

The Horse Raiders

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We were deep in Morning when the barbarians came, far from n'dau, our right place: n'dau, where the sun hung at the proper angle in the sky and our shadows were their correct shape and height. At n'dau, a cloth tape cut to my height would exactly stretch the length of my shadow. My shadow and myself would be matched: n'dau.

N'dau is the correct length of my shadow, and it is the sun's perfect position in the sky, and it is one's correct location on Ping's slow-moving surface. We travel as we need to stay at n'dau while Ping moves under us. It does this slowly, taking a lifetime to move from Night, so far to the west, past Dawn and n'dau into Noon, where stones explode from the heat and the air can melt flesh from bones. If we stopped moving we would rotate with Ping, but to do this would be absurd. To stay still is to slip from n'dau.

We were far from n'dau.

The sun rode too high in the sky. The shadow that dogged my heels was too short, the height of a child's at n'dau, perhaps waist-height if stretched up instead of across the ground. It had been too long since we had seen anyone to trade with and too long since we had attended Moot, where the faces of others of our people might remind us of the beauty within our own clan. The air was too hot and dry, and smelled of dust and the grass and the horses and us.

We snarled at one another, sick of the food we had, sick of each other, cranky with the wrongness of it all. Time to return to n'dau.

Ricard finally agreed: when the sleep time was over we would turn Dawnward again. But I was too hot to sleep, too impatient, so I walked among the mare herd.

We had wandered so far from n'dau because we had found a broad ribbon of Earth grasses and shrubs, rooted into the soil left over from a Dawn meltwater river, which was dried to a marshy trickle. The horses could eat the native vegetation of Ping (and did), but the grass from ancient Earth was best for them, and so we let the herd graze Noonward. We wanted colts, so we set up the estrus tents; using a waterclock, we placed the mares in darkness for one emptying of the waterclock, then out in the light for another, then back in the dark tents. After we had done this for a while, the mares went into heat; the stallion went mad with lust and after fertilizing many of them, ran amok, in the end killing himself by falling into a ravine on his way to the gelding herd, several leagues to the north.

It didn't matter: we had fifty mares in the mare's herd and thirty-five foals, fourteen of them male. It would be simple enough to trade for another stallion, when we came back to the Moot and remet our people. The horses of my family's herds were famed for their beauty and small sturdiness; these would be worth a lot, back at one of the travelling trading fairs or at Moot.

But we hadn't travelled much in the time of the mares' pregnancy, and the planet did not stop its eternal creeping, taking us away from n'dau and Dawn and toward Noon.

Foals and their dams scattered at my passing. They seemed listless and irritable from the heat and the stagnating water, but they were fat and healthy. Their coats gleamed through a thin sheen of dust. I

checked several horses for things I had recently treated. The blazed black mare's right flank, ripped by tearthorn bushes, showed a dark shiny scar, already blending into her black hide. The small gray mare's newborn foal had been attacked by feral dogs before I had found them after delivery and brought them back to the flock; the filly's shoulder was deformed by a bite, but she moved easily. She would probably never sell, but her blood was good; as long as she could keep up, she should be a good broodmare.

The sorrel mare's was the last foal not yet born, and due very soon. Her belly was a huge copper-colored bloat. She shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, but she let me handle her without resisting, too heavy and hot to care. When I thumped her abdomen, I felt movement, a sharp thump back. Her mouth membranes were pink and healthy-looking, and her eyes were clear.

I heard a distant bark: one of my dogs, no doubt chasing birds far from the camp. A second dog took up the sound. I looked out toward them, toward Dawn, and saw dark shapes.

My uncle's wife Brida, who was guarding, and I started shouting at the same time.

"Riders!" I shouted as we ran toward the camp. "Strangers Dawnward!"

The tents had been quiet, dogs sleeping in the short shadows. Now my family ran to the central work area, and dogs danced nervously about them. The three children in the family clung to their parents' hands. My brother Ricard had been sleeping in one of the tents; bare-chested and squinting in the light, he gestured and we all armed ourselves with knives and swords and spears.

"The dogs," he said to me.

I nodded, and pulled my whistles from my sash. They were a handful of silver tubes bound together with silk cords, each a different note to make the different commands. They weren't as convenient as whistling the notes between my teeth, but they carried. I whistled everyone out and alert, and Dawnward. The dogs loped off, dark shapes galloping through pale grass to meet the handful of man-shapes coming.

The foremost rode under a banner, but we couldn't see the color. I fingered my whistles, watching Ricard for direction. We had twenty dogs and eight adults; I would lose some dogs, but we could stop these men, in the unlikely event we needed to.

"White," my brother's wife Jena said.

Trading color. Ricard relaxed and smiled. There aren't many people on Ping; in the time it took for my sister Meg to get pregnant and bear her daughter Mara, I never saw strangers. This was our first contact with strangers since before our father had died and Ricard had assumed the family's leadership. My brother was still likely to take the hard road to any decision: better that this be an easy meeting.

"Barter and news. Peace," he said. The armed ones lowered their weapons with relief.

His wife nodded. "I'll make the tea for the greetings." She walked to the cooking fires, my nephews complaining beside her.

"They might not be peaceful," my uncle Den said.

Ricard turned. "Why not? They ride under white."

"Still, better to—"

Ricard laughed, "Den you're old. We are nine, and they're six. They ride under white, and no one would betray that. We're not fighters, but we'll defend ourselves if we have to. What could they do?"

"Ricard—" Den said sourly.

"Oh, all right." Ricard gestured impatiently. "Katia, send one of the dogs out to bring in Lara and Willem from the gelding herd. The geldings won't wander far before they return. Satisfied?"

I nodded and whistled for the young black dog, and other herd. He loped away to the north. He didn't know enough yet to be useful here, but my cousin and her husband would see him and know he was sent to summon them.

"Let's get the children out of the way," my sister Meg said. "Ron, Mara, Stivan, into the sleep tent." But no one moved. The children clung to their parents: tiny Stivan and Rob clutching Jena's skirts, Mara holding Meg's hand tightly. We stood there, as if trapped out of time, flies hanging in honey.

And then (the trick grassland plays), they were suddenly present. Time began again: the camp was flooded with noise and motion. The dogs whirled around us and the horsemen, jumping and barking. The strange horses flinched away from them; several of the riders looked no more happy. One man had a whip with which he flailed around his horse's flanks; the dogs thought this was a game, and danced away, grinning as dogs do.

I whistled everyone, and back. Obediently the dogs moved away. When they were far enough away not to make the strange horses nervous, I whistled drop, and they collapsed panting in the trampled grass.

I had never seen such large horses. They stood so tall that I could barely see over their backs, with long rangy legs and rough coats. They all looked sick and exhausted, as if they had been ridden harder than they should. I recognized the shapes of prayer flags, scraps of fabric and paper and hide that had been woven into tight little patterns and hung from their bridles.

I had never seen strangers like these: no surprise on Ping, where one might never see members of the same group twice in a lifetime. The barbarians (for so I thought them) were gold-skinned and flat-faced. The four men had shaved heads; the two women had long black braids that fell to their heels as they rode. They were all dressed identically, as if on purpose, in knee-length dark quilted tunics split front and back for riding. The tunics would fold closed and secure with plain gold buttons close to the throat, but it was too hot for that; they wore them gaping open to show sweat-darkened shirts and trousers of undyed Pingworm silk.

They were all warriors. Hung from their belts were knives and embroidered bowcases made of oiled cloth, covers flipped back. Block quivers nestled in the small of their backs. Their felted boots had toes that pointed up and notches in their shaped soles. The stirrups nestled in the notches: very sensible, worth trying to imitate.

One of the riders said, "I am Huer, bodyguard to the emperor Er-c'hua of the T'ien, and the leader of this group." Nonsense words to us, for all their being in the Trade language. He swung from his saddle and stood beside his blood-colored mare: a man just my height (and I am short for my people), a dog's lifetime older than me, with papery wrinkles seaming his face. A bright Ping-beetle's wing and a strand of sky-blue beads hung from his dark brimless cap, his only ornamentation.

"I am Ricard," my brother said. "We are the Winden clan, of the Moot People." These would be nonsense words to them, as well, but necessary for all that. "Greetings."

"Foals!" One of the barbarian women called out in Trade, then said something in their own tongue, pointing at the herd. Several dismounted.

"Wait—" Ricard started; but exclaiming they walked toward our horses and into the herd.

I whistled softly through my teeth, the tones for the two smartest dogs, the lead bitch and the gray-faced male, and look around and be wary. They stood and loped away toward the herd.

"Who made the noise?" the leader asked Ricard. "Why do the dogs leave?"

"Katia told them to." Ricard gestured toward me. "She is our handler."

The stranger looked at me until I flushed and ducked my head. "She wastes her time training curs."

We had run into other barbarians who despised dogs as unclean: Richard did not defend, but only said, "She handles the horses, too."

One of the barbarian women trotted toward us from the herd. "They're small, but they are well," she called to Huer. Her accent was thick, but even through it I heard her excitement. "And all the foals. Completely healthy."

"Are you here to trade for horses?" Ricard asked.

"Your horses are not sick?"

"No." Ricard said. "They're the best horses on Ping. Worth any price. We have—"

"You know horses?" the leader interrupted, staring at me. "What makes them ill? Do you have medicines?"

"Why?" I asked warily. "Do you seek help?"

"Are any of the others healers?"

"I'm teaching one of the children, but—"

"Which one?"

I said nothing, but Mara huddled in Meg's arms, and hid her face in her mother's sleeve.

He turned away to look at Ricard. "I have important news. Are you all present?"

"No," Ricard said—too young to rule, I know now, to know better than to say this. "Lara and Willam are out with the geldings."

"Good," the barbarian said and shouted a word. It seemed impossibly fast; the strangers pulled their short string bows free of the cases at their hips and shot.

The leader struck the metal whistles from my hand before I could get them to my lips. I dove for them, but he caught me as I dropped. I fought to free my hands from the folds of his tunic, to pull my knife.

Three rounds of arrows had hissed through the air in the moment I had fought. Ricard was down, an arrow sprouting from his breastbone. Jena was fallen, Stivan beside her; I couldn't see the arrows. Den, Mikel, Brida, Meg, Daved: arrows and blood blooming from throats and breasts and backs.

Several dogs broke the drop command; silently my lead male launched himself at the leader's throat. An arrow threw him sideways before he hit, but the young male dog behind him struck the man, who raised an arm to protect his face.

My knife pulled free. I jabbed for the man's side as he shoved the male aside; then pulled free and

whistled attack with my mouth, too soft and too late. I heard the dogs scream as they were shot.

I howled with them and slashed again at the barbarian. Although I was good with a knife, he threw up his quilted bowcase to snag the blade and disarmed me.

My family and my dogs were down; but, incredibly, my lead bitch still crawled toward the man who held me, her hind legs dragging uselessly behind her. An arrow struck, and a second. She was dead before her head touched the ground.

I screamed with rage. Insane with it, I fought my captor, snarling and biting like a dog myself, mad for killing. In the end, he crushed my face against his tunic until I hung in his hands, trying not to faint for lack of air. I heard whimpers and sighs, and over them, my niece Mara's constant screaming, as if she had no need for breath.

After a time, he loosed me. I fell to my knees, gasping for breath, heaving helplessly. The barbarians moved through the clearing with bloody knives. We had killed one of the strangers; a woman knelt beside him and sang foreign words in a steady drone. The rest were injured in one way or another, from bites or knife-wounds. One of the women held Mara off the ground, the child's head pressed into her tunic to stifle the screaming. She seemed to be unhurt.

"You have your horse medicines?" I looked up. My captor was a dark silhouette against the high constant sun.

When I was a girl, I had a fever once and nearly died. I had seen everything around me as if through smoke then: things happened but they meant nothing. This was like that. I saw the light, the darkness; saw blood dripping from his arm where my dog had hurt him; heard his voice, and a woman's shouts giving orders to gather the mare herd, scattered from the fight. But none of this was real.

"Medicines?" he repeated more slowly, as if he weren't certain I could understand his words.

I stared at him.

"They are mine now. And you," he said, and walked away.

They were slicing the walls of the tents and pulling free the bundles and packets inside. I heard one calling from my open-roofed work tent. I knew what he'd found: my half-dozen parfleches of tanned painted horsehide; inside, all the boxes and jars and bottles and packets. Everything packed, as I always kept them.

My sister lay beside me. "Meg?" I asked before I saw dust lying undisturbed on her open eyes. Blood flowed sluggishly from her nose and mouth, but the arrow shaft over her heart seemed strangely bloodless. Beneath her more blood stained the grasses and lay on top of the dry ground, as if the soil had rejected it. Her head was turned to one side, as if she sighted along her extended arm.

I whispered, "Mara's alive, Mara's all right." Hidden in the grass, my dog whistles lay along the line of her outstretched arm, as if she had been reaching for them. I picked them up and hid them in my broad sash; stood and walked shakily away.

My dogs were scattered through the area, even some of the ones I had whistled away on tasks. Some looked asleep. One, the second lead male, had died biting at the arrow that pinned him by the flank to the ground.

Several were missing altogether. Blood trails dribbled through the long grasses: dogs who had been strong enough to escape or to find a private place to die. I thought of the whistle, but there would be no

point, to call an injured one in to death.

One of the missing dogs was the clan dog, a great long-legged golden male. His main duty was to run if anything happened to my family and to find the Moot, as we had trained him to, my father and I. He would be seen there: the clan flag on his collar would be recognized. They would know my family was dead. Whoever was at the Moot would mourn us, and our scrolls would be closed and the name Winden remembered only in Moot chants.

Several dogs weren't dead yet, but I had no knife, no pain-killers to ease their suffering. I knelt in the bloodstained grass holding my gasping brindle bitch until my captor ran up and caught my arm. "You don't leave us," he said. Her head hit the ground as I was jerked upright.

"Kill her," I said.

He started to pull me toward the camp, but I ripped myself free and pointed at the dying bitch. "Kill them all. Finish it."

"They're dogs." He spat on the ground. "Unclean."

"Kill them." I met his eyes until he said something guttural and gestured one of the others toward us, a youth barely into adulthood, more boy than man. They spoke back and forth for a moment, and the boy walked toward the dogs, pulling a long knife free. My uncle Bran's knife: I recognized the notch at the tip.

The leader bound my wrists with black cords and lifted me onto a horse, where he tied my feet to the stirrups. The strangers had taken almost nothing but my parfleches, the clan's sextant, and a packet of gold and metal from ancient Earth that the family kept for bartering. Had kept. These were loaded on the backs of two mares. Mara seemed unconscious, held in front of her captor. The leader saw me staring at her. "To keep you honest," he said.

Riding and shouting, the other barbarians had circled the loose mare-herd until they uneasily moved together into a ragged bunch, the queen mare watching the strangers warily. Through the smoke, I listened to their talk: they seemed to speak Trade among themselves, perhaps because they each spoke different dialects. I learned there were seven of them instead of the five I saw; two scouted ahead. They were going to try to keep fifty mares and thirty-five foals moving with five riders and no dogs.

The leader looked around and called, "Shen!"

The boy dropped Bran's knife in the grass and ran back to us, mounted a horse. He caught my eye. "Finished," he said, not unkindly. "It was not painful."

My captor caught my reins and shouted to the others. And we began to move toward morning.

Soon the camp was gone, the dark puddles of its collapsed tents no more than shadows, without forms to make them. My family and my dogs would lie there until their bones baked in Noon and were lost forever. They would never return to n'dau.

My family had traveled only as much as we needed to keep the sun at n'dau or to find a trade fair or the Moot. I had never traveled like this: endless whiles of arrowing north and Dawnward, riding until dirty foam flecked the horses' coats, and their riders fell asleep against their necks. I was bound too securely to escape, even were I free of the smoke, the not-caring. After a time, the woman who had taken Mara, Suhui, handed my niece to the boy, Shen, as they rode. Mara's face was dirty and she slept in the crook

of his arm, as if waking were too painful.

I felt this way. I was awake, but the smoke was thick between me and the world. Nothing mattered: not even when I saw the gelding herd wandering far Dawnward, Dana and Willem's flattened shelter a closer, solitary shadow on the ground. The raiders had stopped there first. They couldn't bring the geldings into the mare herd, not with new foals.

After a while, the barbarians ate as they rode. I took the strips of jerky in my bound hands when Huer gave them to me. Eventually my hands forgot their presence. They fell uneaten to the ground. I didn't worry: the dogs would find them, and then remembered the dogs were gone. I didn't open my mouth when Huer offered water from a skin. "Drink," he said in his harsh voice. I said nothing, but swallowed when he held the skin to my lips; it was too much work to reject it.

We left the ribbon of Earth grasses, and crossed a ragged plateau scoured nearly bare of soil, leaving only stones of every size. Dry as it was, velvet Ping-moss filled each rock's too-short shadow with dark green. When the sun was lower in the sky, the moss had outlined longer shadows. The shadows had abandoned them to the sun, but their deaths had laid the soil for a pocket of Earth grass.

The Earth grass was edible, and the horses snatched mouthfuls of the tasseled grass as we walked, releasing seeds into the air. The horses walked in an ankle-deep cloud of pollen. The Ping-moss would be poison to them; but they would not eat it, I knew.

We came to a brackish stream, dug into the broad bed of its Dawn self. The lead mare stopped at the water, the herd with her. Huer called a command and the riders moved upstream, my horse trailing after theirs. Mara was awake. Shen swung her down to Suhui, who held her by the hand while pulling packs from a horse's back.

"You will not run." Huer stood beside my mare, hands busy on the cords that held my feet in the stirrups.

The smoke in my head made it hard to think. I wouldn't leave Mara. And where would I go, alone and unarmed, horseless and dogless, with a small child? They would catch me before I had traveled a thousand paces. "I won't run," I said.

He nodded and pulled me from the horse's back. "Mei," he said to the junior of the two women. "Take her."

Shrugging, Mei caught the trailing rope that led to my wrists. "Come." On my leash like a dog in training, I moved into the long reeds away from the others to relieve myself, and then to rinse my face and throat with water that smelled of sulfur. Led back to the camp, I sat and leaned against the mossy side of a rock. The shadow barely covered my knees when it should have laid over me like a dark blanket. So far from n'dau.

Mei started a fire. From a fitted felt case, she pulled a large copper bowl beaten thin as a leaf. She filled the bowl with water and hung it over the flames, which let off a thin smoke.

Saddle pads and bridles removed, the raiders' mares mingled with my clan's horses. The strange horses stood head and shoulders higher as they all waded into the stream. One of the riders, Ko, patrolled the opposite bank on horseback, watching for feral dogs and bandits. As he cantered opposite us, he rubbed his dusty face wearily. My dogs would have guarded better, but they were dead.

Mara sat on the cracked-mud bank beside Shen. He was making something with reeds he'd pulled.

"Mara." My voice sounded blurred in my ears, muffled by the smoke in my head.

She turned slightly, as if afraid to look directly at me. "Aunt Katia?"

"Yes." Meaning to reach for her, I lifted my hands until the cord stopped me.

"Tia!" She bolted into my lap and clung to my neck.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

She nodded, dusty, sweaty hair scratching my throat. As well as I could, I felt her for injuries. She looked healthy, if tired and drawn. She had a bruise on one shin. I thought I remembered that from before the barbarians.

I had never been comfortable with the family's children. I tended them when it was my turn, but never asked to hold them or taught them the small-child things. After my father had died, I had showed Mara the things he had taught me when I was her size: how to clean the horses' hooves, how to make a tablet out of herbs or powders. I dealt with her best if I remembered my father teaching me. Now I had to deal with her; there was no one left, but me and the raiders.

"Where are Mama and Papa?" she asked.

Dust on Megan's long-lashed eye; the ragged red gash of a removed arrow along Daved's side. "You don't remember?" I finally said.

"Shen says they had to go away, but that he'll take care of me." She frowned. "You're dirty, Tia. You should wash."

Dried blood flecked her cheek. "You should wash, too, Mara."

"That's what Shen says, but I don't want to. Shen says that where he's from is so cold that water is like sand on the ground."

"Snow," I said. "At Dawn. I saw it once, when I was smaller than you." I had been a long way from n'dau then, too.

"Shen says I'll see it." She blinked sleepily. "Why are you tied up like that? Were you bad like a dog?"

"No. You don't remember the camp?"

She shook her head.

The youth Shen had come closer and squatted on his heels. He held a small animal-shape woven of reeds. He looked as tired as the rest of them, but he smiled at Mara. "I have a sister her age," he said to me in Trade. "Wulin. She's full of questions, too."

"Shen says I may have the straw pony," Mara said. "He made it."

I watched through the smoke. Mara had already forgotten.

I slept until I was drugged with it. I woke once, and staggered to the water's edge to drink the silty water. My hands were bound in such a way that I couldn't cup water; instead I knelt and put my face in the water, like a dog or a horse, then tipped back. I picked at the knot with my teeth as I looked around me.

Shen and Ko slept nearby. Mara cuddled against the youth, straw pony in her hand. Mei watched the

horses and the camp; I saw her astride the one-eared mare from my family's herd. She slowed when she saw me, but didn't stop. She knew I could go nowhere and was no threat; Shen and Ko lay with their knives and bows within arm's reach.

I heard the murmur of voices, Huer and Suhui talking. They stood away from the herd with a single horse, the gray mare Suhui had first ridden. The gray held her head rigid as if afraid to move it, and barked a single shallow cough. Her halter was hung with prayer flags no longer than my finger.

Suhui soothed the horse. "Hush, daughter, easy." I had heard the raiders call one another "daughter" and "father" before. These seemed to be honorifics. I couldn't help but think of my own father, whom I had called by his name.

"The lesions and now pneumonia," Huer said.

"Yes," Suhui said.

"Then the mare's already dead," he said slowly. "I'm sorry."

"I understand." Even at that distance I saw how pale she was, her gold-skinned face leached a muddy white. "But the others, the strange horses—they don't have the lesions, do they? They might not have it?"

"You saw them yourself. You looked in their mouths. No sores."

"Every other horse on Ping seems to have them," Suhui said, and her voice sounded bitter. "How are these free of them?"

"The handler," Huer said. "Or she has something in her packs. Daughter, she might know how to cure your mare."

Suhui's voice was hopeless. "Pneumonia, maybe. The plague? Not even ancient Earth medicine could cure her of that. It must be luck that her herd hasn't caught it yet. It was a mistake to take her, father."

"Perhaps," Huer said. "But it may not be luck. She may know things. Could I leave her behind?"

"Instead you bring her with us," she said slowly. "She is too unwrinkled to be a great healer. I think there is more to it than this."

"There is nothing," he said harshly.

"She might poison her horses rather than see them become ours. Have you thought of that?"

"We have the child, what is it—Mara. She won't endanger her."

"She might not care. Her eyes are dead, this Katia. Haven't you noticed?"

"I have to hope," Huer said.

The gray mare coughed again, once, shallowly, as if she were afraid of the pain. Huer touched her neck. "We can't let her give pneumonia to the others. If she hasn't already. But the handler might at least have something to make it easier for her."

"No. I will do it myself, as it's always been done." The horse shifted restlessly at the grief in Suhui's voice. "Would you trust the stranger if it were your mare dying?"

"We may all have to learn to, daughter," Huer said wearily. "Her horses are well, and ours are dying."

Suhui removed the halter, and walked away, singing softly to the mare. The gray's ears pricked forward, and she followed slowly. They moved out of sight around a curve of the stream bed, Suhui picking the prayer flags from the halter as they walked.

"And will you poison them?" Huer's voice so close to my ear startled me. He stood a bare arm's length from me, watching me watch Suhui.

I said nothing. I had thought of it. But they were my family's horses, all that was left of the Winden clan besides Mara and me and the clan dog, if he lived. And to kill them would take me out of the smoke, to somewhere I didn't want to be. "What sickness?" I asked finally.

"You don't know." I picked at the knots with my teeth: what would I say? After a time, he started to talk again. "There is a plague. Everywhere on Ping, the horses are dying. The horses get sores in their mouths, and then anything they get kills them, whether it's serious or not. It takes a long while for them to die—a dying mare can foal before she dies, but the foal is dying before it's born.

"Many leagues south of where I'm from, back in Dawn, there were a people with a million horses. We used to raid them, but their horses are all dead now. Dead or dying. The Emperor sent us out, a thousand of us, while our horses were still well enough to carry us. To find information or anything that might help."

"And so you killed my family and stole me."

"You are an idea I had. That you might be able to heal the horses. Bringing you and the child with us to the capital may anger the Emperor. He may even kill us."

"Unless I keep the horses well?"

"Even then. I broke my orders."

"Then why bring me back at all?"

"Because my death isn't as important as saving the horses, if you can do that." He shrugged. "We are horse people. The Emperor rules by the speed of our horses. When the horses die, we will also die. I will only die a little faster than my people."

Suhui was quiet, swollen-eyed and hard-jawed when she came back. She selected one of the bays from the Winden mares and looked her over carefully; the horse was young, so she danced as the woman did this, tossing her head high. Suhui seemed to like this, and haltered her with the gray's halter, tying a single prayer flag to its cheekstrap, the first.

We left the stream and travelled again.

There were fifty horses in the Winden herd, as well as the ones we rode. The queen mare decided she didn't like being pushed so hard, and kept moving the herd in other directions, away from north and Dawnward. The riders exhausted their mounts trying to stop this. The barbarians' gray horse that I rode tracked the herd, directed by Huer's shouted commands. More often than not, Mara rode before Shen. When she did ride with me, she chattered about the strange world of the riders.

"Shen says we're going to a city," she said—an unfamiliar word, even in Trade—"that's where his family is from, and he'll introduce me to his sister."

"City," I murmured after her.

"That's like a bunch of houses, only huge. Shen says that more than a thousand people live just in that place. The emperor—that's their group leader, Tia, like the Moot-leader—has a herd of a thousand horses, all together, and they feed them with grain from farmers from all around, instead of eating it themselves. Shen says—"

"Who are your parents, Mara?" I interrupted.

"My mother is Meg Weaver of the Winden clan. My father is Daved Handler of the Leydet clan, crossed into the Windens," she recited. "When are Mama and Papa coming back?"

"You won't forget that, will you?" I asked. "Your clan? Your parents? No matter what happens?"

She twisted in my arms to look at me. "That's silly, Tia. I have to say that every time we come to Moot."

"—But if you never go to a Moot again, Mara. Promise."

"But—" Her face twisted. "Where's Mama?"

"Gone," I said. I still saw through the smoke; I had no resources on which to draw to explain things gently, or at all, to a child. Meg, Daved: dead, leagues Noonward.

"When will they come back?" I recognized the signs of coming tears: the tension in her body, the tightening of her voice. "You have to tell me."

"I don't know," I said. Never.

She screamed and hit me. "You do know! You won't let me talk to them. You're here and they're not; I hate you, I hate you!"

At her first screams, Shen and Huer left their places by the herd and galloped toward us.

"Hush, daughter, hush." Shen pulled her from my arms and into his own. "Wulin is your size and she never cries any more. Do you want her to think you're a baby when you meet her?" He met my eyes momentarily over her heaving shoulders; I saw anger that I had made her cry. "Let me show you a marker-cairn, how we show a way for the horses to go home." Still murmuring in her ear, he kicked his horse into a canter toward the front of the herd.

Huer barked a word; my mare, who had started after Shen's, stopped in her tracks. "You are all right?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Your face—" He gestured toward his own cheeks. I raised my hands, but they stopped halfway, stopped by the short lead around my waist.

"Wait," he said, and pulled free his knife and leaned across. The cords fell from my wrists and waist to the ground beside my horse, a tangle of black. "Now."

My arms were stiff when I lifted them. My face was wet. "She is mine," I said finally. "She is my clan, the only—" My throat closed, cutting the words off.

"No one steals her," he said softly.

I knew that; she gave herself away, to Shen and his family I had never seen.

For the Moot people, finding places is not so hard; we have the sextant to tell us how far north or south we are; and the angle of the sun showed us that we were where we belonged, at the center of things. Rivers and hills and lakes and plains might all move under us, but we and the sun stayed still: n'dau.

The raiders didn't use a sextant in their traveling, although they had my clan's as well as their own. Instead, we passed cairns no higher than my ankle, made of gold-pink stones—laid by the advance horsemen finding a route for so many horses. I don't know how the raiders I traveled with found the cairns on a plain littered with gold-pink stones.

We ate on horseback. There was more water now, easy to find at the center of the soil ribbons we crossed. We stopped to sleep only when the lead mare refused to travel, even with a rider jogging her. Even through the smoke, I remembered to examine the horses of the herd, looking at their mouths, looking for sores, but the Winden mares were all still healthy, if tired. Amazingly, the foals were all keeping up. The barbarians' horses were not so well: none had caught pneumonia from Suhui's mare before it had died; but they were more exhausted than they should be, even for the hard work they were doing.

Back with my family, I had always slept in a tent, but I got used to resting as the barbarians did, with a dark cloth thrown over my face to cut the sun's bite. In the brief time between lying down and exhausted sleep, I looked up and saw the ball of the sun filtered through fabric and the smoke in my head to a hard hot ball. Still too high.

After a while, we crossed another ribbon of vegetation, this time mixed thorn bushes as high as my chest. Some were from Earth. Here they bloomed and seeded at the same time, so that the tangle was filled with tiny yellow-green flowers and brighter wax-yellow berries. A small stream ran along the ribbon's center. The herd drank a little there, but Huer said there was more water and better grazing ahead of us, and we didn't stop for long.

They hadn't tied my hands again, but the blazed gray mare I rode still had no reins. Perhaps she was the best trained for voice commands, because I never rode another, even when she was tired and fell to the back of the group. I had memorized one of the words Huer used on her, the command for stop. Her ears flicked back to hear me when I tried the word, but she plodded on. At last, impatient, I slid from her saddle and ran to her head, caught the cheekstraps of her halter and forcibly halted her.

Her head hung as she labored for breath. She was sweating too hard for the work she was doing; I am small and she was a big horse. Her coat was stained dark. When I laid my ear against her side I heard her heartbeat, too fast. Looking for a sign of the fever I already knew she had, I peeled her lip back. Her gums were pale.

But the inside of her lip and her gums were also covered with weeping sores, some the size of my thumb. The flesh around them was hot red, inflamed. She flinched when I touched her mouth, even with cool hands, even a finger's length from the sores.

I heard a shout from the herd: Ko's voice, calling for Huer. Perhaps he had seen me off my horse. But where would I go afoot? To the ribbon behind us, to squat among thorns? No: Ko galloped past me, back toward the ribbon.

Huer rode up. "The mare," he said harshly. "The pregnant sorrel. She's left the herd."

I stared dully at him. "Bring her back, then."

"Haven't you been watching? She's shedding, drinking a lot. It's her time. Mount."

I looked at my heaving horse. "I don't think mine can carry me."

"Behind me, then," he said impatiently, and leaned over, his hand outstretched. I laid mine in it; he heaved me up in front of him. He pivoted his mare and we followed Ko, back the way we came.

Ko had found her almost immediately, and we followed his shouts to a place in the thorns, just south of where we had crossed the water. We stopped where Ko's horse stood. Ko stood beside a gap in the thorns, and pointed down it. Huer pulled me down with him, and caught my wrist and dragged me down a short path.

The sorrel stood in a small clearing, pawing at the blossom-dusted ground. When she noticed us, she charged a step. Huer and I stepped back into the path's mouth, and, silently, knelt to watch. Perhaps this was distance enough, for she ignored us there.

Something was wrong. She acted as any mare delivering would: shimmied her huge bulk as if uncomfortable, and laid down with her legs tucked under her, like a crouching dog. And then up again, and then down again, twisting restlessly.

"Oh no," I said to myself, suddenly realizing.

"What?" Huer said behind me, his breath warm on my ear.

"She's not eating," I murmured. "She should be eating everything she can reach."

He left me and moved back. I heard him say in a low voice, "Get her medicines." Ko mounted and left at a gallop.

When Huer returned, I said, without looking back, "Wasted effort."

"What?"

The sorrel was rolling on her back, heaving her huge torso from side to side as if in pain. "It's colic. I can do nothing."

"Is this the plague?"

I turned to look at him: "No. The mare is damaged internally somehow: the foal kicked her intestinal wall or has been lying across a vein in her belly. Or she's eaten something strange."

"Well, did the plague make her susceptible?"

"No," I said impatiently. "My horses are fine. There have always been difficult deliveries, colics."

Her neck was stretched straight out, throat muscles working. Her legs thrashed as she tried to shift her bulk. Her coppery coat was stained dark and light with sweat and foam. The eye I could see was rimmed with panic-white. Huer said, "You must do something."

The spasms stopped and she lay on her side, heaving. The hard drying mud of the clearing was spangled with tiny fallen green-yellow blossoms. I moved to her and stroked the long bone of her face.

"There's nothing I can do," I said without looking up.

He crossed the clearing in two strides and pulled my face to his, until his gold eyes were a flat angry glow a hand's width from mine. "You can try, Katia. You can fight for her life."

"Why?" I said wearily. I could not even fight for my own. He had never called me by my name before; none of them had. "She isn't mine anymore, isn't the clan's. So that she can bear foals for you?"

"Better that she bear foals for someone," he said grimly. "Yours is the first pregnant horse I've seen in six of Suhui's menstrual cycles. If they can't be infected, your horses, their foals, will save us all. You will not let her die of colic, not when this colt is so important."

"Important? Nothing is so important that you had to kill Ricard and Jena. Meg. Daved. The dogs." My words came as croaks. My eyes felt pressured by poisons: unshed tears.

"Do you think I don't have a family, Katia-of-the-Winden-Clan? That I don't have brothers, a sister married to a book-saver in the city? A son, too young to leave his mother and join me as a bodyguard? I have family and I fear for them. Without horses, we will die. There will be no way to communicate, no way to gather tribute. We will starve. Save this foal."

"Or what? You will kill me? Mara?"

A horse galloped up; its rider dismounted and pushed through the gap in the thorns with the first of my parfleches.

For a moment Huer's eyes glittered. He looked away before I did. "No," he said. "The child learns our tongue from Shen. She is already loved as a sister by one of us. We will not kill her. Or you."

My clan was gone: my dogs, my family. Even Mara, forgetting it all. But I still had the parfleches and my knowledge. And somehow his admitting he would not kill me freed me to do what I was meant to.

"Bring me the parfleche with the red beads."

"You will save her?" he asked.

She began heaving beside me.

"I told you. No one can. But I can kill the pain, and help her deliver even though she dies."

She was thrashing again, and I had retreated to the path before he got the parfleche to me. I laid it out quickly.

I knew what Huer saw, leaning over my shoulder: a horsehide packet filled with smaller cloth- or leather-wrapped bundles, each tied with dyed cord hung with pottery beads. But I saw the contents instead: boxes of powdered leaves and roots and molds and earths; stoppered jars of honeys and tinctures, knives and threads and needles, splints and bowls; a waxed sack filled with clay dust for casts.

"When she relaxes again, cut her in the neck, a slice this long." I showed him the first joint my thumb.

"And then hold her."

I mixed water and tincture, sucked them into a rigid bamboo straw, cut to a point at the bottom, and stoppered the top with my tongue. The fluid numbed my tongue.

When she stopped thrashing for a moment, he poked the point of his knife in, just above the shoulder. She flinched and prepared to fight, but she was tired and in pain, and I was faster: I jammed the straw's sharp end into the hole he had made and blew hard; then jumped back before she could knock my teeth

out with her tossing head. Blood sprayed from the cut.

"That will work?" Huer said, panting.

I nodded. "I was in muscle. She will calm."

Which she did. Tired and drugged, she writhed less and less, until she died.

We cut the live colt from her belly. While Huer and Ko wiped him clean, I milked the dead mare out. Ko took the waterskin filled with milk and cut a tiny hole in a leg, which he thrust into the colt's questing mouth. He drank greedily.

"Look how healthy," Ko said. Tears fell down his face. "He will father many foals." Huer sent him back to the herd, colt and milk laid over his mare's neck, to find a stepmother as soon as possible.

I still knelt with my hand on the mare's sagging, empty belly. I began heaving; it was a while before I realized this sickness was sores. I cried for a while, and when I was done, Huer gave me water and rode with me back to the herd, now far ahead. I heard a feral dog howling at a great distance. It was a lonely noise, and I was grateful for the first time for the company of the barbarian.

We rode. My numbness was over, replaced by a raw ache as if someone had ripped a limb from my body. The sun scarcely moved in the sky. I watched my short shadow and cried steadily.

Shen's dark bay got sick: a runny nose and fever, then influenza. By the time we noticed it was more than her usual exhaustion from the early stages of the plague, all the other horses had it, as well: the raiders' horses and the new colt worst, my herd no worse than they would ordinarily be in influenza, coughing and staggering their way through the disease's course.

We were passing a drying lake that stretched Dawnward to the horizon. Far to the south, a group of small buildings stood where the lake's shore had once been, not much more than dark blots on the horizon. People had lived there when this was closer to Dawn, and abandoned their village as the lake withdrew and the mud-bed cracked.

"We will stop here," Shen said. He slid from his mare's back and laid his hand on her neck; her coat was flecked with foam, though the air was cooler than it had been. Mucus hung in a thick rope from her panting mouth. "She has suffered enough. They all have, our horses. No: we will let them die in peace here. And when they are gone, we will saddle up new mares from the Winden herd and ride them."

And so we stayed for a while.

For the first time since I had begun travelling with them, the raiders set up a true camp. There was a single tent, which Huer used for his own purposes, and a regular fire, fueled with dried Ping-moss and the branches of the soft-wooded trees that grew and seeded and died in a single dog's lifetime. Mei gave me a jacket, a short version of her quilted riding coat, to keep away the chill of the steady wind that blew across the lake from Dawn. The felted wool smelled like my father's sleep tent had; its warmth was comforting after the steady despair of working with the horses.

The outriders came in once, a grim-faced man and a tiny woman with eyes that might once have been merry, if they hadn't been so weary. They slept through a full sleep-and-wake cycle, and into the next sleep cycle; when they woke they left their dying horses with me, and took six Winden horses before

heading off northward along the shore of the dried lake.

Even after I sent Huer's mare to death, there were still seven of the raider's horses alive: Mei's, Shen's, and Ko's riding mares; one horse with a misshapen hoof which they had used for carrying supplies; and the three left by the outriders: two mounts and one baggage mare. There were still forty-three Winden horses, and eleven of the foals had survived, the losses all being normal to a large herd travelling hard. The Winden horses showed no signs of the disease that killed the others, though several were tired from the journey, and a couple of them still struggled through the last of the influenza. Perhaps my mares truly were resistant to whatever killed the tall horses of the barbarians. But the other horses died, one after the other, and I gave them what medications I could, to ease their passing.

Huer watched me often as I moved among the horses. He seemed to be brooding, but when he spoke to me, it was only to ask about my treatments.

His sick mare lingered. We had separated her from the others, more for her comfort than from any hope of preventing anything, and Huer spent much of his time with her, weaving paper flags into her halter, talking in the universal wordless language between men and horses. After a time, she stopped responding, and instead hung her head and hacked out streamers of mucus that trailed from her cracked lips onto the dust. I watched him watch her, remembering the pain of my first horse's death, remembering my father's death, remembering Meg and Ricard and the rest of my clan, dead.

"Please," I said finally. "Let me help her."

"No." Huer's face was expressionless. "It is not yet time."

"I'm not going to kill her, I just want her to suffer less."

"No," he said. "We do not do things this way."

"Your people have allowed me to help their horses. You thought I might do some good for the horses! Are you too proud of your ways to prevent her pain?" The anger I felt was welcome: it made a change from the pain.

"No," he said. "Proud is not the word."

Shen's mare fell at last, still heaving but no longer able to stand. "Shen! Oh, Shen!" Mara cried, and then something in the raiders' tongue. She threw herself into his arms, sobbing. Shen cradled her in one arm, tears glittering on his face.

"May I help?" I asked.

"Your medicines have made it easier for her," Shen said, "but now it is my turn." He pulled his knife free.

"Mara?" I asked. "Come with me. This isn't going to be nice."

Mara looked at Shen, watched her in silence. "No," she said finally. "Wulin would stay." She did not flinch when the knife bit into the mare's throat.

I turned on my heel.

"Stop," Huer strode across to me. "What are you doing?"

I pointed southward, to the turf houses and their brush. "There may be flitterlass nests there. I'll need their honey."

"Take Suhui." I glanced at her where she leaned against a dead Ping-tree braiding a leather rein. The woman shrugged.

"If Mara doesn't come, alone."

"No," he said. "It's not safe."

"What does that matter?" I snarled. "If anything happens to me, you will still have Mara and the horses."

He looked at me for a time. "Take this then." He handed me his knife.

"Wait!" Suhui straightened. "You can't—"

He held up his hand to silence her. "Protect yourself. There are wild dogs around."

They had not let me use knives before. Even eating, Huer or one of the others had cut anything that needed to be cut. I took it in silence and left on one of my horses before he could say anything more.

I stopped my horse just beyond the ragged ring of turf houses. She was exhausted already, her coat smeared with pale gold froth, her nostrils pulling hard at the air—too hard. I knew what I would find, but I looked anyway. Inside her mouth was a single small sore, the size of my little finger.

The turf houses were dried and empty as husks, hardly more than humps of dead grass and dirt. Plumes of dust like dark veils tore from their corners and stung my eyes. I looked in one doorway and saw light, where the turf ceiling had crumbled into the house's single room. Low benches ringed the space; a stone-lined firepit squatted in its center. There was a gleam in one corner: when I crouched to look at it, I found a tiny medal such as a child might wear, made of gold-colored metal, forgotten in the room's gloom when its inhabitants had abandoned their homes and turned back to Dawn, to build anew.

So much work, all abandoned to dry into dust in Noon. When I was a child, my family had seen a few of these places, where people settled only to move half a lifetime later, as the planet dragged their sturdy little houses toward Noon. Even then it had seemed nonsense, when one could move so easily with tents and horses and dogs. The only stable things on Ping were the sun at n'dau and us: my family at the still center of things. Except that my family was dead and the sun had been a long time from n'dau.

There were no flitterlass nests. I hadn't expected them, after all: flitterlasses stay with the riehoney bushes farther Dawnward. But I had known the raiders wouldn't know that.

I stepped into the next house. I was suddenly thirsty, and tired of walking. I sat on the bench that ringed the wall and drank from my waterskin, warm and flat as the liquid was. The roof was intact and the doorway small. Inside was darker than anywhere I had ever been. It seemed darker than a sleep-tent's interior, darker than the insides of my eyelids, darker than Night.

I could kill myself. I touched the thought with my mind, like feeling a strange fabric at the Moot. Everyone else was dead: family and dogs, the clan itself. I tried to remember them as they had been alive, but all I saw was Stivvan with the arrow in his breastbone, Daved curled like a child around the arrow in his gut.

I looked at the knife Huer had given me, a dim gleam in the darkness. It would be easy enough. Huer thought I was past this cold place, or he wouldn't have given me the knife. (Or would he have? I didn't

know.) Well, he would be wrong. He would still have my horses and my medicines, useless though they were against this plague. I was irrelevant.

I don't know how long the breathing went on before I noticed it. It had been so silent but now I heard it, steady if rasping, in the doorway. It wasn't a human's breathing.

I knew suddenly that I wanted to live, despite everything. I didn't want my bones to follow my family's, baked in Noon and lost at last under the ice sheets of Evening. Anything was better than that. Even slavery. Even sorrow. I stood, prepared to fight.

A single whine, familiar to me as Mara's sleep-noises. "Dog?" I asked in wonder, and softly whistled: everyone, and come in from wherever you are.

A lone dog moved shakily into the doorway, a black outline. One of my males, the rangy red one with the white ear. Here. Alive. I scrambled toward him.

His coat was caked with dark mud; it took a moment to realize the mud was made of blood and dirt. I felt him with frightened fingers, and found a great jagged tear along one flank, where he must have ripped free of an arrow. It was cool to the touch, crusted over. A scab: he was healing. His footpads were hot and rough and cracked. He had tracked me, all these weary leagues.

A small dark circle appeared on the dust of his back, then another. It took a moment before I realized they were my tears.

I cried for a time and fell asleep just inside the doorway to darkness, with my face pressed against his flank.

"Katia?" Huer's voice awakened me. He was moving through the circle of huts looking for me. He hadn't seen me, of course; I lay close to the ground, dirt-colored in my stained clothes, hidden in the constant Night of a hut's interior.

I fingered the knife. I had a waterskin, a knife, a horse—at least until it died—and now, incredibly, a dog. I could travel to the Moot, reopen the Winden scrolls, train new dogs, start a new herd, if it was possible to stop the plague. Huer was all that stood between me and this. He knew about the knife, but not about the dog, nor about my awakening from the smoke and the sorrow. It would be a small thing, a simple thing, to kill him; there would be a long while before they realized what had happened and came after me. If they did. They might assume he and I were lost, killed by dogs perhaps. They might continue on north and Dawnward, back to their Emperor with my horses and Mara, who was barely Winden any more.

"Where are you?" he said. His voice sounded rough, weary. "Please."

I don't know why I didn't kill him and leave. The leagues between me and Moot; the fact that no new family would be my family; the gentleness in his voice, then and there—I don't know. I only know that I walked from the doorway, the dog beside me.

He saw the dog as soon as he saw me. He had not replaced the knife he had given me. He said nothing, did nothing, stood empty-handed. I had nothing to say. The balance between us shifted, like Dawnlands in earthquake, the river uncertain which way to go: the old channel, where the way was already cut, or the new channel, which might lead nowhere.

"How did you get here?" I asked suddenly.

His face was a mask. "I rode."

"But your mare—" I began.

He cut me off. "She is dying, and suffering too much. I asked this one last thing of her, that she would bring me here. Perhaps you will be merciful and send her to rest."

"You are planning to walk back?" It was too far, unless the other raiders meant to ride down and meet him here.

"No," he said. "I have no plans for returning. Suhui knows what I do. She takes the herd and your medicines on to the emperor's city. I will stay with you."

I shook my head violently. "I can't save the horses. I think they will all die. I don't know how the disease transmits, but now mine have it, too, and they're going to die, too. I can heal a rash, soothe a fever, splint certain leg breaks. I can help a mare deliver if she needs it. But I can't cure this plague. I don't think anyone can."

"So there will be no more horses."

"No more," I said.

Silence fell again. I could hear my dog's breathing; the soft wheezing of the horses in the ring, the hushing nose of the Dawn winds.

"Your family," he said finally. "I am sorry. I was wrong. I should have asked aid first."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

"You were—a tool to me. A new knife, a magical medicine. But you have not been able to help, and still I—find I value you. Esteem you. I was wrong to kill. Even to save my people it was wrong."

There was anger in me, and pain. But surprisingly, I had no wish to speak of these things. "Your people will survive," I said. "They will find another way. They will heal the horses or they will learn another way, a way without horses."

"No," Huer said. "There is no way without horses for us. We are an empire splashed across a thousand leagues."

"Then you will become a smaller empire. But you will survive." I knew this: I had survived.

"How?" he said bitterly.

"For them, I do not know. But watch." I whistled, and my red dog shook and launched upright. I whistled dance and he performed an odd little step, crossing paws as he moved sideways, first one way, then the other. I whistled hold, and he stopped, one foot still lifted in the step, his eyes shining with happiness.

"What—?"

"He hunts. And used to herd for us. Takes messages. Watches when we sleep. And he has been trained to defend. To guard. To kill. I had a dozen dogs like this one, before your people killed them. But I can breed and train others. "

"Dogs can do so much?"

I ruffled my dog's head. "Yes. And haul and run. I cannot ride a dog, but they allow us to stay in touch, my people."

"Ah," Huer nodded slowly once. "Perhaps such a thing is possible."

"Yes. Where is your horse?" I asked.

When it was done, Huer pulled free one of the prayerflags from his mare's halter. I turned it over: it was of vellum, stained dark gold with wear, still warm from his dead mare's skin.

"Tie it to the dog's collar," he said. "All animals need prayers."

"I am leaving," I said.

"I will come with you," he said. "I owe you a life. A dozen lives, but I can only repay one."

The river dropped into a new course. He never asked for the knife back.

We turned to the south. If we walked far enough, we would be able to pass the lake, and then head north again, toward where the Moot should be.

I hadn't noticed the sun, my shadow. But it was closer to n'dau, and soon it would be entirely there. Huer had made a mistake, had slipped from the right center of things. It was a terrible thing; my family died for it. The horses die for another reason, but they die. But life continues, and I and Mara and Huer and my dog are the proof of that. The sun hangs where it should in the sky, and I walk beneath it in my right place, n'dau, which never stops moving, which is eventually everywhere.