

This ebook is published by

Fictionwise Publications
www.fictionwise.com

Excellence in Ebooks

Visit www.fictionwise.com to find more titles by this and other top authors in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, and other genres.

Fictionwise
www.Fictionwise.com

Copyright ©March 2002 Asimov's

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment.

Bela ten Belen went on a foray with five companions. There had been no nomads near the City for several years. Harvesters in the Eastern Fields reported seeing smoke of fires beyond the Dayward Hills, and the six young soldiers declared they would go see how many camps there were. They said nothing about attacking the camps. They took with them as guide a Dirt man, Bedh Handa, who had been born a nomad of the Dayward tribes, captured as a child and brought to the City as a slave. Bedh's sister Nata Belenda, famous for her beauty, was the wife of Bela's brother Alo ten Belen. Bedh had guided forays against the nomad tribes before.

The soldiers walked and ran all day following the course of the East River up into the hills. In the evening they came to the crest of the hills and saw on the plains below them, among the watermeadows and winding streams, three circles of the nomads' skin huts.

"They came to the marshes to gather mudroots," the guide, Bedh, said. "They're not planning a raid on the Fields of the City. If they were, the three camps would be close together."

"Who gathers the roots?" ten Belen asked.

"Men and women. Old people and children stay in the camps."

"When do the people go to the marshes?"

“Early in the morning.”

“We'll go down to that nearest camp tomorrow after the gatherers are gone,” said ten Belen.

“It would be better to go to the camp beyond that one, the one on the river,” Bedh said.

Ten Belen did not answer the Dirt man. He said to his companions, “Those are his people. I think he should be shackled.”

They agreed, but none of them had brought shackles. Ten Belen began to tear his cape into strips.

“Why do you want to tie me up, lord?” Bedh asked with his fist to his forehead to show respect. “Have I not guided you to the nomads? Am I not a man of the City? Is not my sister your brother's wife? Is not my nephew your nephew, and a god? Why would I run away from the great wealthy City to those ignorant people who starve in the wilderness, eating mudroots and crawling things?” But the Crown men did not answer the Dirt man. They tied his legs with the lengths of twisted cloth, pulling the knots in the silk so tight they could not be untied but only cut open. Ten Belen appointed three of them to keep watch in turn that night.

Tired from walking and running all day, the young man on watch before dawn fell asleep. Bedh put his legs into the coals of their fire and burned through the silken ropes and stole away.

Waking in the morning and finding the Dirt man gone, Bela ten Belen's face grew heavy with anger, but he said only, “He will have warned that nearest camp. We'll go to the farthest one, off there on the high ground.”

“They'll see us crossing the marshes,” said Dos ten Han.

“Not if we walk in the rivers,” ten Belen said.

When they came down out of the hills onto the flat lands, they walked along streambeds, hidden by the high reeds and willows that grew on the banks. As it was autumn, before the rains, the water was shallow enough that they could make their way along beside it or wade in it. Where the reeds grew thin and low and the stream widened out into the marshes, they crouched down and found what cover they could. No one in the nomad camps saw them pass.

By midday they came near the farthest of the camps, which was on a low grassy rise like an island among the marshes. They could hear the voices of people gathering mudroot on the eastern side of the island. Keeping to the south, they crept up through the high grass and came to the camp. No one was in the circle of skin huts but a few old men and women and a number of children. The children were turning over roots spread on the grass, while the old people cut up the largest roots and put them on racks over low fires to hasten the drying. The six Crown men came among them suddenly with their swords drawn. They cut the throats of the old men and women and then pursued the children, some of whom ran away down into the marshes, though others stood staring, uncomprehending.

All the soldiers were young men on their first foray; they had made no plans. Ten Belen had said to them, “I want to go out there and kill some of those thieves and bring home slaves,” which seemed a good plan to them. To his friend Dos ten Han he had said, “I want to get some new Dirt girls, there's not one in the City I can stand to look at.” Dos ten Han knew he was thinking about the beautiful nomad-born woman his brother had married. All the young Crown men thought about her and wished they had her, or a girl as beautiful as her.

“Get the girls,” ten Belen shouted to the others, and they all ran at the children, seizing one or another. The older children had mostly fled like deer, and only the young ones still stood staring, or began too late to run. The soldiers each caught one or two and dragged them back to the center of the hut-village, where the old people lay in their blood in the sunlight.

They had brought no ropes to tie the children with, and had to keep hold of them. One little girl fought so fiercely, biting and scratching, that the soldier let her go; she ran away screaming shrilly for help. Bela ten Belen ran after her, took her by the hair, and cut her throat to silence her screaming. His sword was sharp and her neck was soft and thin; her body dropped away from her head, held on only by the bones at the back of the neck. He dropped her and came back to the others. He told them each to pick one child they could carry and follow him.

“Where shall we run?” they said. “The people over there will be coming.” For the children who had escaped had all run down the east side of the hill toward the marsh where their parents had gone.

“Follow the river back,” he said, and set off running, carrying a girl of about five years old. He held her wrists and slung her on his back as if she were a sack. The others followed him, each with a child, two of them babies a year or two old.

The raid had occurred so quickly that they had a long lead on the nomads who came straggling round the hill following the children who had run to them. The soldiers were able to get down into the rivercourse, where the banks and reeds hid them from people looking for them even from the top of the island.

The nomads scattered out through the reedbeds and meadows west of the island, looking for them on their way back to the City.

Ten Belen led them not west but southeast, down a branch of the river. They trotted and ran and walked as best they could in the water and mud and rocks of the riverbed. At first they heard voices far away behind them. The heat and light of the sun filled the world. The air above the reeds was thick with stinging insects. Their eyes soon swelled almost closed with bites and burned with salt sweat. Crown men are not used to carrying burdens and they found the children they carried heavy, even the little ones. They struggled to go fast but went slower and slower along the winding channels of the water, listening for the nomads behind them. When the children made any noise, the soldiers slapped or shook them till they were still. The girl Bela ten Belen carried hung like a stone on his back and never made any sound.

When at last the sun sank behind the Dayward Hills, that seemed strange to them, for they had always seen the sun rise behind those hills. They had gone a long way south and were still a long way east of the hills. They had heard no sound of their pursuers since early in their flight. The gnats and mosquitoes growing even thicker with dusk drove them at last up onto a drier meadowland, where they could sink down in a place where deer had lain and be hidden by the high grasses. There they all lay while the light died away. The great herons of the marsh flew over with heavy wings. Birds down in the reeds called. The men heard each other breathing, and the whine and buzz of insects. The little children made tiny whimpering noises, but not often, and not loud. Even the babies of the nomad tribes were used to fear and silence.

As soon as the soldiers had let go of them, making threatening gestures to them not to try to run away, the children crawled together and huddled up into a little mound, holding one another. Their faces were swollen with insect bites and one of the babies looked dazed and feverish. There was no food, but none of the children complained.

The light sank away from the marshes, and the insects grew silent. Now and then a frog croaked, startling the men as they sat silent, listening.

Ten Han pointed northward: he had heard a sound, a rustling in the grasses, not far away.

They heard the sound again. They unsheathed their swords as silently as they could.

Where they were looking, kneeling, straining to see through the high grass without revealing themselves, suddenly a ball of faint light rose up and wavered in the air, fading and brightening. They heard a voice, shrill and faint, singing. The hair stood up on their heads and arms as they stared at the bobbing blur of light and heard the meaningless words of the song.

The child that ten Belen had carried suddenly called out a word. The oldest, a thin girl of eight or so who had been a heavy burden to Dos ten Han, hissed at her and tried to make her be still, but the younger child called out again, and an answer came.

Singing, talking, and babbling shrilly, the voice came nearer. The grasses rustled and shook so much that the men expected a whole group of people, but only one head appeared among the grasses. A single child appeared. She kept talking, stamping, waving her hands so that they would know she was not trying to surprise them. The soldiers stared at her, holding their drawn swords. She looked to be nine or ten years old. She came closer, hesitating all the time, but not stopping, watching the men all the time, but talking to the children. Ten Belen's girl got up and ran to her and they clung to each other. Then, still watching the men, the new girl sat down with the other children. She and ten Han's girl talked a little in low voices. She held ten Belen's girl in her arms, on her lap, and the little girl fell asleep almost at once.

"It must be that one's sister," one of the men said.

"She must have tracked us from the beginning," said another.

"Why didn't she call the rest of her people?"

"Maybe she did."

"Maybe she was afraid to."

"Or they didn't hear."

"Or they did."

"What was that light?"

"Marsh fire."

"Maybe it's them."

"Marsh fire."

They were all silent, listening, watching. It was almost dark. The lamps of the City of Heaven were being lighted, reflecting the lights of the City of Earth, making the soldiers think of that city, which seemed as far away as the one above them in the sky. The faint bobbing light had died away. There was no sound but

the sigh of the night wind in the reeds and grasses.

The soldiers argued in low voices about how to keep the children from running off during the night. Each may have thought that he would be glad enough to wake and find them gone, but did not say so. Ten Han said the smaller ones could hardly go any distance in the dark. Ten Belen said nothing, but took out the long lace from one of his sandals and tied one end around the neck of the little girl he had taken and the other end around his own wrist; then he made the child lie down, and lay down to sleep next to her. Her sister, the one who had followed them, lay down by her on the other side. Ten Belen said, "Dos, keep watch first, then wake me."

So the night passed. The children did not try to escape, and no one came on their trail.

The next day they kept going south but also west, so that by mid-afternoon they reached the hills. They did not try to run. The older children, even the five-year-old, walked, and they passed the two babies from one man to another, so their pace was steady if not fast. Along in the morning, the girl who had joined them pulled at ten Belen's tunic and kept pointing left, to a marsh: she made gestures of pulling up roots and eating. Since they had eaten nothing for two days, they followed her to the marsh. The older children waded out into the water and pulled up certain wide-leafed plants by the roots. They began to cram what they pulled up into their mouths, but the soldiers waded after them and took the muddy roots and ate them till they had had enough. Dirt people do not eat before Crown people eat. The children did not seem surprised.

When she had finally got a root for herself, the girl who had joined them pulled up another, chewed it up and spat it out into her hand for the babies to eat. One of them ate eagerly from her hand, but the other would not; she lay where she had been put down, and her eyes did not seem to see. Ten Han's girl and the one who had joined them held her and tried to make her drink water. She would not drink.

Dos ten Han stood in front of them and said, pointing to the elder girl, "Vui Handa," naming her Vui and saying she belonged to his family. Bela named the one who had joined them Modh Belenda, and her little sister, the one he had carried off, he named Mal Belenda. The others named their prizes; but when Ralo ten Bal pointed at the sick baby to name her, the girl who had joined them, Modh, got between him and the baby, vigorously gesturing no, no, and putting her hand to her mouth for silence.

"What's she up to?" Ralo asked. He was the youngest of them, sixteen.

Modh kept up her pantomime: she lay down, lolled her head, and half opened her eyes, like a dead person; she leapt up with her hands held like claws and her face distorted, and pretended to attack Vui; she pointed at the sick baby.

The young men stood staring. It seemed she meant the baby was dying. The rest of her actions they did not understand.

Ralo pointed at the baby and said, "Groda," which is what Dirt people who have no owner and work in the field teams are called-Nobody's.

"Come on," ten Belen ordered, and they made ready to go on. Ralo walked off, leaving the sick child lying.

"Aren't you bringing your Dirt?" one of the others asked him.

"What for?" he said.

Modh picked up the sick baby, Vui picked up the other one, and they went on. After that the soldiers let the older girls carry the sick baby, though they themselves passed the well one about so as to make better speed.

When they got up on dry ground in the hills, away from the clouds of stinging insects and the wet and heavy heat of the marshlands, the young men were glad; they felt they were almost safe now; they wanted to move fast and get back to the City. But the children, worn out, struggled to climb the steep hills. Vui, who was carrying the sick baby, straggled along slower and slower. Ten Han, her owner, slapped her legs with the flat of his sword to make her go faster. "Ralo, take your Dirt, we have to keep going," he said.

Ralo turned back angrily. He took the sick baby from Vui. The baby's face had gone greyish and its eyes were half closed, like Modh's in her pantomime. Its breath whistled a little. Ralo shook the child. Its head flopped. Ralo threw it away into the bushes. "Come on, then," he said, and set off walking fast uphill.

Vui tried to run to the baby, but ten Han kept her away from it with his sword, stabbing at her legs, and drove her on up the hill in front of him.

Modh dodged back to the bushes where the baby was, but ten Belen prevented her, herding her in front of him with his sword. As she kept dodging and trying to go back, he seized her by the arm, slapped her hard, and dragged her after him by the wrist. Little Mal stumbled along behind them.

After they had gone a long way, Vui began to make a shrill long-drawn cry, a keening, and so did Modh and Mal, and though the soldiers shook and beat them till they stopped, soon they would start again. The soldiers did not know if they were far enough from the nomads and near enough the Fields of the City that they need not fear pursuers hearing the sound. They hurried on, carrying or dragging or driving the children, and the shrill keening cry went with them like the sound of the insects in the marshlands.

It was almost dark when they got to the crest of the Dayward Hills. Forgetting how far south they had gone, the men expected to look down on the Fields and the City. They saw only dusk falling on the lands, and the dark west, and the far lights of the City of the Sky beginning to burn.

They settled down in a clearing, for all were very tired. The children huddled together and were asleep almost at once. Ten Belen forbade the men to make fire. They were hungry, but there was a creek down the hill to drink from. Ten Belen set Ralo ten Bal on first watch. Ralo was the one who had gone to sleep, their first night out, allowing Bedh to escape.

Ten Belen woke in the night, cold; he missed his cape, which he had torn up to make bonds. He saw that someone had made a small fire and was sitting cross-legged beside it. "Ralo!" he said angrily, and then saw that the man was not Ralo but the guide Bedh.

Ralo lay motionless nearby. Ten Belen drew his sword.

"He fell asleep again," the Dirt man said, grinning at ten Belen.

Ten Belen kicked Ralo, who snorted and sighed and did not wake. Ten Belen leapt up and went round to the others, fearing Bedh had killed them in their sleep, but they had their swords, and were sleeping soundly; and the children lay in a little heap. He returned to the fire and stamped it out.

“Those people are miles away,” Bedh said. “They won't see the fire. They never found your track.”

“Where did you go?” ten Belen asked him after a while, puzzled and suspicious. He did not understand why the Dirt man had come back.

“To see my people in the village.”

“Which village?”

“The one nearest the hills. My people are the Allulu. I saw my grandfather's hut from up in the hills. I wanted to see the people I used to know. My mother's still alive, but my father and brother have gone to the Sky City. I talked with my people and told them a foray was coming. They waited for you in their huts. They would have killed you, but you would have killed some of them. I was glad you went on to the Tullu village.”

It is fitting that a Crown ask a Dirt person questions, but not that he converse or argue with him. Ten Belen, however, was so disturbed that he said sharply, “Dirt does not go to the Sky City. Dirt goes to dirt.”

“So it is,” Bedh said politely, as a slave should, with his fist to his forehead. “My people believe that they go to the sky, but of course they wouldn't go to the palaces of the City there. Maybe they wander in the wild, dirty parts of the sky.” He poked at the fire to see if he could start a flame, but it was dead. “But they can only go up there if they have been buried,” he said. “If they're not buried, their soul stays down here on earth. It's likely to turn into a very bad thing then. A bad spirit. A ghost.”

“How long have you been following us?” ten Belen demanded.

“A long way.”

“Why?”

Bedh looked puzzled, and put his fist to his forehead. “I belong to Master ten Han,” he said. “I eat well, and live in a fine house, and am respected in the City. I don't want to stay with the Allulu. They're very poor.”

“But you ran away!”

“I wanted so much to see my people,” Bedh said. “And I did not want them to be killed. I only would have shouted to them to warn them. But you tied my legs. That made me so sad. You did not trust me. I could think only about my people, and so I ran away. I am sorry, my lord.”

“You would have warned them. They would have killed us!”

“Yes,” Bedh said. “But if you had let me guide you, I would have taken you to the Bustu or the Tullu village and helped you catch children. Those are not my people. I was born an Allulu and am a man of the City. My sister's child is a god. I am to be trusted.”

Ten Belen turned away and said nothing.

He saw the starlight in the eyes of a child, her head raised a little, watching and listening. It was the one who had followed them to be with her sister.

“That one,” Bedh said. “That one, too, will mother gods.”

II

Chergo's Daughter and Dead Ayu's First Daughter, who were now Vui and Modh, whispered in the grey of the morning before the men woke.

“Do you think she's dead?” Vui whispered.

“I heard her crying. All night.”

They both lay listening.

“That one named her,” Vui whispered very low. “She can follow us.”

“She will.”

The little sister, Mal, was awake, listening. Modh put her arm around her and whispered, “Go back to sleep.”

Near them, Bedh suddenly sat up, scratching his head. The girls stared wide-eyed at him.

“Well, Daughters of Tullu,” he said in their language spoken the way the Allulu spoke it, “you're Dirt people now.”

They stared and said nothing.

“You're going to live in heaven on earth,” he said. “A lot of food. Big, rich huts to live in. And you don't have to carry your house around on your back across the world! You'll see. Are you virgins?”

After a while they nodded.

“Stay that way if you can,” he said. “Then you can marry gods. Big, rich husbands! These men are gods. But they can only marry Dirt women. So look after your little cherrystones, keep them from Dirt boys and men like me, and then you can be a god's wife and live in a golden hut.” He grinned at their staring faces and stood up to piss on the cold ashes of the fire.

While the Crown men were rousing, Bedh took the older girls into the forest to gather berries from a tangle of bushes nearby; he let them eat some, but made them put most of what they picked into his cap. He brought the cap full of berries back to the soldiers and offered them, his knuckles to his forehead. “See,” he said to the girls, “this is how you must do. Crown people are like babies and you must be their mothers.”

Modh's little sister Mal and the younger children were silently weeping with hunger. Modh and Vui took them to the stream to drink. “Drink all you can, Mal,” Modh told her sister. “Fill up your belly. It helps.” Then she said to Vui, “Man-babies!” and spat. “Men who take food from children!”

“Do as the Allulu says,” said Vui.

It was some comfort to have a man who spoke their language with them. The soldiers now ignored them, leaving Bedh to look after them. He was kind enough, carrying the little ones, sometimes two at a time, for he was strong. He told Vui and Modh stories about the place where they were going. Vui began to call him Uncle. Modh would not let him carry Mal, and did not call him anything.

Modh was eleven. When she was six, her mother had died in childbirth, and she had always looked after the little sister.

When she saw the golden man pick up her sister and run down the hill, she ran after them with nothing in her mind but that she must not lose the little one. The men went so fast at first that she could not keep up, but she did not lose their trace, and kept after them all that day. She had seen her grandmothers and grandfathers slaughtered like pigs. She thought everybody she knew in the world was dead. Her sister was alive and she was alive. That was enough. That filled her heart.

When she held her little sister in her arms again, that was more than enough.

But then, in the hills, the cruel one threw away Sio's Daughter, and the golden one kept her from going to pick her up. She tried to look back at the place in the bushes where the baby lay, she tried to see the trees there so she could remember the place, but the golden man hit her so she was dizzy and drove and dragged her up the hill so fast her breath burned in her chest and her eyes clouded with pain. Sio's Daughter was lost. She would die there in the bushes. Foxes and wild dogs would eat her flesh and break her bones. A terrible emptiness came into Modh, a hollow, a hole of fear and anger that everything else fell into. She would never be able to go back and find the baby and bury her. Children before they are named have no ghosts, even if they are unburied, but the cruel one had named Sio's Daughter. He had pointed and named her: Groda. Groda would follow them. Modh had heard the thin cry in the night. It came from the hollow place. What could fill that hollow? What could be enough?

III

Bela ten Belen and his companions did not return to the City in triumph, but neither did they have to creep in by back ways at night as unsuccessful forays did. They had not lost a man, and they brought back six slaves, all female. Only Ralo ten Bal brought nothing, and the others joked about how he fell asleep on watch. And Bela ten Belen joked about his own luck in catching two fish on one hook, telling how the girl had followed them of her own will to be with her sister.

As he thought about the foray, he realized that they had been lucky indeed, and that their success was due not at all to him, but to Bedh. If Bedh had told them to do so, the Allulu would have ambushed and killed the soldiers before they ever reached the other village. The slave had saved them. His loyalty seemed natural and expectable to Bela, but he honored it. He knew Bedh and his sister Nata, Bela's brother's wife, were fond of each other, but could rarely see each other, since Bedh belonged to the Hans. When the opportunity arose, he traded two of his own house-slaves for Bedh and made him overseer of the Belen House slave compound.

Bela had gone slave-catching because he wanted a girl to bring up in the house with his mother and sisters and his brother's wife: a young girl, to be trained and formed to his desire until he married her.

Some Crown men were content to take their Dirt wife from the dirt, from the slave quarters of their own compound or the barracks of the city, to get children on her, keep her in the hanan, and have nothing else to do with her. Others were more fastidious. Bela's mother had been brought up from birth in a Crown hanan, raised to be a Crown's wife. His brother's wife, caught on a foray when she was four, had lived at

first in the slave barracks; but within a few years a Root slave-merchant, speculating on the child's beauty, had traded five male slaves for her and kept her in his hanan so that she would not be raped or lie with a man till she could be sold as a wife. Nata's beauty became famous, and many Crown men sought to marry her. When she was fifteen, the Belens traded the produce of their best field and the use of a whole building in Copper Street for her. Like her mother-in-law, she was treated with honor in the Belen household.

Finding no girl in the barracks or hanans that interested him, Bela had resolved to go catch a wild one; and had succeeded doubly.

At first he thought to keep Mal and send Modh to the barracks. But though Mal was charming, with a plump little body and big, long-lashed eyes, she was only five years old. He did not want sex with a baby, as some men did. Modh was eleven, still a child, but not for long. She was not beautiful, but vivid. Her courage in following her sister had impressed him. He brought both sisters to the hanan of the Belen house and asked his sister, his sister-in-law, and his mother to see that they were properly brought up.

It was strange to the girls to hear Nata Belenda speak words of their language, for to them she seemed a creature of another order-as did Hehum Belenda, the mother of Bela and Alo, and Tudju Belen, the sister. All three women were tall and clean and soft-skinned, with soft hands and long lustrous hair. They wore garments of cobweb colored like spring flowers, like sunset clouds. They were surely goddesses. But Nata Belenda smiled and was gentle and tried to talk to the children in their own tongue, though she remembered little of it. Hehum was grave and stern-looking, but quite soon she took Mal onto her lap to play with Nata's baby boy. Tudju was the one who most amazed them. She was not much older than Modh, but a head taller, and Modh thought she was wearing moonlight-her robes were cloth of silver, which only Crown women could wear. A heavy silver belt slanted from her waist to her hip, with a marvelously worked silver sheath hanging from it. The sheath was empty, but she pretended to draw a sword from it, and flourished the sword of air, and lunged with it, and laughed to see little Mal still looking for the sword. But she showed the girls that they must not touch her; she was sacred, that day. They understood that.

Living with these women in the great house of the Belens, they began to understand many more things. One was the language of the City. It was not so different from theirs as it seemed at first, and within a few weeks they were babbling along in it.

After three months they attended their first ceremony at the Great Temple, Tudju's coming of age. They all went in procession to the Great Temple. To Modh it was wonderful to be out in the open air again, for she was weary of walls and ceilings. Being Dirt women, they sat behind the yellow curtain, but they could see Tudju choose her sword from the row of swords hanging behind the altar. She would wear it the rest of her life, whenever she went out of the house. Only women born to the Crown wore swords. No one else in the City was allowed to carry any weapon, except Crown men when they served as soldiers. Modh and Mal knew that, now. They knew many things, and also knew there was much more to learn-everything one had to know to be a woman of the City.

It was easier for Mal. She was young enough that to her the City rules and ways soon became the way of the world. Modh had to unlearn the rules and ways of the Tullu people first. But as with the language, some things were more familiar than they first seemed. Modh knew that when a Tullu man was elected chief of the village, he had to marry a slave woman, even if he already had a wife. Here, the Crown men were all chiefs, and they all had to marry Dirt women-slaves. It was the same rule, only, like everything in the City, made greater and more complicated.

In the village, there had been only one kind of person. Here there were three kinds. You could not

change your kind, and you could not marry your kind. There were the Crowns, who owned land and slaves, and were all chiefs, priests, gods on earth. And the Dirt people, who were slaves, less than human, even though a Dirt woman who married a Crown might be treated almost like a Crown herself-like the Belendas. And there were the other people, the Roots.

Modh knew little about the Roots. She asked Nata about them and observed what she could from the seclusion of the hanan. Crown men must marry Dirt women, but Crown women, if they married, had to marry Root men. When she got her sword, Tudju also acquired several suitors, Root men who came with packages of sweets and stood outside the hanan curtain and said polite things, and then went and talked to Alo and Bela, who were the lords of Belen since their father was dead. These Root men were rich. Root people oversaw planting and harvest, the storehouses and marketplaces. Root women were in charge of housebuilding, and all the marvelous clothes the Crowns wore were made by Root women.

Root women had to marry Dirt men. There was a Root woman who wanted to buy Bedh and marry him. Alo and Bela had told him they would sell him or keep him, as he chose. He had not decided yet.

Root people owned slaves, but they owned no land, no houses. All real property belonged to Crowns. "So," said Modh, "Crowns let the Root people live in the City, let them have this house or that, in exchange for the work they do and what their slaves grow in the fields."

"As a *reward* for working," Nata corrected her, always gentle, never scolding. "The Sky Father made the City for his sons, the Crowns. And they reward good workers by letting them live in it. As our owners, Crowns and Roots, reward us for work and obedience by letting us live, and eat, and have shelter."

Modh did not say, "But-"

It was perfectly clear to her that the system was in fact one of exchange, and that it was not fair exchange. She came from just far enough outside it to be able to look at it. And, being excluded from reciprocity, any slave can see the system with an undeluded eye. But Modh did not know of any other system, any possibility of another system, which would have allowed her to say "But." Neither did Nata know of that alternative, that possible even when unattainable space in which there is room for justice, in which the word "But" can be spoken usefully.

Nata had undertaken to teach the Tullu girls how to live in the City, and she did so with honest care. She taught them the rules. She taught them what was believed. The rules did not include justice, so she did not teach them justice. If she did not herself believe what was believed, yet she taught them how to live with those who did. Modh was wild and bold when she came, and Nata could easily have let her think she had rights, encouraged her to rebel, and then watched her be whipped or mutilated or sent to the fields to be worked to death. Some slave women would have done so. Nata, kindly treated most of her life, treated others kindly. Warm-hearted, she took the girls to her heart. Her own baby boy was a Crown, she was proud of her godling, but she loved the wild girls too. She liked to hear Bedh and Modh talk in the language of the nomads, as they did sometimes. Mal had forgotten it by then.

Mal soon grew out of her plumpness and became as thin as Modh. After a couple of years in the City both girls were very different from the tough little wildcats Bela ten Belen had caught. They were slender, delicate-looking. They ate well, but lived soft. Indeed, these days they might not have been able to keep up the cruel pace of their captors' flight to the City. They got little exercise but dancing, and had no work to do. Conservative Crown families like the Belens did not let their slave wives do work that was beneath them; and all work was beneath a Crown. Modh would have gone mad with boredom if the grandmother had not let her run and play in the courtyard of the compound, and if Tudju had not taught her to

sword-dance and to fence. Tudju loved her sword and the art of using it, which she studied daily with an older priestess. Equipping Modh with a blunted bronze practice sword, she passed along all she learned, so as to have a partner to practice with. Tudju's sword was extremely sharp, but she already used it skillfully, and never once hurt Modh.

Tudju had not yet accepted any of the suitors who came and murmured at the yellow curtain of the hanan. She imitated them mercilessly after they left, so that the hanan rocked with laughter. She claimed she could smell each one coming—the one that smelled like boiled chard, the one that smelled like cat-dung, the one that smelled like old men's feet. She told Modh, in secret, that she did not intend to marry, but to be a priestess and a judge-councilor. But she did not tell her brothers that. They were expecting to make a good profit in food-supply or clothing from Tudju's marriage; they lived expensively, as Crowns should, and the Belen larders and clothes-chests had been supplied too long by bartering rentals for goods. Nata alone had cost twenty years' rent on their best property.

Modh had friends among the Belenda slaves and was very fond of Tudju, Nata, and old Hehum, but loved no one as she loved Mal. Mal was all she had left of her old life, and she loved in her all that she had lost for her. Perhaps Mal had always been the only thing she had: her sister, her child, her charge, her soul.

She knew now that most of her people had not been killed, that her father and the rest of them were no doubt following their annual round across the plains and hills and waterlands; but she never seriously thought of trying to escape and find them. Mal had been taken, she had followed Mal. There was no going back. And as Bedh had said to them, it was a big, rich life here.

She did not think of the grandmothers and grandfathers lying slaughtered or Dua's Daughter who had been beheaded. She had seen all that yet not seen it; it was her sister she had seen. Her father and the others would have buried all those people and sung the songs for them. They were here no longer. They were going on the bright roads and the dark roads of the sky, dancing in the bright hut-circles up there.

She did not hate Bela ten Belen for leading the raid, killing Dua's Daughter, stealing her and Mal and the others. Men did that, nomads as well as City men. They raided, killed people, took food, took slaves. That was the way men were. It would be as useless to hate them for it as to love them for it.

But there was one thing that should not have been, that should not be, and yet continued endlessly to be, the small thing, the nothing that when she remembered it made the rest, all the bigness and richness of life, shrink up into the shriveled meat of a bad walnut, the yellow smear of a crushed fly.

It was at night that she knew it, she and Mal, in their soft bed with cobweb sheets, in the safe darkness of the warm, high-walled house: Mal's indrawn breath, the cold chill down her own arms, *do you hear it?*

They clung together, listening, hearing.

Then in the morning Mal would be heavy-eyed and listless, and if Modh tried to make her talk or play she would begin to cry, and Modh would sit down at last and hold her and cry with her, endless, useless, dry, silent weeping. There was nothing they could do. The baby followed them because she did not know who else to follow.

Neither of them spoke of this to anyone in the household. It had nothing to do with these women. It was theirs. Their ghost.

Sometimes Modh would sit up in the dark and whisper aloud, "Hush, Groda! Hush, be still!" And there might be silence for a while. But the thin wailing would begin again.

Modh had not seen Vui since they came to the City. Vui belonged to the Hans, but she had not been treated as Modh and Mal had. Dos ten Han bargained for a pretty girl from a Root wife-broker, and Vui was one of the slaves he bartered for that wife. If she were still alive, she did not live where Modh could reach her or hear of her. Seen from the hills, as she had seen it that one time, the City did not look very big in the great slant and distance of the plowlands and meadows and forests stretching on to the west; but if you lived in it, it was as endless as the plains. You could be lost in it. Vui was lost in it.

Modh was late coming to womanhood, by City standards: fourteen. Hehum and Tudju held the ceremony for her in the worship-room of the house, a full day of rituals and singing. She was given new clothes. When it was over Bedh came to the yellow curtain, called to her, and put into her hands a little deerskin pouch, crudely stitched.

She looked at it, puzzled. Bedh said, "You know, in the village, a girl's uncle gives her a *delu*," and turned away. She caught his hand and thanked him, touched, half-remembering the custom and fully knowing the risk he had run in making his gift. Dirt people were forbidden to do any sewing; it was a Root prerogative. A slave found with a needle and thread could have a hand cut off. Like his sister Nata, Bedh was warm-hearted. Modh and Mal had called him Uncle for years now.

Alo ten Belen had three sons from Nata by now to be priests and soldiers of the House of Belen. Alo came most nights to play with the little boys and take Nata off to his rooms, but they saw little of Bela in the hanan. His friend Dos ten Han had given him a concubine, a pretty, teasing, experienced woman who kept him satisfied for a long time. He had forgotten about the nomad sisters, lost interest in his plans of educating them. Their days passed peacefully and cheerfully. As the years went by, their nights too grew more peaceful. The crying now came seldom to Modh, and only in a dream, from which she could waken.

But always, when she wakened so, she saw Mal's eyes wide in the darkness. They said nothing, but held each other till they slept again.

In the morning, Mal would seem quite herself; and Modh would say nothing, fearing to upset her sister, or fearing to make the dream no dream.

Then things changed.

Tudju's brothers called for her; she was gone all day, and came back to the hanan looking fierce and aloof, fingering the hilt of her silver sword. When her mother went to embrace her, Tudju made the gesture that put her aside. All these years with Tudju in the hanan it had been easy to forget that she was a Crown woman, the only Crown among them; that the yellow curtain was to separate them, not her, from the sacred parts of the house; that she was herself a sacred being. But now she had to take up her birthright.

"They want me to marry that fat Root man, so we can get his shop and looms in Silk Street," she said. "I will not. I am going to live at the Great Temple." She looked around at them all, her mother, her sister-in-law, Mal, Modh, the other slave women. "I'll send here what I'm given there," she said. "This House isn't as poor as Alo says it is. But I told Bela that if he gives one finger's width of land for that woman he wants now, I'll send nothing from the Temple. He can go slave-catching again to feed her. And you." She looked again at Mal and Modh. "Keep an eye on him," she said. "It is time he married."

Bela had recently traded his concubine and the Dirt son she had borne him, making a good bargain in cropland, and promptly offered nearly the whole amount for another woman he had taken a fancy to. It was not a question of marriage, for a Dirt woman, to marry, must be a virgin, and the woman he wanted had been owned by several men. Alo and Tudju had prevented the bargain, which he could not make without their consent. It was, as Tudju said, time for Bela to consider his sacred obligation to marry and beget children of the sky on a woman of the dirt.

So Tudju left the hanan and the house to serve in the Great Temple, only returning sometimes on formal visits. She was replaced, evenings, by her brother Bela. Dour and restless, like a dog on a chain, he would stalk in after Alo, and watch the little boys run about and the slaves' games and dances.

He was a tall man, handsome, lithe and well-muscled. From the day she first saw him in the horror and carnage of the foray, to Modh he had been the golden man. She had seen many other golden men in the City since then, but he was the first, the model.

She had no fear of him, other than the guardedness a slave must feel toward the master; he was spoilt, of course, but not capricious or cruel; even when he was sulky he did not take out his temper on his slaves. Mal, however, shrank from him in uncontrollable dread. Modh told her she was foolish. Bela was nearly as good-natured as Alo, and Mal trusted Alo completely. Mal just shook her head. She never argued, and grieved bitterly when she disagreed with her sister on anything, but she could not even try not to fear Bela.

Mal was thirteen. She had her ceremony (and to her too Bedh secretly gave a crude little "soulbag"). In the evening of that day she wore her new clothing. Dirt people even when they lived with Crowns could not wear sewn garments, only lengths of cloth; but there are many graceful ways of draping and gathering unshaped material, and though the spidersilk could not be hemmed, it could be delicately fringed and tasseled. Mal's garments were undyed silk, with a bluegreen veil so fine it was transparent.

When she came in, Bela looked up, and looked at her, and went on looking.

Modh stood up suddenly without plan or forethought and said, "Lords, Masters! May I dance for my sister's festival?" She scarcely waited for their consent, but spoke to Lui, who played the tablet-drums for dancers, and ran to her room for the bronze sword Tudju had given her and the pale flame-colored veil that had been given her at her festival. She ran back with the veil flowing about her. Lui drummed, and Modh danced. She had never danced so well. She had never danced the way she did now, with all the fierce formal precision of the sword-dance, but also with a wildness, a hint of threat in her handling of the blade, a sexual syncopation to the drumbeat that made Lui's drumming grow ever faster and fiercer in response, so that the dance gathered and gathered like a flame, hotter and brighter, the translucent veil flowing, whirling at the watchers' faces. Bela sat motionless, fixed, gazing, and did not flinch even when the veil struck its spiderweb blow across his eyes.

When she was done he said, "When did you learn to dance like that?"

"Under your eyes," she said.

He laughed, a little uneasy. "Let Mal dance now," he said, looking around for her.

"She's too tired to dance," Modh said. "The rites were long. She tires easily. But I will dance again."

He motioned her to go on dancing with a flick of his hand. She nodded to Lui, who grinned widely and began the hesitant, insinuating beat of the slow dance called mimei. Modh put on the ankle-bells Lui kept

with her drums; she arranged her veil so that it covered her face and body and arms, baring only her ankles with the jingling anklets and her naked feet. The dance began, her feet moving slightly and constantly, her body swaying, the beat and the movements slowly becoming more intense.

She could see through the gauzy silk; she could see the stiff erection under Bela's silk tunic; she could see his heart beat in his chest.

After that night Bela hung around Modh so closely that her problem was not to draw his attention but to prevent his getting her alone and raping her. Hehum and the other women made sure she was never alone, for they were eager for Bela to marry her. They all liked her, and she would cost the House of Belen nothing. Within a few days Bela declared his intention to marry Modh. Alo gave his approval gladly, and Tudju came from the Temple to officiate at the marriage rites.

All Bela's friends came to the wedding. The yellow curtain was moved back from the dancing room, hiding only the sleeping rooms of the women.

For the first time in seven years Modh saw the men who had been on the foray. The man she remembered as *the big one* was Dos ten Han; Ralo ten Bal was *the cruel one*. She tried to keep away from Ralo, for the sight of him disturbed her. The youngest of the men, he had changed more than the others, yet he acted boyish and petulant. He drank a lot and danced with all the slave girls.

Mal hung back as always, and even more than usual; she was frightened without the yellow curtain to hide behind, and the sight of the men from the foray made her tremble. She tried to stay close to Hehum. But the old woman teased her gently and pushed her forward to let the Crown men see her, for this was a rare chance to show her off. She was marriageable now, and these Crown men might pay to marry her rather than merely use her. She was very pretty, and might bring back a little wealth to the Belens.

Modh pitied her misery, but did not worry about her safety even among drunken men. Hehum and Alo would not let anybody have her virginity, which was her value as a bride.

Bela stayed close beside Modh every moment except when she danced. She danced two of the sword dances and then the mimei. The men watched her breathlessly, while Bela watched her and them, tense and triumphant. "Enough!" he said aloud just before the end of the veiled dance, perhaps to prove he was master even of this flame of a woman, perhaps because he could not restrain himself. She stopped instantly and stood still, though the drum throbbed on for a few beats.

"Come," he said. She put out her hand from the veil, and he took it and led her out of the great hall, to his apartments. Behind them was laughter, and a new dance began.

It was a good marriage. They were well matched. She was wise enough to obey any order he gave immediately and without any resistance, but she never forestalled his orders by anticipating his wishes, babying him, coddling him, as most slave women he knew had done. He felt in her an unyieldingness that allowed her to be obedient yet never slavish. It was as if in her soul she were indifferent to him, no matter what their bodies did; he could bring her to sexual ecstasy or, if he liked, he could have had her tortured, but nothing he did would change her, would touch her; she was like a wildcat or a fox, not tamable. This impassability, this distance kept him drawn to her, trying to lessen it. He was fascinated by her, his little fox, his vixen. In time they became friends as well. Their lives were boring; they found each other good company.

In the daytime, he was off, of course, still sometimes playing in the ball courts with his friends, performing his priestly duties at the temples, and increasingly often going to the Great Temple. Tudju wanted him to

join the Council. She had a considerable influence over Bela, because she knew what she wanted and he did not. He never had. There was not much for a Crown man to want. He had imagined himself a soldier until he led the foray over the Dayward Hills. Successful as it had been, in that they had caught slaves and come home safe, he could not bear to recall the murders, the hiding, the proof of his own ineptitude, those days and nights of fear, confusion, disgust, exhaustion, and shame. So there was nothing to do but play in the ballcourts, officiate at rites, and drink, and dance. And now there was Modh. And sons of his own to come. And maybe, if Tudju kept at him, he would become a councilor. It was enough.

For Modh, it was hard to get used to sleeping beside the golden man and not beside her sister. She would wake in the darkness, the weight of the bed and the smell and everything wrong. She would want Mal then, not him. But in the daytime she would go back to the hanan and be with Mal and the others just as before, and then he would be there in the evening, and it would have been all right, it would have been good, except for Ralo ten Bal.

Ralo had noticed Mal on the wedding night, cowering near Hehum, in her blue veil that was like a veil of rain. He had come up to her and tried to make her talk or dance; she had shrunk, quailed, shivered. She would not speak or look up. He put his thumb under her chin to make her raise her face, and at that Mal retched as if about to vomit and staggered where she stood. Hehum had interfered: "Lord Master ten Bal, she is untouched," she said, with the stern dignity of her position as Mother of Gods. Ralo laughed and withdrew his hand, saying foolishly, "Well, I've touched her now."

Within a few days an offer for her had come from the Bals. It was not a good one. She was asked for as a slave girl, as if she were not marriageable, and the barter was to be merely the produce of one of the Bal grain-plots. Given the Bals' wealth and the relative poverty of the Belens, it was an insulting offer. Alo and Bela refused it without explanation or apology, haughtily. It was a great relief to Modh when Bela told her that. When the offer came, she had been stricken. Had she seduced Bela away from Mal only to leave her prey to a man Mal feared even more than Bela, and with better reason? Trying to protect her sister, had she exposed her to far greater harm? She rushed to Mal to tell her they had turned down the Bals' offer, and telling her burst into tears of guilt and relief. Mal did not weep; she took the good news quietly. She had been terribly quiet since the wedding.

She and Modh were together all day, as they had always been. But it was not the same; it could not be. The husband came between the sisters. They could not share their sleep.

Days and festivals passed. Modh had put Ralo ten Bal out of mind, when he came home with Bela after a game at the ball courts. Bela did not seem comfortable about bringing him into the house, but had no reason to turn him away. Bela came into the hanan and said to Modh, "He hopes to see you dance again."

"You aren't bringing him behind the curtain?"

"Only into the dancing room."

He saw her frown, but was not accustomed to reading expressions. He waited for a reply.

"I will dance for him," Modh said.

She told Mal to stay back in the sleeping rooms in the hanan. Mal nodded. She looked small, slender, weary. She put her arms around her sister. "Oh Modh," she said. "You're brave, you're kind."

Modh felt frightened and hateful, but she said nothing, only hugged Mal hard, smelling the sweet smell of

her hair, and went back to the dancing room.

She danced, and Ralo praised her dancing. Then he said what she knew he had been waiting to say from the moment he came: "Where's your wife's sister, Bela?"

"Not well," Modh said, though it was not for a Dirt woman to answer a question one Crown asked another Crown.

"Not very well tonight," Bela said, and Modh could have kissed him from eyes to toes for hearing her, for saying it.

"III?"

"I don't know," Bela said, weakening, glancing at Modh.

"Yes," Modh said.

"But perhaps she could just come show me her pretty eyebrows."

Bela glanced at Modh again. She said nothing.

"I had nothing to do with that stupid message my father sent you about her," Ralo said. He looked from Bela to Modh and back at Bela, smirking, conscious of his power. "Father heard me talking about her. He just wanted to give me a treat. You must forgive him. He was thinking of her as an ordinary Dirt girl." He looked at Modh again. "Bring your little sister out just for a moment, Modh Belenda," he said, bland, vicious.

Bela nodded to her. She rose and went behind the yellow curtain.

She stood some minutes in the empty hall that led to the sleeping rooms, then came back to the dancing room. "Forgive me, Lord Master Bal," she said in her softest voice, "the girl has a fever and cannot rise to obey your summons. She has been unwell a long time. I am so sorry. May I send one of the other girls?"

"No," Ralo said. "I want that one." He spoke to Bela, ignoring Modh. "You brought two home from that raid we went on. I didn't get one. I shared the danger, it's only fair you share the catch." It was a sentence he had clearly rehearsed.

"You got one," Bela said.

"What are you talking about?"

Bela looked uncomfortable. "You had one," he said, in a less decisive voice.

"I came home with nothing!" Ralo cried, his voice rising, accusing. "And you kept two! Listen, I know you've brought them up all these years, I know it's expensive rearing girls. I'm not asking for a gift."

"You very nearly did," Bela said, stiffly, in a low voice.

Ralo put this aside with a laugh. "Just keep in mind, Bela, we were soldiers together," he said, cajoling, boyish, putting his arm round Bela's shoulders. "You were my captain. I don't forget that! We were

brothers in arms. Listen, I'm not talking about just buying the girl. You married one sister, I'll marry the other. Hear that? We'll be brothers in the dirt, how's that?" He laughed and slapped his hand on Bela's shoulder. "How's that?" he said. "You won't be the poorer for it, Captain!"

"This is not the time to talk about it," Bela said, awkward and dignified.

Ralo smiled and said, "But soon, I hope."

Bela stood, and Ralo had to take his leave. "Please send to tell me when Pretty Eyebrows is feeling better," he said to Modh, with his smirk and his piercing glance. "I will come at once."

When he was gone Modh could not be silent. "Lord Husband, don't give Mal to him. Please don't give Mal to him."

"I don't want to," he said.

"Then don't! Please don't!"

"It's all his talk. He boasts."

"Maybe. But if he makes an offer?"

"Wait till he makes an offer," Bela said, a little heavily, but smiling. He drew her to him and stroked her hair. "How you fret over Mal. She's not really ill, is she?"

"I don't know. She isn't well."

"Girls," he said, shrugging. "You danced well tonight."

"I danced badly. I would not dance well for that scorpion."

That made him laugh. "You did leave out the best part of the mimei."

"Of course I did. I want to dance that only for you."

"Lui has gone to bed, or I'd ask you to."

"Oh, I don't need a drummer. Here, here's my drum." She took his hands and put them on her full breasts. "Feel the beat?" she said. She stood, struck the pose, raised her arms, and began the dance, there right in front of him, till he seized her, burying his face between her thighs, and she sank down on him laughing.

Hehum came out into the dancing room; she drew back, seeing them, but Modh untangled herself from her husband and went to the old woman.

"Mal is ill," Hehum began, with a worried face.

"Oh I knew it, I knew it!" Modh cried, instantly certain that it was her fault, that her lie had made itself truth. She ran to Mal's room, which she shared with her so long.

Hehum followed her. "She hides her ears," she said, "I think she has the earache. She cries and hides

her ears."

Mal sat up when Modh came into the room. She looked wild and haggard. "You hear it, you hear it, don't you?" she cried, taking Modh's hands.

"No," Modh murmured, "no, I don't hear it. I hear nothing. There is nothing, Mal."

Mal stared up at her. "When he comes," she whispered.

"No," Mal said.

"Groda comes with him."

"No. It was years ago, years ago. You have got to be strong, Mal, you have got to put all that away."

Mal let out a piteous, loud moan and put Modh's hands up over her own ears. "I don't want to hear it!" she cried, and began to sob violently.

"Tell my husband I will spend this night with Mal," Modh said to Hehum. She held her sister in her arms till she slept at last, and then she slept too, though not easily, waking often, listening always.

In the morning she went to Bedh and asked him if he knew what people did about ghosts-people in the villages.

He thought about it. "I think if there was a ghost somewhere they didn't go there. Or they moved away. What kind of ghost?"

"An unburied person."

Bedh made a face. "They would move away," he said with certainty.

"What if it followed them?"

Bedh held out his hands. "I don't know! The priest, the yegug, would do something, I guess. Some spell. The yegug knew all about things like that. These priests here, these temple people, they don't know anything but their dances and singing and talk-talk-talk. So, what is this? Is it Mal?"

"Yes."

He made a face again. "Poor little one," he said. Then, brightening, "Maybe it would be good if she left this house."

Several days passed. Mal was feverish and sleepless, hearing the ghost cry or fearing to hear it every night. Modh spent the nights with her, and Bela made no objection. But one evening when he came home he talked some while with Alo, and then the brothers came to the hanan. Hehum and Nata were there with the children. The brothers sent the children away, and asked that Modh come. Mal stayed in her room.

"Ralo ten Bal wants Mal for his wife," Alo said. He looked at Modh, forestalling whatever she might say. "We said she is very young, and has not been well. He says he will not sleep with her until she is fifteen. He will have her looked after with every attention. He wants to marry her now so that no other

man may compete with him for her."

"And so raise her price," Nata said, with unusual sharpness. She had been the object of such a bidding war, which was why the Belens had all but beggared themselves to buy her.

"The price the Bals offer now could not be matched by any house in the City," Alo said gravely. "Seeing we were unwilling, they at once increased what they offered, and increased it again. It is the largest bride-bargain I ever heard of. Larger than yours, Nata." He looked with a strange smile at his wife, half pride, half shame, rueful, intimate. Then he looked at his mother and at Modh. "They offer all the fields of Nuila. Their western orchards. Five Root houses on Wall Street. The new silk factory. And gifts-jewelry, fine garments, gold." He looked down. "It is impossible for us to refuse," he said.

"We will be nearly as wealthy as we used to be," Bela said.

"Nearly as wealthy as the Bals," Alo said, with the same rueful twist to his mouth. "They thought we were bargaining. It was ridiculous. Every time I began to speak, old Loho ten Bal would hold up his hand to stop me and add something to the offer!" He glanced at Bela, who nodded and laughed.

"Have you spoken to Tudju?" Modh said.

"Yes," Bela answered.

"She agrees?" The question was unnecessary. Bela nodded.

"Ralo will not mistreat your sister, Modh," Alo said seriously. "Not after paying such a price for her. He'll treat her like a golden statue. They all will. He is sick with desire for her. I never saw a man so infatuated. It's odd, he's barely seen her, only at your wedding. But he's enthralled."

"He wants to marry her right away?" Nata asked.

"Yes. But he won't touch her till she's fifteen. If we'd asked him he might have promised never to touch her at all!"

"Promises are easy," Nata said.

"If he does lie with her it won't kill her," Bela said. "It might do her good. She's been spoiled here. You spoil her, Modh. A man in her bed may be what she needs."

"But- *that* man-" Modh said, her mouth dry, her ears ringing.

"Ralo's a bit spoiled himself. There's nothing wrong with him."

"He-" She bit her lip. She could not say the words.

Bela was keeping her from turning back to pick up the baby, jabbing his sword at her, dragging her by the arm, Mal was crying and stumbling behind them in the dust, up the steep hill, among the trees.

They all sat in uncomfortable silence.

"So," Alo said, louder than necessary, "there will be another wedding."

"When?"

"Before the Sacrifice."

Another silence.

"We mean no harm to come to Mal," Alo said to Modh. "Be sure of that, Modh. Tell her that."

She sat unable to move or speak.

"Neither of you has ever been mistreated!" Bela said resentfully, as if answering an accusation. His mother frowned at him and clicked her tongue. He reddened and fidgeted.

"Go speak to your sister, Modh," Hehum said. Modh got up, seeing the walls and tapestries and faces grow small and bright, sparkling with little lights. She walked slowly and stopped in the doorway.

"I am not the one to tell her," she said, hearing her own voice far away.

"Bring her here then," Alo said.

She nodded; but when she nodded the walls kept turning around her, and reaching out for support, she fell in a half-faint.

Bela came to her and cradled her in his arms. "Little fox, little fox," he murmured. She heard him say angrily to Alo, "The sooner the better."

He carried Modh to their bedroom, sat with her till she pretended to sleep, then left her quietly.

She knew that by her concern, by the nights she had spent with Mal, she had let him become jealous of her sister.

It was for her sake I came to you! she cried to him in her heart.

But there was nothing she could say now that would not cause more harm.

When she got up she went to Mal's room. Mal ran to her weeping, but Modh only held her, not speaking, till the girl grew quieter. Then she said, "Mal, there is nothing I can do. You must endure this. So must I."

Mal drew back a little and said nothing for a while. "It cannot happen," she said then, with a kind of certainty. "It will not be allowed. The child will not allow it."

Modh was bewildered for a moment; she had been wondering if she were pregnant; now she thought for a moment that Mal was pregnant; then she understood.

"You must not think about that child," she said. "She was not yours or mine. She was not daughter or sister of ours. Her death was not our death."

"No. It is his," Mal said, and almost smiled. She stroked Modh's arms and turned away. "I will be good, Modh," she said. "You must not let this trouble you-you and your husband. It is not your trouble. Don't worry. What must happen will happen."

Cowardly, Modh let herself accept Mal's reassurance. More cowardly still, she let herself be glad that it was only a few days until the wedding. Then what must happen would have happened. It would be done, it would be over.

She was pregnant; she told Hehum and Nata of the signs. They both smiled and said, "A boy."

There was a flurry of getting ready for the wedding. The ceremony was to be in Belen House, and the Belens refused to let the Bals provide food or dancers or musicians or any of the luxuries they offered. Tudju was to officiate. She came a couple of days early to stay in her old home, and she and Modh played at sword-practice the way they had done as girls, while Mal looked on and applauded as she had used to do. She was thin and her eyes looked large, but she went through the days serenely. What her nights were, Modh did not know. Mal did not send for her. In the morning, she would smile at Modh's questions about the night and say, "It passed."

But the night before the wedding, Modh woke in the deep night, hearing a baby cry.

She felt Bela awake beside her.

"Where is the child?" he said, his voice rough and deep in the darkness.

She said nothing.

"Nata should quiet her brat," he said.

"It is not Nata's."

It was a thin, strange cry, not the bawling of Nata's healthy boys. They heard it first to the left, as if in the hanan. Then after a silence the thin wail came from their right, in the public rooms of the house.

"Maybe it is my child," Modh said.

"What child?"

"Yours."

"What do you mean?"

"I carry your child. Nata and Hehum say it's a boy. I think it's a girl, though."

"But why is it crying?" Bela whispered, holding her.

She shuddered and held him. "It's not our baby, it's not our baby," she cried.

All night the baby wailed. People rose up and lighted lanterns and walked the halls and corridors of Belen House. They saw nothing but each other's frightened faces. Sometimes the weak, sickly crying ceased for a long time, then it would begin again. Mostly it was faint, as if far away, even when it was heard in the next room. Nata's little boys heard it, and shouted, "Make it stop!" Tudju burned incense in the prayer room and chanted all night long. To her the faint wailing seemed to be under the floor, under her feet.

When the sun rose the people of Belen House ceased to hear the ghost. They made ready for the wedding festival as best they could.

The people of Bal came. Mal was brought out from behind the yellow curtain, wearing voluminous unsewn brocaded silks, with golden jewelry, her transparent veil like rain about her head. She looked very small in the elaborate draperies, straight-backed, her gaze held down. Ralo ten Bal was resplendent in puffed and sequined velvet. Tudju lighted the wedding fire and began the rites.

Modh listened, listened, not to the words Tudju chanted. She heard nothing

The wedding party was brief, strained, everything done with the utmost formality. The guests left soon after the ceremony, following the bride and groom to Bal House, where there was to be more dancing and music. Tudju and Hehum, Alo and Nata went for civility's sake. Bela stayed home. He and Modh said almost nothing to each other. They took off their finery and lay silent in their bed, taking comfort in each other's warmth, trying not to listen for the wail of the child. They heard nothing, only the others returning, and then silence.

Tudju was to return to the Temple early in the morning. She came to Bela and Modh's apartments. Modh had just risen.

"Where is my sword, Modh?"

"You put it in the box in the dancing room."

"Your bronze one is there, not mine."

Modh looked at her in silence. Her heart began to beat heavily.

There was a noise, shouting, beating at the doors of the house.

Modh ran to the hanan, to the room she and Mal had slept in, and hid in the corner, her hands over her ears.

Bela found her there later. He raised her up, holding her wrists gently. She remembered how he had dragged her by the wrists up the hill through the trees. "Mal killed Ralo," he said. "She had the sword hidden under her dress. They strangled her."

"Where did she kill him?"

"On her bed," Bela said bleakly. "He never did keep his promises."

"Who will bury her?"

"No one," Bela said, after a long pause. "She was a Dirt woman. She murdered a Crown. They'll throw her body in the butchers' pit for the wild dogs."

"Oh, no," Modh said. She slipped her wrists from his grip. "No," she said. "She will be buried."

Bela shook his head.

"Will you throw everything away, Bela?"

“There is nothing I can do,” he said.

She leaped up, but he caught and held her.

He told the others that Modh was mad with grief. They kept her locked in the house, and kept watch over her.

Bedh knew what troubled her. He lied to her, trying to give her comfort; he said he had gone to the butcher's pit at night and found Mal's body and buried it out past the Fields of the City. He said he had spoken what words he could remember that might be spoken to a spirit. He described Mal's grave vividly, the oak trees, the flowering bushes. He promised to take Modh there when she was well. She listened and smiled and thanked him. She knew he lied. Mal came to her every night and lay beside her.

Bela knew she came. He did not try to come to that bed again.

All through her pregnancy Modh was locked in Belen House. She did not go into labor until almost ten months had passed. The baby was too large; it would not be born, and with its death killed her.

Bela ten Belen buried his wife and unborn son with the Belen dead in the holy grounds of the Temple, for though she was only a Dirt woman, she had a dead god in her womb.

Visit www.Fictionwise.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.