

theburningman

BY TAD WILLIAMS

Years and years later, I still start up in the deepest part of night with his agonized face before me. And always, in these terrible dreams, I am helpless to ease his suffering.

I will tell the tale then, in hope the last ghosts may be put to rest, if such a thing can ever happen in this place where there are more ghosts than living souls. But you will have to listen closely - this is a tale that the teller herself does not fully understand.

I will tell you of Lord Sulis, my famous stepfather.

I will tell you what the witch foretold to me.

I will tell you of the love that I had and I lost.

I will tell you of the night I saw the burning man.

Tellarin gifted me with small things, but they were not small to me. My lover brought me sweetmeats, and laughed to see me eat them so greedily.

'Ah, little Breda,' he told me. 'It is strange and wonderful that a mere soldier should have to smuggle honeyed figs to a king's daughter/ And then he kissed me, put his rough face against me and kissed me (and that was a sweeter thing than any fig that God ever made.

But Sulis was not truly a king, nor was I his true daughter.

Tellarin was not wrong about everything. The gladness I felt when I saw my soldier or heard him whistling below the window was strange and wonderful indeed.

My true father, the man from whose loins I sprang, died in the cold waters of the Kingslake when I was very small. His companions said that a great pikefish became caught in the nets and dragged my father Ricwald to a drowning death, but others whispered that it was his companions themselves who murdered him, then weighted his body with stones. Everyone knew that my father would have been gifted with the standard

and spear of Great Thane when all the thanes of the Lake People next met. His father and uncle had both been Great Thane before him, so some whispered that God had struck down my poor father because one family should not hold power so long. Others believed that my father's companions on the boat had simply been paid shame-gold to drown him, to satisfy the ambition of one of the other families.

I know these things only from my mother Cynethrith's stories. She was young when my father died, and had two small children - me, not yet five years old, and my brother Aelfric, two years my elder. Together we went to live in the house of my father's father because we were the last of his line, and among the Lake People of Erkyndland it was blood of high renown. But it was not a happy house. Godric, my grandfather, had himself been Great Thane for twice ten years before illness ended his rule, and he had high hopes that my father would follow him, but after my father died, Godric had to watch a man from one of the other

families chosen to carry the spear and standard instead. From that moment, everything that happened in the world only seemed to prove to my grandfather that the best days of Erkyndland and the Lake People had passed.

Godric died before I reached seven years, but he made those years between my father's death and his own very unhappy ones for my mother, with many complaints and sharp rebukes at how she managed the household and how she raised Aelfric and me, his dead son's only children. My grandfather spent much time with Aelfric, trying to make him the kind of man who would bring the spear and standard back to our family, but my brother was small and timid - it must have been clear he would never rule more than his own household. This Godric blamed on my mother, saying she had taught the boy woman-ish ways.

Grandfather was less interested in me. He was never cruel to me, only fierce and short-spoken, but he was such a frightening figure, with bristling white beard, growling voice, and several missing fingers, that I could never do anything but shrink from him. If that was another reason he found little savour in life, then I am sorry for it now.

In any case, my mother's widowhood was a sad, bitter time for her. From mistress of her own house, and prospective wife of the Great Thane, she now became only one of three grown daughters in the house of a soured man, for one of my father's sisters had also lost her husband, and the youngest had been kept at home, unmarried, to care for her father in his dotage.

I believe that had even the humblest of fishermen courted my mother, she would have looked upon him kindly, as long as he had a house of his

own and no living relatives. But instead a man who has made the entire age tremble came to call.

'What is he like?' Tellarin once asked me. 'Tell me about your step-father.'

'He is your lord and commander/ I smiled. 'What can I tell you that you do not know?'

Tell me what he says when he is in his house, at his table, what he does.' Tellarin looked at me then, his long face suddenly boyish and surprised. 'Hah! It feels like sacrilege even to wonder!'

'He is just a man/ I told him, and rolled my eyes. Such silly things men feel about other men - that this one is so large and important, while they themselves are so small! 'He eats, he sleeps, he breaks wind. When my mother was alive, she used to say that he took up more room in a bed than any three others might, because he thrashed so, and talked aloud in his sleep.' I made my stepfather sound ordinary on purpose, because I did not like it when Tellarin seemed as interested in him as he was in me.

My Nabbanai soldier became serious then. 'How it must have grieved him when your mother died. He must have loved her very much.'

As if it had not grieved me! I resisted the temptation to roll my eyes again, and instead told him, with all the certainty of youth, 'I do not think he loved her at all.'

My mother once said that when my stepfather and his household first appeared across the meadowlands, riding north towards the Kingslake, it was as though the heavenly host itself had descended to earth. Trumpets heralded their approach, drawing people from every town as though to witness a pilgrimage passing, or the procession of a saint's relic. The knights' armour and lances were polished to a sparkle, and their lord's heron crest gleamed in gold thread on all the tall banners. Even the horses of the Nabban-men were larger and prouder than our poor Erkyndlandish ponies. The small army was followed

by sheep and cattle in herds, and by dozens and dozens of wagons and oxcarts, a train so vast that their rutted path is still visible on the face of the land three score years later.

I was a child, though, and saw none of it - not then. Within my grandfather's hall, I heard only rumours, things whispered by my aunts and my mother over their sewing. The powerful lord who had come was a Nabbanai nobleman, they reported, called by many Sulis the Apostate. He claimed that he came in peace, and wanted only to make a home for himself here beside the Kingslake. He was an exile from his own country - a heretic, some claimed, driven forth by the Lector under

threat of excommunication because of his impertinent questions about the life of Usires Aedon, our blessed Ransomer. No, he had been forced from his home by the conniving of the escritors, said others. Angering a churchman is like treading on a serpent, they said.

Mother Church still had an unsolid grip on Erkyndland in those days, and even though most had been baptized into the Aedonite faith, very few of the Lake People trusted the Sancellan Aedonites. Many called it 'that hive of priests', and said that its chief aim was not God's work, but increasing its own power.

Many still think so, but they no longer speak ill of the church where strangers can hear them.

I know far more of these things today than I did when they happened. I understand much and much, now that I am old and everyone in my story is dead. Of course, I am not the first to have travelled this particular sad path. Understanding always comes too late, I think.

Lord Sulis had indeed fallen out with the church, and in Nabban the church and the state were so closely tied, he had made an enemy of the Emperor in the Sancellan Mahistrevis as well, but so powerful and important was the family of my stepfather-to-be that he was not imprisoned or executed, but instead strongly encouraged to leave Nabban. His countrymen thought he took his household to Erkyndland because any nobleman could be king in that backward country - my country - but Sulis had his own reasons, darker and stranger than anyone could guess. So it was that he had brought his entire household, his knights and kerns and all their women and children, a small city's worth of folk, to the shores of the Kingslake.

For all the sharpness of their swords and strength of their armour, the Nabbanai treated the Lake People with surprising courtesy, and for the first weeks there was trade and much good fellowship between their camp and our towns. It was only when Lord Sulis announced to the thanes of the Lake People that he meant to settle in the High Keep, the deserted castle on the headlands, that the Erkyndlanders became uneasy.

Huge and empty, the domain only of wind and shadows, the High Keep had looked down on our lands since the beginnings of the oldest tales. No one remembered who had built it - some said giants, but some swore the fairy-folk had built it themselves. The Northmen from Rimmersgard were said to have held it for a while, but they were long gone, driven out by a dragon from the fortress the Rimmersmen had stolen from the Peaceful Ones. So many tales surrounded that castle! When I was small, one of my mother's bondwomen told me that it was now the haunt of frost-witches

and restless ghosts. Many a night I had thought of it standing deserted on the windy cliff top, only a half-day's ride away, and frightened myself so that I could not sleep.

The idea of someone rebuilding the ruined fortress made the thanes uneasy, but not only for fear of waking its spirits. The High Keep held a powerful position, perhaps an impregnable one - even in their crumbling condition, the walls would be almost impossible to storm if armed men held them. But the thanes

were in a difficult spot. Though the men of the Lake People might outnumber those of Sulis, the heron knights were better armed, and the discipline of Nabbanai fighting men was well-known - a half-legion of the Emperor's Sea Wolves had slaughtered ten times that number of Thrithings-men in a battle just a few years before. And Oswear, the new Great Thane, was young and untested as a war leader. The lesser thanes asked my grandfather Godric to lend his wisdom, to speak to this Nabbanai lord and see what he could grasp of the man's true intention.

So it was that Lord Sulis came to my grandfather's steading, and saw my mother for the first time.

When I was a little girl, I liked to believe that Sulis fell in love with my mother Cynethrith the moment he saw her, as she stood quietly behind her father-in-law's chair in Godric's great hall. She was beautiful, that I know - before my father died, all the people of the household used to call her Ricwald's Swan, because of her long neck and white shoulders. Her hair was a pale, pale gold, her eyes as green as the summer Kingslake. Any ordinary man would have loved her on sight. But 'ordinary' must be the least likely of all the words that could be used to describe my stepfather.

When I was a young woman, and falling in love myself for the first time, I knew for certain that Sulis could not have loved her. How could anyone who loved have been as cold and distant as he was? As heavily polite? Aching then at the mere thought of Tellarin, my secret beloved, I knew that a man who acted as my stepfather had acted towards my mother could not feel anything like love.

Now I am not so sure. So many things are different when I look at them now. In this extremity of age, I am farther away, as though I looked at my own life from a high hilltop, but in some ways it seems I see things much more closely.

Sulis was a clever man, and could not have failed to notice how my grandfather Godric hated the new Great Thane - it was in every thing my grandfather said. He could not speak of the weather without mentioning how the summers had been warmer and the winters shorter

in the days when he himself had been Great Thane, and had his son been allowed to succeed him, he as much as declared, every day would have been the first day of Maia-month. Seeing this, Sulis made compact with the bitter old man, first by the gifts and subtle compliments he gave him but soon in the courting of Godric's daughter-in-law as well.

While my grandfather became more and more impressed by this foreign nobleman's good sense, Sulis made his master stroke. Not only did he offer a bride price for my mother - for a widow! - that was greater than would have been paid even for the virgin daughter of a ruling Great Thane, a sizable fortune of swords and proud Nabban horses and gold plate, but Sulis told Godric that he would even leave my brother and myself to be raised in our grandfather's house.

Godric had still not given up all hope of Aelfric, and this idea delighted him, but he had no particular use for me. My mother would be happier, both men eventually decided, if she were allowed to bring at least one other child to her new home on the headlands.

Thus it was settled, and the powerful foreign lord married into the household of the old Great Thane. Godric told the rest of the thanes that Sulis meant only good, that by this gesture he had proved his honest wish to live in peace with the Lake People. There were priests in Sulis' company who would cleanse the High Keep of any unquiet spirits, Godric explained to the thanes - as Sulis himself had assured my grandfather - and thus, he argued, letting Sulis take the ancient keep for his own would bring our folk a double blessing.

What Oswear and the lesser thanes thought of this, I do not know. Faced with Godric's enthusiasm, with the power of the Nabbanai lord, and perhaps even with their own secret shame in the matter of my father's death, they chose to give in. Lord Sulis and his new bride were gifted with the deserted High Keep, with its broken walls and its ghosts.

Did my mother love her second husband? I cannot answer that any better than I can say what Sulis felt, and they are both so long dead that I am now the only living person who knew them both. When she first saw him in the doorway at Godric's house, he would certainly have been the light of every eye. He was not young - like my mother, he had already lost a spouse, although a decade had passed since his widowhood, while hers was still fresh - but he was a great man from the greatest city of all. He wore a mantle of pure white over his armour, held at the shoulder by a lapis badge of his family's heron crest. He had tucked his helmet under his arm when he entered the hall and my mother could see that he had very little hair, only a fringe of curls at the back of his head and over his ears, so that

his forehead gleamed in the firelight. He was tall and strongly-made, his unwhiskered jaw square, his nose wide and prominent. His strong, heavy features had a deep and contemplative look, but also a trace of sadness - almost, my mother once told me, the sort of face she thought God Himself might show on the Day of Weighing-Out.

He frightened her and he excited her - both of these things I know from the way she spoke of that first meeting. But did she love him, then or in the days to come? I cannot say. Does it matter? So many years later, it is hard to believe that it does.

Her time in her father-in-law's house had been hard, though. Whatever her deepest feelings about him, I do not doubt that she was happy toward Sulis.

In the month that my mother died, when I was in my thirteenth year, she told me that she believed Sulis had been afraid to love her. She never explained this - she was in her final weakness, and it was difficult for her to speak - and I still do not know what she meant.

The next to the last thing she ever said to me made even less sense. When the weakness in her chest was so terrible that she would lose the strength to breathe for long moments, she still summoned the strength to declare, 'I am a ghost.'

She may have spoken of her suffering - that she felt she only clung to the world, like a timid spirit that will not take the road to Heaven, but lingers ever near the places it knew. Certainly her last request made it clear that she had grown weary of the circles of this world. But I have wondered since if there might be some other meaning to her words. Did she mean that her own life after my father's death had been nothing more than a ghost-life? Or did she perhaps intend to say that she had become a shade in her own house, something that waited in the dark, haunted corridors of the High Keep for her second husband's regard to give it true life - a regard that would never come from that silent, secret-burdened man?

My poor mother. Our poor, haunted family!

I remember little of the first year of my mother's marriage to Lord Sulis, but I cannot forget the day we took possession of our new home. Others had gone before us to make our arrival as easeful as possible - I know they had, because a great tent had already been erected on the green in the Inner Bailey, which was where we slept for the first months - but to the child I was, it seemed we were riding into a place where no mortal had ever gone. I expected witches or ogres around every corner. We came up the cliff road beside the Kingslake until we reached the

curtain wall and began to circle the castle itself. Those who had gone before had hacked a crude road in the shadow of the walls, so we had a much easier passage than we would have only days earlier. We rode in a tunnel cut between the wall and forest. Where the trees and brush had not been chopped away, the Kingswood grew right to the castle's edge, striving with root and tendril to breach the great stones of the wall.

At the castle's northern gate we found nothing but a cleared place on the hillside, a desolation of tree stumps and burn-blackened grass - the thriving town of Erkynechester that today sprawls all around the castle's feet had not even been imagined. Not all the forest growth had been cleared. Vines still clung to the pillars of the shattered gatehouse, rooted in the cracks of the odd, shiny stone which was all that remained of the original gateway, hanging in great braids across the opening to make an tangled, living arbour.

'Do you see?' Lord Sulis spread his strong arms as if he had designed and crafted the wilderness himself. 'We will make our home in the greatest and oldest of all houses.'

As he led her across that threshold and into the ruins of the ancient castle, my mother made the sign of the Tree upon her breast.

I know many things now that I did not know on the first day we came to the High Keep. Of all the many tales about the place, some I now can say are false, but others I am now certain are true. For one thing, there is no question that the Northmen lived here. Over the years I have found many of their coins, struck with the crude 'F' rune of their King Fingil, and they also left the rotted remains of their wooden longhouses in the Outer Bailey, which my stepfather's workmen found during the course of other diggings. So I came to realize that if the story of the Northmen living here was a true one, it stood to reason that the legend of the dragon might also be true, as well as the terrible tale of how the Northmen slaughtered the castle's immortal inhabitants.

But I did not need such workaday proofs as coins or ruins to show me that our home was full of unquiet ghosts. That I learned for myself beyond all dispute, on the night I saw the burning man.

Perhaps someone who had grown up in Nabban or one of the other large cities of the south would not have been so astonished by their first sight of the High Keep, but I was a child of the Lake People. Before that day, the largest building I had ever approached was the great hall of our town where the thanes met every spring - a building that could easily have been hidden in any of several parts of the High Keep and then never

discovered again. On that first day, it was clear to me that the mighty castle could only have been built by giants.

The curtain wall was impressive enough to a small girl - ten times my own height and made of huge, rough stones that I could not imagine being hauled into place by anything smaller than the grandest of ogres

- but the inner walls, in the places where they still stood, were not just vast but also beautiful. They were shaped of shining white stone which had been polished like jewellery, the blocks of equal size to those of the outer wall but with every join so seamless that from a distance each wall appeared to be a single thing, a curving piece of ivory or bone erupting from the hillside.

Many of the keep's original buildings had been burned or torn down, some so that the men from Rimmersgard could pillage the stones to build their own tower, squat as a barrel but very tall. In any other place the Northmen's huge construction would have loomed over the whole landscape and would

certainly have been the focus of my amazement. But in any other place, there would not have been the Angel Tower.

I did not know its name then - in fact, it had no name, since the shape at its very peak could scarcely be seen - but the moment I saw it I knew there could be nothing else like it on earth, and for once childish exaggeration was correct. Its entrance was blocked by piles of rubble the Northmen had never finished clearing, and much of the lower part of its facade had cracked and fallen away in some unimaginable cataclysm, so that its base was raw stone, but it still thrust into the sky like a great white fang, taller than any tree, taller than anything mortals have ever built.

Excited but also frightened, I asked my mother whether the tower might not fall down on us. She tried to reassure me, saying it had stood for a longer time than I could imagine, perhaps since before there had even been people living beside the Kingslake, but that only made me feel other, stranger things.

The last words my mother ever spoke to me were, 'Bring me a dragon's claw.'

I thought at first that in the final hours of her illness she was wandering in her thoughts back to our early days at the castle.

The story of the High Keep's dragon, the creature who had driven out the last of the Northmen, was so old it had lost much of its power to frighten, but it was still potent to a little girl. The men of my stepfather's company used to bring me bits of polished stone - I learned after a while that they were shards of crumbled wall-carvings from the oldest parts of the castle

- and tell me, 'See, here is a broken piece of the great red dragon's claw.'

He lives down in the caves below the castle, but sometimes at night he comes up to sniff around. He is sniffing for little girls to eat!

The first few times, I believed them. Then, as I grew older and less susceptible, I learned to scorn the very idea of the dragon. Now that I am an old woman, I am plagued by dreams of it again. Sometimes even when I am awake, I think I can sense it down in the darkness below the castle, feel the moments of restlessness that trouble its long, deep sleep.

So on that night long ago, when my dying mother told me to bring her a dragon's claw, I thought she was remembering something from our first year in the castle. I was about to go look for one of the old stones, but her bondswoman Ulca - what the Nabbanai called her handmaiden or bodyservant - told me that was not what my mother wanted. A dragon's claw, she explained to me, was a charm to help those who suffered find the ease of a swift death. Ulca had tears in her eyes, and I think she was Aedonite enough to be troubled by the idea, but she was a sensible young woman and did not waste time arguing the right or wrong of it. She told me that the only way I could get such a thing swiftly would be from a woman named Xanippa who lived in the settlement that had sprung up just outside the High Keep's walls.

I was barely into womanhood, but I felt very much a child. The idea of even such a short journey outside the walls after dark frightened me, but my mother had asked, and to refuse a deathbed request was a sin long before Mother Church arrived to parcel up and name the rights and wrongs of life. I left Ulca at my mother's side and hurried across the rainy, nightbound castle.

The woman Xanippa had once been a whore, but as she had become older and fatter she had decided she needed another profession, and had developed a name as a herbwife. Her tumbledown hut, which stood against the keep's southeast curtain wall, overlooking the Kingswood, was full of smoke and bad

smells. Xanippa had hair like a bird's nest, tied with what had once been a pretty ribbon. Her face might have been round and comely once, but years and fat had turned it into something that looked as though it had been brought up in a fishing net. She was also so large she did not move from her stool by the fire during the time I was there- or on most other occasions, I guessed.

Xanippa was very suspicious of me at first, but when she found out who I was and what I wanted, and saw my face as proof, she accepted the three small coins I gave her and gestured for me to fetch her splintered wooden chest from the fireplace corner. Like its mistress, the chest had clearly once been in better condition and more prettily painted. She set it on the curve of her belly and began to search through it

with a painstaking care that seemed at odds with everything else about

her.

'Ah, here,' she said at last. 'Dragon's claw.' She held out her hand to

show me the curved, black thing. It was certainly a claw, but far too small to belong to any dragon I could imagine. Xanippa saw my hesitation. 'It is an owl's toe, you silly girl. "Dragon's claw" is just a name.' She pointed to a tiny ball of glass over the talon's tip. 'Do not pull that off or break it. In fact, do not touch it at all. Do you have a purse?'

I showed her the small bag that hung always on a cord around my neck. Xanippa frowned. 'The cloth is very thin.' She found some rags in one of the pockets of her shapeless robe and wrapped the claw, then dropped it into my purse and tucked it back in my bodice. As she did so, she squeezed my breast so hard that I murmured in pain, then patted my head. 'Merciful Rhiap,' she growled, 'was I ever so young as this? In any case, be careful, my little sweetmeat. This is heartsbane on the tip of this claw, from the marshes of the Wran. If you are careless, this is one prick that will make sure you die a virgin.' She laughed. 'You don't want that, do you?'

I backed to the door. Xanippa grinned to see my fright. 'And you had better give your stepfather a message from me. He will not find what he seeks among the womenfolk here or among the herbwives of the Lake People. Tell him he can believe me, because if I could solve his riddle, I would - and, oh, but I would make him pay dearly for it! No, he will have to find the Witch of the Forest and put his questions to her.'

She was laughing again as I got the door open at last and escaped. The rain was even stronger now, and I slipped and fell several times, but still ran all the way back to the Inner Bailey.

When I reached my mother's bed, the priest had already come and gone, as had my stepfather, who Ulca told me had never spoken a word. My mother had died only a short time after I left on my errand. I had failed her - had left her to suffer and die with no family beside her. The shame and sorrow burned so badly that I could not imagine the pain would ever go away. As the other women prepared her for burial, I could do nothing but weep. The dragon's claw dangled next to my heart, all but forgotten.

I spent weeks wandering the castle, lost and miserable. I only remembered the message Xanippa had given me when my mother had been dead and buried almost a month.

I found my stepfather on the wall overlooking the Kingslake, and told him what Xanippa had said. He did not ask me how I came to be carrying messages for such a woman. He did not even signify he had heard me.

His eyes were fixed on something in the far distance - on the boats of the fisher-folk, perhaps, dim in the fog.

The first years in the ruined High Keep were hard ones, and not just for my mother and me. Lord Sulis had to oversee the rebuilding, a vast and endlessly complicated task, as well as keep up the spirits of his own people through the first bleak winter.

It is one thing for soldiers, in the initial flush of loyal indignity, to swear they will follow their wronged commander anywhere. It is another thing entirely when that commander comes to a halt, when following becomes true exile. As the Nabbanai troops came to understand that this cold backwater of Erkyndland was to be their home for ever, problems began - drinking and fighting among the soldiers, and even more unhappy incidents between Sulis' men and the local people... my people, although it was hard for me to remember that sometimes. After my mother died, I sometimes felt as if I were the true exile, surrounded by Nabbanai names and faces and speech even in the middle of my own land.

If we did not enjoy that first winter, we survived it, and continued as we had begun, a household of the dispossessed. But if ever a man was born to endure that state, it was my stepfather.

When I see him now in my memory, when I picture again that great heavy brow and that stern face, I think of him as an island, standing by himself on the far side of dangerous waters, near but for ever unvisited. I was too young and too shy to try to shout across the gulf that separated us, but it scarcely mattered - Sulis did not seem like a man who regretted his own solitude. In the middle of a crowded room his eyes were always on the walls instead of the people, as though he could see through stone to some better place. Even in his happiest and most festive moods, I seldom heard him laugh, and his swift, distracted smiles suggested that the jokes he liked best could never truly be explained to anyone else.

He was not a bad man, or even a difficult man, as my grandfather Godric had been, but when I saw the immense loyalty of his soldiers it was sometimes hard for me to understand it. Tellarin said that when he had joined Avalles' company, the others had told him of how Lord Sulis had once carried two of his wounded bondmen from the field, one trip for each, through a storm of Thrithings arrows. If that is true, it is easy to understand why his men loved him, but there were few opportunities for such obvious sorts of bravery in the High Keep's echoing halls.

While I was still young, Sulis would pat me on the head when we met, or ask me questions that were meant to show a paternal interest, but which often betrayed an uncertainty as to how old I was and what I

liked to do. When I began to grow a womanish form, he became even more correct and formal, and would offer compliments on my clothes or my stitchery in the same studied way that he greeted the High Keep's tenants at Aedonmansa, when he called each man by his name - learned from the seneschal's accounting books - as he filed past, and wished each a good year.

Sulis grew even more distant in the year after my mother died, as though losing her had finally untethered him from the daily tasks he had always performed in such a stiff, practised way. He spent less and less time seeing to the matters of government, and instead sat reading for hours - sometimes all through the night, wrapped in heavy robes against the midnight chill, burning candles faster than the rest of the house put together.

The books that had come with him from his family's great house in Nabban were mostly tomes of religious instruction, but also some military and other histories. He occasionally allowed me to look at one,

but although I was learning, I still read only slowly, and could make little of the odd names and devices in the accounts of battle. Sulis had other books that he would never even let me glance at, plain bound volumes that he kept locked in wooden boxes. The first time I ever saw one go back into its chest, I found the memory returning to me for days afterward. What sort of books were they, I wondered, that must be kept sealed away?

One of the locked boxes contained his own writings, but I did not find that out for two more years, until the night of Black Fire was almost upon us.

It was in the season after my mother's death, on a day when I found him reading in the grey light that streamed into the throne room, that Lord Sulis truly looked at me for the one and only time I remember.

When I shyly asked what he was doing, he allowed me to examine the book in his lap, a beautiful illuminated history of the prophet Varris with the heron of Honsa Sulis worked in gilt on the binding. I traced with my finger an illustration of Varris being martyred on the wheel. 'Poor, poor man,' I said. 'How he must have suffered. And all because he stayed true to his God. The Lord must have given him sweet welcome to Heaven.' The picture of Varris in his agony jumped a little - I had startled my stepfather into a flinch. I looked up to find him gazing at me intently, his brown eyes so wide with feelings I could not recognize that for a moment I was terrified that he would strike me. He lifted his huge, broad hand, but gently. He touched my hair, then curled the hand into a fist, never once shifting that burning stare from me.

They have taken everything from me, Breda/ His voice was tight-clenched with a pain I could not begin to understand. 'But I will never bend my back. Never.'

I held my breath, uncertain and still a little frightened. A moment later my stepfather recovered himself. He brought his fist to his mouth and pretended to cough - he was the least able dissembler I have ever known

- and then bade me let him finish his reading while the light still held. To this day I do not know who he believed had taken everything from him

- the Emperor and his court in Nabban? The priests of Mother Church? Or perhaps even God and His army of angels?

What I do know was that he tried to tell me of what burned inside him, but could not find the words. What I also know is that at least for that moment, my heart ached for the man.

My Tellarin asked me once, 'How could it be possible that no other man has made you his own? You are beautiful, and the daughter of a king.'

But as I have said before, Lord Sulis was not my father, nor was he king. And the evidence of the mirror that had once been my mother's suggested that my soldier overspoke my comeliness as well. Where my mother had been fair and full of light, I was dark. Where she was long of neck and limb and ample of hip, I was made small, like a young boy. I have never taken up much space on the earth - nor will I below it, for that matter. Wherever my grave is made, the digging will not shift much soil.

But Tellarin spoke with the words of love, and love is a kind of spell which banishes all sense.

'How can you care for a rough man like me?' he asked me. 'How can you love a man who can bring you no lands but the farm a soldier's pension can buy? Who can give your children no title of nobility?'

Because love does not do sums, I should have told him. Love makes choices, and then gives its all.

Had he seen himself as I first saw him, though, he could have had no questions.

It was an early spring day in my fifteenth year, and the sentries had seen the boats coming across the Kingslake at first light of morning. These were no ordinary fishing-craft, but barges loaded with more than a dozen men and their warhorses. Many of the castle folk had gathered to see the travellers come in and to learn their news.

After they had brought all their goods ashore on the lakefront, Tellarin and the rest of the company mounted and rode up the hill path and in through the main gates. The gates themselves had only lately been rebuilt

- they were crude things of heavy, undressed timbers, but enough to serve

in case of war. My stepfather had reason to be cautious, as the delegation

that arrived that day was to prove.

It was actually Tellarin's friend Avalles who was called master of these because Avalles was an equestrian knight, one of the Sulean family nephews, but it was not hard to see which of the two truly held the soldiers' loyalty. My Tellarin was barely twenty years old on the first day I saw him. He was not handsome - his face was too long and his nose too impudent to grace one of the angels painted in my stepfather's books - but I thought him quite, quite beautiful. He had taken off his helmet to feel the morning sun as he rode, and his golden hair streamed in the wind off the lake. Even my inexperienced eye could see that he was still young for a fighting man, but I could also see that the men who rode with him admired him too.

His eyes found me in the crowd around my father and he smiled as though he recognized me, although we had never seen each other before. My blood went hot inside me, but I knew so little of the world, I did not recognize the fever of love.

My stepfather embraced Avalles, then allowed Tellarin and the others to kneel before him as each swore his fealty in turn, although I am sure Sulis wanted only to be finished with ceremony so he could return to his books.

The company had been sent by my stepfather's family council in Nabban. A letter from the council, carried by Avalles, reported that there had been a resurgence of talk against Sulis in the imperial court at Nabban, much of it fanned by the Aedonite priests. A poor man who held odd, perhaps irreligious beliefs was one thing, the council wrote, but when the same beliefs belonged to a nobleman with money, land, and a famous name, many powerful people would consider him a threat. In fear for my stepfather's life, his family had thus sent this carefully picked troop and warnings to Sulis to be more cautious than ever.

Despite the company's grim purpose, news from home was always welcome, and many of the new troop had fought beside other members of my stepfather's army. There were many glad reunions.

When Lord Sulis had at last been allowed to retreat to his reading, but before Ulca could hurry me back indoors, Tellarin asked Avalles if he could be introduced to me. Avalles himself was a dark, heavy-faced youth with a fledgling beard, only a few years Tellarin's elder, but with

so much of the Sulean family's gravity in him that he seemed a sort of foolish old uncle. He gripped my hand too tightly and mumbled several clumsy compliments about how fair the flowers grew in the north, then introduced me to his friend.

Tellarin did not kiss my hand, but held me far more firmly with just his bright eyes. He said, 'I will remember this day always, my lady,' then bowed. Ulca caught my elbow and dragged me away.

Even in the midst of love's fever, which was to spread all through my fifteenth year, I could not help but notice that the changes which had begun in my stepfather when my mother died were growing worse.

Lord Sulis now hardly left his chambers at all, closeting himself with his books and his writings, being drawn out only to attend to the most pressing of affairs. His only regular conversations were with Father Ganaris, the plain-spoken military chaplain who was the sole priest to have accompanied Lord Sulis out of Nabban. Sulis had installed his old battlefield comrade in the castle's newly-built chapel, and it was one of the few places the master of the High Keep would still go. His visits did not seem to bring the old chaplain much pleasure, though. Once I watched them bidding each other farewell, and as Sulis turned and shouldered his way through the wind, heading back across the courtyard to our residence, Ganaris sent a look after him that was grim and sad - the expression, I thought, of a man whose old friend has a mortal illness.

Perhaps if I had tried, I could have done something to help my stepfather. Perhaps there could have been some other path than the one that led us to the base of the tree that grows in darkness. But the truth is that although I saw all these signs, I gave them little attention. Tellarin, my soldier, had begun to court me - at first only with glances and greetings, later with small gifts - and all else in my life shrank to insignificance by comparison.

In fact, so changed was everything that a newer, larger sun might have risen into the sky above the High Keep, warming every corner with its light. Even the most workaday tasks took fresh meaning because of my feelings for bright-eyed Tellarin. My catechisms and my reading lessons I now pursued diligently, so that my beloved might not find me lacking in conversation ... except on those days when I could scarcely attend to them at all for dreaming about him. My walks in the castle grounds became excuses to look for him, to hope for a shared glance across a courtyard or down a hallway. Even the folktales Ulca told me over our stitchery, which before had been only a means to make the time pass pleasantly, now seemed completely new. The princes and princesses who fell in love were Tellarin and me. Their every moment of suffering burned me like fire, their ultimate triumphs thrilled me so deeply that some days I feared I might actually faint.

After a time, Ulca, who guessed but did not know, refused to tell me any tale that had kissing in it.

But I had my own story by then, and I was living it fully. My own first kiss came as we were walking in the sparse, windy garden that lay in the shadow of the Northmen's tower. That ugly building was ever after beautiful to me, and even on the coldest of days, if I could see that tower, it would warm me.

'Your stepfather could have my head,' my soldier told me, his cheek touching lightly against mine. 'I have betrayed both his trust and my

station.'

'Then if you are a condemned man,' I whispered, 'you may as well steal again.' And I pulled him back

farther into the shadows and kissed him until my mouth was sore. I was alive in a way I had never been, and almost mad with it. I was hungry for him, for his kisses, his breath, the sound of his voice.

He gifted me with small things that could not be found in Lord Sulis's drab and careful household - flowers, sweetmeats, small baubles he found at the markets in the new town of Erkynechester, outside the castle gates. I could hardly bring myself to eat the honeyed figs he bought for me, not because they were too rich for his purse, although they were - he was not wealthy like his friend Avalles - but because they were gifts from him, and thus precious. To do something as destructive as eat them seemed unimaginably wasteful.

'Eat them slowly, then,' he told me. They will kiss your lips when I cannot.'

I gave myself to him, of course, completely and utterly. Ulca's dark hints about soiled women drowning themselves in the Kingslake, about brides sent back to their families in disgrace, even about bastardy as the root of a dozen dreadful wars, were all ignored. I offered Tellarin my body as well as my heart. Who would not? And if I were that young girl once more, coming out of the shadows of her sorrowful childhood into that bright day, I would do it again, with equal joy. Even now that I see the foolishness, I cannot fault the girl I was. When you are young and your life stretches so far ahead of you, you are also without patience - you cannot understand that there will be other days, other times, other chances. God has made us this way. Who knows why He chose it so?

As for me, I knew nothing in those days but the fever in my blood.

When Tellarin rapped at my door in the dark hours, I brought him to my bed. When he left me, I wept, but not from shame. He came to me again and again as autumn turned to winter, and as winter crept past we built a warm, secret world all our own. I could not imagine a life without him in it every moment.

Again, youth was foolish, for I have now managed to live without him for many years. There has even been much that was pleasing in my life since I lost him, although I would never have been able to believe such a thing then. But I do not think I have ever again lived as deeply, as truly, as in that first year of reckless discovery. It was as though I somehow knew that our time together would be short.

Whether it is called fate, or our weird, or the will of Heaven, I can look back now and see how each of us was set on to the track, how we were all made ready to travel in deep, dark places.

It was a night in late Feyever-month of that year when I began to realize that something more than simple distraction had overtaken my stepfather. I was reeling back down the corridor to my chamber - I had just kissed Tellarin farewell in the great hall, and was mad with the excitement of it - I nearly stumbled into Lord Sulis. I was first startled, then terrified. My crime, I felt sure, must be as plain as blood on a white sheet. I waited trembling for him to denounce me. Instead he only blinked and held his candle higher.

'Breda?' he said. 'What are you doing, girl?'

He had not called me 'girl' since before my mother died. His fringe of hair was astrew, as though he had just clambered from some assignation of his own, but if that was so, his stunned gaze suggested it had not been a pleasant one. His broad shoulders sagged, and he seemed so tired he could barely hold up his head. The man who had so impressed my mother on that first day in Godric's hall had changed almost

beyond recognizing.

My stepfather was wrapped in blankets, but his legs showed naked below the knee. Could this be the same Sulis, I wondered, who as long as I had known him had dressed each day with the same care as he had once used to set his lines of battle? The sight of his pale bare feet was unspeakably disturbing.

'I...I was restless and could not sleep, sire. I wished some air.'

His glance flicked across me and then began to rove the shadows again. He looked not just confused but actually frightened. 'You should not be out of your chamber. It is late, and these corridors are full of ...' He hesitated, then seemed to stop himself from saying something. 'Full of draughts/ he said at last. 'Full of cold air. Go on with you, girl.'

Everything about him made me uneasy. As I backed away, I felt compelled to say, 'Goodnight, sire, and God bless you.'

He shook his head - it almost seemed a shudder - then turned and padded away. A few days later the witch was brought to the High Keep in chains.

I only learned the woman had been brought to the castle when Tellarin told me. As we lay curled in my bed after lovemaking, he suddenly announced, 'Lord Sulis has captured a witch.'

I was startled. Even with my small experience, I knew this was not the general run of pillow talk. 'What do you mean?'

'She is a woman who lives in the Aldheorte forest,' he said, pronouncing the Erkyndish name with his usual charming clumsiness. 'She comes often to the market in a town down the Ymstrecca, east of here. She is well-known there - she makes herbal cures, I think, charms away warts, nonsense such as that. That is what Avalles said, anyway.'

I remembered the message that the once-whore Xanippa had bade me give my stepfather on the night my mother died. Despite the warm night, I pulled the blanket up over our damp bodies. 'Why should Lord Sulis want her?' I asked.

Tellarin shook his head, unconcerned. 'Because she is a witch, I suppose, and so she is against God. Avalles and some of the other soldiers arrested her and brought her in this evening.'

'But there are dozens of root-peddlers and conjure-women in the town on the lakeshore where I grew up, and more living outside the castle walls. What does he want with her?'

'My lord does not think she is any old harmless conjure-woman,' Tellarin said. 'He has put her in one of the deep cells underneath the throne room, with chains on her arms and legs.'

I had to see, of course, as much out of curiosity as out of worry about what seemed my stepfather's growing madness.

In the morning, while Lord Sulis was still abed, I went down to the cells, the woman was the only prisoner - the deep cells were seldom used, since those kept in them were likely to die from the chill and damp before they had served a length of term instructive to others - and the guard on duty there was perfectly willing to let the stepdaughter of the castle's master gawk at the witch. He pointed me to the last cell door in the underground chamber.

I had to stand on my toes to see through the barred slot in the door. The only light was a single torch burning on the wall behind me, so the witch was mostly hidden in shadows. She wore chains on wrists and ankles, just as Tellarin had said, and sat on the floor near the back of

the windowless cell, her hunched shoulders giving her the shape of a rain-soaked hawk.

As I stared, the chains rattled ever so slightly, although she did not look up. 'What do you want, little daughter?' Her voice was surprisingly deep.

'Lord ... Lord Sulis is my stepfather/ I said at last, as if it explained something.

Her eyes snapped open, huge and yellow. I had already thought her shaped like a hunting bird - now I almost feared she would fly at me and tear me with sharp talons. 'Do you come to plead his case?' she demanded. 'I tell you the same thing I told him - there is no answer to his question. None that I can give, anyway.'

'What question?' I asked, hardly able to breathe.

The witch peered at me in silence for a moment, then clambered to her feet. I could see that it was a struggle for her to lift the chains. She shuffled forward until the light from the door slot fell on her squarely. Her dark hair was cut short as a man's. She was neither pretty nor ugly, neither tall nor short, but there was a power about her, and especially in the unblinking yellow lamps of her eyes, that drew my gaze and held it. She was something I had not seen before and did not at all understand. She spoke like an ordinary woman, but she had wildness in her like the crack of distant thunder, like the flash of a deer in flight. I felt so helpless to turn away that I feared she had cast a spell upon me.

At last she shook her head. 'I will not involve you in your father's madness, child/

'He is not my father. He married my mother/

Her laugh was almost a bark. 'I see.'

I moved uneasily from foot to foot, face still pressed against the bars. I did not know why I spoke to the woman at all, or what I wanted from her. 'Why are you chained?'

'Because they fear me.'

'What is your name?' She frowned but said nothing, so I tried another. 'Are you really a witch?'

She sighed. 'Little daughter, go away. If you have nothing to do with your stepfather's foolish ideas, then the best you can do is stay far from all this. It does not take a sorceress to see that it will not end happily.'

Her words frightened me, but I still could not pull myself away from the cell door. 'Is there something you want? Food? Drink?'

She eyed me again, the large eyes almost fever-bright. 'This is an even stranger household than I guessed. No, child. What I want is the open sky and my forest, but that is what I will not get from you of anyone. But your father says he has need of me - he will not starve me.'

The witch turned her back on me then and shuffled to the rear of the cell, dragging her chains across the stone. I climbed the stairs with my head full to aching - excited thoughts, sorrowful thoughts, frightened thoughts, all were mixed together and full of fluttering confusion, like birds in a sealed room.

My stepfather kept the witch prisoned as Marris-month turned into Avreland the days of spring paced by. Whatever he wished from her, she would not give it. I visited her many times, but although she was kind enough in her way, she would speak to me only of meaningless things. Often she asked me to describe how the frost on the ground had looked that morning, or what birds were in the trees and what they sang, since in that deep, windowless cell carved into the stone of the headland, she could see and hear nothing of the world outside.

I do not know why I was so drawn to her. Somehow she seemed to hold the key to many mysteries - my stepfather's madness, my mother's sorrow, my own growing fears that the foundations beneath my new happiness were unsolid.

Although my stepfather did feed her, as she had promised he would, and did not allow her to be mistreated in anything beyond the fact of her imprisonment, the witch-woman still grew markedly thinner by the day, and dark circles formed like bruises beneath her eyes. She was pining for freedom, and like a wild animal kept in a pen, her unhappiness was sickening her. It hurt me to see her, as though my own liberty had been stolen. Each time I found her more drawn and weak than the time before, it brought back to me the agony and shame of my mother's last, horrible days. Each time I left the cells, I went to a spot where I could be alone and I wept. Even my stolen hours with Tellarin could not ease the sadness I felt.

I would have hated my stepfather for what he was doing to her, but he too was growing more sickly with each day, as though he were trapped in some mirror version of her dank cell. Whatever the question was that she had spoken of, it plagued Sulis so terribly that he, a decent man, had stolen her freedom - so terribly that he scarcely slept in the nights at all, but sat up until dawn's first light reading and writing and mumbling to himself in a kind of ecstasy. Whatever the question, I began to fear that the one and the witch would die because of it.

One time that I worked up the courage to ask my stepfather why he had imprisoned her, he stared over my head at the sky, as though it

had turned an entirely new colour, and told me, 'This place has too many doors, girl. You open one, then another, and you find yourself back where you began. I cannot find my way.' If that was an answer, I could make no sense of it.

I offered the witch death and she gave me a prophecy in return.

The sentries on the wall of the Inner Bailey were calling the midnight watch when I arose. I had been in my bed for hours, but sleep had never once come near. I wrapped myself in my heaviest cloak and slipped into the hallway. I could hear my stepfather through his door talking as though to a visitor. It hurt to hear his voice, because I knew he was alone.

At this hour, the only guard in the cells was a crippled old soldier who did not even stir in his sleep when I walked past him. The torch in the wall-sconce had burned very low, and at first I could not see the witch's shape in the shadows. I wanted to call to her, but I did not know what to say. The bulk of the great, sleeping castle seemed to press down on me.

At last the heavy chains clinked. 'Is that you, little daughter?' Her voice was weary. After a while she stood and shuffled forward. Even in the faintlight, she had a terrible, dying look. My hand stole to the

purse that hung around my neck. I touched my golden Tree as I said a silent prayer, then felt the curve of that other thing, which I had carried with me since the night of my mother's death. In a moment that seemed to have its own light, quite separate from the flickering glow of the torch, I pulled out the dragon's claw and extended it to her through the bars.

The witch raised an eyebrow as she took it from me. She carefully turned it over in her palm, then smiled sadly, 'A poisoned owl's claw. Very appropriate. Is this for me to use on my captors? Or on myself?'

I shrugged helplessly. 'You want to be free,' was all I could say.

'Not with this, little daughter/ she said. 'At least, not this time. As it happens, I have already surrendered - or, rather, I have bargained. I have agreed to give your stepfather what he thinks he wants in exchange for my freedom. I must see and feel the sky again.' Gently, she handed me back the claw.

I stared at her, almost sick with the need to know things. 'Why won't you tell me your name?'

Another sad smile. 'Because my true name I give to no one. Because any other name would be a lie.'

'Tell me a Ue, then.'

'A strange household, indeed! Very well. The people of the north call me Valada.'

I tried it on my tongue. 'Valada. He will set you free now?' 'Soon, if the bargain is honoured on both sides.' 'What is it, this bargain?'

'A bad one for everyone,' She saw my look. 'You do not want to know, truly. Someone will die because of this madness - I see it as clearly as I see your face peering through the door.' My heart was a piece of cold stone in my breast. 'Someone will die?'

Who?' Her expression became weary, and T could see that standing with the

weight of her shackles was an effort for her. 'I do not know. And in my weariness, I have already told you too much, little daughter. These are not matters for you.'

I was dismissed, even more miserable and confused. The witch would be free, but someone else would die. I could not doubt her word - no one could, who had seen her fierce, sad eyes as she spoke. As I walked back to my bedchamber, the halls of the Inner Bailey seemed a place entirely new, a strange and unfamiliar world.

My feelings for Tellarin were still astonishingly strong, but in the days after the witch's foretelling I was so beset with unhappiness that our love was more like a fire that made a cold room habitable than a sun which warmed everything, as it had been. If my soldier had not had worries of his own, he would certainly have noticed.

The cold inside me became a chill like deepest winter when I overheard Tellarin and Avalles speaking about a secret task Lord Sulis had for them, something to do with the witch. It was hard to tell what was intended - my beloved and his friend did not themselves know all that Sulis planned, and they were speaking only to each other, and not for the benefit of their secret listener. I gathered that my stepfather's books had shown him that the time for some important thing had drawn close. They would build or find some kind of fire. It would take them on a short journey by night, but

they did not say - or perhaps did not yet know - on what night. Both my beloved and Avalles were clearly disturbed by the prospect.

If I had feared before, when I thought the greatest risk was to my poor, addled stepfather, now I was almost ill with terror. I could barely stumble through the remaining hours of the day, so consumed was I with the thought that something might happen to Tellarin. I dropped my beadwork so many times that Ulca took it away from me at last. When dark came, I could not get to sleep for hours, and when I did I woke up panting and shuddering from a dream in which Tellarin had fallen into flames and was burning just beyond my reach.

I lay tossing in my bed all the night. How could I protect my beloved? Warning him would do no good. He was stubborn, and also saved his deepest beliefs for those things he could grasp and touch, so I knew he would put little stock in the witch's words. In any case, even if he believed me, what could he do? Refuse an order from Lord Sulis because of a warning from me, his secret lover? No, it would be hopeless to try to persuade Tellarin not to go - he spoke of his loyalty to his master almost as often as he did of his feelings for me.

I was in an agony of fearful curiosity. What did my stepfather plan? What had he read in those books, that he now would risk not just his own life, but that of my beloved as well?

Not one of them would tell me anything, I knew. Even the witch had said that the matter was not for me. Whatever I discovered would be by my own hand.

I resolved to look at my stepfather's books, those that he kept hidden from me and everyone else. Once it would have been all but impossible, but now - because he sat reading and writing and whispering to himself all the night's dark hours - I could trust that when Sulis did sleep, he would sleep like the dead.

I stole into my stepfather's chambers early the next morning. He had sent his servants away weeks before, and the castle-folk no longer dared rap on his doors unless summoned. The rooms were empty but for my stepfather and me.

He lay sprawled across his bed, his head hanging back over the edge of the pallet. Had I not known how moderate most of his habits were, I would have thought from his deep, rough breathing and the way he had disordered the blankets that he had drunk himself stuporous, but Sulis seldom took even a single cup of wine.

The key to the locked boxes was on a cord around his neck. As I tugged it out of his shirt with as much care as I could, I could not help but see how much happier he appeared with the blankness of sleep on him. The furrows on his brow had loosened, and his jaw was no longer clenched in the grimace of distraction that had become his constant expression. In that moment, although I hated what he had done to the witch Valada, I pitied him. Whatever madness had overtaken him of late, he had been a kind man in his way, in his time.

He stirred and made an indistinct sound. Heart beating swiftly, I hurried to draw the cord and key over his head.

When I had found the wooden chests and unlocked them, I began to pull out and examine my stepfather's forbidden books, leafing quickly

and quietly through each in turn, with one ear cocked for changes in his breathing. Most of the plainboured volumes were written in tongues I did not know, two or three in characters I could not even recognize. Those of which I could understand a little seemed to contain either tales of the fairy-folk or stories about the High Keep during the time of the

Northmen.

A good part of an hour had passed when I discovered a loosely-bound

book titled *Writings of Vargellis Sulis, Seventh Lord of Honsa Sulis, Now Master of the Sulean House in Exile*. My stepfather's careful hand filled the first pages densely, then grew larger and more imperfect as it continued, until the final pages seemed almost to have been scribed by a child still learning letters.

A noise from the bed startled me, but my stepfather had only grunted and turned on his side. I continued through the book as swiftly as I could. It seemed to be only the most recent of a lifetime's worth of writings - the earliest dates in the volume were from the first year we had lived in the High Keep. The bulk of the pages listed tasks to be performed in the High Keep's rebuilding, and records of important judgements Sulis had made as lord of the keep and its tenant lands. There were other notations of a more personal nature, but they were brief and unelaborated. For that terrible day almost three years earlier, he had written only: *Cynethrith* Dead of Chest fever. She shall be Buried on the Headland.

The sole mention of me was a single sentence from several months before - *Breda happy Today*. It was oddly painful to me that my sombre stepfather should have noticed that and made a record of it.

The later pages held almost no mention of the affairs of either home or governance, as in daily life Sulis had also lost interest in both. Instead, there were more and more notes that seemed to be about things he had read in other books - one said *Plesinnen claims that Mortality is consumed in God as a Flame consumes Branch or Bough. How then . . .* with the rest smudged - one word might have been *nails*, and further on I could make out *Holy Tree*. Another of his notes listed several *Doorways* that had been located by someone named Nisses, with explanations next to each that explained nothing at all - *Shifted*, read my stepfather's shaky hand beside one, or *from a Time of No Occupation*, or even, *Met a Dark Thing*.

It was only on the last two pages that I found references to the woman in the cell below the throne room.

Have at Last rec'd Word of the woman called Valada, the scrawl stated. No one else *Living North of Perdruin has Knowledge of the Black Fire. She must be Made to Speak* what she knows. Below that, in another day's even less disciplined hand, was written, *The Witch balks me, but I cannot have another*

Failure as on the Eve of Etyiamansa. Stoning Night will be next Time of strong Voices beneath the Keep. Walls will be Thin. She will show me the Way of Black Fire or there is no other Hope. Either she will answer, or Death.

I sat back, trying to make sense of it all. Whatever my stepfather planned it would happen soon - Stoning Night was the last night of Avrel, only a few days away. I could not tell from his writings if the witch was still in danger - did he mean to kill her if she failed, or only if she tried to cheat his bargain with her? - but I had no doubt that this search for the thing called Black Fire would bring danger to everyone else, most importantly and most frighteningly my soldier, Tellarin. Again my stepfather murmured in his sleep, an unhappy sound. I locked his books away and stole out again.

All that day I felt distracted and feverish, but this time it was not love that fevered me. I was terrified for my lover and fearful for my stepfather and the witch Valada, but what I knew and how I had discovered it I could not tell to anyone. For the first time since my soldier had kissed me, I felt alone. I was full up with secrets, and unlike Sulis, had not even a book to which they could be confided.

I would follow them, I decided at last. I would follow them into the place my stepfather spoke of, the place beneath the keep where the walls were thin and the voices strong. While they searched for the Black Fire, I would watch for danger. I would protect them all. I would be their angel.

Stoning Night came around at last.

Even had I not read my stepfather's writings, I think I would have known that the hour had come in which they meant to search for Black Fire, because Tellarin was so distracted and full of shadows. Although he admitted nothing to me as we lay together in my bedchamber, I could feel that he was anxious about what would happen that night. But he was bound to my stepfather by honour and blood, and had no choice.

He snapped at me when I kissed his ear and curled my fingers in his hair. 'Give a man some peace, girl.'

'Why are you a man and I am a girl?' I teased him, pretending a lightness I did not truly feel. 'Is there such a difference in our ages? Have I not given to you already that which makes me a woman?'

My soldier was short-tempered and did not hear the love in what I said. 'Anybody who will not leave off when she is asked proves herself still a child. And I am a man because I wear a soldier's badge, and because if my master asks, I must give my life.'

Tellarin was five years my elder, and in those long-ago days I was almost as impressed by the difference as he was, but I think now that all men

are younger than their women, especially when their honour has been touched.

As he stared at the ceiling his face turned from angry to solemn, and I

knew he was thinking of what he must do that night. I was frightened too, so I kissed him again, softly this time, and apologized. When he had gone, full of excuses meant to hide his actual task, I prepared for my own journey. I had hidden my thickest cloak and six fat candles where Ulca and the other serving-women would not find them. When I was dressed and ready, I touched my mother's golden Tree where it lay against my heart, and said a prayer for the safety of all who would go with me into darkness.

Stoning Night - the last night of Avrel, on the eve of Maia-month, the black hours when tales say spirits walk until driven back to their graves by dawn and the crowing cock. The High Keep lay silent around

me as I followed my beloved and the others through the dark. It did not feel so much that the castle slept as that the great keep held its breath and waited.

There is a stairwell beneath the Angel Tower, and that was where they were bound. I learned of it for the first time on that night, as I stood wrapped in my dark cloak, listening from the shadows of the wall opposite the tower. Those I followed were four - my stepfather, Tellarin and his friend Avalles, and the woman Valada. Despite the bargain she had made, the witch's arms were still chained. It saddened me to see her restrained like an animal.

The workmen who had been repairing the tower had laid a rough wooden floor over the broken stones of the old one - perhaps to make certain no one fell down one of the many holes, perhaps simply to close off any openings into the castle's deepest places. Some had even suggested that all the old castle floor should be sealed under brick, so that nothing would ever come up that way to trouble the sleep of God-fearing folk.

Because of this wooden floor, I waited a long time before following them through the tower's outer portal, knowing it would take some time for my stepfather and his two bondmen to shift the boards. As I lurked in the shadows by the tower wall while the wind prowled the Inner Bailey,

I thought about the Angel who stood at the top of the tower, a figure black with the grime of centuries that no rain could wash away, tipped sideways as though about to lose her balance and fall. Who was she? One

of the blessed saints? Was it an omen - did she watch over me as I meant to look over Tellarin and the rest? I looked up, but the tower's high top was invisible in the night.

At last I tried the latch of the tower door and found the bolt had not been shot. I hoped that it meant the Angel was indeed looking out for me.

Inside the tower the moonlight ended, so while still in the doorway I lit my first candle from the hidden touchwood, which had nearly burnt down. My footsteps seemed frighteningly loud in the stony entry hall but no one appeared from the shadows to demand my business in that place. I heard no sound of my stepfather or the rest.

I paused for a moment in front of the great, upward-winding staircase and could not help but wonder what the workmen would find when they cleared the rubble and reached the top - as I still wonder all these years later, with the painstaking work yet unfinished. I suppose I will not see it in my lifetime. Will they discover treasures left by the fairy-folk? Or perhaps only those ancient beings' frail bones?

Even were it not for the things that happened on that fateful night, still the Angel Tower would haunt me, as it haunts this great keep and all the lands beneath its long shadow. No mortals, I think, will ever know all its secrets.

Once, long ago, I dreamed that my stepfather gave me the Angel herself to clean, but that no matter how I tried, I could not scrub the black muck from her limbs and face. He told me that it was not my fault, that God would have lent me the strength if He truly wanted the Angel's face to be seen, but I still wept at my failure.

I moved from the entry hall to a place where the floor fell away in great broken shards, and tried to imagine what could smash stones so thoroughly and yet leave the tower itself still standing. It was not easy to follow where my stepfather and my beloved had already gone, but I climbed down the rubble,

leaning to set my candle before me so that I could have both my hands free. I wished, not for the last time, that I had worn something other than my soft shoes. I clambered down and down, hurting my feet, tearing my dress in several places, until I reached the jumble of smaller broken stones which was the floor, at least a half dozen times my own height below the level of the Inner Bailey. In the midst of this field of shards gaped a great, black hole bigger than the rest, a jagged mouth that waited to swallow me down. As I crunched closer to it, I heard what I knew must be the voices of the others floating up from the depths, although they sounded strange to me.

More stones had been pushed aside to reveal the entrance to the stairwell, a lip of shiny white with steps inside it that vanished into shadow. Another voice floated up, laughing. It belonged to no one I knew.

Even with all that had happened in the previous days, I had never yet felt so frightened, but I knew Tellarin was down there in the dark places. I made the sign of the Tree upon my breast then stepped on to the stairway.

At first I could find no trace of them.

As I descended, the light of my single candle served only to make the stairwell seem more than ever like a shadowy throat waiting to swallow me, but fear alone could not keep me from my beloved - if anything, it sped my steps. I hurried downward until it seemed I must have gone as far beneath the castle as the Angel Tower loomed above it, but still I had not caught up with them.

Whether it was a trick of sound, or of the winds that are said to blow through the caves of the Kingslake cliffs, I continued to hear unfamiliar voices. Some seemed so close that if I had not had a candle, I would have been certain I could reach out and touch the person who whispered to me, but the flickering light showed me that the stairwell was empty. The voices babbled, and sometimes sang, in a soft, sad tongue I did not understand or even recognize.

I knew I should be too frightened to remain, that I should turn and flee back to moonlight and clean air, but although the bodiless murmurs filled me with dismay, I felt no evil in them. If they were ghosts, I do not think they even knew I was there. It was as though the castle talked to itself, like an old man sitting beside the fire, lost in the memories of days long past.

The stairwell ended in a wide landing with open doorways at either end, and I could not help thinking of the doorways mentioned in my stepfather's book. As I paused to consider which way I should go, I examined the carvings on the walls, delicate vines and flowers whose type I had never seen before. Above one doorframe a nightingale perched on a tree bough. Another tree bough was carved above the far doorway - or rather, I saw as I moved my candle, they were both boughs from one

single tree, which had been carved directly above me, spreading across the ceiling of the stairwell as though I myself were the tree's trunk. On the bough above the second doorway twined a slender serpent. I shuddered,

and began to move towards the nightingale door, but at that moment words floated up out of the darkness.

'... if you have lied to me. I am a patient man, but ...'

It was my stepfather, and even if I had not recognized his faint voice, I

would have known him by the words, for that is what he always said. And he spoke the truth - he *was* a

patient man. He had always been like one

of the stones of the hilltop rings, cool and hard and in no hurry to move growing warm only after the sun of an entire summer has beat upon him. I had sometimes felt I would like to break a stick upon him, if only to make him turn and truly look at me.

Only once did he ever do that, I had believed - on that day when he told me that 'they' had taken everything from him. But now I knew he had looked at me another time, perhaps seen me smile on a day when my lover had given me a gift or a kiss, and had written in his book, *Breda* happy Today.

My stepfather's words had drifted up through the other doorway. I lit another candle and placed it on top of the first, which had burned almost to the holder, then followed the voice of Sulis through the serpent door.

Downward I went, and downward still farther - what seemed a journey of hours, through sloping, long-deserted corridors that twisted like yarn spilled from a sack. The light of the candles showed me stone that, although I knew it was even more ancient, seemed newer and brighter than that which I had seen farther above. In places the passageways opened into rooms choked with dirt and rubble, but which must have been massive, with ceilings as high as any of the greatest halls I have ever heard of in Nabban. The carvings I could see were so delicate, so perfect, that they might have been the actual things of nature - birds, plants, trees - frozen into stone by the sort of magical spells that so often had been part of my mother's and Ulca's stories.

It was astonishing to think that this entire world had lain in its tomb of earth below us as long as we had lived in the High Keep, and for generations before that. I knew I was seeing the ancient home of the fairy-folk. With all the stories, and even with the evidence of the tower itself, I had still never imagined they would have such a way with stone, to make it froth like water and shimmer like ice, to make it stretch overhead in slender arcs like the finest branches of a willow tree. Had the Northmen truly killed them all? For the first time, I understood something of what this meant, and a deep, quiet horror stole over me. The creators of all this beauty, slaughtered, and their houses usurped by their slayers - no wonder the darkness was full of unquiet voices. No wonder the High Keep was a place of haunted sadness for everyone who lived in it. The castle of our day was founded on ancient murder. It was built on death.

It pulled at me, that thought. It became tangled in my mind with the memory of my stepfather's distracted stare, of the witch in chains. Good could not come from evil, I felt sure. Not without sacrifice. Not without blood and atonement.

My fear was growing again.

The peaceful Ones might have been gone, but I was learning that their great house remained lively.

As I hurried downward, following the tracks of my stepfather and his company in the dust of centuries, I found suddenly that I had taken a wrong turning. The passage ended in a pile of broken stone, but when I returned to the last cross-corridor, there was no sign of footprints, and the place itself was not familiar, as though the ruins themselves had shifted around me. I closed my eyes, listening for the sound of Tellarin's voice, for

I felt sure that my heart would be able to hear him through all the stone in Erkyndland. But nothing came to me but the ghost-murmurs, which blew in like an autumn breeze, full of sighing, rustling nonsense.

I was lost.

For the first time it became clear to me what a foolish thing I had done. I had gone into a place where I should not be. Not one person knew I was there, and when my last candle burned out, I would be lost in the darkness.

Tears started in my eyes, but I wiped them away. Weeping had not brought my father back, or my mother. It would do me no good now.

I did my best to retrace my steps, but the voices flittered around me like invisible birds, and before long I was wandering blindly. Confused by the noises in my head and by the flickering shadows, twice I almost tumbled into great crevices in the passageway floor. I kicked a stone into one that fell without hitting anything until I could not bear to listen any longer.

The darkness seemed to be closing on me, and I might have been lost forever - might have become another part of the whispering chorus - but by luck or accident or the hand of fate, I made a turning into a corridor I did not recognize and found myself standing at the lip of another stairwell, listening to the voice of the witch Valada drift up from the deeps.

'... not an army or a noble household that you can order about, Lord Sulis. Those who lived here are dead, but the place is alive. You must take what you are given ...'

It was as though she had heard my very thoughts. Even as I shuddered to hear my forebodings spoken aloud, (hurried towards the sound, terrified

that if it faded I would never again hear a familiar voice.

What seemed another hour went by, although I had been so long in the

haunted dark that I was no judge. My lover and the rest seemed almost to have become phantoms themselves, floating ahead of me like dandelion seeds, always just beyond my reach.

The stairs continued to curl downward, and as my third and fourth candles burned I could see glimpses of the great spaces through which we all descended, level upon level, as if making a pilgrimage down the tiers of Heaven. At times, as the candles flickered on the wooden base, I thought I could see even more. From the corner of my eye the ruins seemed to take on a sort of life. There were moments when the ghost-voices swelled and the shadows seem to take on form. If I half-closed my eyes, I could almost see these bleak spaces full of bright, laughing folk.

Why did the Northmen kill such beauty? And how could a people who built such a place be defeated by any mortals, however bloodthirsty and battle-hungry?

A light bloomed in the depths, red and yellow, making the polished stone of the stairwell seem to quiver. For a moment I thought it only another wisp of my imagination, but then, from so close it seemed we could kiss if we wished, I heard my beloved's voice.

'Do not trust her sire,' Tellarin said, sounding more than a little fearful. 'She is lying again.'

Intensely happy, but with my caution abruptly restored, I shaded the candle with my palm and hurried down the stairs as quietly as I could. As their voices grew louder, and I saw that the light blooming in the darkness came from their torches, I pinched the flame to extinguish my candle completely. However glad I was to find them, I guessed they would not feel the same about me.

I crept closer to the light, but could not see Tellarin and the others because something like a cloud of smoke blocked my view. It was only when I reached the base of the curving stair and stepped silently on to the floor of the great chamber that I could actually see the four shapes.

They stood in the middle of a room so cavernous that even the torches my lover and Avalles held could not carry light to its highest corners. Before them loomed the thing I had thought was smoke. I still could not see it clearly, despite the torch flames burning only an arm's length from it, but now it seemed a vast tree with black leaves and trunk. A shadow cloaked it and hid all but the broadest outline, a dark shroud like the mist that hid the hills on a winter morning, but it was not mist in which the tree-shape crouched, I felt sure. It was pure Darkness.

'You must decide whether to listen to me or a young soldier/ the witch was saying to my stepfather. 'I will tell you again - if you cut so much as a leaf, you will mark yourselves as ravagers and it will not go well with you. Can you not feel that?'

'And I think Tellarin is right/ Avalles proclaimed, but his voice was less sure than his words. 'She seeks to trick us.'

My stepfather looked from the tree-shadow to the witch. 'If we may not take any wood, then why have you brought us here?' he asked slowly, as though it cost great effort just to speak.

I could hear the sour smile in Valada's answer. 'You have held me captive in your damp pile of stones for two moons, seeking my help with your mad questions. If you do not believe that I know what I know, why did you shackle me and bring me here?'

'But the wood ... ?'

'I did not say you could not take anything to burn, I said that you would be a fool to lift axe or knife to the Great Witchwood. There is deadfall beneath, if you are bold enough to search for it.'

Sulis turned to Avalles. 'Go and gather some dead wood, nephew.'

The young knight hesitated, then handed his torch to my stepfather and walked a little unsteadily towards the great dark tree. He bent beneath the outer branches and vanished from sight. After an interval of silence, Avalles stumbled back out again.

'It is ... it is too dark to see/ he panted. His eyes were showing white around the edges. 'And there is something in there - an animal, perhaps. I... I can feel it breathing.' He turned to my stepfather. 'Tellarin's eyes are better than mine .. /

No! I wanted to scream. The tree-thing sat and waited, cloaked in shadows no torchlight could penetrate. I was ready to burst from hiding and beg my beloved not to go near it, but as if he had heard my silent cry, Lord Sulis cursed and thrust the torch back into Avalles' hand.

'By Pelippa and her bowl!' my stepfather said. 'I will do it myself.'

Just before he stepped through the branches, I thought I heard the leaves whisper, although there was no wind in the chamber. The quiet hiss and rattle grew louder, perhaps because my stepfather was forcing his way beneath the thick branches. Long moments trudged past, then the rustling became even more violent. At last Sulis emerged, staggering a little, with what seemed a long bar of shadow clasped under each arm.

Tellarin and Avalles stepped forward to help him but he waved them off, shaking his head as though he had been dealt a blow. Even in the darkroom, I could see that he had gone very pale.

'You spoke the truth, Valada,' he said. 'No axe, no knife.'

While I watched, he bade Avalles and my beloved make a ring on the ground from the broken stones that littered the chamber. He crossed the two pieces of wood he had gathered in the centre of the circle, then he used kindling from a pouch on his belt and one of the torches to set the witchwood alight. As the strange fire sputtered into life, the room seemed to become darker, as though the very light from

the torches bent towards the firepit and was sucked away. The flames began to rise.

The rustle of the shadowy tree stilled. Everything grew silent - even the flames made no sound. My heart pounded as I leaned closer, almost forgetting to keep myself hidden. It was indeed a Black Fire that burned now in that deep, lost place, a fire that flickered like any blaze, and yet whose flames were wounds in the very substance of the world, holes as darkly empty as a starless sky.

It is hard to believe, but that is what I saw. I could look through the flames of the Black Fire, not to what stood on the other side of the fire but to *somewhere else* - into nothingness at first, but then colour and shape began to expand outward in the space above the firepit, as though something turned the very air inside-out.

A face appeared in the fire. It was all I could do not to cry out.

The stranger surrounded by the black flames was like no man I had ever seen. The angles of his face were all somehow wrong, his chin too narrow, the large eyes slanted upward at the corners. His hair was long and white, but he did not look old. He was naked from the waist up, and his pale, glossy skin was marked with dreadful scars, but despite the flames in which he lay, his burns seemed old rather than new.

The Black Fire unshaped even the darkness. All that was around it bent, as though the very world grew stretched and shivery as the reflection on a bubble of river water.

The burning man seemed to slumber in the flames, but it was a horribly unquiet sleep. He pitched and writhed, even brought his hands up before his face, as though to protect himself from some terrible attack. When his eyes at last opened, they were dark as shadow itself, staring at things that I could not see, at shadows far beyond the fire. His mouth stretched in a silent, terrible scream, and despite his alien aspect, despite being so frightened I feared my heart would stop, I still ached to see his suffering. If he was alive, how could his body burn and burn without being consumed? If he was a ghost, why had death not ended his pain?

Tellarin and Avalles backed away from the firepit, wide-eyed and fearful. Avalles made the sign of the Tree.

My stepfather looked at the burning man's writhing mouth and blind eyes, then turned to the witch Valada. 'Why does he not speak to us? Do something!'

She laughed her sharp laugh. 'You wished to meet one of the Sithi, Lord Sulis - one of the Peaceful Ones. You wished to find a doorway, but some doorways open not on elsewhere, but elsewhere. The Black Fire has found

you one of the fair folk in his sleep. He is dreaming, but he can hear you across the centuries. Speak to

him! I have done what I promised.'

Clearly shaken, Sulis turned to the man in the flames. 'You!' he called. 'Can you understand me?' The burning man writhed again, but now his dark unseeing eyes turned

in my stepfather's direction. 'Who is there?' he asked, and I heard his voice in the chamber of my skull rather than in my ears. 'Who walks the Road of Dreams?' The apparition lifted a hand as though he might reach through the years and touch us. For a moment, astonishment

pushed the agony from his odd face. 'You are mortals! But why do you come to me? Why do you disturb the sleep of Hakatri of the House of

Year-Dancing?'

'I am Sulis.' The tremble in my stepfather's voice made him seem an old,

old man. 'Called by some "the Apostate". I have risked everything I own

- have spent years studying - to ask a question which only the Peaceful Ones can answer. Will you help me?'

The burning man did not seem to be listening. His mouth twisted again, and this time his cry of pain had sound. I tried to stop my ears, but it was already inside my head. 'Ah, it burns!' he moaned. 'Still the worm's blood

burns me - even when I sleep. Even when I walk the Road of Dreams!' 'The worm's blood ... ?' My stepfather was puzzled. 'A dragon? What are you saying?'

'She was like a great black snake/ Hakatri murmured. 'My brother and I, we followed her into her deep place and we fought her and slew her, but I have felt her scorching blood upon me and will never be at peace again. By the Garden, it pains me so!' He made a choking sound, then fell silent for a moment. 'Both our swords bit/ he said, and it was almost a chant, a

song, 'but my brother Ineluki was the fortunate one. He escaped a terrible burning. Black, black it was, that ichor, and hotter than even the flames of Making! I fear death itself could not ease this agony .. /

'Be silent!' Sulis thundered, full of rage and misery. 'Witch, is this spell for nothing? Why will he not listen to me?'

'There is no spell, except that which opens the doorway/ she replied.

'Hakatri perhaps came to that doorway because of how the dragon's blood

burned him - there is nothing else in all the world like the blood of the

great worms. His wounds keep him always close to the Road of Dreams,

I think. Ask him your question, Nabban-man. He is as like to answer it as

any other of the immortals you might have found/

I could feel it now - could feel the weird that had brought us here take us all in its grip. I held my breath, caught between a terror that blew like a cold wind inside my head, that screamed at me to leave Tellarin and everything else and run away, and a fierce wondering about what had brought my stepfather to this impossibly strange meeting.

Lord Sulis tilted his chin down towards his chest for a moment though now the time had come, he was uncertain of what he wished to say. At last he spoke, quaveringly at first, but with greater strength as he went on.

'Our church teaches us that God appeared in this world, wearing the form of Usires Aedon, performing many miracles, singing up cures for the sick and lame, until at last the Emperor Crexis caused him to be hung from the Execution Tree. Do you know of this, Hakatri?'

The burning man's blind eyes rolled towards Sulis again. He did not answer, but he seemed to be listening.

The promise of the Aedon the Ransomer is that all who live will be gathered up - that there will be no death/ my stepfather continued. 'And this is proved because he was God made flesh in this world, and that is proved because of the miracles he performed. But I have studied much about your own people, Hakatri. Such miracles as Usires the Aedon performed could have been done by one of your Sithi people, or even perhaps by one of only half-immortal blood.' His smile was as bleak as a skull's. 'After all, even my fiercest critics in Mother Church agree that Usires had no human father.'

Sulis bowed his head again for a moment, summoning up words or strength. I gasped for air - I had forgotten to breathe. Avalles and Tellarin still stared, their fear now mixed with astonishment, but the witch Valada's face was hidden from me in shadow.

'Both my wives have been taken from me by death, both untimely,' my stepfather said. 'My first wife gave me a son before she died, a beautiful boy named Sarellis who died himself in screaming pain because he stepped on a horseshoe nail - a nail! - and caught a death fever. Young men I have commanded were slaughtered in the hundreds, the thousands, their corpses piled on the battlefield like the husks of locusts, and all for a small stretch of land here or there, or sometimes merely over words. My parents are dead, too, with too much unspoken between us. Everyone I ever truly loved has been stolen from me by death.'

His hoarse voice had taken on a disturbing force, a cracked power, although he meant to shout down the walls of Heaven itself.

'Mother Church tells me to believe that I will be reunited with them,' he said. They preach to me, saying, 'See the works of Usires our Lord and be comforted, for his task was to show death should hold no fear,' they told me. But I cannot be sure - I cannot simply trust! Is the church right? Will I see those I love again? Will we all live on? The masters of the

church have called me a heretic and declared me apostate because I would

not give up doubting the divinity of the Aedon, but I must know! Tell me,

Hakatri, was Usires of your folk? Is the story of his godhood simply a lie

to keep us happy, to keep priests fat and rich?' He blinked back tears, his

stolid face transfigured by rage and pain. 'Even if God should damn me

for ever to hell for it, still I must know - (*5 our faith a lie?*)'

He was shaking so badly now that he took a staggering step back from

the fire and almost fell. No one moved except the man in the flames, who followed Sulis with his blank, dark eyes.

I realized that I was weeping too, and silently rubbed the tears away.

Seeing my stepfather's true and terrible pain was like a knife twisted inside me, and yet I was angry too. All for this? For such unknowable things he

left my mother lonely, and now had nearly destroyed his own life? After a long time in which all was silent as the stone around us, Hakatri said slowly, 'Always you mortals have tortured yourselves.' He blinked, and the way his face moved was so alien that I had to turn away and then look at him anew before I could understand what he said. 'But you torture yourself most when you seek answers to things that have none.' 'No answers?' Sulis was still shaking. 'How can that be?' The burning man raised his long-fingered hands in what I could only guess was a gesture of peace. 'Because that which is meant for mortals is not given to the Zida'ya to know, any more than you can know of our Garden, or where we go when we leave this place.

Listen to me, mortal. What if your messiah were indeed one of the Dawn Children - would that prove somehow that your God had not chosen that

to happen? Would that prove your Ransomer's words any the less true?'

Hakatri shook his head with the weird, foreign grace of a shorebird.

'Just tell me whether Usires was one of your folk,' Sulis demanded

raggedly. 'Spare me your philosophies and tell me! For I am burning too!

I have not been free of the pain in years!'

As the echoes of my stepfather's cry faded, the fairy-lord in his ring of black flames paused, and for the first time he seemed truly to see across

the gulf. When he spoke, his voice was full of sadness.

'We Zida'ya know little of the doings of mortals, and there are some of our own blood who have fallen away from us, and whose works are hidden from us as well. I do not think your Usires Aedon was one of the Dawn Children, but more than that I cannot tell you, mortal man, nor could any of my folk/ He lifted his hands again, weaving the fingers in an intricate, incomprehensible gesture. 'I am sorry.'

A great shudder ran through the creature called Hakatri then - perhaps the pain of his burns returning, a pain that he had somehow held at

bay while he listened to my stepfather speak. Sulis did not wait to hear more, but stepped forward and kicked the witchwood fire into a cloud of whirling sparks, then dropped to his knees with his hands over his face.

The burning man was gone.

After a march of silence that seemed endless, the witch called out, 'Will you honour your bargain with me now, Lord Sulis? You said that if I brought you to one of the immortals, you would free me.' Her voice was flat, but there was still a gentleness to it that surprised me.

My stepfather's reply, when it came, was choked and hard to understand. He waved his hand. 'Take off her chains, Avalles. I want nothing more from her.'

In the midst of this great bleak wilderness of sorrow, I felt a moment of sharp happiness as I realized that despite my foreboding, the witch, my beloved, even my tortured stepfather, all would survive this terrible night. As Avalles began to unlock the witch's shackles, shivering so that she could hardly hold the key, I had a moment to dream that my stepfather would return to health, that he would reward my Tellarin for his bravery and loyalty, and that my beloved and I would make a home for ourselves somewhere far away from this ghost-riddled, windswept headland.

My stepfather let out a sudden, startling cry. I turned to see him fall forward on to his belly, his body ashake with weeping. This seizure of grief in stern, quiet Sulis was in some ways the most frightening thing I had yet seen in that long, terrifying night.

Then, even as his cry rebounded in the invisible upper reaches of the chamber and provoked a dim rustle in the leaves of the shadowy tree, something else seized my attention. Two figures were struggling where the witch had stood. At first I thought Avalles and the woman Valada were fighting, but then I saw that the witch had stepped back and was watching the battle, her bright eyes wide with surprise. Instead, it was Avalles and Tellarin who were tangled together, their torches fallen from their hands. Shocked, helpless with surprise, I watched them tumble to the ground. A moment later a dagger rose and fell, then the brief struggle was ended.

I screamed, 'Tellarin!' and rushed forward.

He stood, brushing the dust from his breeks, and stared at me as I came out of the shadows. The end of his knife was blackened with blood. He had a stillness about him that might have been fear, or simply surprise.

'Breda? What are you doing here?'

'Why did he attack you?' I cried. Avalles lay twisted on the ground in a spreading puddle of black. 'He was your friend!'

He said nothing, but leaned to kiss me, then turned and walked to where

my stepfather still crouched on the ground in a fit of grief. My beloved put his knee in my stepfather's back, then wrapped his hand in the hair at the back of the olderman's head and pulled until his tearstained face was tilted up into the torchlight.

'I did not want to kill Avalles,' my soldier explained, in part to me, in

part to Sulis. 'But he insisted on coming, fearing that I would become closer in his uncle's favour if he were not there too.' He shook his head.

'Sad. But it is only your death that was my task, Sulis, and I have been waiting long for such a perfect opportunity.'

Despite the merciless strain of his position, my stepfather smiled, a ghastly, tight-stretched grin. 'Which Sancellan sent you?'

'Does it matter? You have more enemies in Nabban than you can count, Sulis Apostate. You are a heretic and a schismatic, and you are dangerous. You should have known you would not be left here, to build your power in the wilderness.'

'I did not come here to build power,' my stepfather grunted. 'I came here to have my questions answered.'

'Tellarin!' I struggled to make sense where there could be none. 'What are you doing?'

His voice took on a little of its former gentle tone. 'This is nothing to do with you and me, Breda.'

'Did you...?' I could scarcely say it. My tears were making the chamber as blurry as the Black Fire ever did. 'Did you ... only pretend love for me? Was it all to help you kill him?'

'No! I had no need of you, girl - I was already one of his most trusted men.' He tightened his grip on Sulis then, until I feared my stepfather's neck would break. 'What you and I have, little Breda, that is good and

real. I will take you back to Nabban with me - I will be rich now, and you will be my wife. You will learn what a true city is, instead of this devilish, backward pile of stone.'

'You love me? Truly, you love me?' I wanted very much to believe him. Then let my stepfather go, Tellarin!

He frowned. 'I cannot. His death is the task I was given to do before I

ever met you, and it is a task that needs doing. He is a madman, Breda!

Surely after tonight's horrors, after seeing the demon he called up with forbidden magic, you can see why he cannot be allowed to live. 'Do not kill him, please! I beg you!'

He lifted his hand to still me. 'I am sworn to my master in Nabban. This one thing I must do, and then we are both free.'

Even an appeal in the name of love could not stop him. Confused and overwhelmed, unable to argue any longer with the man who had

brought me so much joy, I turned to the witch, praying that she would do something - but Valada was gone. She had taken her freedom, leaving the rest of us to murder each other if we wished. I thought I

saw a movement in the shadows, but it was only some other phantom, some flying thing that drifted above the stairwell on silent wings.

Lord Sulis was silent. He did not struggle against Tellarin's grip, but waited for slaughter like an old bull. When he swallowed, the skin on his neck pulled so tight that watching it made tears spill on to my cheeks once more. My beloved pressed his knife against my stepfather's throat as I stumbled towards them. Sulis looked at me, but still said nothing. Whatever thought was in his eyes, it had gone so deep that I could not even guess what it might be.

'Tell me again that you love me,' I asked as I reached his side. As I looked at my soldier's frightened but exultant face, I could not help thinking of the High Keep, a haunted place built on murder, in whose corrupted, restless depths we stood. For a moment I thought the ghost-voices had returned, for my head was full of roaring, rushing noise. 'Tell me again, Tellarin,' I begged him. 'Please.'

My beloved did not move the blade from Sulis' throat, but said, 'Of course I love you, Breda. We will be married, and all of Nabban will lie at your feet. You will never be cold or lonely again.' He leaned forward, and I could feel the beautiful long muscles of his back tense beneath my hand. He hesitated when he heard the click of the glass ball as it fell to the tiles and rattled away.

'What...?' he asked, then straightened suddenly, grabbing at the spot at his waist where the claw had pricked him. I took a few staggering steps and fell, weeping. Behind me, Tellarin began to wheeze, then to choke. I heard his knife clatter to the stone.

I could not look, but the sound of his last rattling breaths will never leave me.

Now that I am old, I know that this secretive keep will be the place I die. When I have breathed my last, I suppose they will bury me on the headland beside my mother and Lord Sulis.

After that long night beneath the castle had ended, the Heron King, as the Lake People called my stepfather, came to resemble once more the man he had been. He reigned over the High Keep for many more years, and gradually even my own brawling, jealous folk acknowledged him as their ruler, although the kingship did not outlive Sulis himself.

My own mark on the world will be even smaller.

I never married, and my brother Aelfric died of a fall from his horse

without fathering any children, so although the Lake People still squabble over who should carry the standard and spear of the Great Thane, none of my blood will ever lead them again. Nor, I expect, will anyone stay on

in the great castle that Lord Sulis rebuilt after I am dead - there are few enough left of our household now, and those who stay only do so for love of me. When I am gone, I doubt any will remain even to tend our graves.

I cannot say why I chose to keep this bleak place as my home, any

more than I could say why I chose my stepfather's life over that of my beautiful, deceitful Tellarin. Because I feared to build something on blood

that should have been founded on something better, I suppose. Because

love does not do sums, but instead makes choices, and then gives its all.

Whatever the reasons, I have made those choices.

After he carried me out of the depths and back to daylight, my stepfather scarcely ever mentioned that dreadful night again. He was still distant to the end of his days, still full of shadows, but at times I thought I sensed a peace in him that he had not had before. Why that might be, I could not say.

As he lay at last on his deathbed, breath growing fainter and fainter, I sat by his side for hours of every day and spoke to him of all that happened in the High Keep, talking of the rebuilding, which still continued, and of the tenants, and the herds, as if at any moment he might rise to resume his stewardship. But we both knew he would not.

When the last moment came, there was a kind of quiet expectancy on his face—no fear, but something more difficult to describe. As he strained for his final breath of air, I suddenly remembered something I had read to his book, and realized that I had made a mistake on that night so long ago.

She will show me the Way of Black Fire or there is no other Hope, he had written. Either she will answer, or Death.

He had not meant that he would kill her if she did not give him what he needed. He had meant that if she could not help him find an answer,

then he would have to wait until death came for him before he could learn the truth.

And now he would finally receive an answer to the question that had tormented him for so long.

Whatever that answer might be, Sulis did not return to share it with me.

Now I am an old, old woman, and I will find it soon enough myself.

It is strange, perhaps, but I find I do not much care. In one year with

Tellarin, in those months of fierce love, I lived an entire lifetime. Since

then I have lived another one, a long, slow life whose small pleasures have largely balanced the moments of suffering. Surely two lives are enough for anyone - who needs the endless span of the immortals? After all, as the burning man made clear, an eternity of pain would be no gift.

And now that I have told my tale, even the ghosts that sometimes still startle me awake at midnight seem more like ancient friends than things to be feared.

I have made my choices.

I think I am content.

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