You understand the feelings of the body," Maara said. "When you feel cold, you find a way to warm yourself. You know what hunger means and how to satisfy it. When you're ill or in pain, you do what you can to care for yourself."

She looked at me to see if I had understood her. What she'd said seemed so obvious that I thought I might be missing something, but I nodded anyway.

"The feelings of the body tell you about the world that you can see and touch, but it's not so easy to know what the feelings of your heart are telling you, because they're telling you about a world that you can't see."

"The world of spirits is invisible," I said, "and the world of the gods. I don't know of any others."

"There are many worlds we can't see. I want to show you the one you most need to be aware of, because every human heart lives in it. That world is no less real than the world we see, but it's much more difficult to understand. We can make a good start by learning to understand our own hearts, but as difficult as that is, it's not enough. In many ways people are all the same, and in just as many ways, they're all very different."

Maara was silent for several minutes. She was trying to think of a way to teach me something important, and I waited for her to speak again.

"When your body feels pain," she said at last, "you try to find the cause and do something to stop it, because your pain is warning you of a real danger. When your heart feels pain, you need to find the cause of that too, because the danger is no less real, and your pain will grow worse until you understand what caused it. Only then will you know what can be done to stop it."

###

The answer came to me that afternoon. I was thinking about my anger at Laris, an anger I found it hard to justify. While I had no right to be jealous of a friendship that could only do Maara good, there was more to my anger than simple jealousy. It was one thing to seek Maara's friendship. It was quite another to take something that belonged to me. Laris in all innocence had taken the place I wanted for myself, a place I felt I'd earned the right to.

Then I had to ask myself what place it was I meant to claim. It was more than sharing blankets on a cold night or finding comfort in being close to someone in a lonely place. In themselves, those things meant nothing. I had never thought twice about sharing blankets with Sparrow or with Taia or with any of the other companions. It was something I was used to from my childhood, but I felt that Maara was not used to it. The way she held herself made me careful how I touched her. She seldom touched me or gave me any sign that she wanted or even understood the gestures of companionship that were commonplace to me. It could be that the ways of her people were different from ours, or perhaps it was simply her own nature, but I had respected what I thought she wanted and kept my distance. Seeing Laris asleep beside her had surprised me because I thought that she would let no one come that close to her.

What had hurt me was believing that Laris was welcome where I was not. The place I wanted was the place nearest Maara's heart, and if Laris had taken that from me, I would have found it hard to forgive her for it. Instead she had shown me that if she was welcome by Maara's side, I too might be welcome there.

At once my heart felt lighter. I thought of Maara's words. *Your pain will grow worse until you understand what caused it. Only then will you know what can be done to stop it.* And then I knew what to do.

###

Cael and Alpin came up the hill late that afternoon. They brought some cold supper with them, and we all ate together. Neither Cael nor Maara had much to say, but Alpin chattered away about the people she had met that day and the things she'd learned from them about this part of Merin's land.

All of us kept the evening watch together. As I knew she would, Alpin stuck to her warrior like a cocklebur. When it was time for us to sleep, I watched with satisfaction as she carefully laid out their cloaks in the soft grass where Taia and I had made our bed the night before.

I followed her example. I took Maara's cloak from her and laid it on the grass where she had spent the previous night. Then I laid over it the cloak she had given me. I slipped into our makeshift bed and held it open for her. She hesitated only a moment before she lay down beside me.

GIANT'S BONES

The next day it was our turn to stay at the farmstead with Donal and Kenit. The farmers were busy this time of year. Even the children had work to do. I would have helped them, but Maara reminded me that I had another responsibility. We were to be ready to challenge travelers and to warn cattle raiders away. While it sounded exciting, what it meant was that we all spent a great deal of time doing nothing.

The weather had turned quite warm, and the byre was stifling, so we set up a camp outdoors, under a sprawling oak tree in the farmer's yard. Donal and Kenit amused themselves by playing a game that involved tossing sticks onto the ground and finding certain patterns in them that were supposed to mean something. I had seen the game played before, but I'd never learned it.

Maara sat gazing up at Greth's Tor.

"Giant's bones," Donal said to her.

Maara looked at him. "What?"

"Looks like a giant's bones," he said. "There's a knee there." He pointed to a place halfway up the hill, where a knob of bare rock emerged through the thin soil. "A shoulder there." He pointed to a similar place higher up. "Teeth there." He pointed to the craggy hilltop. "My mother used to tell me a story. Let's see if I remember it. I was never much for storytelling."

Donal scratched his head and knit his brow. "A giant got hurt somehow. I forget that part. But he lay down to die and pulled a blanket of sod up over him. My mother pointed to the hill behind our house. Looked a lot like that one. 'And there he died, and there he lies to this very day,' she'd say, 'and those crags are his bones.'" Donal chuckled. "Used to scare me silly when I had to go up that hill looking for a lost sheep. I was always afraid the giant might wake and any minute he'd stand up and sheep and I and all would tumble off his lap."

Donal laughed quietly to himself, a deep rumbling sound that I found comforting.

Maara turned to me. "Do you know that story?"

I shook my head. It sounded like a lot of giant stories I'd heard, but I couldn't remember any of them well enough to tell just at that moment.

“Do you know any others?” she asked. “Any about giants?”

Her eyes were bright with the eagerness of a child. I would have been glad to tell her a story, but the presence of the men made me shy.

“Well,” said Donal, “will you help us pass the time?”

His voice was so gentle and his eyes so kind that my shyness left me.

In ancient days, when only women were warriors, lived three brothers, herdsmen in a country still half wild. In those days, in that half-wild land, giants walked the earth. They were few and, for all their size, not often seen, but on stormy days they could be heard arguing amongst themselves in their deep rumbling tongue.

One day the eldest of the brothers took his sheep out to graze. He had far to go into the wilderness, and there he spied what he took to be a stone house, built lonely far away from the houses of men. When he approached it, he saw that it was no house, but a huge table made of stone. Two great stones set on end thrust up out of the earth, with an immense stone slab across the top of them.

A holly tree grew in the shelter of the stones, and by climbing it the eldest brother was able to reach the tabletop. There he saw a golden platter that held an entire lamb, roasted to a turn, an enormous silver goblet filled with wine, and a stone the size of his foot.

“Well now,” he thought to himself, “there are no sheep but mine here in this wilderness, and no lambs but belong to my sheep, so this lamb must belong to me.”

He sat down on the tabletop beside the golden platter, cut himself a fat slice of meat, and ate his fill.

“Well now,” he thought to himself, “a little bite of what was mine already hardly makes up for the theft of a lamb, so perhaps I should play with this thief a game of turnabout.”

And the eldest brother tucked the golden platter under his arm, climbed back down the holly tree, and went off home with his sheep.

His brothers admired the golden platter, and when they heard there was still a silver goblet on the stone table, they thought it would be a fine thing to have that too.

The eldest brother had begun to have unquiet thoughts about his theft of the golden platter, so he said to his brothers, “Since I brought

the platter back, it seems only fair that someone else should bring the goblet."

The middle brother claimed his right to be the next to seek adventure, and in the morning he took his sheep out to graze in the wilderness. He found the stone table without difficulty, but when he drew near to it, he saw that the holly tree had been torn out of the ground, roots and all, and lay some distance away.

The middle brother was both strong and clever. He dragged the holly tree back to the stone table, leaned it up against one of the upright stones, and clambered up it to the tabletop. There he found the silver goblet filled with wine and a stone the size of his foot. He drank as much of the wine as he could hold and reluctantly spilled the rest onto the ground. Then he took the silver goblet, climbed back down the holly tree, and went off home with his sheep.

The two brothers hid their treasures away, for they had little use for them in the simple life they led. From time to time they would take them out to admire them and congratulate themselves on their adventures. Then they would put their treasures carefully away again.

Now the two older brothers believed their youngest brother to be a little simple, and one evening they decided they would have some fun at his expense. They took out their treasures, the golden platter and the silver goblet, and cleaned and polished them until they shone brighter than the sun and moon together.

"What a shame," the eldest brother said, "that our youngest brother should not have had an adventure and gained a treasure for himself."

"What a pity," the middle brother said, "that our youngest brother should be such a poor man, while both his brothers are men of wealth."

They went on in this way until the youngest brother felt a little sorry for himself. He decided that he would go and find the stone table, to see if there might be a treasure there for him.

The next day the youngest brother took his sheep out to graze in the wilderness. He found the stone table without any trouble, but the holly tree that his brothers had told him of had been broken in two as a man breaks a kindling stick over his knee. One part lay a great distance to the east, and the other lay a great distance to the west. Even

if he could have dragged both pieces back to the stone table, neither piece was long enough to reach the tabletop.

The youngest brother despaired of ever being able to discover if there might be another treasure on the stone table. Then the earth beneath his feet began to tremble, and he saw, striding toward him, a giant whose head seemed to touch the clouds and whose shadow blocked out the sun. The giant appeared to move quite slowly, but the length of his stride more than made up for the slowness of his gait. The young man stood where he was, as if his feet had grown roots that held him there, and in as little time as it takes to tell, the giant stood before him.

The youngest brother had heard of giants, of course, but he had never hoped to see one, yet here one was, and he rejoiced in his good luck.

"Hail, giant," he called out to the giant, who towered above him. "Will you lift me onto this stone table, so that I may see if my brothers have left a treasure behind for me?"

The giant bent down and picked the young man up, as a father picks up his child, and set him upon the tabletop. The youngest brother looked around him and saw with disappointment that the only object on the table was a stone the size of his foot.

"Young man," the giant said to him in a voice so deep that the youngest brother felt his heart tremble in his chest. "If your brothers have taken a golden platter and a silver goblet from this table, they are thieves, for those things belong to me."

The young man's heart fell.

"I must indeed be as simple as my brothers think me," he said to himself, when he understood his plight. Still, he was determined to do what he could to save his life.

"Friend giant," he said, "my brothers and I never meant to do you harm. I will bring what is yours back here tomorrow, if you will let me go."

Now giants aren't as stupid as people believe them to be, although they may appear to be a little slow, and this giant knew that once the young man was safely home, he would have no reason to return with the golden platter and the silver goblet.

"I will let you go," he said, "but you must swear you will return

with what belongs to me, and when you do, I will reward you with a gift that is worth much more than gold or silver."

"I swear I will return with your treasures in the morning," said the youngest brother, greatly relieved that the giant wasn't going to kill him. He leaped down from the stone table and ran all the way home, leaving his sheep to follow as best they could and growing more excited by the minute at the prospect of receiving a gift more valuable than gold or silver.

The young man told his brothers of his meeting with the giant and of the giant's promise, but his brothers only laughed at him.

"Such a silly boy," said the eldest brother.

"Such a foolish boy," said the middle brother.

"To think that we would be taken in by such an obvious trick."

"To think that we would give him our treasures so that he could keep them for himself and bring us back who knows what worthless thing."

"To think we would believe that he had met a giant."

"A giant would have eaten him on the spot."

And the two elder brothers went on in this way until the youngest brother gave up trying to argue with them and went to bed.

But the young man couldn't sleep, because he had sworn to return what his brothers had stolen and he meant to keep his word. He waited until he was certain his brothers were asleep. Then he took the golden platter and the silver goblet from their hiding place and went by the moon's light out into the wilderness.

By night the wilderness was quite a different place. The wind rattled the bare branches of stunted, twisted trees. Unseen things made strange noises in the dark. Misty wraiths swirled around him and twined their tendril fingers in his hair. The young man was trembling with fear by the time he reached the giant's table. He crept beneath it to wait for morning, and there at last he fell asleep.

When the young man awoke, it was daylight. The golden platter and the silver goblet were gone. Beside him lay a stone the size of his foot, the very stone that he had seen on the giant's table.

"I must indeed be as simple as my brothers think me," the young man said to himself, and he feared their anger when they discovered their treasures gone and that he had brought home to them only this

worthless stone.

For a long time his brothers were angry with him. They called him a thief and other unkind things, until his tears convinced them that he had not taken their treasures for himself. For a longer time they called him foolish for allowing a stupid giant to deceive him, and for yet a longer time they teased him about the stone he kept on a shelf beside his bed. But the time came at last when they forgot they had once been rich men, and they were content to live the simple life they had always led.

One night, long after his foolishness had been forgotten, the youngest brother felt drawn to the giant's stone. It was an ordinary stone, blue-grey in color, worn very smooth. When he picked it up, it felt warm in his hands, as if it were a living thing. On a whim he placed it under his pillow.

That night the young man dreamed. His dream took him to a crossroads, and there, beside a stone seat where weary travelers could stop and rest, he found a purse filled with gold coins. When he woke the next morning, the dream seemed so real to him that he went to the crossroads to see what he might find there.

Beside the stone seat he found the purse of gold coins, just as it had happened in his dream. He took the purse to his eldest brother and said, "Now I can make amends to you for losing your golden platter."

His brother thanked him and forgave him and went by way of the crossroads to live in a town, where he soon became a wealthy merchant.

Not many days later the giant's stone called him again, and the young man placed it under his pillow. Again he dreamed. His dream took him to an abandoned house that lay in ruins, and there, among the tumbled stones, he found a purse filled with silver coins. The next morning he went to that ruined house and found the purse where he had found it in his dream.

He took it to his brother and said, "Now I can make amends to you for losing your silver goblet."

His brother thanked him and forgave him. He rebuilt the ruined house into a very grand house indeed and went to live there.

At first the young man found life more peaceful without his brothers,

but as time went by he was troubled more and more by loneliness. One night he picked up the giant's stone. It grew warm in his hands, and he placed it under his pillow.

That night he dreamed. His dream took him to the marketplace, where he saw a beautiful young girl. From the moment he first saw her in his dream, the young man loved her. The next morning, when he went to the marketplace, he found her there. For half a year he courted her, and in the spring he married her. On their wedding night, the young man placed the dreamstone beneath their pillow, and both he and his young wife dreamed of children and grandchildren, blooming gardens, thriving flocks, and every good thing that fills the heart with joy.

After I finished, I thought it might not have been the best story to tell to a band of warriors. Donal looked quite wistful, as if he had been lost in a dream of a life he had left far behind him and could never hope to live again. Kenit was still too young to want the life the young man had dreamed for himself, but he might have been thinking of the home he left, as I was thinking of my own home, our gardens and our flocks, and the love I'd known there. I wondered why I had been so impatient to leave that life behind.

Only Maara was smiling. She gazed up at the giant's bones on Greth's Tor and said, "I like stories about giants."

A GAME WITH RULES

At midnight Maara woke me. For a moment I didn't remember where I was. I looked up and saw the branches of the oak tree against the starry sky. I heard Cael's voice, then Donal's deeper one. My warrior was already buckling on her armor. I got up and tried to help her, but my fingers were clumsy.

"I can do it," she told me. "Get our pack ready."

"What happened?"

"Hurry," she said.

In a few minutes all of us were ready—Donal and Kenit, Cael and Alpin, Maara and me. There was no moon that night. We made do with starlight as we stumbled through the pastures to the foot of Greth's Tor, where Laris and Taia waited for us.

"Two fires," I heard someone say.

We walked all night, traveling north, finding our direction by the bear stars. When light began to show in the eastern sky, Laris led us into the shelter of a stand of trees that lay between two hills.

"If we're lucky, they'll come through here," she said. "It's an easy trail, and they may be trying to stay out of sight of the Tor."

Laris took Cael aside, and they had a brief whispered conversation. Then Cael and Alpin started up the hill behind us.

"Where are they going?" I asked Maara.

"They're going to find a vantage point. The people who were so careless with their fires last night may make the same mistake again this morning."

We waited under the trees for a long time before Cael and Alpin returned. They had seen nothing. Laris was undecided about what to do. She called the warriors together to talk things over. The general feeling was that if we kept going north, we might miss the travelers, who could have taken another way and gone past us, or we might run into them unexpectedly and risk a confrontation before we knew their strength.

Then we heard in the distance the groaning of cart wheels and the heavy tread of oxen's feet. At once Laris had us spread out on both sides of the cattle trail that wound through the dale. We found hiding places where we could and waited.

Whoever was approaching wasn't trying to be quiet. I heard a man's voice coax his beasts over a rough place. A few minutes later he spoke again, and another man answered him.

They soon came into view — two oxen pulling a two-wheeled cart with a woman and three men walking beside it. The cart didn't appear to be heavily laden, but where the trail ran uphill, the oxen strained against their yoke. One of the men carried a pole for driving them. None carried weapons.

Laris stepped out from her hiding place and blocked the trail, and Donal too showed himself. The rest of us stayed hidden.

Laris approached the man driving the oxen, and they talked for a few minutes. Maara and I were too far away to hear what was said.

The man lifted the covering of oxhide to show Laris the contents of the cart. Once she had inspected everything, she motioned to the rest of us to show ourselves.

The strangers were traders, bringing tin and copper ingots and some finished goods, farming implements and an assortment of bowls and cooking pots. They had been traveling with another group of traders who had left them that morning to travel farther west. It was their fires we had seen. I was both relieved and disappointed.

We traveled south with the traders, even though their oxen moved so slowly, because they brought news and gossip with them. Maara seemed to want to keep her distance from them, so she and I walked on ahead.

"What would we have done if they had been cattle raiders?" I asked Maara.

"That would depend on how many there were. If we could have done so safely, we would have confronted them and made them turn back."

"That's all?"

"What else should we do?"

"What would prevent them from coming back another day?"

"They might try again somewhere else. If we caught them a second time, we would know they hadn't taken our warning seriously, and we would have to make them pay for their arrogance with blood."

"Would we kill them?"

"We would have to fight them. Blood might be spilled, and someone might die, but it would be better if no one did."

I knew what she meant. Once begun, a blood feud was difficult to stop. Still I didn't understand how we could protect our cattle if we didn't fight.

"It's like a game," she said. "We know they're coming, and they know we're waiting for them. The game will prove who is stronger and more clever. They may succeed in taking a few cattle home with them, but they don't want to fight with us. No one wants to die for a few cattle."

"What would happen if they did outnumber us?" I asked her.

"That's what Laris was concerned about. She wouldn't put us in harm's way until she knew how many they were. If we had been outnumbered, we would never have shown ourselves. Laris would have taken us back to the farmstead as fast as we could go and called for help."

"Help? Who would help us?"

"The farmers," she said. "At least until we could send for more of our warriors. But it's not likely a raiding party would outnumber us by more than a few."

"Why not?"

"Because then it wouldn't be a raiding party. It would be war party, a real threat, and we would have to do more than just warn them away."

Like the games I had played in childhood, cattle raiding seemed to be a game with rules that everybody understood. But if cattle weren't worth dying for, why had Maara almost died defending them?

"Why did you have to fight last year?" I asked her.

Maara glanced back over her shoulder to see if anyone was close enough to overhear. Then she said, "Vintel made a mistake."

"What did she do?"

"She didn't show herself and challenge them. She didn't give them time to take what they needed and get away. She was angry because they had killed one of our animals. She drew her sword and ran at them, and we had no choice but to follow her."

"Were you outnumbered?"

"No," she said. "We were evenly matched, and we took them by surprise. If we hadn't, if we had given them time to prepare to meet us, they might have done us a lot more harm."

I saw in my mind's eye the image of Maara lying on a bloody litter.

"They did quite enough harm as it was," I said.

We walked on in silence for a while. I had forgotten about cattle raiders. I was thinking about Vintel.

"Why does everyone admire Vintel's leadership?" I asked.

"One mistake doesn't make her a bad leader."

"What she did was foolish."

"Most people would consider what she did courageous."

"Do you?"

Maara shook her head. "What Vintel showed that day wasn't courage. Vintel loves a fight. The butchered calf gave her an excuse."

"She risked the lives of her warriors because she loves a fight?"

"There's a place for leaders like Vintel," Maara said. "In time of war, she would go joyfully into battle, carrying the hearts of her warriors with her."

"This isn't a time of war."

"No," she said. "It isn't."

###

It would be our turn to watch that night, and Laris wanted to accompany the traders a little farther on their journey, so Maara and I went alone up Greth's Tor. Before we were halfway to the top, I was stumbling from exhaustion.

When we reached the campsite, Maara told me to lie down. I was so tired I didn't protest. I was determined to rest for only a little while, but I fell into a deep sleep and must have slept for several hours. It was late afternoon when Maara woke me. Laris and Taia were coming up the hill.

After we kept the evening watch, all four of us sat around the fireless hearth while Laris told us what she had learned from the traders. The northern tribes had had a poor harvest the year before, and the winter had been hard for them. Those who were starving stole from those who had little more than they did. It was a fortunate thing for us, because as long as they were fighting among themselves, they were leaving us alone.

"That explains why we have yet to see a raiding party this year," Laris said.

"Let's hope this year they have a better harvest," said Maara. "When all of them are starving, their shared misery will bind them together. That's when they'll come to trouble us."

"They say you lived once among the northern tribes."

Laris's tone was casual, but she and Taia and I all seemed to hold our breath, waiting for my warrior's answer.

"No," said Maara.

"But you know their language and their ways," Laris persisted.

"I know enough of their language to exchange a few words with them. That's all."

"Then how do you know so much about what they're likely to do?"

Maara studied Laris's face. A cautious look came into her eyes, as if she were standing on the threshold of a trust that could not be taken back.

"My people were more like your people than the people you call northernners," she said at last. "We were never allied with any of the northern tribes, but we traded with them sometimes, and sometimes we preyed upon them. We knew a little of their language because we traded with them, and we knew something of their ways because they were our enemies."

"You traded with your enemies?"

"We traded with whoever had what we wanted," Maara said. "If we couldn't trade, we fought them for it."

I would have liked to ask her what kinds of things her people needed to trade for. My family traded wool for grain, but that was an exchange of gifts between friends. Every year we sent wagons filled with bales of wool to Merin's house, and when they returned, they brought us a share of the harvest. I thought better of questioning Maara just then. I decided I would rather talk to her in private about it.

"Where do your people live?" Laris asked her.

Maara shook her head. "They're not my people anymore."

###

I was glad I had slept that afternoon. If I hadn't, I would have toppled over where I sat and missed the entire conversation. I would also have missed the look Laris gave me when Taia stumbled off to bed. Laris expected me to follow Taia, and when I didn't, her impatient frown told me that she was waiting for me to leave her alone with Maara. It didn't come as a complete surprise when the thought occurred to me that Laris might be looking for more than someone to share blankets with. That made me all the more determined to take my place at Maara's side, at least until she herself told me to do differently.

I was in fact not at all sleepy. I watched Laris stifle her yawns while she waited for me to go to bed. Maara didn't seem tired, although she had been up since the middle of the previous night.

Finally I said to her, "You need to sleep." She looked at me and nodded, and I took her cloak and mine and made a bed for us, as I had when we were on the Tor with Cael and Alpin.

Laris understood what I had done. When our bed was ready, I touched Maara's shoulder and offered her my hand to help her up. Laris caught my eye. My grandmother used to say that someone had looked daggers at her, and that phrase came back to me when I met Laris's eyes. I knew better than to look away from a look like that. I held her gaze, not as a challenge, but to show her that I knew what she wanted and that I intended, if I could, to prevent her having it.

That night, as I lay beside my warrior, I wondered what it was about Laris that bothered me. Maara had the right to lie with anyone she chose, and if she wished to lie with Laris, no one had the right to interfere. Still the thought kept coming back to me that Laris didn't love Maara. She may have been fascinated by her, but what fascinated her was the people Maara came from, not Maara herself.

Sparrow would have laughed at me. I could almost hear her teasing voice asking me what there was to be upset about. The only answer I could think of was that Maara deserved better. She deserved to be loved for herself.

###

We spent a month at Greth's Tor. The cattle raiders never came. We encountered no one but a few traders with their caravans.

Because we could see anyone approaching us from quite a distance, raids against our cattle there seldom succeeded, but it was unusual that no one made the attempt.

Other places along our borders were more hilly or more wooded. It was easier for raiders to approach unseen there, and our warriors had to be always on the move along the frontier. Word came to us that raiding parties had made off with a few cattle in some of those places. I wished we had gone there instead. We would at least have had a little more to do, and the prospect of encountering a raiding party was still unreal enough to me to be exciting.

I think Alpin felt as I did, but Taia had been to Greth's Tor the year before and was content to have been sent there a second time. She seemed not to relish the idea of challenging cattle raiders or wandering the countryside.

On our last morning on the Tor, we made a show of keeping watch, but I think we all passed the time just enjoying the beauty of the place.

During our stay there, the weather had often been unsettled. Sometimes we'd had to sit huddled under our cloaks through spring showers, and when it wasn't rainy, the nights could be quite cold. The last few days, though, had been warm and fine.

Maara came to sit beside me.

"Your first adventure has been uneventful," she said

I nodded.

"Are you disappointed?"

I was, a little. I nodded again, but I said, "I know I should be glad."

"Most of the days of a warrior's life are uneventful," she said, "but the others more than make up for it."

Even as I leaned back against the sun-warmed rock, I felt a chill go down my spine.

"How do we know the raiders won't come as soon as we've gone home?" I asked her.

"They have other work to do now. They're farmers too."

Maara ran her hand over the rock that sheltered us. A piece the size of a bird's egg broke off in her hand. She admired it for a moment. Then she handed it to me and smiled.

"Giant's bones," she said.

SPRING FESTIVAL

We returned to find new faces in Merin's house. Many warriors had joined the household while I was away at Greth's Tor, and some brought their apprentices, who, along with the girls to be fostered with us, now filled the companions' loft to overflowing. I was about to take my bedding back to my warrior's room when Sparrow came looking for me. Together we went outdoors, outside the earthworks, and found a shady place to sit in the cool grass.

"Why are there so many people here?" I asked her.

"Don't worry," she said. "We'll be back to normal by midsummer's day."

"There's no room in the companions' loft. Where am I supposed to sleep until then?"

"Some of us come out here at night and sleep under the stars. Why don't you join us?"

"All right," I said. "I will."

The year before, I had spent the springtime with my warrior. Even after she recovered from her injuries, we kept mostly to ourselves. I still had much to learn about life in Merin's house.

"What happens on midsummer's day?" I asked Sparrow.

"Many of the warriors will have fulfilled their time of service here. On midsummer's day, they will leave for home. If Eramet had lived, we would be returning to Arnet's house on midsummer's day next year."

There was nothing in Sparrow's voice to tell me how much she still missed Eramet, but I saw the darkness come into her eyes.

"You won't ever have to go back to Arnet's house, will you?"

She shook her head. "I'll be here for as long as the Lady can find a use for me. Once I become a warrior, I suppose I could go wherever I like, but this is as good a place as any." She lay back in the grass and gazed up at me.

"Did you catch any cattle raiders?"

"No."

"Too bad." She reached out and took my hand. "I missed you."

I blushed and said, "I missed you too." And I realized it was true.

###

We now had leisure to enjoy the springtime. The fine weather and the freedom to be out of doors after winter's long confinement made everyone a bit giddy, especially those of us who were still young. We would often steal an hour for ourselves, to go picking wildflowers or to lie in the soft grass, feeling the sun on our faces, breathing the spring-scented air. On warm moonlit nights we slipped away from the household and ran down the hill to bathe in the river. What we did was not forbidden, but we were secretive about it anyway, because it was more fun to pretend that we'd outfoxed our elders.

Some of our elders, though, seemed as giddy with spring as we were. One afternoon I saw Fet and Fodla sitting together in the sun outside the earthworks. While Fodla watched with rapt attention, Fet wove a wreath of yellow daisies. When it was done, she presented it to Fodla, who wore it for the rest of the day with as much dignity as if it were a crown.

Everyone in Merin's house was happy and at ease. We had survived the winter. The seed was in the ground and growing. No one threatened us or what belonged to us, a few lost cattle notwithstanding. As much as I loved the colors of autumn and the stark beauty of wintertime, the warm air, the scent of flowers and new grass, and the smiles on the faces around me were irresistible. How was it possible to be unhappy even for a moment at such a time?

And yet no matter how beautiful the day, perfect happiness eluded me. For no reason I understood, the loneliness that had haunted me when I first came to Merin's house returned when I least expected it, and one thing about springtime made it worse. On midsummer's day, many of the young women the Lady had fostered would return to their homes, taking the young men they'd chosen with them. It was futile trying to keep lovers apart in springtime. I couldn't go anywhere without finding some young couple sitting with their heads together or lying on the hillside in each other's arms.

It made my heart ache sometimes to see them. I didn't begrudge them their happiness, but I couldn't help wondering how long I would have to wait before that kind of happiness came to me.

One thing more than any other was forbidden to apprentices. No young woman who aspired to become a warrior was permitted to lie with a man, not even during the spring festival. A few had dared, and the year before,

one of them conceived a child. She was sent home, because the obligation of motherhood takes precedence over all others, but I was sad for her. She was the first daughter of her house. She went home without her shield, and not long afterwards her younger sister came to take her place.

I had years to go before I would become a warrior. I could give no thought to love until I had won my shield.

###

The first day of the spring festival was the warmest day we'd had so far. For two whole days together, the young people of the household, the companions and apprentices, would be free to do as we pleased, while our warriors would have to look after themselves. It was the time of the Maiden, and we were the maidens in Merin's house.

Taia and I were both up early. Together we went to the kitchen to see what good things there would be to eat that day. Whole lambs had been dressed and spitted for roasting. Great piles of fresh spring greens, washed and trimmed, lay ready to garnish the meat. For breakfast, there were baskets of eggs, cooked in their shells, and crusty round loaves.

Freshly dug wild roots lay soaking in a bowl of water. I recognized a few that my mother used to make a spring tonic, and I begged a few pieces to make some for Taia and me. While it was brewing, I thought of Gnith, and I brewed another bowl for her.

Gnith lay on her pallet. Her eyes were closed. She appeared to be asleep, but I felt her spirit, alive and bright and waiting.

"Are you sleeping, Mother?" I asked her.

At once her eyes flew open. "Who are you?"

I set the bowl of tea down beside her. "This will do you good."

"Tamras."

"Yes."

I helped her to sit up and held the bowl for her as she drank. Taia sat down on a stool nearby to drink her tea. She regarded Gnith with curiosity.

"Are you well, Mother?" I asked.

Gnith nodded. "Yes, indeed. Very well. Never better."

Taia leaned toward me and whispered, "I thought she was—you know." She tapped the side of her head with one finger.

"Hush," I said.

Gnith ignored Taia and took another sip of tea.

"This is good," she said.

A trickle of tea ran down her chin. I wiped it away.

"May I ask a blessing, Mother?" I said.

"A blessing? What kind of blessing?"

It was a long tradition in my family, and in every other family I knew, for children to ask a blessing of the oldest woman in their household on festival days.

"A blessing for the day," I replied. "For the spring festival."

A twinkle came into Gnith's eye. She took my hand.

"I see," she said. "A maiden comes to an old woman in springtime to ask a blessing. There can be only one thing she wants."

"What's that?"

"Love."

I heard Taia give a little snort. I blushed. "Not this time, Mother."

"Why not?"

"I have so many other things to accomplish before I think about that."

"Nonsense."

Gnith's fingers tightened around mine, and she gave my hand a little shake, as one does to get a child's attention. She looked around to see if anyone was nearby. She didn't seem to notice Taia.

"Listen," she said. "I'm going to tell you a secret." She crooked her finger at me, and when I leaned toward her, she whispered, "Every thing in the world can wait but one. Only love can't wait."

It would have to wait for me, I thought to myself. Out loud I said, "First I have to win my shield."

"Oh, you will, you will," she said. "No doubt about that. No doubt at all."

I found her words reassuring. Sometimes I still doubted I would ever have the strength and skill to be worthy of my shield.

Gnith took my chin in her hand and peered into my eyes. Her eyes were great dark pools that drew me until I felt something within me let go.

"You can't leave your heart behind," she said. "Don't ever try."

I couldn't speak. Her eyes had captured me, and I could only wait and listen.

"A blessing you already have within you. You need none from me. You have a gift, and you must use it."

She let go of me and looked away.
“What gift?” I asked her.
Gnith took another sip of tea. “Who’s that?”
She pointed a gnarled finger at Taia.
“Her name is Taia,” I said.
I didn’t know Taia’s lineage, but Gnith evidently did.
“You bear your grandmother’s name,” she said.
Taia nodded. “Yes. It’s an old name.”
“Older than me?”
“Yes, Mother,” Taia said. “Even older than you.”
“Nothing is older than me,” said Gnith.

###

After breakfast I left the house with Taia and Sparrow and several of the other apprentices. Many people from the household and the nearby farms had gathered in a meadow by the river. As we approached them, music drifted toward us in the still air. The shrill voices of pipes and flutes reached us first, followed by the voices of women and men, singing a song I had known from childhood.

I hadn’t much of a singing voice, but I could carry a tune, and I had always loved to join my voice to the voices of others. I sat down among the singers and blended my voice with theirs. Together we sang the old songs, which every springtime felt as new as the tender shoots of grass and the innocent spring light.

Sparrow sat down nearby to listen, while Taia and the others went on down to the river. As the day grew warmer, many shed their clothing to swim in the cold water and lie afterwards on the riverbank to warm themselves again. At last the heat became too much for us, and Sparrow and I wandered down to the riverbank to dangle our feet in the water. A cool breeze caressed my face. Tiny fish nibbled at my toes.

“You look happy,” Sparrow said.
At that moment I was content.
“I am,” I said. “Are you?”
Sparrow shrugged. “Happy enough.”
She didn’t sound all that happy to me.
“Eramet would want you to be happy.”

She sighed. "I thought I'd be over it by now."

Asking Gnith's blessing that morning had put me in mind of all the times I had crept into my grandmother's bed early in the morning on festival days and begged a blessing from her. She had been dead for many years, but I still grieved for her.

"You don't stop loving someone just because she died," I said.

Sparrow leaned over the water and gazed down into it. Her reflection made her look like someone in a dream.

"The worst thing of all is knowing I'll never see her again," she said. "Sometimes I think I'll turn around and there she'll be, laughing at me for missing her so much."

I took Sparrow's hand and squeezed it. I hesitated to speak my thoughts, but at last I leaned close to her and said, "I know it hurts, but I envy you. At least you've loved someone."

"Haven't you?"

"Not in the way that you loved Eramet."

"Well," she said, "someday you will."

I wasn't at all sure of that just then. I had begun to feel a little melancholy.

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe someday."

"You needn't be in such a hurry. Love is a sword with two edges."

Yes, I thought to myself, and the want of it also has an edge.

"And in the meantime, you have me," said Sparrow.

She gave me a lopsided grin and pushed me into the river.

###

By midafternoon I was worn out. We had swum in the river and played chasing games and hiding games. Then we'd gone with some of the country girls to gather yarrow. I wanted it for making medicines, but they would put it under their pillows, to give them lovers' dreams. We sat with them afterwards by the river, weaving wreaths for the maidens' dance, gossiping and telling the bawdy jokes and stories people tell at that time of year.

When it was time for the feasting to begin, we trudged back up the hill to Merin's house. Trestle tables had been set up outdoors, on the meeting ground outside the earthworks where we had celebrated the harvest festival. Warriors and country people, women and men, the very young and the very

old, picnicked side by side.

Like everyone else, I ate too much and drank too much ale. Sparrow caught me nodding over the remains of my dinner.

"You'd better take a nap or you'll miss all the fun," she said.

Since the companions' loft had become so crowded with new girls, Sparrow and a few of the other apprentices had set up a bower outside the earthworks. Several of us slept there, and it also gave us a pleasant place to go during the day when we tired of the crowded household and the stifling air indoors. It was just a bit of wickerwork on a flimsy frame, but it gave us some shade and some privacy. Sparrow and I took refuge there. Several other girls were there already, sleeping away the heat of the afternoon.

###

Sparrow woke me. "Let's go," she said. "They've started."

For a moment I didn't know what time of day it was. I seldom slept during the day, and I thought it must be morning, but I was fully dressed and I couldn't remember having gone to bed. The light was wrong, too, for morning. I felt confused and frightened, until I remembered.

Sparrow held out her hand to me and pulled me to my feet. The sun had set, and the golden haze of twilight settled over the hillside. The evening breeze drifted cool against my skin.

I heard music coming from the meeting ground. When we arrived there, people were already dancing. The lively music of pipe and harp lifted their feet, and underneath it all the beating hearts of drums, strong and steady, were more felt than heard.

We watched as people of all ages danced a circle dance. Hand in hand, the dancers flew over the ground. Some wore brightly colored ribbons, pinned to their clothing or tied around their wrists and ankles, that fluttered as they moved. Suddenly a girl wearing a garland of hawthorn flowers broke into the circle, and the circle became a line of dancers as she led them into the crowd of people watching. The line broke apart into several shorter lines. As they wound in and out among the people, they picked up more dancers along the way. When the lines of dancers passed each other, they joined together again, and the circle almost reformed, but at the last moment it spiraled in upon itself. People were moving in all directions and watching them made me dizzy. When the spiral had drawn itself into a

knot so tight that the dancers could hardly move, the garlanded girl burst out of it, drawing the line out behind her. The dancers repeated the spiral pattern over and over again. Then they unraveled the knot one last time, and the dance ended.

The dancers collapsed breathless on the ground. A new group of dancers stood up to take their turn. Girls in groups of six or eight formed themselves into circles. Each girl carried a long ribbon, and as they danced, they wound their ribbons in and out, weaving them together like threads on a loom. It was a beautiful dance, full of color and intricate pattern, with a meaning that even the youngest among us understood. For the first time that day, I missed my warrior. I wished she was beside me, asking me questions about the dance and what it meant. These girls were weaving the web of life. I doubted that Maara had ever seen anything like it.

When the maidens finished, it was time for the young men to dance. Their dance was different from the others. Now we heard, loud and strong, the voices of the drums, as each man danced alone, leaping high into the air and turning somersaults and handsprings—anything to catch the attention of the girl he had his eye on. Their bodies were beautiful with strength and grace.

I was surprised to see Kenit among them. I pointed him out to Sparrow.

“Why is Kenit dancing?” I asked her.

“Why not?”

“He’s a warrior. Is he looking for a country girl?”

“It would seem that he is.”

Then I saw what Sparrow had already seen. A lovely girl with pale skin and long, dark hair stood at the edge of the crowd. Her eyes were on Kenit, and it was plain to see that he danced only for her. Other young men tried to capture her attention, but when they came between her and Kenit, she stepped aside, so that she could keep him in sight. He danced closer and closer to her, until, when the dance ended, he stood before her. She reached out her hand to him. He took it, and they walked away together.

It was growing dark. Someone lit the fire at the center of the dancing ground, and another circle dance began.

The young people had begun to pair off. Couples lay together around the ragged edge of firelight. They appeared to be watching the dancing, but I saw the shy caresses, the fingers entwined together, a stolen kiss. Women

my mother's age lay in their husbands' arms as though they were newly wed. Sparrow slipped her arm around me.

"Dance with me," she said, and before I could protest, she took me by the hand and led me to join the circle of dancers.

It was a dance I didn't know, but the steps were simple, and soon I was dancing as if I'd known them all my life.

My body enjoyed moving with the dancers. I felt as I had when I first set out with Laris and her band of warriors, a part of something greater than myself. But this was different. This was the dance. I didn't need to think about what my feet were doing. They moved of themselves, as I moved with the others, dancing the pattern of our life together.

I saw faces I knew well and faces I knew not at all, caught in a flare of firelight, now here, now gone. Sometimes I thought I saw a face from home, but when I looked more closely, a stranger's face smiled back at me. Still, in the midst of strangers I was at home, and these strangers were my family.

Someone built up the fire. It lit the earthworks and the palisades of Merin's house, until they stood out, bright against the night sky. I had never seen them look more formidable. I thought about the people, long dead before I was born or thought of, who had made this stronghold for themselves and for their children and for me.

A generation past, this ground had been a battlefield. My mother's sisters fell here. Their blood lay in the ground beneath my dancing feet, and perhaps someday my blood too would claim this land again for the children who would be conceived this night. Though I was still so young, I felt the presence of the coming generation, waiting to be born into the world that we would make for them.

The music stopped. Sparrow stood before me, breathless, and took both my hands in hers.

"Where are you?" she said.

I shook my head, to bring myself back into the present moment, into this wonderful spring night.

Sparrow led me out of the circle of firelight.

"You look as if you've seen the fairies dance," she said. "Or have you been dancing with them?"

"No," I said, but I still felt the souls of the unborn all around me. They lingered in the air, as close as a whisper, waiting to ask me whether I would be the door through which they might enter into life.

I understood then a little of what the young girls were feeling as they lay in their lovers' arms. More than desire, the deep longing for life that beat like a heart in the ground beneath our feet opened them to their young men and to the souls of the children who would be born to them.

"Come," said Sparrow.

Hand in hand we walked out into the darkness.

We wandered down the hill. The moon was low in the sky behind us, and the stars gave so little light that it felt as if we were descending into the earth. We must have passed couples lying together on the hillside. I never saw them. They were wrapped in darkness as in a shroud, and what they did was not for us to see.

When we reached the river, we saw a few couples sitting shoulder to shoulder at the river's edge. We found a place a short distance away from them, where the drooping branches of a willow tree hid us from view.

"You're very quiet," Sparrow said, as we stood there together, gazing at the moving water.

We hadn't exchanged a word since we left the dance. I may not have had the power of speech. I had stepped out of my own time and place, and the night wrapped itself around me like a stranger's cloak.

Sparrow put her hand on my back, between my shoulder blades. Her touch was comforting and real. It brought me back a little. She slipped her arm around my shoulders. The warmth of her body drew me close.

I closed my eyes, and in this deeper darkness, another world revealed itself. It was the world Maara had tried to show me. Of all the worlds we can't see, she said, this one was the most important, because every human heart lives in it. I saw in my mind's eye the image of a spider's web, whose threads bound every heart to every other, into a web of hearts. Woven into it, along with the hearts of the living and the dead, were the hearts of the unborn. Someday they would stand where I was standing now. They would breathe the air of another fragrant springtime, would wrap themselves in darkness, would join together to strike the spark of yet another life.

Death comes to us in the first moment of desire. I wanted to protest, to speak into the darkness, to say I would refuse to yield, to tell the world that I would not give up my place, until I remembered that I was standing in the place of someone who had already died, of someone who had yielded her place to me.

Sparrow took me into her arms and kissed my brow. I embraced her. We

stood there for a long time, until both the dead and the unborn had fled our measured breath and beating hearts. That night we were real, and they were not. We were alive.

Sparrow let go of me. Where her touch had been, the night air chilled me. She took my hand and led me away from the river's edge, to a little knoll where the air was warmer. We sat down in the long grass.

Sparrow leaned toward me. I thought she was going to kiss me, but she only touched me with her eyes. Instead of the ironic half-smile I knew so well, it was a sweet smile she gave me that night. Her eyes had lost the hint of doubt I so often saw in them. Even my own face felt strange to me, as if for that one night I had become someone else, not someone entirely unknown to me, but someone whom I might someday recognize. And the woman who opened herself to me that night was a stranger too. She was beautiful.

She drew so near to me that my eyes lost sight of her. Then I felt her mouth touch mine. Her breath smelled of lemon grass. Did I breathe or did she breathe for me? I had no need to draw life into my body from the air around me. I drew life from her, as she drew life from me.

She drew back, and the night air rushed into my lungs. She lay down, opening her arms to me, and I fell into them. The earth was warm from the day's heat. Her body was warm with life. My body pressed itself against her.

I slipped my hand under her shirt, to feel the naked skin of her back and shoulders. The places where I touched her were warm and alive, moving with her blood and breath. I pulled her shirt up, so that I could feel her skin against me, and she shrugged out of it. Then she helped me out of mine.

When she touched me, I was unprepared for what I felt. Warmth and pleasure flowed from her hands as they stroked my arms and back. Not only the places she touched, but my whole body, felt her caress. I was comforted, as I had been comforted as a child at my mother's breast. I lay unmoving in her arms, and all the while her hands were never still.

She turned and pushed against me, until I lay on my back and she lay over me. The fragrance of springtime rose up all around us—the warm earth, the tender grass crushed by our bodies, the cool scent of water from the river. A gentle breeze whispered in the grass. Insects sang us their night songs.

She slipped her hand into the waistband of my trousers and let it rest there. Her lips brushed my face. I turned toward her until my mouth found hers. When I put my arms around her, she pulled away from me and sat up. I felt cold without her body close to me, and I reached out to stop her.

With a smile she eluded me. She knelt at my feet and tugged my boots off. She undid my belt and helped me to slip out of my trousers.

She paused then to look at me. As if she had never before seen a woman's body, her eyes explored my body with both curiosity and desire. I looked down at myself and saw how much I had changed in the year I'd been in Merin's house. My breasts were still small, but they had a pleasing roundness that was new. What had been just a tuft of curls now covered the secret places of my body. My hips had lost their boyish slimness. While I was stronger than I had ever been, my strength now hid beneath a woman's softness.

When did I change? When had my own body become so strange to me? The body that in childhood had belonged entirely to me was no longer mine alone. It belonged now to life, and it would yield to desire, whether I would or no.

Sparrow's body mirrored mine. Her breasts were more full than mine. When she slipped her trousers off, I saw that the curls between her legs were darker. She was too thin, and the joints of her shoulders and her collarbones were plain to see. Her pale skin glowed with moonlight.

I found it difficult to breathe. The night air had not enough life in it to sustain my life. She lay down beside me. My body yearned toward hers, and I wondered why desire drew us together when no child could come of it, but when our bodies touched, I had no need to understand. I couldn't tell if the heartbeat pounding in my ears was mine or hers. I breathed in the fragrance of her skin and her sweet breath. I breathed her into me. She was life.

If she had turned away from me then, my body would certainly have lived, but I believe that something in my spirit would have died. I never thought that night that something in her spirit might have died if I had not been there to meet it. I knew only that she had kept something alive in me, or perhaps she had brought something new to life. I needed her that night as my body needed food and drink and air and warmth and light. My spirit needed her, to keep my heart alive.

Her arms enfolded me. We wore the night air as a cloak, warming it with our desire. Our bodies clung together, now joined in a tight embrace, now moving in a soft caress. We touched each other with gestures of love forgotten since infancy. My mouth found her breast and gave her pleasure while I found comfort there. I remember lying for a time upon her body, as I used to lie upon the body of my mother when I was small. She stroked my back as my mother had done to soothe me into sleep, but Sparrow's touch both

soothed and awakened me.

For a while I was content to lose myself in the sweetness of her touch. Her sweet kiss lingered on my lips. Sweet sensation flowed over the surface of my skin, pooled around my heart and deep within my belly. Then between my legs I felt a longing. I moved against her, and she made a soft sound beside my ear that sounded like yes.

She put her arms around me and held me for a moment. Then she turned over with me in her arms, until I lay on my back beneath her. I could do nothing but wait for her. Whatever she would do, I would meet. I knew she wouldn't leave me. I knew she would fill the empty place that she had opened within me like an abyss.

The earth had life in it. Against my back I felt a heartbeat, a trembling. She held me tight as the ground spiraled out from underneath me. She steadied me against it, as the world changed.

She touched me. She opened me and caressed me. She held me trembling on the edge of the abyss. She kept me there.

She entered my body. I wanted to pull her into me, to feel her heart beat against my own heart. I wanted her to reach deep inside me, to find the life that had chosen my body as its hiding place and reveal it to me.

I fell. Deep into the earth, into her deepest heart, I fell.

How long did I lie against the beating heart of life? Perhaps only for a moment, perhaps for longer than a lifetime. Beyond both pain and pleasure, alone in a lover's arms, I laid my face against my Mother's breast.

But it was Sparrow's breast that pillowed my head and her arms that made the world assume its familiar shape again. Her heartbeat beside my ear brought me back. Her need called me out of the dark.

I touched her then, as she had touched me. I carried her where she had carried me. I held her, steadied her, shielded her, and offered her to the beating heart of life.

LOST

When I opened my eyes, the morning star was peeking over the horizon. We lay together on the hillside. Pieces of our clothing pillowed my head. Sparrow's head lay upon my breast. Our only covering was a shirt pulled over our shoulders, but I wasn't cold. Sparrow's body warmed me, and the still air of early morning lay warm against my skin.

In just a little while the sounds of morning would begin—the music of birdsong and the sigh of a spring breeze. Now I heard only the soft murmur of the river and the whisper of Sparrow's breath. I would have held back the dawn, so that I could stay suspended in that perfect moment, but the demands of the body intruded. When I got up to relieve myself, I tried not to disturb Sparrow. She woke up anyway and rubbed her eyes.

"It's still dark," she said. She sounded grumpy.

"Not for long."

I went a short distance away and squatted down in the grass. She sat up and watched me for a moment. Then she got up and joined me. The picture of the two of us squatting side by side there on the hillside struck me as so ridiculous that I had to laugh. Sparrow looked at me, puzzled. Then she too began to laugh.

"We must be a sight," she said.

"With any luck, no one will notice."

"There isn't that much luck in the world. Almost everyone we know is lying somewhere in sight of this hillside."

"And they're probably doing the same thing we are."

"I suppose they are," she said.

Sparrow took me by the hand and led me down to the river. Hand in hand we leaped into the water. The shock of the cold water took my breath away, but before long I was used to it, and when at last we climbed out onto the riverbank, the air felt warm and welcoming.

I lay down on my back in the grass and looked up at the lightening sky with its scattering of fading stars. Sparrow sat down beside me. She took my hand, turned it over in her hands, examined it. She ran her fingertip along the lines of my palm and played with my fingers. I watched her face. She looked thoughtful, and a bit sad.

"Are you sorry?" she said. She kept her eyes on my hand in hers.

"Sorry? What for?"

She didn't answer me.

"Are you?" I asked her.

She looked at me, surprised. "No, of course not."

"Then why should I be sorry?"

She shrugged. "We haven't had much time for each other. I wondered if you still cared for me a little."

"Of course I care for you." I leaned up on one elbow and touched her face. "You're my friend. I've never had a better one."

She gave me half a smile. "Neither have I."

A teasing look came into her eyes. Before she could say something that would push me away, I sat up and embraced her. I kissed her cheek and gently stroked her back, and her body relaxed against me. I held her for a moment longer. Then I let her go.

"Let's go home," I said.

We found our clothing and dressed ourselves. When we started back up the hill to Merin's house, I took Sparrow's hand. I remembered walking up that hill hand in hand with her at the harvest festival, when she had been unhappy because Eramet was with someone else. Now Eramet was gone, and no doubt Sparrow would give a great deal to have that day back again. I took a lesson from it. I resolved to keep my heart open to those I loved, no matter what they did, even if they hurt me.

Other couples were straggling home. I was surprised to see Fet and Fodla among them. They too walked hand in hand. Fet was as serene as usual, but Fodla's smiling face glowed with joy and a peacefulness that was quite unlike her. Her restless eyes that seemed always to be darting here and there, trying to take in everything happening around her, now gazed steadily off into the distance. If she saw anything at all, it was something no one else could see.

The household gathered in the great hall. No one spoke. The couples who had spent the night together seemed reluctant to separate. I too wanted to keep Sparrow close to me. Cael and Alpin sat side by side. Taia sat shoulder to shoulder with a young girl who had only just arrived in Merin's house. Then I wondered where Laris was.

Servants brought us steaming bowls of tea and hot barley cakes, along with meat and eggs left over from the day before. I was hungry, and I gave

all my attention to my breakfast. By the time I had taken the first edge off my hunger, people were talking and laughing as they did every morning. The benches had begun to fill with warriors. I hadn't seen many of the warriors at the bonfire. Where had they been all night?

"Why don't the warriors join in the spring festival?" I asked Sparrow.

"Some do," she replied.

"But not many. Where were they?"

"I imagine the elders had their own work to do. As for the rest, why not ask your warrior?"

For some reason I was reluctant to do that. I wasn't sure I wanted her asking me where I had been or what I'd been doing.

"Is there some reason not to?" Sparrow asked.

I shrugged. "It's no business of mine what she did, just as it's no business of hers what I did."

"I see." Sparrow looked at me out of the corner of her eye. She started to say something else, then changed her mind.

"Last year," I said, "did you and Eramet —"

"Yes."

Suddenly I felt awkward. I opened my mouth, to tell her I was sorry for intruding on a private grief, but she spoke first.

"That's why I'm glad you were with me last night," she said. "I don't think I could have borne it, to spend the night alone."

I reached for her hand under the table and squeezed it.

"Of course, there are a few other reasons too," she said, and winked at me.

###

The rest of the day was uneventful. Since most of the young people had been awake almost all night, no one felt up to doing much, and for us it was still a holiday. Sparrow and I spent the day together. In the morning we found a sunny place outdoors to sit. In the afternoon we napped in the cool shade by the river. We talked a bit about nothing important. Most of the time we simply shared a comfortable silence.

More than once I found myself watching for my warrior. Many of the warriors were outdoors enjoying the day. I didn't see her among them. Neither had I seen her in the great hall at breakfast time nor at the midday meal. I

asked a few of the apprentices. None of them had seen her either.

I tried not to feel uneasy. In spite of the fact that she had made some friends in Merin's house, I knew she wouldn't be among the groups of warriors I'd seen in the great hall entertaining themselves by drinking too much ale and boasting to one another of their victories. More likely she had found one or two who preferred to spend a quiet day, or perhaps she had kept to herself.

At last the day was over. As the sun was setting, we made our way home. We had our supper in the great hall. Maara never came downstairs.

Sparrow saw me looking for her.

"Why are you so worried about her?" she asked me. "Can't she look after herself for a day or two?"

"Of course she can," I said. "I'm not worried."

But my words convinced neither Sparrow nor myself.

Sparrow sighed. "Why don't you take her some supper? Maybe she feels left out of things. She's still a stranger here, after all."

Sparrow had said aloud what I'd been thinking. As much as I wanted to protest that Maara was no longer a stranger in Merin's house, I wondered how much she understood of what was happening around her. I regretted that I hadn't thought to talk to her about it.

After supper I took some food upstairs. Maara wasn't in her room. I sat down on her bed to wait for her. As I watched the twilight fade, I grew more and more uneasy. I tried to tell myself that I was being foolish, that I should go on to bed and that in the morning I would find her there, safe and sound.

When it was quite dark outside and I could no longer believe that she would be home that night, my uneasiness turned to dread. I went out to the bower and found Sparrow sleeping there. I almost lay down beside her. I wanted the comfort of her arms around me, but I knew I wouldn't sleep, so I turned away and walked down the hill.

I sat for a while by the river. The night before, people had been everywhere out on the hillside. This night no one but me kept vigil. I felt more peaceful out under the stars. A little of the enchantment of the night before lingered in the air around me. The loneliness that had hurt me so much that springtime was gone. Before last night, I had felt abandoned by love. Now love surrounded me.

Then I thought of Maara. For the first time it occurred to me to wonder

if she had been lonely too.

On my way back up the hill I stopped by the oak grove. I had no gift to bring, not even a scrap of cloth to tie around a branch, but the Mother would surely know what was in my heart. I sat down in the darkness under the trees. Here and there a moonbeam reached down through the branches and cast a lacy pattern on the ground. I brought into my mind the image of my warrior and asked the Mother to take Maara to her heart, as she had taken me.

I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. Someone was behind me. Although I had heard nothing, I knew someone was there as surely as if she had tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to see Maara sitting not far away, her back against the immense trunk of an ancient tree. Her face was in shadow, but I could feel her eyes on me.

I got up and approached her. I almost asked if I was disturbing her. Then I thought better of it. I didn't want to give her a chance to send me away. I knelt down beside her and said, "Are you all right?"

She nodded.

"I was worried."

She said nothing. She simply looked at me. Her look reminded me of the way my mother used to look at me when I had done something mischievous and she didn't know whether she wanted to hug me or scold me.

"Why are you here?" I asked her.

"Why are you?" she said. "Why aren't you with your friends?"

I tried to listen, not to her words, but to her tone of voice. Her words made no sense. I had been with my friends because of the holiday, and now the time had come for me to return to her. Surely she understood that.

"Because I'm bound to *you*," I replied.

"Bound to *you*," she echoed.

The wind stirred the branches overhead. Moonlight flickered across her face. Her eyes were empty.

I tried to set my fear aside. "Have you eaten?"

She shook her head.

"Are you keeping a fast?"

She didn't understand me.

"Sometimes people will fast to open themselves to the Mother," I said.

"She's not my mother."

The bitterness in her voice shocked me as much as her words.

"She is," I said. "She is everyone's mother. You can't disown her, any more than you can disown the woman who gave you birth."

"I hardly remember the woman who gave me birth. And I never disowned the mother you speak of. It was she who disowned me."

I felt as if I were skirting the edges of a bog, where one false step might tip me into it.

"She did not," I said.

Maara looked away from me, but not before I saw the tears shining in her eyes.

"She's here," I whispered.

And at that moment, I could feel the Mother all around me, as I had felt her by the river, as I had felt her holding me while I lay in Sparrow's arms. I felt the Mother's love as I had felt the love of my own human mother all my life, but Maara could not feel it. She looked at me with the eyes of an abandoned child.

Something occurred to me then that frightened me. "Were you here last night too?"

She nodded.

I thought I knew the answer, but I asked her anyway, "Was no one with you?"

She shook her head. "No one."

In a way I was relieved to hear it. At the back of my mind was still a gnawing fear of Laris and her intentions. Maara's words put that fear to rest for the moment. At the same time I found another reason to fear for her. What must that night have been like for her? On a night meant for lovers, she had been alone. She should have stayed at home, safe with the other warriors in Merin's house. Instead she had been in this powerful place, unshielded in the magical night.

"Why did you come here?" I asked her.

"I don't remember," she said. "I don't remember coming here."

"Perhaps the Mother called you here."

Anger flashed in Maara's eyes. "She lied to me."

"What do you mean? Did you see her? Did she speak to you?"

"She lied," she said again. "I thought this time I could trust her, but she lied to me."

"What did she say?"

"Not a word." Maara gripped my arm. "She doesn't love her children.

She uses them. Then she devours them.”

How could Maara fail to feel the love that I still felt all around me?

“Sometimes she uses us,” I told her, “and someday she will devour us all and give birth to us again, but not yet. She hasn’t taken you yet.”

But as I looked into Maara’s eyes, I feared I might be wrong. The woman before me was no longer the woman I knew. Something had been taken from her. Not her life—not yet—but it seemed as if a door had opened and some part of her spirit had fled. Fled from what?

I tried to understand what could have happened to her in the grove. The night of the spring festival is a joyous and a perilous time. It is a time, more than any other, when the Mother makes use of us for her own purposes. That night I had been with someone who loved me, and I had needed Sparrow then. It was she who carried me into the heart of life and laid me in the Mother’s arms. It was she who called me back again.

Perhaps the Mother opened Maara too that night, but no one had been there to meet her spirit, to fill the emptiness within her, to ease that terrible loneliness. No one had been there to call her back. To me, the Mother’s arms had felt like home. To Maara, they must have felt like death.

I reached out to touch her. She stood up so suddenly that I toppled over backwards onto the ground. She strode out of the grove, and I scrambled to my feet and followed her. When I caught up to her, she was standing out on the open hillside, breathing hard.

She gazed up at the sky. Moonlight fell across her face. Sparrow’s words ran through my mind. *They wonder if she’s not out dancing to the moon.* She looked fey enough to do almost anything.

I took her hand. She turned and looked at me as if she’d forgotten I was there. I led her like a child farther away from the grove. I made her sit down in the grass on the hillside and sat close beside her.

I had no idea what to do for her. Namet would know what to do, but I was afraid that if I left her to go fetch Namet, she might wander off or fall into the river or find some other place of power that would steal her soul.

Then I remembered how she had sung to me on the night when I first set foot upon the warrior’s path. I began to hum a simple tune from my childhood. Bit by bit the words came back to me, and as they did, I sang them. It was a lullaby.

Maara lay back in the grass and stared unblinking at the sky. She didn’t seem aware of me at all. Still I held her hand in both of mine and sang.

After a while, she pulled away from me and turned over. She cradled her head on her arm, as if to sleep, but her spirit was restless, although her body was exhausted.

I lay down beside her and put my hand on her shoulder. She quieted a little. I stroked her back and felt her body yield to sleep. She moved in her sleep, visited by unquiet dreams.

Even while she slept, I sang to her restless heart.

I was beginning to doze. Suddenly she sat up and turned to face me.

"You left me," she said.

I struggled to sit up. What could she mean?

"You left me," she said again. "You left me to die."

"What?"

"They couldn't have killed everyone. How could they have killed so many? Yet no one came for me."

Then I understood. She was talking to her mother.

"I would never have left you," I said. "If I had lived, I would have come back for you. I would have looked for you. I would never have stopped looking for you."

She stared at me with haunted eyes. Then she covered her face with her hands. I held myself very still. We were not quite in this world and not quite in the other, and I feared to upset such a precarious balance.

When at last she looked at me again, in her eyes I saw the unmet need of long ago. I knelt beside her and took her into my arms. I rocked her and whispered to her a mother's words of love and comfort.

"No," she said. She pushed me away. "It's too late for that."

She stood up and strode away from me down the hill. It was all I could do to keep up with her.

"Where are you going?" I asked her.

She didn't stop or answer me. When she reached the path by the river, she turned north to follow the trail we had taken so often together through the snow. We walked for a long time. I began to worry that she might never stop, that we might walk and walk until we trespassed on one of the northern tribes, and what would we do then?

"Where are we going?" I asked her again.

"We're going to find her."

"Who?"

"The child."

“What child?”

“She’s alone,” she said. “Her mother let her go.”

“Her mother died.”

“No!” She whirled around and raised her hand as if to strike me. When I lifted my arm to shield myself, she grasped hold of my wrist so hard I thought the bone would break.

“Please,” I said. “Don’t hurt me.”

The pain in my arm was so great that I fell to my knees, and she let go.

She looked around, confused. “We’ve come too far. It couldn’t be as far as this.”

“We should go home,” I said. “It’s late. They’ll be worried.”

“Home,” she said. Then she turned and walked away.

I don’t know how long I stumbled along after her. I was afraid to keep going and afraid to turn back. Every choice I made would be wrong but one. I would not leave her.

She turned onto a footpath that followed the river. A swirling mist lay over the water and in places encroached upon the riverbank. Whenever we passed through a patch of it, I had to pay careful attention to my footing, so that I didn’t slip on the muddy ground.

Then I did slip. I fell to one knee and was soon up again, but when I looked for Maara, I saw only the mist, closing in around me.

I listened for a footfall or the rustle of her clothing. All I heard was the sound of the river, and even that was muffled by the fog. I took a few steps, then stopped again to listen. I took another step and went up to my knee in water. It might have been a bit of boggy ground or the river itself. I couldn’t see well enough to know which it was, but I dared not take another step.

I called out once to Maara. Then I began to cry.

Strong arms lifted me. A voice whispered in my ear words of comfort I didn’t understand. I put my arms around her neck and laid my head down on her shoulder. She carried me to higher ground and set me on my feet. I was afraid that if I let go of her she would disappear again into the fog, so I held tight to the sleeve of her shirt.

The ground was uneven. I couldn’t see a thing. I took a step and lost my balance. As I fell, I reached for her to steady myself and pulled her down with me. All around us the fog lay thick over the ground. It hid the starry sky. It hid the earth we sat upon. It hid us from each other.

I still clutched her shirtsleeve, now torn to tatters, the most frail of ties

binding us together. My body sought her out, and when I touched her, she took me into her arms. We clung together in the dark. She rocked me and soothed me with her strange, incomprehensible words.

I have never known a deeper darkness. Neither moonlight nor starlight could penetrate the murk. I didn't understand the meaning of her words, so I listened to the music of her voice. I settled myself against her and laid my head down on her shoulder.

I was tired. Fear had worn me out. I slept.

I dreamed of home, of my mother putting me to bed on a summer's evening when I was very small. I lay awake through the long twilight, listening to the muffled voices of the grown-ups and the chirping of crickets outside my door. All the world had loved me then, and as I drifted into sleep, life whispered her sweet promises in my ear.

"Tamras."

I was so tired. I didn't want to wake. I felt myself lifted and carried in someone's arms. I snuggled against her. "Mama," I said.

She set me down and sat down beside me.

"No," she said. "It's me."

Reluctantly I opened my eyes. The stars twinkled overhead. The moon shone down on us. I sat up and looked around me.

"Where are we?" I asked her.

"I don't know."

She looked exhausted. She was watching me, a guarded expression on her face, as if she expected me to tell her something she feared to hear. I wondered how much she remembered of what had happened that night and if she was herself again.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"I don't know."

"Are you unwell?"

She shook her head. "Why are we here?"

I heard a tremor in her voice. She was afraid.

"Don't you remember?"

"No."

"You were looking for someone," I told her. "A child."

"A child? What child?"

"The child you were."

"Oh." She looked away from me. "I thought it was a dream."

I studied the sky. It would be a few hours yet before the sun came up. Our hair and clothing were damp with mist, but the air was warm. Her body sagged with weariness.

“Lie down,” I said. “Sleep a little. We’ll go home in the morning.”

She lay down, and I lay down beside her. When I put my arm around her, she shrugged it off and turned away from me.

“Please,” I said. “Don’t push me away.”

She kept still for a moment. Then she turned to face me and let me put my arms around her. I kissed her lightly on the brow and rubbed her back, and before long I felt her slipping into sleep. She murmured something I couldn’t hear.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“You left me.”

You left me too once.

“Never again,” I told her. “Never again.”

MOTHERS

As I held Maara through the rest of that long night, I thought and thought about what to do. She was exhausted, and those few hours of sleep wouldn't help her much. I had to get her home. Then what? How long had it been since she'd eaten anything? And after food and rest, what else could be done for her? Although she seemed to be herself again, how could we go on as if this had never happened?

I feared for Maara more that night than I had ever feared for her before. In the short time I'd known her, there had been much to fear on her behalf, but this wounding of her spirit terrified me.

She had told me dreadful things about her life before she came to Merin's house, but I hadn't understood how deeply those things had hurt her, and it was clear that some of those hurts had failed to heal. Perhaps what I thought of as her strange ways were not instead something I might have recognized if she had been one of us, if she had not been a stranger in Merin's house.

From time to time she whimpered in her sleep. I soothed her with my voice and with my hands, not enough to wake her, just enough to chase away her bad dreams. The year before, I had held her like this, to keep her still, to keep her warm, to help her body heal. Now I wished I knew half as much about the healing of the spirit as I knew about the healing of the body.

I watched the light grow in the east, then closed my eyes against the first rays of the sun as it rose above the horizon. I didn't feel her wake, but suddenly she pulled away from me and sat up.

"I'm hungry," she said.

"That's good. You must be feeling better."

She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

"Better?" she said. "I've seldom felt worse."

"We need to get you home," I said.

I took a long look at her. Her clothes were rumpled and dirty. Her shirt-sleeve was in tatters. Her tangled hair and dirt-streaked face made her look like the wild woman so many still believed her to be. Even if her face were clean, her haggard look would attract attention. I didn't like to take her home the way she was, but I had no choice. She needed to be cared for.

“What’s the matter?” she said.

“I can’t take you home looking like that.”

“Like what?”

“You need a bath.”

I stood up and held out my hand to help her up. Then I led her down to the river. We left our clothing on the riverbank and waded into the water. She bathed herself while I tried to comb the tangles out of her wet hair with my fingers. I made sure her face was clean.

While she sat patiently on the riverbank, I shook the worst of the dirt and wrinkles out of our clothes. By the time I finished, we were dry enough to put them on.

When we were both as presentable as I could make us, we started home. We left the meandering footpath beside the river and walked cross-country until we reached the main road. Even with having to make our way through thickets and over some rough ground, it was the quickest way.

Every step was an effort for her, but she made no complaint. We didn’t talk. She was too tired to do more than put one foot before the other, and I was puzzling over how to get her safely into the house. When we were almost home, I led her off the main path and took her up to the oak grove. I wasn’t sure it was the best idea to take her back there, but I couldn’t think of what else to do with her. I didn’t want anyone to see her the way she was.

When we reached the grove, she stopped.

“What are we doing here?” she asked me.

“You’re going to stay here while I bring you something to eat and some clean clothes.”

“I want to go home.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I told her. “People are bound to notice us, and there are a few in Merin’s house who would be eager to believe the worst and give everyone else the benefit of their opinion.”

Still she looked doubtful.

“Are you afraid of the oak grove?”

It was a clumsy attempt to get her to do what I wanted her to do, but I was too tired just then to argue with her.

“No,” she said.

She entered the grove and settled herself beside the same tree where I had found her the night before.

###

As usual no one paid much attention to me. I slipped into Merin's house through the back door and went to Maara's room without anyone asking me where I'd been. I rolled a clean shirt and a pair of trousers into a bundle. Then I went down to the pantry, where I found some bread and meat and a jar of fresh milk.

On my way out the back door I stopped. Maara needed food, but there was something else she needed more. I set everything down in an inconspicuous place and went upstairs to Namet's room.

"I need your help, Mother," I said.

"Come in," she said. "Sit down."

"I can't. Maara is waiting for me in the oak grove."

I didn't know how to tell Namet what I needed, but she seemed to understand.

"Then I'll come with you," she said, and followed me downstairs.

As we walked down the hill, I told her what had happened the night before. I told her about finding Maara in the oak grove, about our journey north along the river, and as much as I could remember of the things she'd said to me. I also told her the little that Maara had told me about her childhood.

"Why did she go down to the oak grove?" Namet asked me.

"She says she doesn't remember going there. I think she was ghostwalking."

"Ghostwalking?"

I nodded.

"Does she do that often?"

"I've seen her do it only twice before," I said. "I spoke to Gnith about it, and she gave me a binding spell to hold her."

"A binding spell to hold Maara?" Namet gave me an odd look. "What did this spell consist of?"

I told her about the braided thong that had bound Maara and me together.

"That's not a binding spell," said Namet.

"It's not?"

"No," she said. "A binding spell is meant to bind the spirits of the dead. I've never heard of binding a living person, although I suppose it could be

done. Even so, you would bind someone only to keep her away, not to keep her by you.” She chuckled. “Gnith is a wise woman when she has her wits about her, but her binding spell sounds more like a love spell to me.”

“Oh,” I said. I blushed with embarrassment.

“Well,” said Namet. “You do love her, don’t you?”

She smiled at me and nudged my arm to let me know that she was teasing, but the truth in her words touched my heart, and tears came into my eyes.

“I care for her very much,” I said, “and I’m very much afraid for her.”

Namet put her arm around my shoulders.

“I know,” she said. “Don’t worry. There’s a healing for everything.”

###

Maara was asleep. I hesitated to wake her, even to give her the food she needed, but when I approached her, she opened her eyes. Her gaze rested on me for a moment. Then she saw Namet. When she started to get up, Namet made a gesture to her to stay where she was and sat down beside her.

“Let her eat first,” said Namet, and I gave Maara the food I’d brought.

While she was eating, Namet sat at Maara’s side, gazing about her and smiling her contentment at being in this sacred place. Her arm rested against Maara’s arm and Maara didn’t move away from her.

After Maara finished eating, I helped her change into her clean clothes and gathered her dirty ones into a bundle. When we were ready, I turned to Namet, expecting that she would come with us, but she remained where she was beneath the oak tree. She didn’t seem to realize that we were waiting for her.

“Shall we go home now, Mother?” I asked her.

“Wait a while,” she said.

So Maara and I sat down to wait.

The morning light filtered through the leaves and dappled the ground around us. Birds sang in the branches overhead. We heard in the distance the voices of children playing in the river. For the first time since I left the grove the night before, I felt that all was well.

“How does this place feel to you?” Namet asked Maara.

Maara gave a start at the sudden, unexpected question.

“It feels as it used to feel,” she said. “This place was always a good

place.”

“Until night before last,” said Namet.

“Yes.”

“Why was this place a good place for you?”

Maara smiled. “In this place someone told me I’d come home.”

“What changed?”

Maara’s face darkened. “I don’t know.”

“Well,” said Namet, “that doesn’t matter. What matters is that you are home now, and we must convince your spirit of it.”

Maara looked surprised. I think she would have liked to ask a question if she could have thought of one.

Namet sat quietly under her tree for a little longer. Then she got to her feet.

“Now we can go,” she said.

Maara and I stood up, and Namet looked us over with a critical eye.

“Not too bad,” she said, “but let’s not call attention to ourselves.” She touched each of us on the brow. “Don’t speak. Don’t catch anyone’s eye. Don’t look at anything but what’s in front of your feet.”

All the way up the hill, we passed warriors and country people, servants and companions. No one noticed us or spoke to us. As if we were invisible, we passed through the maze of earthworks, crossed the yard, and entered Merin’s house by the front door without attracting anyone’s attention. Through the great hall we went, and up the stairs, and no one so much as nodded a greeting to us. When we were safe in Maara’s room, Namet took a deep breath and sat down heavily on the bed.

“Maara should sleep for a while,” said Namet. “Will you brew her some chamomile?”

I nodded, but I didn’t think the tea would be necessary. Maara’s eyes were already closing. When I returned with the tea, she was lying in her bed asleep.

Namet took the bowl from me.

“You must leave her to me now,” she said.

###

Although I wasn’t hungry, I tried to eat a little breakfast. Sparrow found me sitting in a corner of the kitchen, a half-finished bowl of porridge in

my lap.

"What are you doing here?" she asked me. "Where were you all night?"

She sounded a bit put out. Then she looked at me more closely and sat down beside me. "What in the world happened to you?"

"I'm all right," I said. "It's Maara who is unwell."

"Maara is unwell?"

I nodded.

"Where is she?"

"Upstairs in her room. Namet is with her."

"Namet?" Sparrow said. "Namet's no healer."

"Maara needs more than a healing of the body. Otherwise I would have tended her myself."

I heard something in my voice that made me suspect I was a little jealous of Namet, and I was ashamed of myself. Maara's healing might well depend on Namet's kindness.

Sparrow was about to speak when we heard Vintel's voice in the great hall. Sparrow leaped to her feet.

"I have to go," she said.

I nodded that I understood, and Sparrow ran to bring Vintel her breakfast.

I remembered Maara's warning. Had Vintel been angry that Sparrow spent the night of the spring festival with me? I almost wished I had followed my warrior's advice, both for Sparrow's sake and for Maara's. Then I remembered the gifts I had been given that night, and I was ashamed of myself again. Gnith had told me, *Only love can't wait*. Now I understood what she meant. I had felt both the Mother's love and Sparrow's in a way that might never come to me again, and to wish it undone was to turn that love away.

###

I must have fallen asleep where I sat there in the kitchen corner. Then someone tripped over me. I didn't want to go out to the bower in case Namet sent for me, so I went to the companions' loft, where I fell into the nearest bed and slept.

I woke just in time for the midday meal. Alpin sat next to me at the companions' table. She managed to distract me from my troubles by keeping up

a constant stream of conversation about everything under the sun. I noticed that she kept a close eye on her warrior, and when Cael rose to leave the hall, Alpin left half her dinner on her plate and followed her.

I enjoyed Alpin's company. I didn't mind her chatter, and I found her attention to her warrior amusing until I recognized myself. I seldom left food on my plate only because I spent mealtimes eating instead of talking, but I always had one eye on Maara, and when she left the hall, I left with her.

Suddenly I was lonely for her. Although she was only just upstairs, I felt as if Namet had taken her away from me. As the healing of the body takes time, the healing of Maara's spirit would take time. How long would it be before Namet gave her back to me?

I never allowed myself to think that Namet might fail. Maara had survived wounds of the body that should have killed her. Surely this wounding of her heart could not be past mending.

One of the servants put a hand on my shoulder.

"Namet wants you," she said. "She's in the kitchen."

###

I found Namet sitting at a table with the healer. When she saw me, she pointed to a stool opposite her, and I sat down.

"I don't know," the healer was saying. "She may need to understand and she may not."

"Understand what?" I said, before I could stop myself.

I had spoken out of turn, and I half expected them to ignore me, but Namet turned to me and said, "A healing may succeed whether or not a person understands it. Willow bark cools a fever, though the person who is ill may not understand its virtue. That isn't always true for this kind of healing. Maara may need to understand, and I don't know her well enough to know what certain gestures mean to her."

"It can't hurt to try," the healer said.

Namet looked doubtful. "Sometimes it can hurt to try, but I think we have no choice this time." She gave me a look of sympathy. "This child wants her warrior back."

Namet stood up and motioned to me to follow her. Together we went out the back door and down the well-worn path between the sheds that led to the place of ritual. This time we didn't remove our clothing. I followed

Namet down the ladder into the underground chamber.

I remembered the silence. The cold was something new. When I had come into this sacred space the first time, the air was warm, despite the cold air of winter that hovered just above our heads. This time it was the warmth of springtime we left behind, and the cool air in the chamber made me shiver.

Namet sat down by the wall farthest from the altar and patted the floor beside her. I sat down on the cold stone.

Namet's doubts worried me. I wanted to tell her things that would prove to her my warrior's value and her strength of spirit, but Namet sat still, her gaze turned inward, and I was afraid to speak. Then little by little my worries left me, and I sat silent beside a woman whose wisdom I trusted, just as I trusted her good intentions.

"It's nothing I haven't seen before," said Namet.

I gave a start. "What?"

"You're too young to remember the war," she said, "but many were left motherless by it. Even so, there is something in your warrior I find disturbing." Namet turned to face me. "Go back in your mind to the night you spent with her here. How did you feel about her then?"

I didn't know what she meant. "I felt about her as I always have."

"Did you trust her?"

"Yes."

"Did she ever frighten you?"

"No," I said.

"You were never frightened?"

"I was," I said, "but she eased my fears."

"Did you ever feel that she might do you harm?"

"No." Then I remembered the bruises on my wrist.

"Not on purpose," I said.

A shrewd look came into Namet's eyes. "What has she done?"

I couldn't lie to Namet. Reluctantly I pulled my sleeve up a few inches.

"It looks worse than it is," I said.

"She did that?"

I nodded.

"When?"

"Last night," I said, "but she wasn't herself. She would never have hurt me if she'd been herself."

"If she wasn't herself, who was she?"

Namet didn't expect an answer.

I looked away, and all at once tears filled my heart, although my eyes remained dry.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "If she pulled my hand from my arm, she would be welcome to it if that would make her whole again."

Namet took my hand and touched my bruises tenderly with her fingertips. "Such words should not be spoken lightly. The world may hear them and remember them, and someday you may be held to a promise you never knew you made."

Her words didn't frighten me, although they should have. I remembered the warriors standing with drawn swords at the foot of the stairs while Eramet barred the way. I remembered Maara's face when the Lady made my life the price of treachery. I remembered her challenge to Vintel.

"Maara has put her life at risk more than once for me," I said.

Namet's gentle hold tightened until my wrist began to hurt. A knife appeared in her hand.

"I wouldn't ask an entire hand," she said.

She held the blade against the second joint of my little finger.

I stared at her in disbelief. A wildness had come into her eyes. Did she need this from me for Maara's healing? If she did, I would find a way to bear it.

"Yes," I said.

The knife vanished. Namet took my hand in both of hers and raised it to her lips. She blew on it three times, then kissed the back of it and let it go.

"The world will be happy enough with that, I think," she said, and smiled at me.

I clasped my hands together to stop their shaking.

"I admire your courage," Namet said, "but you should temper it with prudence. A warrior needs her hands."

Namet thought for a few minutes before she spoke again.

"At first I was inclined to let her heal herself," she said. "A person may step into the past for a short time, to find something of herself she left behind or to understand the persistent ache of an old wound. Many times such a journey brings its own healing. At worst, she may simply put it behind her and go on."

“Will Maara’s spirit heal itself, do you think?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but I think that in any case, a day or two from now her memories of the last few days will have faded, and she will appear to be as she was before.”

“Appear to be?”

“No,” said Namet. “I misspoke. I think she will be as she was before.”

I was relieved to hear it, but something was worrying Namet.

“If she is unchanged, then what happened once may happen again.”

I hadn’t thought of that.

Once more I feared that Namet had doubts about undertaking Maara’s healing. If Maara could be as she had been before the night of the spring festival, I would be grateful for even that much, but if Namet could help her change, so much the better.

“Can’t you do something for her?” I asked.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But I must think carefully how best to do it.”

Namet’s uncertainty puzzled me until she said, “Have you ever lanced a boil?”

Then I understood. Sometimes a lancing lets the poison out and speeds a person’s healing, but if it is not done skillfully, it may only spread the poison, and then the person might die.

Namet took my hand in hers. She leaned back against the stone wall of the chamber and closed her eyes.

“Open your heart,” she said, “and let someone wiser tell us what to do.”

We sat there hand in hand for a long time. I tried to do as Namet told me, but my mind was full of doubts and questions. I tried to open my heart, only to find it full of fear. I knew I wasn’t being very helpful.

Namet’s hold on my hand tightened. I turned to look at her. Her eyes were open, and tears trickled down her cheeks.

“So simple,” she said.

She must be listening to something that could be heard only by the wisest heart.

“Will you entrust her to me?” Namet said.

“Of course,” I told her.

“The healer thinks it doesn’t matter whether or not she understands her healing. I think it does matter. I think it matters a great deal, and there is one gesture I know she’ll understand.”

Namet turned to look at me, and her face was full of hope.

“She’s a child who has lost her mother,” she said, “and I’m a mother who has lost her child.”

###

The news went through the house like wildfire. No one spoke openly about it. It went from person to person in whispers. Before the day was out there was no one who hadn’t heard it. That Namet intended to take Maara as her daughter so soon after the loss of Eramet was surprising enough, but that she would take a stranger into her family was even more astonishing.

“Why would she do such a thing?” Sparrow asked me. “She has no need for a daughter. Arnet is the head of her house, and Arnet has an heir.”

I wondered if Sparrow’s heart might hurt a bit for Eramet’s sake.

“She didn’t take Maara to replace Eramet,” I said.

“I suppose not.”

But Sparrow looked doubtful.

“You may love someone else too someday. You still have love to give, even if Eramet no longer needs it.”

“How can Namet love your warrior? She hardly knows her.”

“Namet has been Maara’s friend since before midwinter’s night.”

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t know.”

“This is something Namet needs,” I said.

Though Namet had first thought of becoming Maara’s mother as a way to help Maara heal the wounds of childhood, I believe that her decision changed something in her own heart. Namet spoke to me about it that morning as if she had been offered a wonderful gift, and when she went to ask Maara for her consent, it seemed to me that she was a little apprehensive that Maara might not accept her.

I had no doubt what Maara’s answer would be. I would have loved to see her face when Namet spoke to her, but that was a moment for them to share only with each other.

###

Late that afternoon Namet sent for me.

“Sit with your warrior for a while,” Namet said to me. “I have some things to do.”

After Namet left the room, I sat down on the foot of Maara's bed. She looked much better than she had that morning. She seemed almost her old self again, but I felt something new in her I couldn't name.

"You look well," I told her.

She met my eyes and gazed at me.

I needed to hear her voice.

"How do you feel?" I asked her.

"I don't understand," she said. "Why would Namet care for me?"

"She does," I said. "Don't you believe her?"

"I do believe her. I just don't understand why."

"What did she say to you?"

"She told me she's my friend. She said that will never change, but that if I'm willing, she needs a child as much as I seem to need a mother." She chuckled. "Do you think I need a mother?"

I smiled. "We all need our mothers."

"Warriors too?"

"Warriors too."

We were silent for a while. It took me several minutes to understand what was different about her. There had always been a wariness in her that I noticed now only because it was gone.

"Namet has made a strange choice," Maara said.

There was something in her tone of voice I didn't like, as if she thought Namet had made a mistake.

"I made the same choice," I reminded her.

She looked at me then as if she would have opened my heart and peered inside. "Why?"

I didn't know how to answer her.

At last I said, "There's no one else like you."

"Thank the gods for that!" she said.

She was teasing, but I saw her hide a smile.

"Do you care for Namet?" I said.

She nodded.

"Why?"

"Because she's kind. She's wise. She listens."

"Many women here are kind and wise," I said. "And most of them will listen, at least for a little while. Do you care for them as you care for Namet?"

She understood what I meant. She laughed.

"No," she said. "There's no one else like Namet. Or like you."

###

That night Namet took Maara down into the place of ritual. I had no idea what would happen there. I knew only that in the morning a mother and her child would emerge out of the earth. I was glad for Maara. I knew that Namet's love would do her good, just as Maara's love would do Namet good, but there was a feeling in my chest as heavy as grief. I didn't understand it.

Sparrow knew what I was feeling. At suppertime she sat beside me at the companions' table. Once in a while she would lean her shoulder against mine or give my hand a quick squeeze.

After supper we went together out to the bower. A few girls were sleeping there. We walked down the hill a little way, so that our talk wouldn't disturb them.

"I'm sorry for what I said today," Sparrow told me.

I had forgotten our conversation. "What are you talking about?"

"About Namet and your warrior," she said. "I was jealous, I think."

"Jealous for Eramet?"

"Partly."

"What else?"

"For a long time I was the only person here without a name. Then Maara came to Merin's house. She was a stranger, as nameless as I. Now she will have a name, but I never will."

I didn't know what to say. Instead of holding my tongue until the right thing occurred to me, I blurted out something foolish.

"A name isn't that important," I said.

"Only someone with a name would say something like that."

"You're right," I said. "I dishonor my own name by saying such a thing." I took her hand. "But I don't believe you will never have a name. Names can be earned, as well as given."

Sparrow smiled her teasing smile. "You're so old-fashioned. That only happens in stories. No one earns a name by her deeds anymore. Anyway, I don't mind. Once I've won my shield, the lack of a name won't matter."

That afternoon a spring shower had cooled the air. The earth we sat on

was damp and cold. I shivered a little, and Sparrow put her arm around my shoulders.

I thought about how Sparrow must feel. Namet was Eramet's mother, and Sparrow had been Eramet's beloved. There should have been a bond between them, but it almost seemed as if Namet had given Sparrow's place to Maara.

"Was Namet disappointed when Eramet chose you?" I asked her.

I felt her stiffen. "She wasn't overjoyed."

"Namet didn't know you. She should have trusted Eramet's judgment, but no mother ever thinks her child has chosen someone worthy of her, no matter how great a name she bears."

Sparrow laughed. "I suppose you're right."

"Namet is a good woman. She's someone well worth knowing for her own sake, and for Eramet's sake you might try to love her a little."

Sparrow sighed. "You would put the whole world around one hearth."

I think she meant that I would sooner see people at peace with one another than at odds. I thought to myself, Wouldn't anyone? Then I remembered Bec, who at the first hint of an argument hastened to encourage the underdog, not for the sake of justice, but only to prolong the altercation.

I yawned. Sparrow stood up and helped me to my feet.

"Come on," she said. "It's past your bedtime."

We went back to the bower. Sparrow spread an oxhide on the ground against the damp, then covered it with a soft blanket. I sat down and pulled off my boots and trousers. Then I lay back, and through the wickerwork of the roof, I gazed up at the stars. Sparrow lay down beside me and drew a light blanket over us. I could feel her watching me. After a moment she put her hand shyly on my shoulder.

I found her nearness comforting, and I snuggled against her, but I couldn't sleep. I was thinking of Maara, who was at that moment with Namet in the place where she had held my sleeping body through the night while I flew with the beings in the air. I wondered what would pass between them as they knit the bonds of kinship that would last for as long as they both lived.

"Why can't you sleep?" Sparrow whispered. "You must be exhausted."

"The world changes too much," I whispered back. "I'm trying to keep up."

Sparrow brushed my cheek with her fingertips.

"You can catch up tomorrow," she said. "Close your eyes."

I felt her soft hand against my cheek, turning my face to hers. Her kiss didn't surprise me. Her lips were warm and soft. They stopped my thoughts. They awakened in me, not desire, but a longing to be comforted. I turned toward her and put my arms around her.

The touch of her body easily awakened mine. My body remembered her and trusted her. I felt echo within me the memory of what we'd shared, but this time I felt, not the spark of passion, but the comfort of a deep, familiar pleasure.

Sparrow began to caress me. I had not forgotten the sleeping girls who shared the bower with us, and I tried to be quiet. I hid my face in the hollow of Sparrow's shoulder. Her touch was soft and patient. She gave me a gentle pleasure, and as the pounding of my heart slowed, I floated just under the surface of sleep. I had to struggle to stay awake. When I would have reached for her, she stopped me.

"Not now," she whispered. "Go to sleep."

I slipped into the dark.

###

The entire household gathered for the midday meal. It was unusual for everyone to be there all at once except on holidays, but they knew what was going to happen, and no one wanted to miss such an important event.

Everyone remained standing. Even the Lady and the elders stood by their places at the high table. Usually on these occasions the warriors were impatient. Coughing and mumbling and shuffling of feet would signal their desire to have the formalities over with so that they could eat their dinner. Today they waited in silence, and an air of anticipation filled the hall.

Namet appeared with Maara in the doorway. They stood in the place where my mother and I had waited for the Lady to summon us on the first day I set foot in Merin's house. Namet's face glowed with happiness and pride. I saw Maara glance at her and smile.

All eyes were on them. The Lady beckoned to Namet, who took Maara's hand and led her to the Lady's table, just as my mother had done with me.

"My daughter," said Namet.

I half expected to see resentment or displeasure in the Lady's eyes, but she surprised me. She bowed her head to Maara in acknowledgement.

When she looked up again, I saw in her face acceptance and respect, as she welcomed one who had been a stranger in her house and who now would be a stranger no longer.

With the same words, Namet presented Maara to each of the elders. One by one they acknowledged her. Then Namet went to each table in turn. She presented Maara to every warrior present, and my warrior became Maara, Namet's daughter.

END BOOK I

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES IN:

WHEN WOMEN WERE WARRIORS

BOOK II

A JOURNEY OF THE HEART

&

WHEN WOMEN WERE WARRIORS

BOOK III

A HERO'S TALE

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