

Sometimes, there are things that one must do— even at the risk of all one holds dear.

THE OUTLING

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HERTA PULLED IMPATIENTLY AT THE HOOD THE WILD WIND attempted to take from her head. Facing this was like trying to bore her body, sturdy as it was, into a wall. The dusk was awaking shadows one did not like to see if only in a glimpse from eye corner. She shifted her healer's bag and tried to hold in mind the thought of her own hearth fire, a simmering pot of stew, and a waiting mug of her own private herb restorative.

The wind hollowed and within her hood Herta grinned. Let the Dark go its way, this eve it held no newborn in its nets. Gustava, the woodsman's wife, had a new son safe at her breast and a strong boy he was.

Then she slowed her fight against the wind, actually pushed aside a bit of hood to hear the better. No, there was no mistaking that whimper—pain, fear, both fed it.

In the near field there was a rickety structure Ranfer had once slovenly built for a sheep shelter, though all flocks would be safely bedded this night. She had not been mistaken—that was a lonesome cry, wailed as if no help could be expected.

Herta bundled up thick skirts, gave a hitch to her bag, to push laboriously through the nearest gap in the rotting fence. She did allow herself a regretful sigh. There was pain and she was a healer; for such there was no turning aside.

She tore a grasping thorn away from her cloak and rounded the end of the leanto. Then she halted again al-most in mid-step, and her white breath puffed forth in a gasp.

There was a form stretched on the remains of rotting straw, yes. Great green eyes which yet had a hint of gold in them were on her. The body which twisted now as if to relieve some intolerable pain was—furred. Yet it was womankind in all its contours.

Herta dropped her cloak and strove to pull it over brush and crumbling wood to give some shelter. Light—not even a candle lantern. But she had the years behind her to tell her what lay here—a thing of legend—yet it lived and was in birth throes.

White fangs showed between pale lips as Herta went to her knees beside that twisting figure.

“I would help,” the healer got out. She was already pulling at her bag. But there was no fire to warm any potion and half her hard-learned skills depended upon such.

She shook off mittens and into the palm of one hand shook a mixture. As she leaned closer the thing she would tend swept out a long pale tongue to wipe her flesh clean.

Having turned back her sleeves, Herta placed her hands on that bulge of mid-body. “Down come.” She recited words which might not be understood by her patient but were the ritual. “Come down and out into this world, without lingering.”

She never knew how long she kept up that struggle, so hampered by the lack of near all that was necessary for a proper birthing. But at last there was a gush of pale blood and a small wet thing in her hands. While she who had yielded it up at last cried aloud a mournful cry—or was it a howl?

Though Herta held now, wrapping in her apron, what was undoubtedly a female child, large to be sure but still recognizable for what it was, the body which had delivered it once more writhing. Foam dripped from the jaws and a strong animal smell arose. But the eyes went from Herta to the babe and back again. And in them, as if it were shouted aloud, there was a plea.

Without knowing why, except that somehow this was a part of her innermost being, Herta nodded. “Safe as I can, I shall hold.”

Her breath caught as she realized what she had just promised. But that it was a true oath she had no doubt. The eyes held to hers; then came a dimness and the figure listed for the last time. Herta squatted, a wailing baby in her arms. But at her feet there was now, stiffening and stark, the body of a silver white wolf.

Herta’s hand started to move in the traditional farewell to those passing beyond and then stopped. All living things in the world she had

always known paid homage to That Beyond, but did an Outling come within that shelter? Who was she to judge? She finished the short ritual with the proper words almost definitely.

“Sleep well, sister. May your day dawn warm and clear.”

Stiffly she got to her near-benumbed feet. The babe whimpered, and she sheltered it with a flap of cloak. Night was closing in. She did not know how or why the Outling had come to the fringe of human habitation, but either those of her kind would find her or else, like the wood creatures whose blood she was said to share, she would lie quiet here to become part of the earth again.

Heavy dusk was on Herta when she reached her cottage at the outer edge of the village street. Lanterns were agleam above the doorways after the Law and she must set hers also. But luckily she seemed to have the village street to herself at the moment. It was the time for day’s-end eating and all were at their tables.

Inside she laid the baby, still bundled in her apron, on her bed and then saw to the lantern and gave a very vigorous poking to the embers on the hearth, feeding them well from her store. She even went to the extravagance of lighting a candle in its grease-dripped holder.

To swing a pot of water over the awakening fire took but a moment or so, and she rummaged quickly through her supplies of castoffs, which she kept ready for those too poor to have prepared much for birthings.

Once it was washed and clad she would have vowed that this was a human child—healthy of body—born with a thick thatch of silver fair hair—but human as the one she had earlier brought into the world.

She hushed a hungry wail by a rag sopping with goat’s milk to suck. Its eyes opened and Herta would always swear that they looked up at her with strange knowledge and recognition.

Briary, she named her find, and the name seemed to fit. And she had her story ready, too: a beggar woman taken by her time in the forest, who died leaving one there was none to claim.

Briary was accepted by the village with shrugs and some mutterings. If Herta wished to burden herself with an extra mouth during the lean months, the care of a stranger’s off throw—that was her business. Too many owed life and health to the healer to raise questions.

As time passed, though, Herta was hard put to explain some things. Why her charge grew so quickly and showed wits and strengths village children of near age did not. Yet, though she watched carefully, especially on the full moon nights, she saw no sign of any Outling change.

Briary early advanced from a creeping stage to walking, and she was always a shadow to Herta. She seldom spoke and then only in answer to a direct question, but when Herta sat by the fire of an evening, a warm posset in her mug, stretching her feet to the fire's warm, she would feel a small hand stroking her arm and then her cheek and she would gather up the child to hold. Perhaps it was because she had lived alone for so long herself that she felt the need for speech, and so she first told Briary of her own childhood, and then tales of older times. But she never spoke of Outlings nor such legends. Instead she repeated the names of herbs and plants and most of the lore of her trade, even those the child she held on her lap could not understand. Yet Briary seemed to find all Herta's speech a comfort, for when the healer would take her to bed she would ask in her soft voice for more.

When spring came Briary grew restless, pacing to the door of the house and fingering the latch bar, looking to Herta. At first the healer was reluctant to let her out. There were two reasons—the Outling blood in her, which Herta tried hard to forget, and the fact that she was so forward for her age that surely the village women would gossip about it.

But at length she yielded and allowed Briary to go into the garden, which must be carefully tended, and even, walking, with one hand grasping Herta's skirt, to the mill for a packet of meal, standing quietly, sometimes with a forefinger in her mouth, listening while Herta exchanged greetings and small talk with her neighbors.

If Briary did not hunt out the children of the village, they were quick to spy her. To the older ones she was but a baby, but there were others who shyly offered flowers or a May apple. At length she became accepted; all differences denied that she was a stranger. She could outrun even Evison, who had always been fleetest of foot. And as the years passed Herta also forgot her wariness and looked no more for what she suspected might come.

Somehow the villagers came to accept though they sometimes commented on her rapid growth of both mind and body. She became a second pair of hands for Herta, learning to grind, to measure, to spread for drying, to measure drop by drop liquids from the clay bottles on the

shelves. It was she who stopped the lifeblood flow when Karl misswung an axe until Herta could come. And Lesa swore that Briary only touched the ugly wart rising on her chin and it grew the less and vanished. Herta was given credit for training so good an apprentice.

When summers reached the height of sticky weather and one sweated and slapped at the flies, hunting shade at noontide, Briary was made free of another of the children's secrets. For she had early learned that there were some things one did not blab about.

This was one mainly known to the boys until Briary had followed them. And, seeing her watching, they some-how could not send her away.

Among the ancient stories Herta had shared with her was one of the village itself. There had been a mighty lady, such as had never been hereabouts before, who had come with workmen and had built a stone house which stood now fields apart from the village. Before it was dug a pool as the lady ordered, and a spring had burst to fill it, nor had the water ever failed. Then she had built across the upper end of the pool, nearest to the building, a screen of stone.

Once that had been done she dismissed the workpeople, offering land to those wanting to stay. Later came others, odd-looking in queer garments. They, too, worked, for one could hear the ring of their hammers throughout the day and sometimes on nights when the moons were full.

Whatever they wrought was also finished at last, and they left very quickly between dawn and dusk of a single day. The native villagers took an aversion to the building. Of the lady they never saw anything again, and it was thought she must have gone with the last workpeople.

However, in time the boys used to dare each other to try the pool and, nothing ill happening, it became a place of recreation for the village in the high heat of summer. But no one ventured beyond the screen or tried to explore what stood there.

Briary seemed able to swim as easily as one already tutored, though the other girls squealed and splashed and floundered into some manner of propulsion—though some gave up more than just the splashing.

It seemed that life flowed as smoothly as always, one day melting into another one, until the coming of the ped-dler. He arrived on a day for rejoicing for the crops, for the last of the harvest had been brought in and there was a table set up in the middle of the street whereon each housewife

set a dish or platter of her best and most closely guarded recipe. They were just about to explore these delights when Evison came running to say there was a stranger on the road from the south.

Perhaps twice or three times a year such a thing might happen. It meant news to be talked over for months and sometimes things to be learned. To have this happen on the day of Harvest Home was a double event which near aroused the younger members of the village to a frenzy.

He came slowly, the peddler, with one hand on the pack frame of his mule, as if he in some manner needed support, and his face was near as red as a field poppy.

Johan, the smith, hurried to meet him, a brimming tankard of Harvest Mix in his hand. The man gave him a nod of the head and drank as if he had been in a desert for days. When he came up for air he pulled his dusty hand across his wet chin.

“Now that’s a fair greeting.” His voice had a cracked note as if some of the dust had plagued him to that point. “I be Igorof, trader. May all your days be sunny and your crops grow tall, good people.”

“Let us help your beast, trader.” Johan already had a hand on his shoulder and was pulling him toward the table. “Good feasting, Igorof.” He placed him on the nearest bench while the women crowded forward with this dish or that full of the best for him to make choice.

Evison had taken the donkey to the nearby field, where two of the other boys helped him lift off the heavily laden pack frame while another brought a pail of water for the thirsty animal.

“Feast, let us feast!” Johan hammered the hilt of his knife on the table.

Briary had squeezed in beside Herta, but she noted, as she always was able, that the healer was eyeing the new-comer with a frown beginning to form between her eyes.

Feast well they did, with many toasts in the more potent drink offered the elders. Igorof’s tankard was kept brimming and he emptied it nearly as quickly, though he did not seem as drawn to do more than taste what lay on his plate.

Herta leaned forward suddenly and asked, her voice loud enough to

cut through the general noise, “How do those in Langlot, friend? You have come from there— what news do you bring?”

His eyes were watching her over the edge of the tankard.

“Well as one would wish, goodwife. There be three new babes and—” Suddenly he set down the tankard so its contents splashed and his mouth was drawn crooked in grimace.

What moved Briary arose inside her as one might suddenly come from a dark into light. She skidded under the table and caught the edge of Johan’s smock, pulling him backwards with all her might, away from the stranger. He cried out in surprise and tripped.

The girl continued to face the stranger, flung out her arms and pushed against all those near him she could reach. “Away—away—” Her voice was shrill.

“What do you, brat!” Ill-tempered Trike aimed a slap at her.

Herta arose. “She saves your life!” she told Trike. “Stranger, what is the truth of what you have brought to us?”

He grimaced again, his eyes turning swiftly from side to side.

“No! Not the fire!” He had scrambled up from his seat. His shirt only loosely held together fell open to show red splotches on his chest. Herta’s eyes widened, fear masked her face.

“Plague!”

One word, but enough to silence them all. Those nearest the trader strove to get away, and those beyond tried to elude them in turn. There had been no plague in many years, but when it struck, whole villages went to their deaths and only the wild creatures were ever seen in their streets.

Such was the role of deaths, it was said that those bearing the contagion were often hurled into fires, the living with the dead.

A wild scramble rolled along the street, each family seeking their own home, though one could not shelter with any bolt against this menace.

The man threw back his head and howled like a beast at the slaughter pen and then crumpled to the ground. Briary could see the heavy shudders

that shook his body.

“Get away from him, fool!” Johan’s wife showed her ratchet face at their cottage window.

Herta moved around the table to the stricken stranger. She did not look to Greta in the window, but her voice surely reached the woman, for the shutter was slammed shut again.

“I am healer sworn,” Herta said, then she spoke to Briary.

“Bring me the packets from the drawer with the black spot on it.” Briary ran as swiftly as in a race. But fear was cold within her. She knew the nature of those pack-ets—they brought an end to great suffering—but also to life, and she who used them would take a great weight upon her inner self for every grain of the powder she dispensed. Yet it was said that the last moments of the plague brought pure torment and if that were lessened it was a boon well meant.

There were two sides always to the healer’s craft. In her hands from time to time she held both life and death. Briary found the packets, thrust them deep into her apron pocket and returned to the wreckage of the feast.

Herta was on her knees by the still shuddering body of the trader. As Briary came up she grabbed a tankard from the edge of the table before her and there was an answer-ing slosh of drink unconsumed. Then she spoke to Igorof.

“Brother, you are plague gripped. There is no cure—but your passing can be eased if you will it so.”

His head turned so his sweating face could be seen, and it seemed that the shudders ran also across his features. His bitten lips, flecked with blood, twisted.

“Give—peace—” Somehow he grated out the words.

Calmly Herta held packet and tankard up to eye level and shook some grayish ashes into the tankard. Then she pushed the packet back to Briary.

As if the man had been stricken by an ordinary fever and lay in her own cottage, she slipped an arm about his shoulders and lifted him, setting the tankard to his lips.

“Thanks of all good be on you, healer,” he grated out. “But you have doomed yourself thereby.”

“That is as it may be,” she said steadily as he drank what she offered.

To Briary’s eyes his passing was quick, but the body he had left behind was as much a danger to the village as the living man had been.

Herta arose and faced down the street. And her voice came high and clear.

“Show your courage now. Those who were near to this poor soul and his belongings—already, as well you know, the taint may lie upon you. Away from those you cherish until you know you are clean. Come forth and give aid for what must be done.”

There was silence, no other answer. Then a door was flung open and a youthful figure half fell, half flung him-self into the street. There were screams and calls from behind him as he lurched to his feet, stood for a moment as if to get his full breath, and then came forward with visible reluctance. It was Evison, who had dealt with Igorof’s pack and mule. He gulped twice and turned his head not to view the dead as he approached, and his face was gray beneath the summer’s tan.

His coming might have been a key turned in a stubborn lock, for now other doors opened and the wailing from within the cottages mingled in a great cry of sorrow and loss. But they came—Johan, and the others who had drunk with the stranger, three women who had taken it upon themselves to fill his plate and so had been shoulder close to him.

Johan loosened one of the benches and they brought pitchforks and staffs, to roll the limp body on that surface, carrying it into the field where the trader’s pack had been left. It was Stuben who smoothed the mule’s neck and, looking into the animal’s eyes, said in a shaking voice, “What must be done, will be done.” And with his butcher’s practice brought down the heavy axe in the sin-gle needed blow.

There was movement again in the village, though those who had come forth stood carefully away from the known cottage while doors or windows were opened. Wood cut for the hearth, a roll or two of cloth, several jugs of oil were thrust into the street.

So Igorof came to the fire after all, though it was only his tortured husk which lay there in the lap of flames. And with him burned all his belongings,

the frame on which those had ridden, and the mule.

It took hours and those who worked tottered with weariness as they pulled together more fuel for that fire. Also their eyes went slyly now and then from one to another, watching, Briary knew, for some sign of the sickness to show.

Herta oversaw the building of the pyre and then went to her cottage and began to sort out bottles and packets, Briary following her directions as to blending and stirring.

“What can be done, shall be. Gather all the cups and tankards left on the table, child, and have them ready.”

The stink of the fire hung like a doom cloud over the whole village, and Briary could see those others still adding to its fury with whatever they could lay hands upon. She readied the cups and Herta came, a pot braced against her hip. The workers must have sighted her and taken her arrival as a signal, for they gathered again, singed, smoke darkened, though no one stood close to another.

“A Healer is granted only such knowledge as the Great Ones allow. I can promise you nothing. But here I have the master strength of many remedies, some akin to a lighter form of the plague. Drink and hope, for this is all which has been left to us, if we would not wipe out all who are kin to us.”

Drink they did, with Herta watching that each might get his or her full share. When they had done, their weariness seemed to strike at them, and they settled on the bank of the stream. Two of the women wept, but the third wore a face of anger against fate and dug her belt knife again and again into the earth as if she would clean it well for some use; while the men, grim of face, looked now and then to the towering flag of flame.

Briary had first sought Herta, tagging at her heels as might a babe who had but shortly learned to walk and needed a skirt to cling to. Inside she felt strange and wanted comfort, but of what sort she could not tell, perhaps better than most, for she had learned of Herta's knowledge. Yet there grew in her a strange feeling that this thing was no threat to her, and that those sorrowing and damning fate upon the river bank were its prey—not she.

She still trod in Herta's footsteps as they returned to the healer's cottage. But on the very doorstep she halted as if a wall had risen past

which she could not go. Yet all she could see was a string of drying herbs somehow fallen from its ceiling hook. The odor from it grew more pungent and she made a small sound in her throat—more like a whine than a true protest.

Herta swept around and stood staring at her as if she were some fragment of the plague broken loose. The healer sank down on her chair. Her lips moved as if she were speaking.

Briary heard no sound, but there came a tingling in her skin as if the briars which had been her birthing bed once more pricked at her. There seemed to be stronger smells, and some of them she found worse than those which had come from the fire.

Her hands itched and she rubbed them together and then looked down in startled horror, for skin did not touch smooth skin—rather hair. She looked to see a down ap-pearing—gray as fire ash and certainly not true skin. Fran-tically she pushed up her sleeves to discover that that fluff continued, and then she tore apart the fastening of her bodice and looked down upon just the same growth.

The plague! And yet the trader had showed no such stigmata. Briary cried out her terror and from her throat there arose no true words, but rather a howl.

Despairing she held out one of those strangely gloved hands toward Herta and went to her knees, begging aid.

The healer had arisen from her seat, the twisted as-tonishment on her face fading. She wet her lips with her tongue tip and then enunciated slowly as if speaking to a small child who must be made to understand.

“You are—Outling!” Again she wet her lips with tongue tip. “Now you meet your true self. Why I do not Know, unless what has happened this day has also a strange effect on those of your blood. But this I will tell you, daughterling: get you away. They,” she gave a short nod in the direction of the rest of the village, “will wish for one on whom to blame disaster—they will remember now unlike their kin you are—the more so now!”

“But,” Briary’s voice was hardly more than a harsh rumble. “I—I smelled the evil—I wished to aid—”

“Truth spoken. But you have never been one to measure beside the other younglings. There have always been some who wondered and

whispered. And now that black doom has descended upon us, their whispers will become shouts.”

“You call me Outling.” Tears gathered in the girl’s eyes, matted in the fur on her cheeks. “Am I then of the night demon kind?”

Herta shook her head. “Your kind is old. Before the first of the human landseekers came down valley your people knew this land. But then you passed, as a fading race passes when pressed by a stronger, fresher planting. I do not know why your mother returned here, though her need must have been sore, for death accompanied her. I do not—”

Suddenly she paused, arose from her chair. “The shrine,” she said. “Surely only the shrine could have drawn her hither, that she must have aid for some dire hurt!”

“The shrine—?”

“Yes, that which lies beyond the pool. None ever saw clearly the Great One who ordered its building, nor did any who worked upon it understand why it was set here—at least they answered no questions. But if it *is* a thing of power for your kind perhaps you can save yourself there—”

“But you—the plague—” faltered Briary.

“Listen, youngling, ends come to all living creatures, and the reason behind such we do not ever know. I am a healer; what I can do for these people, some I have known from their cradles, that I shall do. But I also know how fear twists minds, and I will not have you fall into their hands. Someone need only say ‘Outling,’ and point a fin-ger—and the hunt would be swift and short. Perhaps your mother lost in just such a race. Go you to the shrine. You, I am sure, will find no barrier at the screen there. Go beyond and may all the blessings of seed and fruit, earth, and stream, be upon you. Go—I say—already they are on the move.”

Briary glanced back over her shoulder. Those who had thrown themselves on the river bank no longer were apart but had drawn together, and Herta was right, in that their faces were turned toward the healer’s cottage.

Though what Herta had said had not seemed possible to the girl, she was certain that the healer believed her own words, was moved by fear—

Perhaps—perhaps they would also hunt down Herta if they fastened

on Briary as the one who had somehow attracted ill fortune. After all, she was Herta's fosterling from birth.

It was too quick, too much, Herta's words—

"Ayyha, Healer—" A man's voice, those by the river were standing now, moving in their direction.

"Go!" She could not withstand Herta's command after all these years of obedience. Briary turned and ran.

As she went her clothing seemed to impede her movements, her skirts twisted about her legs to bring her down—as if such were not for her wearing. But she was still fleet of foot and, though she heard voices baying behind her as if hounds had been loosed, she gained the upper slopes, cut across recently mown fields, and then the pool was before her. The pool—and the screen. What lay behind that—who knew? Though some of the more venturesome had dived in the past to discover that there was space yawning at its foot.

Now she struggled with clothes which were more and more of a hindrance, until she at last poised to dive, her small body still human in form but clad in fine gray fur.

Down she fought her way through the water, straining to reach that dark line of the screen's edge. And then one of her hands hit against it and she seized upon the edge to pull herself forward—into what? Some crevice in which her aching lungs would betray her?

Fortune was with her: the screen was less than her struggling body in length. She was still in the water but she could fight her way up frantically, until her head burst from the pool and she could breathe again, tread water, and look about her.

On this side of the barrier the expanse of water was far less, and facing the screen was a series of bars set in the stone as if to provide handholds to draw oneself out. She swam toward the nearest and pulled her body waist high into the open, her feet finding niches below into which they fitted by instinct.

Then she was fully out and facing what lay before her, what the screen had guarded all these years. It was not a large building, rather tall and narrow, hardly wider than the open doorway that pierced its side directly before her.

There was no door—only darkness—darkness thick as a curtain. Briary, not really knowing what she did, flung back her dripping head and gave voice to a call which no human could have uttered.

There was something like an early morning fog which gathered to the right of that opening, gathered, thickened, as flesh upon bone. Then she fronted a being far stranger than her known world held.

A woman, yes, for it stood on two feet, and held before its furred body a spear. Though the jaw was somewhat elongated, and the eyes set at a slight angle in the skull, which was framed with large furred ears, it was still enough like those she had dwelt among.

“What clan, cubling?” the woman guard asked.

Briary still clung to the handhold she had above the pool.

“Lady,” she quavered, “I know nothing of clans.”

The woman thing leaned forward a little and looked at her more closely.

“Threb’s get. We thought you long dead, cubling. Nei-ther of the People or of the Wasters are in truth, since Threb broke hearth law and lay with a Wasters to conceive you. So the Wasters have at last thrown you out?”

“No! It was Herta—and the plague—she was afeared that they would fasten on me the cause of their deaths.” Somehow Briary felt she must make this statuelike figure understand and believe her.

Quickly she spoke of the healer who had brought her life and how now her own presence might threaten with harsh judgment.

“Ever the Wasters look beyond their own follies and errors to set the consequences upon others. Stupid they are—look you!”

She turned a fraction and sent the point of her spear into that dark behind her. It split and light poured out upon them, streaming from a land beyond. In Briary arose a mighty longing to race, not from what lay behind but toward what lay ahead.

“Their plagues are borne of dirt, of their rooting in their own waste.”

The guardian was scornful. "This land was ours before they befouled it, and every secret it had it freely shared with us. See you this?" She stabbed forward again and then swung the spear toward Briary. Impaled on its sharp point was a thing which wriggled and squirmed and yet seemed more vine section than any animal.

"This they have torn from its rooting wherever they discovered it; for to them it was nothing, and it covered ground which they wanted for their own purposes. Yet it had its duty which it did well. As other growth struggles for water to live, so this struggles for refuse and filth. They need only leaves to lay upon their ailing and aid would come. But they are fools and worse. Now, your gate is open, cubling; I make you free to the world in which you rightfully should have been born."

But Briary's eyes were on the plant. She suddenly roused herself and made a half leap to catch the vine with one hand. It rolled itself about her arm, and it was as if she had stuck her hand into a fire. Yet still she held to it.

The woman's green eyes measured her. "There is a price," she said evenly.

Briary nodded. Of course, there would be a price. But there was Herta, who knew herbs as a mother knows her children, and in Herta's hands this might yet save the village.

"If you return to the waste world"—the woman's voice was cold—"you will turn from all which is yours, and you may well pay for it with your blood. Outlings are hunted when they are seen. And it cannot be promised this gate will open to you again."

Briary huddled on the edge of the pool, her head turned to what lay beyond that doorway—a clean land in which her kind had found refuge. But between those flowers, and distant trees, and the warm sweet wind which beckoned to her, stood the vision of a sturdy woman, her gray hair knotted at her neck, her shoulder a little crooked from the many years of carrying a healer's bag.

Perhaps it was that portion of human blood which anchored her, but Herta she could not abandon.

"For your grace, thanks, Lady." She raised the arm about which the vine still clung. "This I must take to her who brought me into life and dealt always kindly with me."

Fearing that perhaps the guard might strive to take it from her, she dived once more, heading for that passage to the world she knew.

She made the journey as quickly as she could, climbed from the outer pool, and reluctantly put on her skirt and bodice though they were quickly wet through from her fur.

It was approaching dusk; that would serve her. She slunk as fast as she could from shadow to shadow. Then she saw—the cottage door was open wide—strewn out-ward from it were smashed pots and bottles, torn-apart lengths of drying herbs.

“Herta!” Only fear moved her now as she leaped for-ward. And she found what she sought, a bundle of torn clothing about bloodied and bruised flesh. But still liv-ing—still living!

Through the night she tended the healer, trying to find among the debris the nostrums she needed, not daring to strike a light, lest she draw some villager. Oddly enough her sight seemed unhindered by the lack of any lamp, and she worked swiftly with practiced hands.

It was breaking dawn when Herta roused. She stared at Briary and then her face became a mask of fear—

“Off with you! I would not have them gut you before my very eyes.”

“Listen, Heart-Held.” Few times in her life had Briary used those words but she realized they had been with her forever. Swiftly she swung up her arm to which the vine still somehow clung and repeated what the guard had told her.

“Bindweed, rot guts.” Herta looked at her offering in wonder. “Yes, it has always been rooted forth wherever found. Cattle eat of it and die, as do the fowl of the barnyard. And now you say that it, also, has its part and the folly has been ours. Well, enough, one can only try to do one’s best.”

She somehow got to her feet and Briary found that the vine slipped from her furred arms smoothly as metal. Looking at that she thought she knew its price which had never been fully stated.

“I shall go,” she said in her new hoarse voice. “None shall see me with you. Certainly not all of those in the village have turned mad. You have been their ever-present aid for many seasons. Let the bindweed work but

once and they shall know shame at their madness. But not if I remain.”

“Where do you go?” There were seldom seen tears on Herta’s cheeks.

“That lies in fortune’s hands. But see it is nearly light and—” The girl shivered, “I hear voices.”

Herta reached for her but she slid from the other’s grasp, and somehow only the bulky clothing remained for Herta to hold. Then she was running free with the rising first wind of morning around her, up and back, up and back.

She was Outling with nothing now here to hold her unless she was weak in purpose. The gate to her own place might indeed be closed by her choice, but she had the right to go and see.

Reaching the side of the pool, Briary paused once to look down to those about Herta’s cottage as the morn’s light made them clear. And then she dove arrow quick and smooth into the water, down and down, until the dark edge of the screen was before her. Nor did she hesitate to see what her choice had cost her but swam on, for this was the thing she had to do.

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AFTERWORD

I first met Roger when we were both inhabitants of Cleve-land in the very dim days of the past. He was a warm and generous person, someone one felt at home with at once. And while a great deal of distance divided us in the fol-lowing years, I had the pleasure of looking forward to his next spectacular production in print. Such as he leave an unfillable void behind—but also set goals for those who follow.