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THE ACTORS

A Hwarhath Historical Romance

THERE WERE TWO WOMEN who fell in love. At first this was no problem. Their families were allies and trading partners whose ships plied the narrow ocean between the coast of Sorg and the Great Southern Continent.

The northern family was Sorg itself. Numerous, prosperous, clever and arrogant, these folk gave their name to an entire region.

In recent centuries the coast of Sorg has been improved in many ways: land drained and turned to agriculture, canals dug to carry away excess water and for transportation. The coastal people still prefer boats to the railroad, which they claim is noisy, dirty and unnatural. "If the Goddess had meant us to ride on iron rails, she would not have given us so much water."

Most of the year a steady wind blows off the ocean. Modern silent windmills stand everywhere, their metal blades flashing "like a flock of little suns" in the words of a famous poem. These power the country's many drainage pumps and the even more numerous air cooling machines, which make the climate of Sorg tolerable to foreigners as long as they remain indoors.

In ancient times the coast was a place of brackish marshes, slow rivers, shallow bays and heat. The inhabitants would have been gray if they'd kept all their fur, as they do now, being influenced by air conditioning and the opinions of other cultures. In those days, however, both men and woman cropped their outer layers of hair, leaving only the soft white undercoat; and many decorated themselves by shaving certain areas down to the bare dark skin.

Imagine a folk with snowy fur so short that it hides no detail of the bodies underneath. Dark lines zigzag or coil over their angular shoulders and long narrow backs. (The Sorg have always been a tall and bony people.) Often their faces are partially shaved as well, becoming patterned masks from which stare eyes as blue as the ocean. Savages, we'd call them now. In their time they were matriarchs, warriors, explorers and merchants.

Their country was rich, providing them with fish, shellfish, birds of many kinds and luatin, which came into the coastal bays to breed. Though it is never easy to kill these massive animals, lust makes them less wary than usual; and many of the bays could be turned into traps. In the coastal marshes the wis plant bloomed, red as blood or fire. Its sap made (and makes) a famous scarlet dye.

The southern family was Helwar. Their home was an island which lies off the northeast corner of the Great Southern Continent. A polar current runs up the continent's eastern coast and coils around the island, bringing cold water, cool air, rain, and fog. The rain nourished the Helwar forests; the icy current gave

them fish; the cool air made their flocks grow long thick wool. The family wealth, such as it was, came from these four sources: fish, wool, lumber, and ships. At the time of this story the Helwar made the best ships in the world.

It was the Helwar ships, seen in their own harbors and other places, which drew the Sorg south, traveling in wide wallowing barges better fit for rivers than the ocean. As rich as they were, they lacked the Helwar skill. To gain it, or at least the use of it, they offered an alliance.

How could the Helwar refuse these towering white and black people? An agreement was made and confirmed with gifts, though the Sorg did not offer the one gift that makes an alliance unbreakable: their men as fathers for Helwar children. No bond is stronger than kinship. The offspring of such a mating would connect the two families as long as they and their descendants lived.

The Helwar made hints, which the Sorg pretended not to understand. Growing desperate, for they really wanted this alliance, the Helwar matriarchs made an offer of their own. They would send the five best and most promising young men in their lineage north to father children among the Sorg. The Helwar's new allies hesitated and consulted among each other, while the Helwar waited anxiously; and some of the islanders began to mutter that this might not be such a good deal. Maybe they ought to find more willing trading partners. Finally the Sorg agreed, though in a way that seemed grudging and reluctant.

"This is a beginning," said the Helwar matriarchs to each other. "Once they have our ships, they will understand the appeal of a stronger alliance."

When the Sorg left, five Helwar men -- sturdy warriors -- traveled with them. The motion of the Sorg barges was terrible, they reported later. "No wonder these folk want our ships. And the heat of their homeland! We're surprised that we didn't shrivel up like fish in a smoke house. But the job is done. All five women are pregnant."

Reassured, the Helwar built ships for their new allies: deep-hulled ocean flyers. When the ships were finished, sailors had to be trained; and this is how this story's heroine came to Helwar. She arrived in the southern autumn, along with other young folk, female and male. All had short hair. Many shaved. What a sight they must have been among the furry, fog-gray southerners!

The Helwar divided them, assigning each gender to the proper kind of ship. Like most of the peoples of the narrow ocean, they had both male and female vessels. The former explored new regions and traded in areas known to be dangerous. The latter kept to established routes, doing business with allies.

Sorg Ahl ended on the Foam Bird. The captain -- Helwar Ki -- was short, sturdy, and as gray as the winter ocean or the cloud-wrapped peaks of her island home.

Now we have brought together the story's first pair of lovers, as gangling Ahl walks up the gangway of the Bird, carrying her journey bag over one shoulder. Ki looks down at her, admiring the foreign woman's grace and evident confidence, but despising the unfamiliar haircut.

There are dark triangles below Ahl's eyes, both pointing down. A third triangle, this one pointing up, occupies most of her forehead. Rows of dark squares go down her arms. A final downward-pointing triangle rests between her upper pair of breasts, in no way concealed by her vest, which seems scanty to Ki.

The ship had two private cabins. One was for the captain. Ki put the foreigner in the other one, safely away from the rest of the crew. She was the only daughter of Sorg on board.

At first, as might be expected, Ahl kept herself aloof, though she was a hard worker and eager to learn. Then one day Ki noticed Ahl had stopped shaving. She asked about this,

"It's not easy to shave on board a ship," the northerner answered. "Especially in the weather we've been having; and I don't enjoy the feeling that ice-cold rain and spray produce when they beat against my bare skin. Finally --" She gave Ki a sideways glance. "I'm tired of looking like a foreigner."

After that Ahl became more friendly. By midwinter she'd stopped cutting her fur. "You people look so comfortable," she told Ki and ran a hand along the other woman's arm, ruffling, then smoothing the winter-thick hair. Ki noticed she was falling in love, but kept quiet, having no idea how to court a person who came from so far away.

In early spring they carried a cargo of pickled fish to a harbor on the eastern coast of the Great Southern Continent. The trip was stormy. By the time they reached land and tied up in protected water, all of them were exhausted. Nonetheless most of the crew went on shore. The lineage that held this part of the coast was connected to the Helwar by generations of interbreeding. They all had relatives in the houses that lined the harbor town's narrow, winding streets.

Ki and Ahl stayed on board, Ahl because she was not kin to anyone in the town, Ki out of courtesy and affection. The storm had blown out to sea, and the sky in the east was black; but where their ship rested, the sun shone, and the clouds were mostly white. Farther west, above low hills covered by a semitropical forest, the sky was clear. Hah! It was pleasant to lie on the Foam Bird's deck, sharing sunlight and a jug of halin. Ahl had unfastened her vest. Her four breasts were visible: rather flat, especially the lower pair, but with prominent nipples and large oval areolae so dark that they seemed black. Ki felt desire, stronger than before. Something about the day-- the stillness, the brightness, their fatigue, the jug of halin -- made it possible for her to speak. Voice halting, she confessed her love.

Ahl listened courteously, head tilted, blue eyes half closed. When Ki finished, she said, "If that's so, why don't we have sex?"

Ki could think of no reason.

An awning had been raised in the middle of the ship and thick rugs laid under

it, so crew members could sleep in open air. They went there and, in the dim light coming through the canvas, gave each other pleasure and release. When they were done, Ahl rolled onto her back and sighed. "It's been a long time."

"Do you have a lover at home?" asked Ki.

"I did, a woman whose family is closely tied to mine. Most likely, she has found someone else by now."

Ki repeated that she was in love.

Ahl raised herself on one elbow and looked at the little southerner. "More likely you find me interesting because I'm foreign."

No, said Ki. It was the true emotion. To prove this she listed the qualities she loved: Ahl's hardworkingness, her courage, her even temper, her sense of justice. "There ought to be a fifth quality, but it doesn't come into my mind."

"This sounds like respect to me," said Ahl.

"Well, then, I love your thin body, your small breasts, your silver fur, your laugh and the place between your legs, which has a taste faintly reminiscent of fish."

Ki loved fish, especially when just pulled from the ocean and lightly cooked in the grill on deck, so this was not an insult.

Ahl laughed. "Maybe you're in love. Let's continue and see what happens next."

At first they tried to be secret. But it's difficult to keep anything hidden on a ship full of women. Soon Ki's cousins took her aside. "Stop this acting and sneaking back and forth between cabins. Everyone knows what's going on. Be open and honest!"

The two women became acknowledged lovers, holding hands in public, kissing and using the personal form of "you" and "she." This continued until Ahl's training ended, and she was ready to go home.

"I'm going to ask my mother to send me back here as soon as possible," she told Ki. "I don't know if I'm in love; it's not a word that comes easily to me; but I know I'll miss you and the Foam Bird."

Ki could say nothing. All her words had become stuck together in a lump at the back of her mouth. Sorrow lay in her mind like a heavy stone.

They parted, Ahl going up a gangway onto one of the ocean-flyers that Helwar had built for Sorg. The flyer spread its sails like great white wings and carried her away across the ocean. Little Ki went back to her own ship to grieve.

THE TRIP NORTH was easy, except for the jokes that everyone made about Ahl's long fur. She ignored her relatives, remaining quiet and aloof.

"Is anything wrong?" they asked finally.

"I'm thinking."

"Don't make yourself ill with ideas."

At home it was the dry season. The marshes of Sorg baked under a cloudless sky, their vegetation turning yellow. The great house where Ahl's mother lived was surrounded by gardens, kept watered except in times of severe drought. Ahl carried her journey bag past brightly colored ornamental plants. She dropped the bag in the entrance room and went looking for her mother.

The matron's favorite place was a porch at one end of the house. The walls were carved wood screens, pierced by many holes. White gauze curtains hung inside the screens, keeping out most bugs, but admitting whatever light and air came through the holes.

This is how you should imagine the room: mostly shadow, but flecked with sunlight which has been slightly dimmed by its passage through gauze. In the middle is a large square table, where Ahl's mother does her accounts, arranging colored stones in rows. Now and then a gust of wind stirs the curtains. When this happens, the room's pattern of light and shadow flickers and shifts.

"Well," the matron said, looking at her daughter. "You need a haircut."

"It's cold in Helwar; I'm planning to return there."

Her mother frowned, then moved a stone from one row to another.

"I'm not certain the alliance will hold."

"Why not?"

"They are a small lineage and far away. Aside from their ships, they aren't important. Allies should be neighbors or lineages so powerful they can't be avoided. That's the rule. Everyone knows it." Ahl's mother lifted her head, giving her daughter another look. "None of the children fathered by Helwar is alive."

"What happened?" Ahl asked sharply.

"One woman was not pregnant, though she seemed to be; or possibly she miscarried almost at once. Another woman miscarried at midterm. Two women remained pregnant, but their children died at birth." Her mother's tone permitted no questions. Maybe the children had been deformed or too weak to survive. If so, the midwives would have killed them, rather than let them die slowly or live in pain.

"There's one you haven't accounted for," Ahl said.

"Your cousin Leweli." Her mother looked down again, pondering an arrangement of red and reddish-purple stones. "She went hunting in the marshes. Her boat was found later, floating upside-down. She was not found. She and the child she carried have gone to the same place."

The land of death, Ahl thought. Leweli was dead. "You think this is a sign. The agreement with Helwar is unlucky."

"Maybe. They are a long way off." Her mother paused, white-furred hand hovering over a red stone. "And not important."

Ahl went to her room and unpacked, feeling grief for Leweli, who had been a distant cousin but a close friend, also for the other women who'd lost their children. Lastly, she grieved for herself and Ki.

In time -- not her first day at home, nor the second -- it occurred to Ahl that Leweli's death was strange. Her cousin had been a fine hunter, not in the least bit careless. Yet she had gone into the marshes alone while pregnant and done something so stupid that it killed her and her child.

Was this likely?

No.

She would go into the marshes and speak with a cousin who lived there. This woman, closer to Leweli than anyone, might know what had happened.

The next morning Ahl saddled a tsin, riding past fields and orchards. The sky, as usual, was cloudless and brilliant. The road was dusty, even when it reached the marshes and wound among waterspears. The plants were in blossom, their tall stalks topped with bladelike/lowers as blue as the sky.

The woman Ahl went to visit was named Merhit. A witch, she lived by herself in a thatched hut by one of the marsh's many slow-moving channels. This kind of behavior would not have been tolerated in any other kind of woman. But holy people make their own rules. If they want to live alone, they can.

Ahl reached the hut at noon, dismounted and tied her animal in the shadow of a tree. The witch was sitting in an arbor made of driftwood branches overgrown with vines. For the most part the wood was hidden, but here and there a small piece showed, white as a bone among glossy leaves.

"Well," said Merhit. "You are back."

Ahl squatted, pushing her wide-brimmed hat off her head.

"And you need a haircut," said the witch.

"It was easier to get along with the Helwar if I looked like them. I've fallen in love with one of their daughters, though I don't imagine we have much of a future, if the alliance turns out badly."

"It has turned out as planned," the witch said. "We have the ships we desired and no permanent entanglement in the south."

Ahl considered this remark while looking at the channel's dark water dotted with red-orange flowers. These were not wis, as you might think, but a closely related plant, which had no commercial value, though it was lovely. "What happened to Leweli?"

"You know that five women mated with the men of Helwar. One had a mother who might be called weak. She didn't want her daughter to carry a child for most of a year, then lose it."

"What do you mean?" asked Ahl.

"It had been decided that none of the children would live beyond birth."

"Why?"

"The matriarchs of Sorg do not want this alliance. We are a proud family, also careful. The Helwar live far off and have nothing to recommend them except their skill in building ships. We have the ships now."

"They won't last forever. What if we need more?"

"That problem will be dealt with when it comes forward and can be seen. Our family is proud and careful, but does not always look into the distance."

Ahl considered this information, squatting in dust and heat. No question about what the witch was saying: their relatives had decided to kill whatever children came from the Helwar interbreeding. A contemporary woman would be sick with horror or at least uncomfortable. What did Ahl, a woman of the middle distance in time, feel?

Remember how many children died in the days before modern medicine. Those who were deformed or sickly died at once, of course, as they still do. It is a kindness we owe our kin. But many strong and healthy children died as well, due to illnesses which can now be prevented or cured. As a result, in many cultures, babies were called "guests" or "visitors" until they reached the end of their first or second year. Often they were not given a permanent name until it seemed likely they'd remain; and women tried to keep from loving these nameless children too much. If they had thought all the little ones they buried were true people, instead of beings who would turn into people in time and with luck, the women might have died of sorrow.

Because of this, Ahl saw the situation differently than we do. The two children who were killed at birth might have died later. How did she know for certain they'd been healthy? The idea was disturbing, but it did not make her sick.

"What happened to Leweli?" Ahl asked again.

"The mother I mentioned told her daughter to pretend pregnancy. The daughter told Leweli what was going on. By this time Leweli was pregnant; and it turns out she is one of those women who can't bear to lose a child. She knew if she stayed in her mother's house and had the child delivered by midwives, it would die. She came to me."

"She is alive," Ahl said.

"As is her daughter," said the witch. "A fine healthy child, though she has a definite southern look, which I don't find attractive."

"Where?" asked Ahl.

"In the marshes," said the witch after a pause. "I'm not happy about this. The air here breeds too many diseases. As you know, I can foretell the future. The child is important. I knew it the moment I saw Leweli's distended belly. I want the two of them in a place that's safe."

"What can I do?" asked Ahl after a moment.

"Take them to Helwar."

"How?"

"My vision does not see."

AHL LEFT, taking a different route, since she wanted time to think. The day grew hotter. She started panting and remembered an inn at the marsh's edge. With luck it was still in business. She made a detour and found the building, standing in the shade of a good-sized atchul tree.

Secondary roots hung from the tree's branches, forming a greenish-white curtain. A few had reached the ground and burrowed down, becoming runners that would in time, at a safe distance from the parent tree, send up shoots. This is the atchul's preferred way to grow, though it also flowers and can produce seeds. In youth -- and this atchul was comparatively young, though larger than usual -- it is surrounded by a veil of roots, none thick, most ending in midair.

In middle age the roots increase in size; many dig into the earth; instead of a veil of white filaments, they become a sturdy net. Outside the net, beyond the shadow of their mother, daughter trees rise, stretching out their branches, producing their own curtains or veils.

As the tree reaches old age the roots thicken even further, weighing the branches, pulling them toward the ground. Now the tree stands within a cage made of itself. In this cage, in time, it dies.

The tree is fairly common in the southern marshes, though rare elsewhere. Because of its behavior it has several nicknames: the Veil Tree, for obvious reasons, and the Sewing Tree, because of the way it grows, roots descending, then rising as another tree, then re-descending, as if it were stitching its

family into the soil, generation after generation.

Finally it is called the Mother Tree, because it reminds people of their mothers: large formidable women who sew or figure their accounts in rooms where gauzy curtains hang and billow.

Ahl pushed through the veil of roots and saw the inn clearly. It was more run-down than she remembered, but a cart stood at the entrance. Brightly painted in a foreign style, it must belong to travelers. Ahl dismounted and led her animal into the courtyard.

Two tsina stood there, old and bony. One was apparently lame as well. A man stood next to it, examining a forefoot. Something there, in the horny pads or the fissures between the three broad toes, disturbed him. He groaned softly, released the foot -- the tsin put it down gingerly -- looked up and greeted Ahl in a courteous, despondent tone.

Not her concern. She returned the greeting, tied her animal and went inside.

A man sat there. Like the man outside, he was a foreigner with uncut fur. But the man in the courtyard had been middle-aged, while this fellow was barely more than a boy, slender and graceful, though not -- it was obvious to Ahl -- entirely sober at the moment. He lounged on a bench, his back against the rough trunk of the atchul, which formed one wall of the room. The other walls were plastered and white rather than gray, though almost as rough as the atchul.

The innkeeper was female and a true daughter of Sorg: tall, thin, white and black. Ahl got beer from her. "Is there another place to be?" "There is only the patio," the innkeeper said, her tone apologetic. Anything would be better than sharing a room with an unrelated man. Ahl went out, finding an area paved with stone, shaded by the atchul's leaves and curtained by its roots.

Hah! Better! There was even a breeze that stirred the hot air, bringing the aroma of summer vegetation to her nostrils.

She sat down, tasted the beer -- it was cool in her mouth and pleasant on her tongue -- then thought about her current situation.

Merhit was asking her to oppose her own mother, as well as all the other senior women of her lineage. No woman did this lightly. Many women -- most women -- would never do it.

But it was wrong to make a contract with the intention of breaking it, and even more wrong to break a contract made solid by children; and to break the contract in such a way!

No one would question the right of senior women to examine newborn children and decide, "This one should be kept. This one should not."

The job had to be done. A decent self-respecting family, one such as Sorg had always been, could not allow any of its members to die slowly. Nor could a

decent family let children who had come out badly continue to live. What future did they have? How could they be happy or useful? The children who were killed held no grudge, as was known by the behavior of their ghosts.

The ghosts of adults are almost always resentful and dangerous. Hungry and angry, they haunt the living, looking for revenge or restitution. But the ghosts of newborn children cause no trouble. They appear in the houses where they were born and died, as if they don't know where else to go, causing no trouble, merely lingering. In time they grow dim and transparent. Finally they vanish. No one is the worse for them. This proves no wrong has been done. The children have lingered out of ignorance and confusion, not because they were angry or felt they had been dealt with unjustly.

The job of judging fitness to live was necessary. But it was the kind of decision that could not be left to the mothers who had borne the children; young women as a group were unsuited to this kind of work; and men were obviously utterly unfit. Beyond question the job was best done by matriarchs full of experience. They judged, then made sure the children -- the ones not kept -- died without pain.

The children were not always sickly. In times of famine Sorg women had killed healthy children. A great loss, but unavoidable. In addition, Ahl had heard of families who used infanticide to control the number of males and females in each generation. If times were difficult and violent, it made sense to have sons. In good times, one wanted daughters. As far as Ahl knew, the Sorg had never done this. Always confident and proud, they trusted in the Goddess and their own ability to turn any healthy child to a good use, providing the rains fell and crops rose from the soil.

Maybe she would be justified in opposing the matriarchs of Sorg in this case, though the idea made her queasy. But how could she get Leweli and the child away? By ship, of course. But a ship that belonged to Sorg would not take them; and what story could she tell to foreign sailors? Two women alone were certain to look odd. Why weren't they traveling with kin?

The innkeeper came out. "Those men are quarreling."

"Hah?"

"Quietly, and in a language I don't understand. Nonetheless, it's a quarrel. I didn't want to stay."

Ahl tilted her head in agreement. It was the worst kind of discourtesy for men to argue in front of unrelated women.

"They're actors. Something happened to split their company. These two are all that's left. For some reason they don't want to go home, though it's difficult to see what else they can do."

"Actors are often men of irregular behavior." Ahl said. This was a way of saying the men might be in trouble with their families. A terrible idea, but such

things happen, and happened more often in the period of this story. It was the age called the Unraveling. An apparently endless war raged to the north of Sorg, on the continent's Great Central Plain. For a while it had seemed that the great warleader Eh Manhata would bring peace by defeating all rival armies. But Manhata had died a year before; and the war continued with increased savagery.

The innkeeper sat down and drank from the cup she carried. "I've thought they might be criminals or outcasts, though they're both very civil, and the older man has been through here before, causing no trouble.

"I saw him act the last time. He had a company of five, and they did the death of some hero. I forget which one, but he had a red robe and died impressively, after a lot of talk -- about honor, mostly, as I remember. When the talk stopped, he gave a yell, and crash! Down he went! The men of Sorg are usually quieter when they die. What is there to talk about, anyway, in these situations?"

Ahl could think of no comment, though she'd enjoyed the few plays she had seen. She finished her beer and went to get her tsin, going around the outside of the inn, so as to avoid the quarreling men. When she looked closely, she saw the cart was shabby, its carving worn, its paint chipped and faded.

She got home at dusk. Great tall clouds were blowing in from the southwest, lightning flickered around their tops.

The storm broke after dark. Thunder woke Ahl. She lay in bed, listening to wind and rain. This was the way summer ended in her country. The season for safe ocean travel was almost gone. The task she had been given would become more difficult with every day that passed.

SHE WENT to Sorg Harbor the next morning. This was not a harbor town like the ones she had visited in the south: rows of houses climbing over hills; steep streets paved with stone; marketplaces, also paved; and gar dens, mostly private; but the people of the far south were not clutching, nor did they live in fear of thieves. It was a habit for them to share their gardens with passersby. Not everything, but something. Vines grew on the tops of walls. Pots of flowers stood by doors. Trees were left untrimmed, so their branches stretched over the street, dropping seeds in spring and leaves in autumn. In one town Ahl had walked through clouds of floating gauze. In another the streets had been carpeted with leaves as orange as fire. In a third there had been flowers, tiny and purple, dotting pale gray paving stones. Looking up, she had seen a flowering tree.

The Sorg preferred living on the farms established by their ancestors, and they saw no reason to make the stays of foreign visitors comfortable. Their harbor town consisted of storage barns. Here and there it was possible to find an inn, though most foreign sailors and merchants stayed on their ships, which were more pleasant and less expensive. The streets were unpaved and badly rutted. Unused ground was either bare or full of weeds.

The harbor itself was a wide bay. Five docks extended into it. Two were for

local fishing boats, empty at present: the boats were at work far out on the ocean.

It was the other docks that interested Ahl. Five deep-bellied freighters were tied along them. Shading her eyes, she surveyed each deck. All the sailors were black and white: members of her lineage or of closely allied families.

This was bad news, but it might not be the only news. Ahl reined her tsin at one of the taverns along the waterfront. These were the only structures in town that looked welcoming and pleasant. They were a kind of building that used to be common along the south coast. A wooden framework is anchored in large ceramic pots. Vines grow out of the pots and over the frame, creating an arbor open on one side. The taverns all looked toward the harbor. What else would interest sailors?

Inside were benches and more pots, these with narrow mouths. Beerflies whirred around them or crawled on their lips. Ahl dipped beer into a cup, paid for it and sat down.

"Where are you from?" asked a black and white sailor.

"Sorg."

"You need a haircut, then."

"I've been traveling. I'll find a barber now that I'm home."

The sailors went back to their conversation, which was about ships, as are all conversations in a harbor town. A Batanin women's ship had left the day before, early enough so the storm wouldn't have caught it close to shore; and there was a Taig ship outside the harbor, waiting for high water.

"It will be men," a male sailor added. Obviously he was Sorg or he wouldn't have been sitting with Sorg women, even in an arbor with an open front. "The Taig women don't travel. The ocean is dangerous, they say, and uncomfortable."

The other sailors -- all women -- grinned, tilting their heads in mocking agreement. The Taig women were right, of course, but there was more to the ocean than danger and discomfort. Let the Taig be timid, if they wished. The women of Sorg would sail, having confidence in their new ships and their family's traditional courage and strength.

No other foreign ships were expected.

Ahl drank her beer and left, riding home thoughtfully.

"Where have you been?" her mother asked.

"At Sorg Harbor."

"You are turning into a restless woman, and you still need to get a haircut."

"You're right that I've become restless," Ahl said. "I think I'll pay another visit to the marshes."

"Better that than the ocean," her mother said. "But I expect you to settle down soon."

The next day Ahl took her questions to the marsh witch and found Leweli visiting. Her cousin's fur -- like her own -- had not been cut recently, though for a different reason. The marsh was full of bugs, Leweli said. She wanted as much protection as she could get. "And Merhit, in spite of all her skills, is not a barber."

The fur had grown to its full length and was as gray as fog. The baby nursing at Leweli's upper left breast was the same color, though dappled.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Leweli said, sounding worried.

"It's common among the island folk," said Ahl. "Baby spots they call the condition. The spots usually fade, though now and then a person remains dappled. I have seen old grandmothers with spots and venerable men as well."

Her cousin frowned, looking at the child, who had finished eating and gone to sleep. "I hope they fade. Though I don't suppose it will matter, if she spends her life in a marsh."

"She won't," Merhit said firmly.

At this point Ahl explained her problem. How could she take Leweli and the baby south, if there were no ships in port except those belonging to relatives? "I could make up a story, explaining why we need to go south. But I have never been a good liar."

"This is true," said Leweli.

"And you know that any Sorg captain would check the story with my mother."

"You will have to go in disguise," said the witch. "How fortunate that both of you have uncut fur. You can pass as foreigners."

"Until we open our mouths and Sorg voices come out," Ahl said. "In any case, it's too late in the season. I don't think any of our family's ships will be going out again."

The witch frowned and was silent for a while. Finally she said, "The Taig ship will be leaving. Go with them."

"Two women and a child, traveling alone? How likely are they to take us?"

"This plan is doomed," said Leweli. "I'll have to stay here with you, Merhit."

"First of all, the marsh is unhealthy," the witch replied. "Secondly, I have visitors. Sooner or later you will be discovered. Imagine the trouble we'll be in then. Finally, I know the child belongs with her father's kin. I have seen that."

No way to argue with a witch who's had a vision. Ahl was silent. Leweli placed the baby in a basket lined with vegetation. The tiny hands were closed. Ahl couldn't see the bare skin of the palms. But the soles of the feet were visible and dark gray. So were the four nipples, emerging from the fog-gray fur like buds. Even the dappling seemed lovely to Ahl, since it reminded her of the Helwar and Ki.

"Tell me everything that has happened to you since you left my house two days ago," Merhit said finally. "Maybe there's something that will help me find a path out."

Ahl complied. After she finished Leweli said, "Would the actors take us north with them? It sounds as if they're in trouble already; they might not mind a bit more trouble, especially if we paid them."

Ahl realized she hadn't thought about money. "Do we have any?"

"I do," Merhit said. "So does your mother."

"Are you suggesting that I rob my mother?" Ahl asked, horrified.

"One thing at a time," said Merhit. "I want to answer Leweli first. You shouldn't go north. There's a war on, as you ought to remember, and it has gotten so bad that even women aren't entirely safe. I've heard stories of bandits --" She paused, apparently unwilling to continue. "The child belongs in the south."

The child opened her eyes, revealing sea-gray irises. It was a southern color. Leweli had blue eyes, as did Ahl and Merhit and almost all the Sorg.

"Have you named her?" Ahl asked, remembering Ki's gray eyes.

"Not yet. When I need to call her something, it's Darling or Dapple. A real name will come later, if she lives."

"I'm going to meet with the actors," Merhit said. Moving quickly, as witches do when they have made up their minds, she saddled her tsin and rode off. This was not the animal we know in modern times, descended from chargers used by warriors on the Great Central Plain. Instead this was a swamp tsin: short, stocky, thick-legged and broad-footed. Its coat was greenish-tan with pale, thin, vertical stripes which enabled it to blend with the marsh reeds. No breed of tsina is better over dubious ground. No breed is harder to find if it doesn't want finding.

Ahl knew all of this, of course, and paid no attention to the tsin. Instead she settled down to admire the baby and talk with her cousin.

Admiring a baby takes time, if it's done properly; and talking about one's family takes even longer. The afternoon passed without notice. All at once the light was slanting, and the witch rode back in view.

"Well?" asked Ahl.

Merhit dismounted, groaned and robbed her behind. "It's just as I thought. I know the actor. He's been here often, though his former tours were luckier. What the innkeeper told you is true. His company has split apart, and he is left with one companion. They don't want to go back north. 'War is bad for every kind of art,'" Perig said to me, 'except the art of war.' There may be other reasons, unpaid bills or the kinds of trouble actors get into.

"I offered him money to go south across the ocean and take the two of you, disguised as actors. Obviously it's a dubious enterprise, but he's desperate; and he knows I'm a good and reliable witch. I cured him of a throat inflammation that wouldn't go away. That was several years ago, but an actor remembers!

"He'll meet the two of you tomorrow at sunrise on the marsh road. Keep going till you meet him."

"Are we leaving already?" Leweli asked in a worried tone.

"Of course not. He has to train you. I'll mind the baby."

That was that. Ahl rode home on her animal, which was a crossbreed, larger and swifter than a true marsh tsin and less careful about where it put its feet: a good animal for ordinary use and warfare on solid ground.

That evening she sat with her mother and two aunts in a porch with gauze curtains. Hanging lanterns filled the room with light. Ahl's senior relatives sewed, while Ahl sharpened a favorite knife. Long and narrow, it was the best tool she had for cleaning fish.

"We're getting tired of waiting for you to settle down," an aunt said.

"We don't usually produce flighty women in this house," the second aunt added.

Ahl's mother kept at her cross-stitch, saying nothing, though she glanced at her daughter.

"Give me a few more days," Ahl said. "It's disturbing to live in a foreign place."

"We'll remember this in the future," her mother said.

The aunts tilted their heads in agreement.

"If we send any of our family off a second time, it will be men."

"Or women who are not promising."

"Though your kin haven't come back restless, as you have," Ahl's mother added.

Ahl ran her whetstone along the knife's blade. "What can I say?"

"There is nothing to say," her mother replied. "Remember who you are. And do!"

Ahl excused herself soon after that and went to her bed, not through the house's winding corridors, but outside through the garden. The air was cool and full of the scent of herbs. The sky was clear and starry. A meteor blazed in the north. Watching it, she swore two things. By the Goddess, she would find her way back to the Helwar and Ki. By the Goddess, she would not turn out like her mother!

She made the morning rendezvous on time. The men stood on the road, sun rising behind them. They'd brought their one healthy tsin, which grazed nearby. As Ahl dismounted, Leweli arrived on the witch's tsin.

"We went to the harbor yesterday," the older man said. "The Taig ship was planning to leave tomorrow, but will wait one extra day. Everything must be ready by tomorrow night. A challenge, let me tell you! But actors are used to rapid changes of plan and fortune."

"This is true," said the younger man with a glinting smile.

The men pulled clothing out of their animal's bags: male tunics, belts, swords and strips of fabric. "Put these on," the older man said. "Use the strips of fabric to bind your breasts till they're as flat as you can make them. We'll take a walk down the road while you dress. Be rapid! We have one day to teach you how to behave like men."

They worked till noon, the women walking and turning, bending, hefting tools and weapons, speaking. The men watched and made comments or demonstrated the right way to stride and pull a sword. At midday they rested in the shade of an atchul, a sapling with no secondary roots, which had apparently popped up out of nowhere. The mother tree was nowhere in view.

The older man, whose name was Perig, said, "I think you'd best pretend to be actors who specialize in female parts. They are usually tall; and they often have feminine mannerisms." He paused and gave the women a quick sideways glance. "I really can't imagine you as the kind of actors who play warriors or romantic leads."

"Well enough," said Ahl. "I've never wanted to be a soldier, even in pretense."

"They have the best roles," said the older man in a comfortable tone.

"I prefer lovers," said the younger man, whose name was Cholkwa.

"Well that you should," said Perig. "You have the beauty and grace required of such roles."

"But not the passion and darkness required of heroes," added the younger man. This sounded like an old argument, possibly a teasing one, though Ahl couldn't tell for sure.

"That will come. Youth is not a time for passion."

"It isn't?" asked Ahl, surprised.

"The young experience lust, which is a fine and useful feeling. How else can a young man move away from his mother? How else can he form friendships? And the best friendships are those formed when young. But real passion, the kind that can be acted, comes later. You'll see this, when you see me act."

When noon was past they got up and practiced more. At last, when the sun was low in the west, the actors called a halt.

"I've done what I can," Perig said. "Meet us here tomorrow at midafternoon, and bring the money for our passage. The Taig will want to be paid the moment we're on board."

Leweli tilted her head. The two kinswomen rode off together. When they were safely away from the men, Leweli said, "Merhit has a message for you. Bring what money you can find."

"She wants me to rob my mother," Ahl said.

"Yes." Leweli reined the witch's tsin, though it wasn't easy, since the animal knew it was going home. At last it came to a halt. Ahl stopped her more-obliging animal.

"We both know your mother has a cache under the floor in her counting porch. Most likely you know the exact stone and how to raise it."

"This is horrible," Ahl said.

"It was horrible for me when I realized they were going to kill my child, not because it was sick or deformed, but to escape an agreement they never intended to keep. Obviously it is shameful to rob one's mother. But haven't we been shamed already? What have our relatives left us in the way of honesty and honor?"

Ahl groaned and tilted her head in agreement.

That night she went to her mother's counting porch and pried up the right stone. Gold shone in the light of the tiny lamp she carried: coins, bracelets, chains, ingots and works of art that were too badly damaged to be shown: a mounted warrior with a missing head, a luat with two missing flippers, a statue of the Goddess in her guise of creator. The statue was hollow and had gotten crushed. Ahl could still recognize the Great One, her tools in her hands, the hammer that beat out the heavens, the axe that chopped out the earth; but it wasn't easy.

Coins would be the safest. They were least likely to be missed. She gathered two handfuls, then replaced the stone and hurried away, feeling self-disgust.

It was impossible to sleep now. Instead she went to the stable and saddled her animal. In the first light of dawn she rode to the marsh. The day was hot already; Ahl felt queasy; it wasn't a real sickness, she decided, but rather fear and shame. When she reached the witch's cabin, she found Merhit outside, crouched next to a fire, brewing a potion. "It will keep the child sleepy and quiet. I have a wicker chest to put her in. She'll be able to breathe. Did you bring the money?"

Ahl pulled it out. Merhit examined the coins, putting several off to the side. "These are distinctive. Better to take only coins in common use. The ship will be in harbor tonight. Board after dark. By sunrise you'll be on the open ocean. I'll hide your animal. When you are missed, your relatives will think you've run away or died in the marsh like Leweli. No one will connect you with a band of actors going south by sea."

"The innkeeper knows there are only two men in the acting company."

"Maybe two of their companions came back. Maybe they found new companions." The witch stirred her potion, looking thoughtful. "Maybe I should talk to the innkeeper. She knows I met with the actors; and your mother knows that you have been visiting me. I'm a closer neighbor than your mother or any of the matriarchs. She won't talk, if I tell her not to. But I have to say this business of weaving plots isn't easy. I'm going back to ordinary magic as soon as you and Leweli are gone."

When the potion was cooked through and cooled, she fed a spoonful to the baby.

"Why are you doing this now?" asked Leweli.

"To make sure the dose is right. People vary in how they respond to magic, and it's always hard to judge how much to give a baby."

Soon Dapple was asleep, lying in the green shade of the witch's arbor. She looked, Ahl thought, like a sul cub: newborn, soft and round, still covered with down. All too soon the down is lost, giving way to rough fur and scales. But for a while such cubs have an unequalled charm.

Merhit poured the rest of the potion into jars and sealed them, pausing now and then to examine the baby. "The dose is right," she said at last. "This is a healthy sleep, neither light nor heavy. She held out a spoon made of horn, yellow and translucent. "Take this. Always use it. Give the child a spoonful when you want her to be quiet, but never more than five times a day."

"Is the potion dangerous?" Leweli asked.

"All magic is dangerous," Merhit said.

A little after noon the women set off. Leweli and Ahl rode double. Merhit, on her marsh tsin, carried Dapple in the wicker chest.

When they reached the rendezvous, the men were there with their one healthy animal, loaded with baggage now. "Take your costumes and go down the road," Perig said. "We'll load your bags while you change."

"Not the baby," Leweli said. "It's hot already and will get hotter, I don't want her in that box."

"What are you going to do with her?" Cholkwa asked.

"Carry her till the sun goes down."

The two men looked at each other. "Very well," said Perig. "But if anyone comes, you'll have to hide in the marsh."

Leweli agreed. The two women changed clothing, Ahl binding all four of her breasts. Leweli, however, left her upper pair free and used the binding strip to make a sling for Dapple. "If she wakes, I can feed her."

They rejoined the men, and Perig said, "Another thing has occurred to me. By the time we reach Sorg Harbor, you are going to smell of milk and the baby."

"This is true," said Merhit, who was still on her tsin, watching everything.

"I also have a solution to this problem," Perig said. "Or rather, Cholkwa does."

The young man looked puzzled.

The older man smiled. "He likes perfume and always has a jar. We'll pour it over Leweli -- "

"What?" cried Cholkwa.

"When we reach the south, dear one, I'll buy you more."

Cholkwa opened his mouth.

"You can argue on the way," said Merhit. "Be careful! And be lucky!" She turned her tsin and rode off, leading Ahl's animal.

The journey to Sorg Harbor was uneventful. They met no one. Only a fool would travel through weather like this, Perig remarked. Late in the afternoon they took shelter against the heat, resting in the shadow of a half-grown atchul tree. Sister trees stood in the distance, but Ahl couldn't find the mother. Had it fallen? Was this an omen? Would she ever see her mother again? Imagining the matriarch's fury, Ahl decided she might not want to.

At sunset the four continued on their way, trudging through the long summer dusk into a starry night. By the time they reached Sorg Harbor the buildings were

dark.

They stopped. Leweli put her baby in the wicker chest and, with Ahl's help, strapped her upper breasts. The two men went off to relieve themselves. When they returned, Perig got out the perfume and dowsed Leweli.

"Too much," said Cholkwa. "You know what she smells like now."

"Like a man who sells the use of his body to other men," said Perig cheerfully. "Better than a mother. In the future, please remember to use the male pronoun when speaking of Leweli or Ahl. They are men now."

"With a baby in a box," said Cholkwa.

"As you say," Perig agreed in the same cheerful tone. He looked toward the women. Ahl could see starlight shining on his eyes. "You need new names. How does Lewekh sound? And Ahlin?"

"Good enough," said Ahl.

Perig led them through dark streets. A few dim lanterns shone in the harbor, aboard docked ships. One was the Taig Far Traveler. A sleepy male voice asked, "Who?"

"The actors," said Perig.

"Come on board."

Tired and half-asleep, Ahl helped unfasten the chest. She and Leweli carried it into a cabin. A lamp hung from the ceiling; the still air stank of burning fish oil. Ahl forced open the cabin window. "It'll be better once we're under way."

"Good," said Leweli.

The men followed with bags, then left again. The tsin had to be delivered to its new owner. Ahl searched the cabin. A row of cabinets went along one wall. Inside were five hammocks, neatly rolled, and five pots of fired clay, good-sized and glazed inside. The lids fit tightly. One was clearly for urination. She could tell by the shape and the emblem drawn on the outside. She didn't know the purpose of the others.

Leweli spread her bedroll on the floor, but Ahl -- a sailor -- hung up one of the hammocks, fastening it to iron hooks in the cabin walls. Along with the lamp and the cabinets, these were the cabin's only furniture. A spare folk, the Taig.

Lying in her hammock, she regarded the lamp, which was iron and shaped like a fish with bulbous glass eyes. Light shone out the eyes and through a hole in the fish's back. Taig art. The Sorg would never make anything so grotesque. Thinking this, Ahl went to sleep.

Waking, she felt the ship in motion. The fish was dark. Daylight came through

the window. She could make out Leweli, sleeping next to the wicker chest, one hand on it. The men were not present. Had they slipped off in the night? Were she and Leweli alone among male strangers? A disturbing idea! She rose and used the pot-for-urination, then went on deck. Perig and Cholkwa were there, leaning on the ship's aide, watching blue waves go past.

"Good morning, Ahlin," Perig said. "Cholkwa is a little queasy. I thought he'd be better up here."

"And you?" asked Ahl.

"No kind of travel bothers me."

She stayed a while with the men. For better or worse the journey had begun. There was a kind of relief in simply beginning. As to the end, who could say? With luck, she'd find Ki.

The first two days of the voyage were bright, with a strong wind blowing out of the north. Nothing could be better! They sped toward Helwar over foaming water. Leweli stayed in their cabin, afraid that the Taig sailors would see through her disguise, afraid as well to leave the baby alone.

"A good actor and a bad traveler," Perig said in explanation. "Poor Lewekh is often queasy, but if you could see him play a matron mourning the death of her male relations! A stone would groan and grieve!"

"I would like to see this," said the Taig captain politely.

Ahl preferred to be on deck, listening to Perig tell stories about his acting career, though he never mentioned the trouble that had left him with one companion.

At night they had to share the same cabin. The two men slept on the floor, keeping as far from the women as was possible. They were not perverts, Perig said in a reassuring tone. "Neither one of us has ever touched a woman, except for close relatives when we were children. Nor will we. Men like us are never used to fulfill breeding contracts. What lineage would want the kind of traits we have?"

This was true, as Ahl realized. The most important male virtue is directness. How could an actor have this quality? Surely-- to do his work -- he had to be devious. Nor did it seem likely that an actor's life would encourage loyalty, the second male virtue. Always traveling, living a series of lies, how could men like Perig and Cholkwa be loyal, except possibly to one another?

In thinking this, Ahl showed the prejudice of her time. Now we understand that honesty can manifest itself in more than one way, and that people can travel long distances from home without becoming disloyal.

But it wasn't simply prejudice that made her think of actors as men of doubtful virtue. In those days acting was a trade halfway in shadow. Many actors were

runaways; and not a few were criminals: thieves and prostitutes, usually, though there had been one famous acting troop which supplemented its income with banditry.

"Understandable, given the quality of their acting," Perig said when he told Ahl about this group. "Eh Manhata caught them finally and told them to put on a play. Maybe they thought he'd leave them alive, if they could please him. They did their best, and he had them all beheaded. It wasn't a judgment on their acting, but it could have been."

Were her two companions thieves? Ahl wondered uneasily, then remembered that she was a thief and beyond question disloyal to her family. In addition she was pretending to be a man. Hah! She was most of the way into darkness! Maybe she ought to finish the job and become an actor, though women never did.

On the third day the wind shifted, blowing out of the west. Black clouds loomed there, lightning flashing around them: the first autumn storm. The Taig men reefed their sails. In spite of this the ship's speed increased. The waves grew taller and changed color, becoming dark green with thick white streaks of foam. The air filled with flying spray. "Get below," the Taig captain said to them.

They obeyed. Leweli was in the cabin already, throwing up in a pot which had not been used till now.

"This is turning into a difficult situation," Perig said.

"Yes," said Cholkwa in a strange voice and found a pot of his own.

The cabin window was already shut. Ahl checked to make sure it was secure, then sat down. The ship was well-made, though not of Helwar quality; and the crew were good sailors, the captain especially. Nonetheless they might go down. Such things happened. It was terrible to sit here quietly! She mentioned to Perig that she was trained as a sailor.

"The captain sent us below for a reason," he replied. "Respect his knowledge; and remember how wet it is on deck. If you go up, your clothing will be soaked at once. It will cling to your body. The Taig men will know you're a woman."

This was true. Ahl tilted her head in agreement. Above her the fish lamp swung back and forth, casting shadows that danced over the walls. Leweli and Cholkwa were still throwing up. Perig sat on the floor, arms clasped around his knees, in a pose of patient endurance. Seeking distraction, Ahl opened the wicker chest. The child Dapple slept quietly, as if in the witch's arbor. She laid a thick cloth over her legs for protection, then lifted the child out. How delicate the body between her hands! How soft the fur! How light the weight when she laid Dapple in her lap! Ahl watched the baby sleep, the tiny chest rising and falling gently. The eyes were not perfectly shut. Now and then, when the lantern's light shifted, a gleam shone between the gray lids. Hah! It made Ahl feel tender! As did the loosely curled hands, their nails uncut and curving over the fingertips like claws.

It occurred to her that the potion's magic might work on full-grown people. At the moment Leweli and Cholkwa were both lying down. If they were making any noise, Ahl was not able to hear it over the sound of water rushing, the creak and groan of wood. But neither looked comfortable.

So.

Ahl laid Dapple in the chest, then filled the horn spoon with potion, bringing it to her cousin. Leweli glanced up, her expression despairing.

"Try this," said Ahl, kneeling.

Leweli hesitated. The ship made a sudden loud noise and shuddered around them. That was enough. Leweli took the potion.

If that was the right dose for a child, then the mother needed more. Ahl went back to the jar.

When she finished with Leweli, she took the jar to Perig and explained her idea, speaking loudly through the ship's noise. The actor smiled and carried the jar to his companion.

Leweli and Cholkwa dozed, looking more comfortable than before. Perig sat as before. After a while Ahl began to feel queasy. The jar of potion was still mostly full. She ate a spoonful. The flavor was medicinal, sharp and herby. Soon she noticed her body was relaxing. Instead of fear and nausea, she felt a pleasant drowsiness. She lay down, one hand on the chest where Dapple slept, dreamt of Ki and woke to a banging noise.

Was the ship breaking apart? No, it was the Taig captain, beating on their door. The storm was as bad as ever, he told them. All the sails were gone, pulled down or blown away. Still the ship drove east, far off course already. "Pray for us, if you think the Goddess will listen; and if you have charms or know any spells, use them now!"

Then he was gone. The fish lamp swung back and forth. Looking across the cabin, Ahl saw Perig's mouth moving. "Are you reciting magic spells?"

"Speeches out of the plays. Everything I can remember in praise of the Goddess, courage and luck."

This didn't seem useful, but could hardly do harm. Ahl gave more potion to the invalids, the child and herself. Time passed. Now and then, among her dreams, she thought she heard Perig's voice, speaking of honor and fate.

Finally -- was it on the third day or the fourth? -- the motion and noise decreased. Perig left the cabin, coming back to say, "The captain thinks we'll survive, though we're far east of the route he planned for us; and I have never seen an ocean like this one.'

Ahl couldn't stay put. Pulling a vest over her tunic, she went on deck. The

smooth planks shone with water. The air tasted of moisture and salt. Looking up, she saw the main mast still intact, though loose ropes flapped around it, holding pieces of broken spar like fish in a net.

On every side waves rose like mountains capped with snow. What a sight it was! But the ship was moving like a ship, climbing the dark blue slopes, sliding down into deep blue valleys. Before this, when the storm was at its worst, the ship's motion had reminded her of an animal fighting as the butcher's helpers dragged it into the butcher's killing yard.

They were going to live.

The next day was cloudless. Ahl and Perig opened the cabin window and emptied the various pots. Nonetheless the cabin's air remained less than pleasant. The two of them spent most of the day on deck. The waves had decreased in size; and the Taig sailors put up a sail.

"We can steer now," the Taig captain said. "Though not well. We have to put in for repairs. I'm at the eastern edge of my knowledge, beyond all certain ports; and we can't turn back and sail across this wind until the repairs are made."

"Is that so?" said Perig in his usual tone of friendly interest.

"What then?" asked Ahl.

"There are islands out here," the captain answered. "I've heard other captains describe them, and they're marked on my maps, though this far out the maps are unreliable. Some are uninhabited, which would be fine. Others are inhabited by honest fishing people, which would be even better. What I'm worried about is pirates. Also monsters, though I'm not sure the monsters are real. There's no question about the pirates."

The day after, they spotted land. A sailor climbed the main mast. Coming down, he reported no signs of habitation. But there were plenty of trees and a broken coastline that might provide a harbor.

"We'll try it," said the captain.

At sunset they anchored in a little bay edged by sand. Beyond the sand were ledges of rough-looking, dark-brown rock. Trees grew atop the ledges, their foliage the color of weathered bronze. The place made Ahl uneasy, though the harbor water was still and clear, the sky bright and almost cloudless.

They would spend the night on board, the Taig captain said. Was he simply being cautious, or did he feel -- as Ahl did -- that the island brooded and held secrets? Being the captain, he did not have to explain himself.

In the morning men went ashore. They returned midway through the afternoon, having gone around the island. It was empty of people, though there were plenty of birds. The sailors brought back firewood and fresh water from a spring. Hah! It was sweet to drink!

"I don't imagine you'll be any help in repairing the ship," the Taig captain said to Perig and Ahl. "But you can work on shore. We'll need more wood, more water, and if any of you know how to hunt or fish -- "

"Lew --" Ahl said and paused, then continued. "Lewekh is a fine hunter, though what he knows best is marshes."

"Cholkwa and I have lived off the land," said Perig.

"Do what you can," said the captain.

Cholkwa had no problem with this idea. But Leweli refused. "I can't leave the child alone. What if she wakes and begins to cry? What if she becomes ill? Men can't take care of children."

"The child is healthy as a tsin and sleeps like a rock," said Ahl.

"Usually," said Leweli. "But I will not leave her."

In the morning the three of them set off. It was another bright day. Small clouds dotted the sky. A mild wind blew, stirring the bronze-brown forest, making spots of sunlight dance over the ground. There were no trails. Obviously, no large animals lived on the island, though -- as the sailors had said -- birds were plentiful. So were edible plants, and Perig turned out to be excellent at finding these. Soon he had a basketful. Ahl knew most, though he was especially happy with something she hadn't seen before. "Tsin ears," he called the plant. It was fleshy and looked like its name, except for its color, which was a reddish-purple. The plant grew on tree trunks, so it looked as if the trees had ears and were listening: an eerie sight. Perig cut them off, using a knife. The cut ends did not bleed, a relief to Ahl.

On the far side of the island was a moor, covered with low vegetation. The birds there were large and heavy, like the halpa which people raise on many parts of our home planet. Like halpa, they flew when startled, but only for a short distance. Then they dropped down and tried to run.

"This can't be called a sport," said Cholkwa and shot one.

Seen close, it was covered with glossy brown feathers, except for its legs and feet, which were naked and bright blue. There were areas of bare skin on the head, circling the animal's round yellow eyes, so it seemed to wear spectacles, though this image would not have occurred to Ahl. In her age spectacles were rare, and it's likely that she never saw a pair.

"What do you think?" asked Cholkwa.

"It looks like a halpa," said Perig. "Except for the blue skin. Maybe it's a relative. If so, it ought to be tasty, especially in a stew with my ears."

They spent the midday killing birds. All had the same areas of blue skin. So it

wasn't a disease, a thought which had occurred to Ahl. When they had enough, Perig found a long straight branch. They fastened the birds to it by their bright blue feet and carried them back this way, Cholkwa at one end of the stick, Ahl at the other. The wind had died. Ahead of them a trail of smoke rose into the cloudless sky.

"They must be heating pitch," said Perig. "The ship was taking on water, the captain said."

"How could it not?" asked Cholkwa. "If I had known what kind of trip this was going to be --"

"We couldn't stay in Sorg," said Perig. "Nor return to the north; and we have survived the journey."

"Wait till we've reached our destination before you say that," replied Cholkwa.

They reached the inlet in late afternoon. The ship's cook, a burly man with gray-brown fur, descended on them and seized their birds. Perig followed with his, sin ears.

Dinner was roast bird. The cook would use the ears tomorrow, Perig said. "The men are hungry. A stew takes time; and tsin ears require special preparation. I have to say the birds taste fine roasted. I'm almost certain they're related to halpa."

"How did they get here?" asked Cholkwa. "They could hardly fly."

"Maybe they've been here all along," Perig said. "Placed by the Goddess when she made the world."

"Or maybe people left them," said Ahl, licking her fingers.

"That's possible," Perig admitted.

Most of the sailors stayed on shore that night, as did Perig and Cholkwa. Ahl suspected the two men were interested in sex, now that they were safe and could get away from their female companions. Nothing could be done in the cabin. No self-respecting male would do anything so intimate in a room containing women. But on a dark beach, surrounded by other men -- She envied them and went back to the ship.

The next day the Taig captain said, "I'm tired of your comrade's laziness. What is his excuse today? Sickness? An unlucky omen?"

"He still hasn't recovered from the storm," said Ahl.

"Nonsense," said the captain. "He will go on shore. You said he's a good hunter. We need food, and he clearly needs exercise and fresh air."

Argument was impossible. Leweli went with Ahl and the actors, though she looked

unhappy and began complaining as soon as they were in the forest.

"Merhit is a good witch," said Ahl. "I'm confident her magic will keep the child safe. We have no choice, cousin. A captain must be obeyed."

THIS TIME the birds were harder to find, but at noon they came on a flock, all grouped together in an open space on the moor, scratching with large blue feet and pecking. It was easy to kill as many as they were able to carry. Laden with their prey, they returned to the beach.

The pitch pot was turned over, and a black pool of pitch lay next to it. Bodies, the Taig sailors almost certainly, lay scattered on the sand.

"Bad luck!" said Perig.

Could they flee? Ahl glanced around. The forest was close, but not close enough. Ragged strangers moved toward them, holding bloody swords.

Perig stretched his arms out to the side. His hands were open and empty. "Obviously we can't fight you. But I ought to mention if you kill us, you will be killing a pair of women."

"What do you mean?" asked one of the men. His accent was thick, but Ahl could understand him.

Perig gestured. "Those two are women."

The man frowned. "They don't look it."

"Ahl, pull off your tunic," Perig said.

She did as he asked, dropping the tunic and unfastening the band that held her upper breasts. The moment she was bare, the men looked down. This was encouraging. In spite of being pirates, they had not lost all sense of right behavior.

"Put on your tunic," said one of the men in a stifled voice.

She picked up the tunic and pulled it on.

"There is a baby on the ship," Perig continued in his usual pleasant voice. "The other woman, the one holding the stick with birds, is the mother. I assume you're planning to kill us or maroon us. But you can hardly kill women or maroon them with unrelated men."

"How do you know what we can do?" asked the man who had spoken previously. Most likely he was the leader.

The men around him looked uneasy. One said, "Jehan," in a nervous tone.

"And why are these women traveling in disguise with men who aren't relatives?"

added the man named Jehan. "I know foreigners lack self-respect, but this seems worse than usual."

"Why don't you disarm us, which is the obvious next step, and then we can talk," said Perig. "If you've left the Taig cook alive, you might give the birds to him."

Jehan swung his sword. Perig fell.

"Goddess!" cried Cholkwa, falling to his knees beside his lover. Ahl was certain now. She heard love in the young man's anguished voice.

Perig sat up, feeling his head.

"I used the flat," said Jehan. "But if he keeps talking, I'll use the edge."

"He'll be quiet," said Cholkwa and stood, helping Perig up. His hands, on the older man, seemed as careful as if he were holding a fragile treasure: something made of glass and gold.

"Now," said Jehan. "Give us your weapons."

They went down the beach, still carrying their birds, surrounded by pirates. Now Ahl could see beyond the Taig ship. There was another ship, somewhat smaller, outside the harbor entrance, blocking escape. Obviously it belonged to the pirates. Squinting against the glare of sunset, she tried to make out details, but couldn't tell if there were pirates on the Taig ship.

Clearly they held the beach and the remaining sailors on shore: a group of seven, two injured, one badly. The Taig cook was wrapping an already-bloody bandage around his chest. Guards stood around the prisoners, holding weapons that had belonged-- Ahl was almost certain-- to the Taig.

"Are the rest dead?" asked Ahl.

"Some," said the cook in an angry voice. "Most were on the ship, repairing the rigging. They are still there, guarding it against capture."

One of the guards said, "My cousin Jehan thought it would be a good idea to attack from the land. That's where you seemed to be, if your smoke was any indication. If we came sailing in from the west, you'd see us and make preparations. Better to circle to the south -- the island would hide us -- and land a party in the little southern harbor, then come through the forest and take you by surprise."

"It worked," said Jehan stubbornly.

"We don't have their ship," said the guard.

"We'll get it," Jehan said. "In the meantime, we have dinner."

"And two women," said one of the other pirates.

"What?" asked the guard. He was a stocky man with dark fur going silver over his shoulders. In Ahl's opinion, he looked sensible, not a trait she associated with piracy.

"I'm a woman," said Ahl. "And so is she."

"This is turning into a perplexing mess," the guard said. "What are two women doing on a Taig ship, disguised as men? Taig women don't travel, and why would any woman disguise herself as a man? Surely you know how dangerous it is! We could have killed you by mistake."

"Can I speak?" asked Perig.

"If you want to," said the guard. "And have something useful to say."

"He's one for chattering," said Jehan in a warning tone.

"Let him chatter," said the guard. "I want information."

"These two women needed to get south in a hurry and went in disguise, because they couldn't find a women's ship."

"Are you related to them? You don't look similar."

Perig hesitated briefly, then tilted his head in assent. "The women in our lineage are tall and have an authority we men lack."

"Which lineage?" the guard asked.

"Tesati," said Perig.

"Not one I know."

"It's to the north," said Perig. "At the edge of the Great Central Plain. Or rather it was there. The Unraveling has destroyed much. Another family overwhelmed ours. The men are dead, except for us."

"Why are you alive?" asked Jehan.

"We weren't home when the end came. Cholkwa and I are actors and often travel."

"Actors!" said the guard, looking interested.

"When we did come home, we found --" Perig smiled briefly. "No home. Our male kin were dead. The family that killed them, the Chaitin, had gathered in our female relatives and the children. We should have killed ourselves. It would have been the decent thing to do. But we found these two hiding out, along with Leweli's baby. They didn't want to be Chaitin. There are women who hold this kind of grudge."

Everyone was listening intently, of course. It was a good story, told excellently. But now Ahl saw a look of confusion on the Taig cook's face, followed by a look of horror. The cook was remembering the night before, she thought. Perig and Cholkwa had made love on the beach. The Taig sailors had noticed and been undisturbed. Traveling companions often give each other this kind of comfort, provided they are the same sex and not related. But if the two actors belonged to the same family, the act was incest. The cook opened his mouth, then closed it and glanced down, going back to work on his injured comrade.

A near thing! And not over. The cook might still decide to denounce the actors.

"Maybe we should have given our kinswomen to the Chaitin," Perig said. "They would have been safer; and there is always something offensive about the idea of women without a family. Such things happen to men. We know it! But women should live inside a double wall of matriarchs and soldiers.

"These ethical problems are never easy to untangle. In the end we decided to rely on the old rule, which says that men should not make decisions for women. That power lies in the hands of their mothers and their female relatives; and they were not available, nor were they kin, since they had become Chaitin, while these two remained Tesati. They asked us to escort them south; and we agreed out of loyalty, which is not the foremost male virtue. That, of course, is directness or honesty. But loyalty is one of the five."

"I told you he talked a lot," said Jehan.

"Are you really actors?" asked the guard.

"Why would I lie?" asked Perig.

"I've never seen a play," the guard said. Ahl heard longing in his voice.

"Well, then," Perig said. "Let the Taig cook fix our birds. You can feast tonight and see The Death of Eh Manhata."

"He's dead?" cried the guard. The other pirates made noises indicating surprise.

"What happened?" asked Jehan.

"He was betrayed by men he trusted, captured and --" Perig stopped. "The play will show you. Wait till tonight."

"It's all very well for you to talk about waiting," Leweli said. "But I have a child on board the Taig ship. I need to get back to her."

"We can't let you go," said Jehan.

"Why not?" asked the silver-backed guard.

"For one thing, the Taig might be willing to surrender their ship in order to get these two women back, especially if they have a baby on their hands."

"You are willing to hold women hostage?" asked Perig in a shocked tone.

Jehan frowned and raised his sword.

"Don't kill him," said the guard. "I want to see the play."

"For another," continued Jehan, "we can't let the women tell the Taig whatever they may have found out about us. What if they've realized how few of us there are? And how difficult it will be for us to take the ship?"

A look of pain crossed the guard's face. "Very well," he said. "Keep the women here."

The pirates untied the cook's feet, so he could work, helped by pirates. Soon a new fire was burning, and the cook was eviscerating birds. As for Ahl and her comrades, they settled in the sand close to the Taig prisoners. The guard settled with them, obviously anxious to talk. His name was Jehan, he said, the same as his cousin. Though he was Jehan Silverback, and his cousin was Long Jehan.

"Long?" said Perig. "He's no taller than you are."

"That isn't the way he's long," said Jehan Silverback, then looked embarrassed. "It's hard for me to remember these two are women."

"This isn't a situation where it's easy to remember anything having to do with manners," said Perig. "Though I'm glad to know you're a self-respecting man. How did you end in this line of work?"

He came from an island, said Jehan Silverback. "Where exactly I won't tell you, in case we decide to let you live." It was one of two islands that lay remote from all other land. The guard's family lived on one island. Another lineage -- "our breeding partners" -- lived on the other. Both islands were steep and stony, surrounded by rocks and shoals. Not much to look at, according to the guard, though his voice sounded affectionate to Ahl. "But the cliffs are full of nesting birds; and the waters next to shore are so full of shellfish that they are like stones on a beach; and there are plenty of fish."

The problem was the islands were treeless. The islanders lived in houses made of stone and sod. Their fuel was driftwood and the oil of marine animals.

Lacking timber, they could not build boats. Without boats, they would not be able to fish or reach their neighbors. "We might not starve, since we could still net birds and gather shellfish. But how could we breed without boats to carry men from one family to the other? We'd die out, unless we were reduced to inbreeding." There was horror in the guard's voice as he said this. "We are pirates because we can't buy the ships we need. Nothing we have to sell is of sufficient value."

"Couldn't you cut timber on an island like this one?" asked Ahl.

"We gather wood for ordinary uses on this island," the guard said. "And we could make some kind of wretched little dinghy from the timber here. But a good ship requires large trees, metal tools and fittings, fabric for the sails, rope and wood most of all -- skill."

"You want the Taig ship," said Perig.

"Yes. We thought we were in luck when we saw your smoke. Since the island is uninhabited, we knew that meant a ship, most likely one that had put in for water and repairs. The sailors would be tired from fighting the storm which blew them here; they would be preoccupied by work, and they would not expect any trouble. Why should they, in a place this remote? Things didn't turn out exactly as we expected. But we have prisoners, eleven of you now. If we can't take the ship by force, maybe we can strike a bargain."

"It really doesn't seem wrong to you, holding women and a baby hostage?" asked Perig.

Jehan Silverback scratched his forehead. "It's a difficult situation and not one we expected. No one lives in this part of the ocean except us and our neighbors. When ships come here, it's usually to fish or hunt. The crews are male. What family would risk its women on work that is hard and dangerous and unpleasant, and which does not require any of the usual female skills? One does not negotiate with a storm or a fish."

There were, of course, many families whose women fished. But Ahl was not going to argue with this pirate, who seemed to have strong opinions about women's work. Nor did she wish to bring up the worst danger of this region, the one that would almost certainly keep women away: murderous pirates.

"You have never encountered a women's ship?" asked Perig.

"To the west of here we have," the guard said. "Not often, since we rarely go far into the narrow ocean. When we realize that a ship is crewed by women, we let it go with an exchange of greetings. We are not monsters! My cousin is right. You talk too much."

Perig said, "Let me go and help the cook. Then you'll be free of my foolish questions."

Jehan Silverback gave permission. The rest of them stayed where they were. By this time the sun was down and the sky darkening. Lamps began to glimmer on the two ships. This was a frightening situation, though not as frightening to Ahl as it would be to a modern woman. Having met the humans, we know that it is possible for a species to flourish in spite of behavior that our ancestors would find unthinkable; and we wonder if our own behavior is fixed. Could our men turn into monsters like human men? Could they turn on women and children? Is it possible that violence has no natural limits?

None of these questions occurred to Ahl, sitting on the darkening beach in another age. Instead she worried about the baby on the Taig ship. Surely it would wake soon, be hungry and cry. She worried about the possibility that her shipmates and the two actors would die, if not tonight, then tomorrow; and she worried about the rest of this unlucky trip. Would they ever get to Helwar? Would she ever see Ki again? But she did not fear harm to herself or Leweli. Was she fight to be fearless? At this distance in time we cannot say.

As dark closed around them, the cooking fire burned more brightly. Working in a red glare, the Taig cook roasted birds, while Perig prepared his tsin ears. Dismembered, the birds went into an iron pot with water, the ears and herbs.

"This is something" said Jehan Silverback. "A proper feast and then a play. We never have events like this on our island."

Soon there was food, halin, and fresh clean water, drawn from one of the island's springs. None drank water, except the prisoners.

"Eat moderately," Perig whispered as he settled next to Ahl.

"Why?" she hissed.

"The ears have to be prepared in just the right way. If not, they are toxic. Not fatal, but I hope --"

A pirate glanced at them. Perig stopped talking.

He had poisoned the stew. She whispered a warning to Leweli.

"This is likely to be a long night," her cousin whispered in answer.

While the pirates ate, Perig and Cholkwa consulted. Their costumes and props were on the Taig ship, so they borrowed from the pirates and prisoners: a long red ragged cloak, a stained yellow tunic, a staff with impromptu ribbons. They set torches on long poles in the sand and drew lines to mark a stage.

Then -- the pirates full of food, but still drinking -- they began.

This was The Death of Eh Manhata, Cholkwa announced. A true story, acted by men whose native home was on the Great Central Plain. "We have not lied. This story is the way things actually happened."

The first scene was between Perig in the red cape and Cholkwa. Perig was Manhata: arrogant and confident, the greatest man in the world. Cholkwa was a younger relative, worried about his kinsman. He was too trusting, Cholkwa said. The men who sought a meeting with him were liars. They would betray him.

Strutting back and forth, the red cape swirling, Perig said, "Nonsense."

It really was remarkable. Perig, who had always been mild and reasonable, in no

way formidable, now held everyone's attention. It seemed to Ahl that he had grown in size. His stride was forceful. His voice commanded. Even the cloak had changed, becoming -- how could Ahl describe it? -- richer and heavier, fit for a great leader, a warrior without equal.

In vain Cholkwa argued. Perig would not listen. Off he went to the foredoomed meeting.

Cholkwa left the circle of torchlight, returning shortly in the stained yellow tunic. Now he was one of the false allies, a wheedling plausible man, who had been -- one sensed -- handsome in his youth and was still in the habit of behaving seductively.

How did Cholkwa manage this? His own good looks were mostly gone, and he seemed older. The stained tunic helped, making him look seedy, but it was something more. The way he held himself? His voice? He didn't command attention like Perig; and Ahl could still see him inside the character he played, the way one saw people inside festival dolls, when firelight shone through the stick and cloth bodies. Nonetheless, he impressed her.

Ahl leaned forward, intent. Around her the pirates and prisoners were silent.

At first Manhata was oblivious. The other man, the ally, praised, made promises, even flirted, though carefully. Manhata ignored the flirtation and accepted the praise, expecting nothing less. Gradually Cholkwa's manner changed. Sharpness crept in. He began to mock the old warrior at the same time that he became more openly seductive.

A disturbing scene. Around her the pirates shifted and muttered. One stood up, stumbled into the bushes and threw up.

Understandable, though maybe it was the stew.

It took a long time for Manhata to understand what he was hearing. Finally he turned on the ally, shouting, "How dare you?"

The ally explained. The trap had closed. Manhata's men, the guard he'd brought with him, were dead by now. Manhata would join them soon. "You have lived too long and become a fool, deserving of a shameful death. I promise you, old man, that is the kind of death you'll get."

What happened next was impossible to understand. Perig barely moved, yet she could see every idea and feeling in his mind. Disbelief came first, then anger-- a brief hot flash, then fear. How was this possible? Manhata was fearless. As she watched, Perig grew smaller, collapsing in on himself like a festival doll at festival end, when the sticks that hold it up are folded. Now she saw Manhata's age. He was more than eighty at the time of his death. His life had been one of constant violence. Who knew how many injuries he had endured? Surely his body must have reached its limit. And he was alone. His sisters, who had guided him through his long career, were dead. What was left for him, except his terrifying reputation?

Courage was left. She could see that now, as the old man straightened, meeting the gaze of his former ally.

"Do what you will," Manhata said. The pirates sighed. As they did, Perig stepped out of the torchlight. Cholkwa joined him. A moment later the young man returned wearing his own tunic. Now he was a messenger, bringing news of Eh Manhata's death. He stood quietly, looking out at the audience, and described what happened next. It had been a bad death, long and deliberately painful; and Manhata handled it less than well. The Man Who Broke Lineages was himself finally broken. Ahl had heard most of this before. It was no more pleasant a second time. Of all the brutal things done during the Unraveling, this was the worst. Around her the pirates gasped and groaned. "Why?" cried more than one.

"His former allies wanted us to remember him this way," said Cholkwa. "If he had died in battle or by some ordinary form of execution, his reputation would not have been diminished. But this --"

"You should have lied," said Jehan Silverback. "You should have given him the death he had earned. How can you cooperate in something so contemptible?"

Perig stepped back into the torchlight. The red cloak was gone. He was Manhata no longer. "Anyone can be broken," he said in his ordinary, quiet, even tone, "No one escapes shame except through luck. This is something that Manhata may have forgotten, for a while at least. But he learned it at the end.

"That's one thing to remember. The other is, his enemies are fools."

"Why do you say that?" asked Jehan Silverback.

"In old age, when he no longer had his sisters to advise him, Manhata acted in ways that must be called foolish. This can't be denied. It's true as well that his courage failed him at the end.

"But think of the rest of his life! I'm from the plain, as my cousin told you. For more than fifty years, Manhata rose above the rest of us like a thundercloud that would not dissipate. Every time we looked up, there he was -- his head in sunlight and lightning around his shoulders. Can a year or two of folly, a day or two of pain unmake a life like his?"

"Yes," said Long Jehan.

"No," said Jehan Silverback.

"Time will determine," Perig said in his usual reasonable tone.

That ended the play. The pirates continued drinking. By now they were obviously intoxicated. Several more threw up, lurching past the prisoners into the forest shadows. Long Jehan grabbed Cholkwa's arm, pulling him down on the sand beside him. Perig settled by the other pirate cousin. Ahl couldn't tell if Jehan Silverback had ordered him to do so or asked him. Maybe Perig was acting on his

own, trying -- like Manhata -to beg a better ending.

"I think it's time for us to leave," said Leweli quietly.

"Mother told me men were disgusting after they'd been drinking for a while," Ahl said in agreement.

Maybe they could say they needed to urinate, Ahl thought. That would get them to the forest. But no ruse was necessary. The pirate closest to them slumped over suddenly, his cup spilling from his hand. The next fellow over had already risen and was stumbling toward the Taig prisoners. Why, Ahl didn't know or want to know. She and Leweli rose together, stepping backward into the black forest shadow. No one called out.

Instead of entering the forest, they went along its edge, keeping in the shadow. Hah! It was dark! But there were stars above them and lamps on the two anchored ships. When the beach ended, they clambered over rocks, going out on the promontory which formed one side of the harbor. Someone by the pirate's fire was screaming. Ahl didn't think it was from pain or fear.

Finally, when they were a good distance from the beach, Leweli said, "This will do."

The two women dove into the water and swam toward the Taig ship.

Remember that Sorg is marsh. No one grows up there without learning to swim. Ahl was excellent and Leweli even better. Side by side, they stroked through the cold still water, making no sound. On shore the pirates were shouting at one another. Had they discovered the missing women? Or were they quarreling, as drunks will do?

When they reached the ship, Ahl grabbed the anchor chain. It made a noise. A moment later she saw a shape above her, leaning over the ship's side. Metal gleamed in starlight.

"It's Ahlin," she said quietly. "With Lewekh. We escaped."

Ropes came down. They climbed up.

"I hope you'll be able to do something about that baby," said the Taig captain.

"You found it," said Ahl.

"Hard to miss it, once it began to cry."

"I'll take care of Dapple," said Leweli and went toward their cabin.

Ahl stayed with the captain, telling him about the situation on shore.

"The actor tried to poison them," he said, leaning on the railing and looking at the figures that moved around the pirate's fire. "They don't look dead to me."

"He said it wasn't fatal. They are certainly intoxicated, though that might be due to halin."

"They don't seem to be looking for you, which suggests an unusual degree of intoxication. Either they haven't noticed that you're gone, or they no longer care." The Taig captain paused, evidently thinking. "I could wait and hope they lose consciousness. But I think it'd be better to move before the other pirates -- the ones on board the pirate ship -- notice something is wrong. Do you want to join the attack, or are you a woman like your friend?"

"I'm a woman," said Ahl.

"How about the other two?"

"Perig and Cholkwa? They're men. When I left, it seemed to me they were trying to seduce the two chief pirates."

"With luck, that will prove distracting. I'll leave some men here, in case the pirates on the ship decide to move." The captain made a noise that indicated irritation. "This would be much easier, if I didn't have to worry about enemies on two sides. Not to mention a ship with damaged rigging. As the proverb says, when luck turns bad, it turns bad."

"True enough," said Ahl. She went down to the cabin and found a knife. Leweli was nursing the baby, who was quiet now.

"The Taig men are going to attack," Ahl said.

"In which direction?" Leweli asked.

"Shore."

Leweli tilted her head, regarding the child. "A hard decision. I'm glad it's not one I have to make. But the party looked as if it might become ugly. Maybe it should be broken up."

Ahl went back on deck, carrying the knife. The Taig sailors were clustered on the landward side of their ship. After a moment Ahl realized they were lowering a boat. "Quietly," said the captain to them. "Act with care."

There was a soft splash as the boat hit water. The sailors climbed down and rowed away, their oars making almost no sound.

The remaining sailors posted themselves along the rail, some watching the shore, while others kept an eye on the pirate vessel. A man said, "They'd be crazy to bring the ship in at night with the tide low, but they could send a boat. The captain says you're a woman. Why are you traveling in disguise?"

Ahl said, "I can't tell the story now. Later, if we survive."

After that they waited. The fire on the beach was burning low, and only a few figures remained around it. Most had wandered into darkness, though she could still hear them howling like sulin.

Finally, when she began to wonder if the Taig boat had sunk, a shout came over the water: sharp and commanding. Not a drunken howl. A battle call.

Men ran into the firelight, carrying weapons. The sailors around Ahl exhaled. "Hah! Taig!"

Behind her Leweli said, "The baby's asleep at last. What's going on?"

"The battle has begun," said Ahl.

They were too far away to see anything clearly. Ahl longed for a looking-into-the-distance tube. Such things existed at this point in history, and she had seen them in the south. But the Taig ship didn't have one. The battle was small dark figures, meeting in dim light. There was more shouting, then a high shrill scream that did not end.

One of the Taig sailors said, "Don't you think you ought to go below deck? It can't be good for a mother to see this kind of violence. Or any woman, for that matter."

"Is that what's worrying your" asked Ahl.

"Of course not," said another man. "We're worried about our kinsmen on shore. But there's nothing we can do about their situation. So my cousin here is taking the only action he is able to take. I have to say he's right. It's the reason our women don't travel. No mother -- or future mother -- should watch while men kill each other. It's bound to do something to the milk."

"If not to the milk, to the mind," said a third man. "What kind of mothers are you two going to be after a trip like this one?"

Enough, thought Ahl. She and Leweli went down to the cabin. The porthole was open. She found she could see the beach. The fire had been scattered and was mostly out. She thought she could see motion, and there was still noise. Apparently the battle continued.

"How could I be a worse mother by traveling than by staying home?" asked Leweli. "If I had stayed in Sorg, Dapple would have died."

"Nothing men say about child-rearing is worth attention," Ahl said. "I wish I could see more clearly."

Finally -- it must have been an ikun later--she heard noises on deck. The Taig sailors returning? Or a pirate boarding party? Leweli lay asleep. Ahl stood and pulled her knife.

The noises continued, none of them loud. Surely this meant it was the Taig

sailors. Ahl relaxed, then grew tense again as the cabin door opened. She'd forgotten to bar it. Too late!

The actors entered, both unsteady. Perig's tunic was torn, and Cholkwa had a bandage wrapped around one arm.

"That," said Perig as he settled on the floor, "was the worst evening of my life."

"You, at least, didn't have Long Jehan in your hands," said Cholkwa. "Goddess!" He leaned against the open doorway. "Don't get comfortable. We're sleeping on deck."

"Are you all right?" Perig asked the women.

"Yes," said Leweli. "It was a fine performance."

"Which part?" asked Cholkwa. "The lies Perig told about our history or the play itself or the way the two of us behaved with Jehan and Jehan?"

"We didn't see the last," said Ahl.

"Good," said Perig.

"The play," said Leweli.

"Wasted on louts," said Cholkwa. "Get up, old man."

Perig groaned, stood and searched in his baggage until he found a tunic, faded but clean and untraced.

"That will do," said Cholkwa. "You needn't look pretty. There's no one left to charm."

"It's over?" asked Ahl.

"There's still the pirate ship," said Cholkwa. "But the pirates on shore are prisoners or dead. Perig needs sleep. So do I."

Then they were gone. She'd heard about the kind of mania that overcomes some men after battle. That must be what she'd just seen, unless it was the effect of halin and the tsin ears. Cholkwa, who had always seemed a bit sullen, had shone with happiness, so beautiful -- in spite of his rumpled fur -- that even a woman could see his beauty. Perig had seemed tired, nothing more. Maybe it was too soon for him to feel happiness. Maybe he'd done too much.

That night she dozed rather than slept. Often she was awake, or in a strange state between sleep and waking. At dawn she went on deck. The Taig sailors were up, watching the pirate ship.

"Leaving, I think," said the Taig captain.

Sails billowed out, filling with wind. The anchor went up, water dripping from it and flashing in the first rays of the rising sun.

"They've decided to abandon their kin," said one of the Taig sailors.

"What do you expect of pirates?" said another sailor. The ship headed north and west, vanishing at last among the waves. When it was gone, the Taig captain said, "We need to spend another day here. I want the two of you -- the women -- to stay on board."

"Why?" asked Ahl.

"What we have to do on shore is not pleasant."

Cremate their dead, Ahl thought, and kill the remaining pirates. Cremation did not bother her, though it took a primitive form in her era; but the cremation of Taig men belonged to Taig men. The other activity was male as well.

"We'll stay on board," said Ahl.

Perig and Cholkwa went with the Trig men. Ahl and Leweli went to the cabin. The day had a mild wind, enough to carry the pirate ship away, but not enough to bring fresh air through the porthole. The room seemed stifling to Ahl. The baby fretted. "She misses her potion," Leweli said. "But I'm not giving her any more, unless she becomes impossible."

The baby became impossible and got more potion. "Just a little, to make her quiet."

Ahl went through her baggage and repacked everything, made sure her knives were sharp, then went on deck.

"Something has occurred to me," she said to a sailor. "If you build a fire for cremation, it may attract more pirates."

"We thought of that," the sailor said. "We won't cremate our men until we're ready to leave. What the captain is doing now is questioning the pirates. When he's done, they'll be killed and buried. No reason to burn them. We don't intend to take their ashes home."

"I haven't heard anything," Ahl said.

"Our men went inland with the pirates. The captain didn't want to bother you. Sound carries well over water, especially on a day like this."

There were dark shapes on the beach, laid in a line. The Taig dead, almost certainly. One man stood by them, leaning on a spear. No one else was visible. A bright hot day. The air barely moved. Bugs would be gathering around the Taig bodies. Not a pleasant job the watcher had.

Would it be pleasanter to be inland, torturing the captive pirates?

Ahl shook her head, thinking life was full of difficult choices.

IN LATE AFTERNOON the sailors came back, Perig and Cholkwa with them. Ahl waited on the deck. Cholkwa looked sullen again, while Perig looked grim.

"That's done," the older man said. "The Taig know how to reach the pirates' homes, though the pirates certainly did not want to give out the information."

"Goddess," said Cholkwa.

"They said they weren't going to harm you," Perig told Ahl. "They let you go, they said, though my impression at the time was they hadn't noticed your disappearance. Jehan and Jehan certainly seemed busy with other things. I don't remember anyone coming to tell them that you were gone, though I was occupied at the time."

"You shouldn't talk about such things to women," said Cholkwa.

"You did last night."

"I was drunk."

The sailors set to work on their repairs. Most looked grim, though a few seemed satisfied. The next day the ship was ready to go. They took it out of the harbor, anchoring where the pirate ship had been, then rowed back to burn their kinsmen.

This was done at night. Looking through the porthole, Ahl saw the great red glare of the funeral fire. The air smelled of wood smoke and burning flesh. By morning the fire was out. No smoke rose into the cloudless sky. The Taig let out their sails, going west and south over an ocean dotted with foam.

Once the island was gone from sight, the Taig captain called them all on deck. "I want to know the truth about you people. I've heard one story about you which is obviously untrue; and our cook says there's another story, which you told the pirates. Is there a third story? A fourth? A fifth?"

Perig glanced at Ahl. "Tell him what you know," she said.

Perig did, describing how he and Cholkwa had been stranded in the country of the Sorg. "Like a luat trapped in a too-shallow lagoon." Just when they reached desperation, the witch appeared and made her offer: money to go south, if they would escort two women in disguise. "It was wrong to do it, of course," Perig said. "But we had no alternative."

The Taig captain glanced at Ahl. "Why did you need to flee your home, escorted by unrelated men? Surely this is shameful behavior."

Ahl told her story: how the Sorg matrons had decided to kill five children in

order to get out of a business contract. One child was left alive, the baby in the cabin. She and Leweli had decided to save it, advised by the witch who hired Perig and Cholkwa. "She said it was the right thing to do."

"You've put us in a bad place," the captain said. "It's too late in the season to turn back and risk more storms. In addition, if I returned you to Sorg, the Helwar would be angry; and no one makes better ships than they. But if I take you to Helwar, as I intend to do, I'll make bad enemies among your kin. Why couldn't you let the child die? The crime --if it is a crime --would not be yours, but would belong to your mother and the other matriarchs. It's wrong to take on too much responsibility."

"That may be," said Ahl. "But it's done."

The cook, who had been listening said, "It's my belief that those of us who were taken prisoner would have died, except for the actors' cleverness. Now that I know they are not perverts and committers of incest, I can be grateful. Granted, it's odd for men to travel with unrelated women, but every man is supposed to help women in need of help; and healthy babies should not be killed, especially to escape from a business contract. Where will we be, if people don't keep the agreements they make? I don't intend to tie my mind into knots by trying to make sense of this situation. Go with the simple solution, kinsman! Thank these folk for their help, and deliver them to Helwar."

"A good cook is always worth listening to," the captain said. "I will take your advice."

The ship continued west and south, carried by a mild and steady wind. Leweli spent most of her time in the cabin, caring for the baby, who was often awake, now that she no longer got the potion. Without the witch's magic, the child proved as irritable as any ordinary baby.

"And maybe more so," said Ahl to Perig while explaining why she spent most of her time on deck. "I'm willing to save the child from death and maybe ruin my own life by doing so; but I will not listen to her cry."

Several days later, Ahl asked, "Did the tsin ears work the way you expected?"

"Not entirely," Perig said. "If you peel them before cooking and cut off the base, they are an ordinary food, except for being unusually tasty. But if this isn't done, they cause visions, followed by stupor. In my home country diviners use them to look into the future. They wear headdresses in the shape of tsin ears." Perig glanced sideways and smiled. "Foreigners think the headdresses are funny; and maybe they are; but the visions are often useful, though only if the person involved has been trained."

"Wasn't it dangerous to give something like that to pirates?"

"The situation was dangerous already. The pirates were going to kill all of us, except possibly you and Leweli. It seemed like a good idea to try everything: the tsin ears, drama, sex -- if the pirates wanted sex, as they obviously did.

Anything to distract them and delay the moment of killing. I thought if they began to see visions or fell into a stupor, maybe we could escape. Or maybe the Taig sailors would attack, or the Goddess reach down her hand and lift us all to safety. Who can say?" For a moment he was silent, looking out at the ocean. "If I had the witch's potion, I would have used it. But it was on the ship. I used what was at hand."

Ten days later a sailor vanished. The ship was searched. He wasn't found.

Perig told Ahl about it. "They think he went overboard last night. He was one of the men held prisoner by the pirates, a young man, good looking."

Odd, thought Ahl. She didn't remember a good looking man among the prisoners.

"After they were drunk, several of the pirates approached him. He wanted nothing to do with them. It's not a good idea to say 'no' to a drunken pirate. For one thing, they won't listen."

"He killed himself out of shame," Ahl said.

"The Taig believe so, though it doesn't seem to me especially shameful to endure what can't be prevented. Maybe he thought he could have behaved in a more disciplined and undemonstrative fashion. Or maybe he wanted the memories of what had happened to stop. He should have waited. Most memories grow less sharp in time."

It seemed wrong for a man to die on his way home, in good weather, after danger was past. Was what he had experienced so terrible? Hadn't the two actors gone through something similar and made jokes about it? She asked Perig about this, speaking carefully, since most men don't enjoy discussing sex or violence with women.

Obviously Perig was under no obligation to answer her; no matter how indirectly she asked her question, it was rude. But he did reply, his tone courteous and more serious than usual.

"Remember how Cholkwa and I make our living. Actors spend most of their time traveling. Any business that is carried on away from home is risky.

"Remember also that no man can expect help in a foreign country. Especially, no man can expect help given freely. That is done for women and children, but a man is expected to pay in one way or another. Actors learn to do what is necessary; and we make jokes about these necessary actions. Why not?"

She thought she understood what he was saying, and it fit with everything she'd heard about traveling players. They lived at the edge of morality. How could they feel shame in the same way as other men? After all, they sold strangers the right to stare at them and said the most intimate things, which ordinary men would reveal only to their closest relatives or friends, in loud voices in public.

"Was the Taig youth right to die?" she asked. "Is that what a man of ordinary honor would do?"

Perig glanced at her sideways. "One who isn't an actor? I think not, though it isn't my business to judge any of the Taig. He should have waited and spoken with his relatives. It's not a good idea to kill yourself without permission. Now his mother has lost a son and the men on this ship have lost a cousin. Did he have the right to deprive them of so much, because the world is not as safe and pleasant as he imagined?"

A troubling conversation. Ahl was no longer sure she could disentangle right from wrong. The threads seemed knotted together. When she pulled on a bright one, she found something dark, while the dark threads often led to something as bright as gold or silver.

AHL PONDERED morality while the ship continued south. Looking around, she began to see evidence that land was near. Clouds like towers stood at the horizon; and there was an increase in the number of birds. Next came an island: a bald rock that rose straight out of the ocean, useless to anyone except the birds. Another island followed, equally bare and sheer. Finally they passed a fishing boat, wallowing home with as many fish as it could carry. The Taig sailors shouted and waved message banners. The fishers replied with their own shouts and flags.

"We'll be in harbor before dark," the Taig captain said.

Soon after that Helwar came into view. Its forested peaks rose into a wreath of clouds; and mist lay in the upland valleys like handfuls of unspun wool. Off the north coast rain fell like a curtain made of gauze. Ahl's mind filled with happiness.

One troubling idea remained. "I have a final question," she said to Perig, as they watched Helwar approach.

"Surely you can stop asking questions now."

"What broke apart your acting company?"

He was silent for a moment. "That's my business."

"It's obvious that you and Cholkwa have a secret," Ahl said. "I think I know what it is."

"Do you?" he asked.

"You have been lovers for a long time; everything about you suggests as much; and he's still young. It would surprise me if he's twenty-five."

"You think I'm a child molester," said Perig.

"Well," said Ahl. "I've met every other kind of criminal on this journey."

"It hasn't been a lucky trip," Perig admitted.

"How old was he when you met?"

Perig turned, leaning his elbows on the rail and looking around to see who might be near. "What are you going to do with this idea!"

"Nothing. You got us out of Sorg and saved us from the pirates. Except for you, they might have killed Leweli and me, or adopted us and taken us home to their miserable island. I will not repay you with harm."

"Hah," said Perig, the long slow exhalation which can mean anything. For a while he was silent. Ahl waited, her eyes on the cloud-capped island.

At last Perig said, "He was fourteen when he left home. His family had been destroyed in the war, and he refused to join the lineage that had killed all his male kin."

"Was that family the Chairing' asked Ahl. "Is he Tesati?"

"Yes. I didn't know his family name at first, nor did he know mine. Actors use their personal names, so as not to embarrass their families. He was a beggar I found on the road, fed and cleaned and found to be lovely.

"I said he could stay with the company if he was old enough, but I wouldn't have an unrelated child traveling with me. Of course he told me he was adult. He wasn't lying by much. He'd been on his own for almost a year by then.

"We were lovers before he reached his fifteenth birthday, and before he learned my family name. When he learned it, he tried to kill me, though it wasn't a serious effort. I took the knife away from him, and he explained."

"You are Chaitin," Ahl said, not certain what she felt. Confusion? Horror! A need to laugh? This is the kind of joke the Goddess loves to play: two-sided like a sword, with sharp edges that can cut to the bone. When the joke is especially fine, when the Great One brings it down like a blade on her victim, piety requires that everyone -- even the victim -- laugh. But Ahl had never been religious.

"Yes," said Perig. "He's angry at me for telling his story to the pirates; but I had to think quickly; and it's always a good idea to stay close to the truth when lying. So I turned one fierce and stubborn boy into a pair of women, and I turned myself into a hero. Art is full of such transformations."

"The cook was right. You are a committer of incest."

"No," he said firmly. "Cholkwa was never adopted by my family. Therefore what we did was not incest. But it would have been, if I'd dragged him home and said, 'Here's a cousin I found at the side of the road.' The actors in my company knew what we'd been doing. The story would have come into daylight; and my hair goes up when I think of how my mother would have responded.

"In any case, Cholkwa didn't want to join the Chaitin, and I didn't want to give him up."

"He stayed with you, after finding out who you were?"

"I'm Chaitin Perig when I'm at home, which isn't often. The rest of the time I'm Perig the actor. The answer to your question is 'no.' He ran away. I followed and dragged him back, partly because I knew how dangerous the plain was for someone like him -- alone, without a family. But mostly because love had made me crazy.

"The second time he came back on his own. What else could he do? Starve on the plain? Live among criminals and learn to be like them? I offered him safety and the chance to learn a skill more honest than robbing travelers."

"And this is what broke apart your company?"

"After so many years," Perig said in admission. "I really thought we could hide the secret forever. But we don't always get along. We had a quarrel which was overheard. When Cholkwa has been drinking, he drags the past forward. The actor who overheard us is Chaitin. As far as he was concerned, it was incest. In addition, I had robbed our family of a child who had grown up to a perfectly acceptable young man. Even worse, my cousin had been interested in Cholkwa, though nothing had happened. Imagine how he felt! He had been on the edge of perversion without knowing it!

"Of course he made a lot of noise, and the other men decided the company was unlucky. That was true enough. I can't blame them for going.

"I don't think my cousin has a future as an actor. He's stiff as a plank and far too moral. It was a mistake to take him into the company. But when a relative asks a favor, it's difficult to refuse."

Ahl looked at her hands, almost seeing the tangle of darkness that filled them. Perig was wrong about his lover. A man could be kinless. So could a woman, though it wasn't common. But every child must have a family. Cholkwa could not be Tesati, since that lineage was gone; and no other lineage had adopted him. Therefore he was Chaitin or had been until his fifteenth birthday. When the two of them first had sex, it was incest and the molesting of a child, but only by a few days, twenty or thirty. How could wrong behavior be a matter of timing? She asked Perig this question.

"Everything is a matter of timing," Perig said. "When the witch came with her offer, I thought, 'What fine timing! What excellent luck!'" He gave Ahl a sideways glance. "If you keep quiet about our story, this may still be true. Cholkwa and I can still recover."

"I have already promised to cause you no harm," Ahl said. "I want this journey to end. Too many bad things have happened since I left Helwar. I've learned too many things I didn't want to know."

"You would ask questions," Perig said.

"I'll stop. All I want now is Ki and a safe place to stay."

Perig turned, looking at the cloudy island. "You have almost reached safety. With luck Helwar Ki will be waiting."

As the fishers had promised, they were in harbor by sundown. The two women hurried onshore, Dapple in Leweli's arms. By nightfall they were in a great house, surrounded by matriarchs, telling the story of Sorg's betrayal. Ki was there, leaning over the back of her mother's chair, looking both grim and happy. Even in the midst of her dark narration, Ahl felt happy as well.

When the story was done, a matriarch spoke. Large and solid, well into middle age, she still had her baby spots. Her son had fathered Dapple, though the women from Sorg didn't know this. "If Sorg wants to escape our alliance so badly, let them go! It's no loss, since they have shown themselves to be cheats of the worst variety. What kind of people enter into a contract, intending to break it? What kind of people breed children, knowing the children have no future?"

"We need to tell everyone in the narrow ocean about this behavior. No one should trust the Sorg, and no one will, once this story has traveled. As for the child, it's my advice that we adopt her and her mother."

Gray eyes met blue-gray eyes. One by one, the women of Helwar tilted their heads. A quick decision, you may say. Remember how angry the Helwar must have been, and remember that every child must have a family.

Leweli was invited to stay in the great house, along with Dapple, but Ahl went back to the Foam Bird with Ki. A fine rain was falling, dimming the lights of Helwar Town. The ships in harbor seemed ghost-like, though the Bird's deck was solid enough, once they set foot on it.

Ki's cabin was exactly as Ahl remembered. Hard to imagine anyone moving Ki's large bed. Made of carved wood, it was fastened to the wall and floor for safety in turbulent weather. The hanging lantern was too fine to change. Five luatin curled around a bronze bowl. Their eyes and teeth were gilded. One held a silver fish in its mouth. Another held a bronze harpoon no longer than Ahl's smallest finger. The weapon was broken; a torn rope -- made of twisted gold wire -- flew out from it. Who could say what had happened to the luat hunter?

In the lantern's bowl a seed oil burned, aromatic and bright.

"Nothing is missing, except your belongings," said Ki to Ahl. "You can bring them tomorrow."

They drank halin. Ahl spoke of her journey: the storm, the pirates, the actors' cleverness.

"And courage, I should think," said Ki. "It must have been frightening to act in

front of criminals. As for deliberately seducing men like that -Surely every instinct and every idea of morality would push one back."

"Maybe," said Ahl in a tone that lacked conviction. According to Perig, his motivation had been fear of death, rather than courage; and she doubted that ideas about morality had much effect on either man.

"You owe them a lot," said Ki firmly. "As do I and all the Helwar."

This was true. Ahl tilted her head in agreement.

They moved on to other topics, then into Ki's large bed. Tangled with her lover, smelling and tasting Ki, Ahl forgot -- for a while -- her uncertainty; though the person she had been, the always confident daughter of Sorg, was gone; and never, in a long life, did she regain her family's absolute, unquestioning self-assurance.

THE REST OF THE STORY can be told quickly. Ahl refused adoption, since it would end her romance with Ki. Instead she remained Sorg until her kin disowned her. Then the Hasu, who were neighbors of the Helwar, adopted her as a courtesy. For the rest of her life, she was Hasu Ahl, though she visited her new family only rarely, preferring to stay with her lover and Leweli.

Perig and Cholkwa formed a new company and brought northern theater to the Great Southern Continent. Previous to this, the southerners had told stories through a combination of narration and dance. The new style was recognized everywhere as an improvement. To actually see heroes, as they struggled! To hear their voices! To have their anguish made so vivid that it could be felt! This was something!

The two men remained lovers, though their relationship was difficult. At times they quarreled so badly that one or the other left the company. During one such period, Perig came to Helwar. Cholkwa was on the continent, in a far southern area where the people were barely civilized, but great lovers of drama, especially the comedies for which (it turned out) Cholkwa had a gift.

"A surprise to me," said Perig to Ahl. "I never thought Cholkwa would do so well dressed up as an animal with an erect penis. As we age, we learn who we really are. But," he added, while turning a cup of halin between his hands, "the plays are really clever. Cholkwa can write comedy. Who can say, maybe it's more difficult than the kind of writing I do."

After he drank some more, he said, "The problem is the secret we share. One should never base love on something which must be hidden. It's like building a tower in a bog. Nothing is solid. Cracks run everywhere."

"You could live apart," said Ahl.

"And you could leave Helwar Ki."

In the end, the actors formed two companies, but remained acknowledged lovers. They organized their tours so they met often. Towns vied to be their meeting

place. Even in later years, when there were many companies in the south, no one could equal Perig as a tragic hero or Cholkwa for humor.

As for Dapple, she was given the name of Helwar Ahl and used it while growing up. But after she was an adult, she became interested in acting and formed the first women's company anywhere. Even now women in theater, actors and playwrights, call her "mother" or "the originator."

Because acting was a dubious activity in those days, especially for women, she went back to her baby name. In this way, the Helwar were not embarrassed. Nor was her aunt Ki's lover.

Nothing remains of the plays written by Perig and Cholkwa, but we have fragments of Dapple's work. No one has ever written more beautifully in her native language; and much of the beauty remains in the various translations. There are many of these. As the witch predicted, Dapple became famous. Even now, after centuries, her words are like diamonds: pure, hard, angular, transparent, full of light.