

Words Like Pale Stones

Nancy Kress

THE GREENWOOD GREW LESS GREEN AS WE TRAVELED west. Grasses lay flat against the earth. Brush became skimpy. Trees withered, their bare branches like crippled arms against the sky. There were no flowers. My stolen horse, double-laden but both of us so light that the animal hardly noticed, picked his way more easily through the thinning forest. Once his hooves hit some half-buried stone and sparks struck, strange pale fire slow to die away, the light wavering over the ground as if alive. I shuddered and looked away.

But the baby watched the sparks intently, his fretful body for once still in the saddle. I could feel his sturdy little back pressed against me. He was silent, although he now has a score of words, "go" and "gimme" and "mine!" that ordinarily he uses all day long. I couldn't see his face, but I knew how his eyes would look: wide and blue and demanding, beautiful eyes under thick black lashes. His father's eyes, recognizing his great-great-grandfather's country.

It is terrible for a mother to know she is afraid of her infant son.

I could have stabbed the prince with the spindle from the spinning wheel. Not as sharp as a needle, perhaps, but it would have done. Once I had used just such a spindle on Jack Starling, the miller's son, who thought he could make free with me, the daughter of a village drunkard and a washerwoman whose boasting lies were as much a joke as her husband's nightly stagger. *I have the old blood in me. My father was a lord! My grandmother could fly to the moon!* And, finally, *My daughter Ludi is such a good spinster she can spin straw into gold!*

"Go ahead and spin me," Jack leered when he caught me alone in our hovel. His hands were hot and his breath foul. When he pushed both against my breasts, I stabbed him with the spindle, square in the belly, and he doubled over like scythed hay. The spindle revolved in a stone whorl; I bashed him over the head with that and he went down, crashing into the milk pail with a racket like the end of the world. His head wore a bloody patch, soft as pulp, for a month.

But there was no stone whorl, no milk bucket, no foul breath in the palace. Even the spinning was different. "See," he said to me, elegant in his velvets and silks, his clean teeth gleaming, and the beautiful blue eyes bright with avarice, "it's a spinning wheel. Have you ever seen one before?"

"No," I said, my voice sounding high and squeaky, not at all my own. Straw covered the floor, rose to the ceiling in bales, choked the air with chaff.

"They're new," he said. "From the east." He lounged against the door, and no straw clung to his doublet or knee breeches, slick with embroidery and jewels. "They spin much faster than the hand-held distaff and spindle."

"My spindle rested in a whorl. Not in my hand," I said, and somehow the words

gave me courage. I looked at him straight, prince or no prince. "But, my lord, I'm afraid you've been misled. My mother... says things sometimes. I cannot spin straw into gold. No mortal could."

He only smiled, for of course he was not mortal. Not completely. The old blood ran somewhere in his veins, mixed but there. *Fevered and tainted*, some said. Only the glimmerings of magic were there, and glimmerings without mastery were what made the cruelty. So I had heard all my life, but I never believed it—people will, after all, say anything—until I stood with him in that windowless room, watching his smile as he lounged against the door, chaff rising like dusty gold around me.

"I think you are completely capable of spinning straw into gold," he said. "In fact, I expect you to have spun all the straw in this room into gold by morning."

"Then you expect the moon to wipe your ass!" I said, and immediately clapped my hand over my mouth. Always, *always* my mouth brings me trouble. But he only went on smiling, and it was then, for the first time, that I was afraid. Of that bright, blue-eyed smile.

"If you don't spin it all into gold," he said silkily, "I will have you killed. But if you do, I will marry you. There—that's a sweet inducement, is it not? A prince for a husband for a girl like you. And for me—a wife with a dowry of endless golden fingers."

I saw then, as if in a vision, his fingers endlessly on me, and at the expression on my face his smile broadened.

"A slow death," he said, "and a painful one. But that won't happen, will it, my magical spinster? You won't let it happen?"

"I cannot spin straw into gold!" I shouted, in a perfect frenzy of floating and fear, but he never heard me. A rat crept out from behind the bales and started across the floor. The prince's face went ashen. In a moment he was gone, whirling through the door and slamming it behind him before the rat could reach him. I heard the heavy iron bar drop into its latch on the other side, and I turned to look at the foreign spinning wheel, backed by bales to the rough beams of the ceiling.

My knees gave way and I sank down upon the straw. There are so many slow and painful ways to die.

I don't know how long I shrank there, like some mewling and whimpering babe, visioning horrors no babe ever thought of. But when I came back to myself, the rat was still nosing at the door, trying to squeeze underneath. It should have fit; not even our village rats are so thin and mangy. On hands and knees, I scuttled to join the rat. Side by side we poked at the bottom of the door, the sides, the hinges.

It was all fast and tight. Not even a flea could have escaped.

Next I wormed behind the bales of straw, feeling every inch of the walls. They were stone, and there were no chinks, no spaces made rotten by damp or moss. This angered me. Why should the palace be the only sound stone dwelling in the entire damp-eaten village? Even Jack Starling's father's mill had weak stones, damn

his crumbling grindstone and his scurrilous soul.

The ceiling beams were strong wood, holding up stronger, without cracks. There were no windows, only light from candles in stone sconces.

The stone floor held no hidden trapdoors, nor any place to pry up the stone to make a tunnel.

I turned to the spinning wheel. Under other circumstances I might have found it a pretty thing, of polished wood. When I touched the wheel, it spun freely, revolving the spindle much faster than even I, the best spinster in the village, could have done. With such a thing, I could have spun thread seven times as fast. I could have become prosperous, bought a new thatch roof for our leaky cottage, a proper bed for my sodden father...

The rat still crouched by the door, watching me.

I fitted straw into the distaff. Who knew—the spinning wheel itself was from some foreign place. "From the east," he'd said. Maybe the magic of the Old Ones dwelt there, too, as well as in the west. Maybe the foreign wheel could spin straw. Maybe it could even spin the stuff into gold. How would I, the daughter of a drunkard and a lying braggart, know any different?

I pushed the polished wheel. It revolved the spindle, and the straw was pulled forward from the distaff, under my twisting fingers, toward the spindle. The straw, straw still, broke and fell to the floor in a powder of chaff.

I tried again. And again. The shining wheel became covered with sticky bits of straw, obscuring its brightness. The straw fell to the stone floor. It would not even wind once around the spindle.

I screamed and kicked the spinning wheel. It fell over, hard. There was the sound of splintering wood. "By God's blood," I shouted at the cursed thing, "damn you for a demon!"

"If it were demonic, it would do you more good," a voice said quietly.

I whirled around. By the door sat the rat. He was a rat no longer but a short, ratty-faced man, thin and starved-looking and very young, dressed in rags. I looked at his eyes, pale brown and filmy, like the floating colors in dreams, and I knew immediately that I was in the presence of one of the Old Ones.

Strangely, I felt no fear. He was so puny, and so pale. I could have broken his arm with one hand. He wasn't even as old as I was, despite the downy stubble on his chin—a boy, who had been a rat.

What danger could there be in magic that could not even free itself from a locked room?

"You're not afraid," he said in that same quiet voice, and if I had been, the fear would have left me then. He smiled, the saddest and most humble smile I have ever seen. It curved his skinny mouth, but it never touched the washed-out brown of his eyes. "You're a bold girl."

"Like my mam," I said bitterly, before I knew I was going to. "Bold in misfortune." "Except, of

course, that it wasn't her who would die a slow and painful death, the lying bitch.

"I think we can help each other," he said, and at that I laughed out loud. I shudder now, to remember it. I laughed aloud at one of the Old Ones! What stupidities we commit from ignorance!

He gave me again that pitiful wraith of a smile. "Do you know, Ludie, what happens when art progresses?"

I had no idea what we were talking about. Art? Did he mean magic arts? And how did he know my name? A little cold prickle started in my liver, and I knew I wouldn't laugh at him again.

"Yes, magic arts, too," he said in his quiet voice, "although I was referring to something else. Painting. Sculpture. Poetry. Even tapestry—everything made of words and colors. You don't weave tapestry, do you, Ludie?"

He knew I did not. Only ladies wove tapestries. I flushed, thinking he was mocking me.

"Art starts out simple. Pale. True to what is real. Like stone statues of the human body, or verse chanted by firelight. Pale, pale stone. Pale as straw. Simple words, that name what is true. Designs in natural wool, the color of rams' horns. Then, as time goes on, the design becomes more elaborate. The colors brighter. The story twisted to fit rhyme, or symbol, or somebody else's power. Finally, the designs are so elaborate, so twisted with motion, and the colors so feverish—look at me, Ludie—that the original, the real as it exists in nature, looks puny and withered. The original has lost all power to move us, replaced by a hectic simulacrum that bears only a tainted relation to what is real. The corruption is complete."

He leaned forward. "The magic arts are like that, too, Ludie. The Old Ones, our blood diluted by marriage with men, are like that now. Powerless in our bone-real paleness, our simple-real words."

I didn't have the faintest idea what he was talking about. His skin was so pasty; maybe a brainpox lay upon him. Men didn't talk like that, nor boys either. Nor rats. But I wanted to say something to cheer him. He had made me forget for a few minutes what awaited me in the morning.

"*A slow and painful death*"... the rack? The red-hot pincers? The Iron Maiden? Suddenly dizzy, I put my head between my knees.

"All you have to do," the Old One said in his thin voice, "is get me out. Of this room, of the palace, of the courtyard gate."

I didn't answer. A slow and painful death...

"Just that," he said. "No more. We can no longer do it for ourselves. Not with all this hectic... all this bright..." I heard him move wearily across the floor, and then the spinning wheel being righted. After a long moment, it whirred.

I raised my head. The wheel was whole, with no break in the shining wood. The boys sat before it on a bale of straw, his ashen faces as sad as Good Friday. From under his fingers, winding around the spindle turning in its wheel-driven whorl, wound skeins of feverishly bright gold thread.

Toward morning, I slept, stretched out on the hard stone floor. I couldn't help it. Sleep took me like a drug. When I woke, there was not so much as a speck of chaff left in the room. The gold lay in tightly wound skeins, masses and masses of them, brighter than the sun. The boy's face was so ashen I thought he must surely faint. His arms and legs trembled. He crouched as far away from the gold as possible, and kept his eyes averted.

"There will be no place for me to hide," he said, his voice as bone-pale as his face. "The first thing they will do is paw through the gold. And I... have not even corrupted power... left." With that, he fell over, and a skinny rat lay, insensible, on the stone floor.

I lifted it gingerly and hid it in my apron. On the other side of the door, the bar lifted. The great door swung slowly on its hinges. He stood there, in turquoise silk and garish yellow velvet, his bright blue eyes under their thick lashes wide with disbelief. The disbelief changed to greed, terrible to watch, like flesh that has been merely infected turning dark with gangrene. He looked at me, walked over to finger the gold, looked at me again.

He smiled.

I tried to run away before the wedding. I should have known it would be impossible. Even smuggling out the rat was so hard I first despaired of it. Leaving the room was easy enough, and even leaving the palace to walk in the walled garden set aside for princesses, but getting to the courtyard gate proved impossible. In the end I bribed a page to carry the rat in a cloth-wrapped bundle over the drawbridge and into the woods, and I know he did so, because the child returned with a frightened look and handed me a single stone, pale and simple as bone. There was no other message. There didn't need to be.

But when I tried to escape myself, I couldn't. There were guards, pages, ladies, even when I went to bed or answered the call of nature. God's blood, but the rich were poor in privacy!

Everywhere, everyone wore the brightest of colors in the most luxurious of fabrics. Jade, scarlet, canary, flame, crimson. Silks, velvets, brocades. Diamonds and emeralds and rubies and bloodstones, lying like vivid wounds on necks brilliant with powder and rouge. And all the corridors of the palace twisted, crusted with carving in a thousand grotesque shapes of birds and animals and faces that never were.

I asked to see the prince alone, and I came at him with a bread knife, a ridiculous thing for bread, its hilt tortured with scrollwork and fevered with paint. He was fast

for so big a man; I missed him and he easily disarmed me. I waited then for a beating or worse, but all he did was laugh lazily and wind his hands in my tangled hair, which I refused to have dyed or dressed.

"A little demon, are you? I could learn to like that..." He forced his lips on mine and I wasn't strong enough to break free. When he released me, I spat in his face.

"Let me leave here! I lied! I can't spin gold into straw—I never could! The Old

One did it for me!"

"Certainly they did," he said, smiling, "they always help peasants with none of their blood." But a tiny line furrowed his forehead.

That afternoon a procession entered my room. The prince, his chancellor, two men carrying a spinning

wheel, one carrying a bale of straw. My heart skittered in my chest.

"Now," he said. "Do it again. Here. Now."

The men thrust me toward the wheel, pushed me onto a footstool slick with canary silk. I looked at the spinning wheel.

There are so many different kinds of deaths. More than I had known just days ago.

I fitted the straw onto the distaff. I pushed the wheel. The spindle revolved in its whorl. Under my twisting fingers, the straw turned to gold.

"'An Old One,'" mocked my bridegroom. "Yes, most certainly. An Old One spun it for you."

I had dropped the distaff as if it were on fire. "Yes," I gasped, "yes ... I can't do this, I don't know how ..."

The chancellor had eagerly scooped up the brief skein of gold. He fingered it, and his hot eyes grew hotter.

"Don't you even know," the prince said, still amused, disdainful to notice the actual gold now that he was assured of it, "that the Old Ones will do nothing for you unless you know the words of their true names? Or unless you have something they want. And how could you, as stinking when I found you as a pig trough, have anything they wanted? Or ever hope to know their true names?"

"Do you?" I shot back, because I thought it would hurt him, thought it would make him stop smiling. But it didn't, and I saw at once that he did know their true names, and that it must have been this that gave his great-great-grandfather power over them for the first time. True names.

"I don't like 'Ludie,'" he said. "It's a peasant name. I think I shall call you

'Goldianna.'"

"Do it and I'll shove a poker up your ass!" I yelled. But he only smiled.

The morning of the wedding I refused to get out of bed, refused to put on the crimson-and-gold wedding dress, refused to speak at all. Let him try to marry me

bedridden, naked, and dumb!

Three men came to hold me down. A woman forced a liquid, warm and tasting of pungent herbs, down my throat. When I again came to myself, at nightfall, I was standing beside a bed vast as a cottage, crusted with carvings as a barnacled ship. I wore the crimson wedding gown, with bone stays that forced my breasts up, my waist in, my ass out, my neck high. Seventeen yards of jeweled cloth flowed around my feet. On my finger was a ring so heavy I could hardly lift my hand.

The prince smiled and reached for me, and he was still stronger, in his corrupted and feverish power, than I.

The night before my son was born, I had a dream. I lay again on the stone floor, chaff choking the air, and a figure bent over me. Spindly arms, long ratty face... the boy took me in his arms and raised my shift, and I half stirred and opened my legs. Afterward, I slept again to the whirring of the spinning wheel.

I woke to sharp pain in my belly. The pain traveled around to the small of my back, and there it stayed until I thought I should break in two. But I didn't shriek. I bit my tongue to keep from crying out, and when the pain had passed I called to the nearest of my ladies, asleep in my chamber, "Send for the midwife!"

She rose, rubbing her eyes, and her hand felt first for the ornate jewels in which she slept every night, for fear of their being stolen. Only when she found they were safe did she mutter sleepily, "Yes, Your Grace," and yawn hugely. The inside of her mouth was red as a wound.

The next pain struck.

All through that long morning, I was kept from screaming by my dream. It curled inside me, pale and wispy as a woodland mist in the morning. If... maybe... God's blood, let it be true! Let the baby be born small, and thin, and wan as clean milk, let him look at me with eyes filmy as clouds...

Near the end, the prince came. He stood only inches inside the door, a handkerchief over his mouth against the stench of blood and sweat. The handkerchief was embroidered with gold and magenta threads. Above it his face gleamed brightly, flushed with hope and disgust.

It bit through my lip, and pushed, and the hairy head slid from between my legs. Another push, and he was out. The midwife lifted him, still attached to his bloody tether, and gave a cry of triumph. The prince nodded and hastily left, clutching his handkerchief. The midwife laid my son, wailing, on my belly.

He had a luxuriant head of thick bright hair, and lush black eyelashes. His fat cheeks were red, his eyes a brilliant, hectic blue.

I felt the dream slide away from me, insubstantial as smoke, and for the first time that morning I screamed—in fury, in despair, in the unwanted love I already felt for the vivid child wriggling on my belly, who had tethered me to the palace with cords as bloody and strong as the one that still held him between my legs.

I walked wearily down the palace corridor to the spinning room. My son toddled beside me. The chancellor met me outside the door, trailing his clerks and pages.

"No spinning today, Your Grace."

"No spinning?" There was always spinning. The baby always came with me, playing with skeins of gold, tearing them into tiny bits, while I spun. Always.

The chancellor's eyes wouldn't meet mine. His stiff jeweled headdress towered two feet in the air, a miniature palace. "The Treasury has enough gold."

"Enough gold?" I sounded like a mocking-bird, with no words of my own. The chancellor stiffened and swept away, the train of his gown glittering behind. The others followed, except for one courtier, who seemed careful not to touch me or look at me.

"There... is a woman," he whispered.

"A woman? What woman?" I said, and then I recognized him. He had grown taller in three years, broader. But I had still the stone he gave me the day he carried the stricken rat beyond the courtyard gate.

"A peasant woman in the east. Who is said to be able to spin straw into diamonds."

He was gone, his rich velvets trembling. I thought of all the gold stacked in the palace—skeins and skeins of it, filling room after room, sewn into garment after garment, used for curtain pulls and fish nets and finally even to tie up the feet of the chickens for roasting. The gold thread emerged blackened and charred from the ovens, but there was always so much more. And more. And more.

Diamonds were very rare.

Carefully I took the hand of my son. The law was clear—he was the heir. And the raising of him was mine. As long as I lived. Or he did.

My son looked up at me. His name was Dirk, but I thought he had another name as well. A true name, that I had never been allowed to hear. I couldn't prove this.

"Come, Dirk," I said, as steadily as I could. "We'll go play in the garden." He thrust out his lip. "Mama spin!"

"No, dearest, not today. No spinning today."

He threw himself full length on the floor. "Mama spin!"

One thing my mother, damn her lying soul, had never permitted was tantrums.

"No."

The baby sprang up. His intense blue eyes glittered. With a wild yell he rushed at me, and too late I saw that his chubby fist clutched a miniature knife, garish with jewels, twisted with carving. He thrust it at my belly.

I gasped and pulled it free—there was not much blood, the aim of a two-year-old is not good. Dirk screamed and hit me with his little fists. His gold-shod feet kicked

me. I tried to grab him, but it was like holding a wild thing. No one came—no one, although I am usually surrounded by so many bodies I can hardly breathe. Finally I caught his two arms in one hand and his two flailing legs in the other. He stopped screaming and glared at me with such intensity, such hatred in his bright blue eyes, that I staggered against the wall. A carved gargoyle pressed into my back. We stayed like that, both of us pinned.

"Dirk," I whispered, "what is your true name?"

They write things down. All of them, all things. Births, deaths, recipes, letters, battles, buyings and sellings, sizes, stories—none of them can remember anything without writing it down, maybe because all of it is so endlessly complicated. Or maybe because they take pride in their handwriting, which is also complicated: swooping dense curlicues traced in black or gold or scarlet. They write everything down, and sometimes the ladies embroider what has been written down on sleeves or doublets or arras. Then the stonemasons carve what has been embroidered into designs across a lintel or mantel or font. Even the cook pipes stylized letters in marzipan across cakes and candies. They fill their bellies with their frantic writing. Somewhere in all this was Dirk's true name. I didn't know how much time I had. Around a turn of the privy stairs I had overheard two ladies whisper that the girl who could spin straw into diamonds had already been captured and was imprisoned in a

caravan traveling toward the palace.

I couldn't tread. But I could remember. Even shapes, even of curlicued letters. But which curlicues were important? There were so many, so much excess corrupting the true.

The day after the privy stairs, the prince came to me. His blue eyes were cold.

"You are not raising Dirk properly. The law says you cannot be replaced as his mother... unless, of course, you should happen to die."

I kept my voice steady. "In what way have I failed Dirk?"

He didn't mention the screaming, the knives, the cruelty. Last week Dirk cut the finger off a peasant child. Dirk's father merely smiled. Instead, the prince said, "He has been seen playing with rats. Those are filthy animals; they carry disease."

My heart leaped. Rats. Sometimes, in the hour just before dawn, I had the dream again. Even if it wasn't true, I was always glad to have it. The rat-boy bending over me, and the baby with pale, quiet eyes.

The prince said, "Don't let it happen again." He strode away, magnificent in gold-embroidered leather like a gilded cow.

I found Dirk and took him to the walled garden. Nothing. We searched my chambers, Dirk puzzled but not yet angry. Nothing. The nobility have always taken great care to exterminate rats.

But in the stable, where the groom lay drunk on his pallet, were holes in the wall, and droppings, and the thin sour smell of rodent.

For days I caught rats. I brought each to my room hidden in the ugly-rich folds of my gown, barred the door, and let the rat loose. There was no one to see us; since the rumors of the girl who can spin diamonds, I was very often left alone. Each rat sniffed the entire room, searching for a way out. There was none. Hours later, each rat was still a rat.

Dirk watched warily, his bright blue eyes darting and cold.

On the sixth day, I woke to find a pale, long-nosed girl sitting quietly on the floor. She watched me from unsurprised eyes that were the simplest and oldest things I'd ever seen.

I climbed down from my high bed, clutching my night shift around me. I sat on the floor facing her, nose-to-nose. In his

trundle Dirk whimpered.

"Listen to me, Old One. I know what you are, and what you need. I can get you out of the palace." For the first time, I wondered why they came into the palace at all. "No one will see you. But in return you must tell me two things. The true name of my son. And of one other: one like yourself, a boy who was here three years ago, who was carried out by a page because he taught a washerwoman's daughter to spin straw into gold."

"Your mother is dead," the rat-girl said calmly. "She died a fortnight ago, of fire in the belly."

"Good riddance," I said harshly. "Will you do as I ask? In exchange for your freedom?"

The rat-girl didn't change expression. "Your son's true name would do you no good. The blood is so hectic, so tainted"—she twitched her nose in contempt—"that it would give you no power over him. They keep the old names just for ritual."

Ritual. One more gaudy emptiness in place of the real thing. One more hope gone.

"Then just tell me the name of the Old One who taught me to spin gold!"

"I would sooner die," she said.

And then I said it. Spare me, God, I said it, unthinking of anything but my own need: "Do it or you will die a slow and painful death."

The rat-girl didn't answer. She looked at me with bone-white understanding in her pale eyes.

I staggered to my feet and left the room.

It was as if I couldn't see; I stumbled blindly toward my husband's Council Chamber. This, then, was how it happened. You spun enough straw into gold, and the power to do that did not change you. But when that power was threatened, weakened by circumstance—that changed you. You turned cruel, to protect

not what you had, but what you might not have.

For the first time... I understood why my mother lied.

The prince was at his desk, surrounded by his councillors. I swept in, the only one in the room whose clothes were not embroidered with threads of gold. He looked up coldly.

"This girl who can spin diamonds," I said. "When does she arrive?"

He scowled. The councillors all became very busy with papers and quills. "Escort the princess from the Council Chamber," my prince said. "She isn't feeling well."

Three guards sprang forward. Their armor cover was woven of gold thread.

I couldn't find the young page of three years ago, who at any rate was a page no longer. But in the stable I found the stablemaster's boy, a slim youth about my height, dressed in plain, warm clothing he probably thought was rags. "In my chamber, there is a rat. If you come with me I will give it to you wrapped in a cloth. You will take it through the courtyard gate and into the forest. I will watch you do this from the highest tower. When you're done, I'll give you doublet and hose and slippers all embroidered with skeins of gold."

His eyes shone with greed, and his color flushed high.

"If you kill the rat, I'll know. I have ways to know," I told him, lying.

"I wouldn't do that," he said, lying.

He didn't. I know because when he came to my chambers from the forest, he was shaken and almost pale. He handed me a stone, clean and smooth and light as a single word. He didn't look at me.

But nonetheless she took the gold-embroidered clothes.

That night, I woke from the old dream. It was just before dawn. The two pale stones lay side by side on my crimson-and-gold coverlet, and on each was writing, the letters not curlicued and ornate but simple straight lines that soothed the mind, eased it, likely lying on warm rock in the elemental sunshine.

I couldn't read them. It didn't matter. I knew what they said. The words were in my mind, my breath, my bone, as if they had always been there. As they had: *rampel*

, thereal; still skin, with quiet skin.

The forest disappeared, copse by copse, tree by tree. The ground rose, and Dirk and I rode over low hills covered with grass. I dismounted and touched some stalks. It was tough-fibered, low, dull green. The kind of grass you can scythe but never killoff, not even by burning.

Beyond the hills the forest resumed, the trees squat but thick-bodied, moss growing at their base, fungus on their sides. They looked as if they had been there forever. Sometimes pale fire moved over the ground, as no-colored as mist but with a dull glow, looking very old. I shuddered; fire should not be old. This was not a place for the daughter of a washerwoman. Dirk squirmed and fretted in front of me on the saddle.

"You're going to learn, Dirk," I said to him. "To be still. To know the power of quiet. To portion your words and your making to what is real."

As my mother had not. Nor the prince, nor his councillors, nor anyone but the rat-boy and rat-girl, who, I now knew, crept back into the corrupted palace because the Old Ones didn't ever let go of what was theirs. Nor claim what was not. To do either would be to name the real as unreal.

Dirk couldn't have understood me, but he twisted to scowl at me. His dark brows rushed together. His vivid blue eyes under thick dark lashes blinked furiously.

"In the real, first design is the power, Dirk."

And when I finished those words he was there, sitting quietly on a gnarled root, his pale eyes steady. "No," he said. "We don't teach children with fevered and corrupted blood."

For just a second I clutched Dirk to me. I didn't want to give him up, not even to his own good. He was better off with me, I was his mother, I could hide him and teach him, work for him, cheat and steal and lie for him...

I couldn't save my son. I had no powers but the tiny, disposable ones, like turning straw into gold.

"This time you will teach such a child," I said.

"I will not." The Old One rose. Pale fire sprang around him, rising from the solid earth. Dirk whimpered.

"Yes, you will," I said, and closed my eyes against what I was about to do: Become less real myself. Less powerful. For Dirk. "I can force you to take him. Rampe/stillskin is your name."

The Old One looked at me, sadness in his pale eyes. Then Dirk was no longer in my arms. He stood on the ground beside the boy, already quieter, his fidgeting gone. The pale fire moved up from the ground and onto my fingers, charring the moist stumps. A vision burned in my head. I screamed, but only from pain: Dirk was saved, and I didn't care that I would never spin again, nor that every gold thread in the kingdom had suddenly become stone, pale, and smooth and ordinary as a true word.