

Shadow fell over Mariarta. She glanced up—

—into darkness that was *not* a cloud, but a huge shape like the cliffside preparing to fall on her. Eyes, hot red like coals in the fire, glared at her. The monstrous demon Bull leaned over Mariarta, and roared.

She lifted the crossbow, trembling. The Bull was alive enough, for the wind blew down the line of her aim, and amid the colorless swirl of magic she could see a heart beating dark, behind a hide like armor. She wasn't sure any shaft would pierce that skin. The Bull bent in toward her, raising one huge hoof—

The wind screamed at Mariarta, gusting past the peak. She gripped her bow and fired, saw the bolt plunge toward the burning black hide and splinter as it hit, the pieces flaring into bright coals, blowing away in sparks. The Bull roared, in rage this time, and lifted that hoof higher...

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Raetian Tales, Book One:
A Wind from the South

The Badfort Press

A division of The Owl Springs Partnership

The Badfort Press
A division of The Owl Springs Partnership
County Wicklow, Ireland
<http://www.owlssprings.com>

A Badfort Press E-BOOK

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Distributed electronically via eJunkie
<http://www.e-junkie.com>

Set in Times Roman using Adobe PageMaker 6.5
Interior graphics designed using CorelDraw! 11

Cover design (“Aletsch Glacier seen from the Jungfrau”)
by Diane Duane

For Konrad and Elisabeth Egli
with happy memories of much *bundnerfleisch*
and a lot of Fendant under the bridge

Part One:
The Bull of Uri



Tgi che ha magliau il giavel, magla era la corna.
(He who eats the devil must eat the horns too.)
—Raetian proverb

ONE

Her first memory was of the shine of copper in the kitchen—a dim, warm, ruddy light, gleaming from pots hung on the cream-colored, stuccoed wall, catching the firelight in the near-dark. It must have been after supper was done, all the lamps quenched. A star or two of rushlight shone in that memory, reflected in the eyes of those who bent over the scrubbed blond wooden table, talking. What their words were, what caused their remembered laughter, she had no idea; the memory was too old. It only came to Mariarta sometimes as she was falling asleep, and heard the echo of it coming up through her bedroom floor. She would lie there, those nights, drifting along the edge of the crevasse of sleep, looking drowsily out the window at the stars.

Some times of year you could not. When winter bit hardest, all the house shutters were closed against the gigantic falls of snow that came down the southern slopes of Piz Giuv into the valley. Not one shutter could be opened,

except those covering the tiny wooden-screened ghost-windows under the eaves. Otherwise the snow could come whipping in and ruin everything. The house was dark then. The place stank of beef tallow and soot, and tempers grew short in the close air.

But other times—like now—

Spring was beginning. The snow was not over. But the *föhn* had begun blowing—the warm fierce south wind that melted the snow on the high pastures, and started the glaciers talking, and made tempers short. Her father was one who suffered badly from *föhn* weather. Today he had gone ranting around the house until mamli had given him wine with valerian in it and told him to stop his yammering before he brought the avalanche down off Giuv. Her bab had taken the draft sheepishly enough, and gone off to lie down with a cold cloth on his head.

“Fine for those who have time to lie about,” Onda Baia had grumbled: but Mamli had gone after her next. “Baia, here’s half a cheese melted on the stone, why are you standing here gabbling!” Mariarta’s aunt had turned back to the cooking, and Mariarta slipped away before her mother should notice she had finished her lesson early, and find her something to do.

Having lessons was unusual enough. None of the other children in town had them. But she was not like the other children—as she had heard too often recently. She had been happy when she *was* like them, and had spent every sunny day in the lower pastures, helping the herders with the cheesemaking in their huts, or just spending long hours lying among the little flowers and tough grasses of

the scree slopes, watching the clouds' shadows pass across the face of Giuv, thinking of nothing.

Now there was too much to think of. She was the daughter of the *mistral* of Tschamut, her mother told her, and this suddenly meant all kinds of things—not getting dirty, answering promptly when spoken to, always telling the truth. No more playing with the cowherds—well, they were gone from the lower huts now, anyway, headed to the pastures on Alp Tgom, where the grass was ready for the cows. But no more playing all day with Cla and Paol and Duri and Flurin and all the rest. “The age of reason,” her mother had called it. To Mariarta it was the age when everyone had reasons you couldn't do what you wanted.

These days, instead of going straight out to play, *she* had to spend three hours a day with a tutor. Useless stuff it was. All the people in the musty old books were as dead as Hendri Lozza who fell off Giuv last month while chasing chamois. And as for the language lessons—

She had tried throwing a tantrum. “I don't *want* to learn Daoitscha!” she cried, and clung to her mother in the kitchen, burying her face in the embroidered apron. “The words all sound bad, and they don't make sense when you put them together!”

Mariarta cocked one eye from inside the folds of the apron. She saw her mother looking with a sad face at her father; and her father sighed. “That's as may be, *car*,” he said, “but you must learn it, or I will beat you.”

Mariarta sighed, and stopped crying. Her father had never beat her except once, the time the kitchen cauldron full of hot soup almost fell on her. All *this* meant was that

she had to do it whether she liked to or not—it was something not even her father could change. “Is it because I’m the daughter of the *mistral* of Tschamut, bab?”

Her father seemed glad of an answer he could agree with. “Yes. And Daoitscha’s one of the things the daughter of a *mistral* needs to know.”

“Will you let me learn something else too?”

“What, *car*?”

“How to shoot. I’ll learn the Daoitscha faster if you let me learn how to shoot too.”

Her father laughed. “Maybe. Maybe, if you learn the Daoitscha well.”

Mariarta frowned. She had heard her bab say this maybe-that-meant-no at town meeting, to people arguing: hearing it, Mariarta knew her father was waiting for the people having the argument to forget about it—and he would wait as long as he had to. *I don’t care*, Mariarta had thought. *I’ll wait too. And I’ll learn the wretched Daoitscha!*

...In her bed she gazed out into a darkness all afire with stars. Her window faced west-by-north, and the mountain filled half of it, the sky the rest. Piz Giuv was a broad-shouldered mountain, and Tschamut was built on one of its lower shoulders—a lump of a ridge with a lumpy top, jutting out over the floor of Val Tavetsch, just off one side of the road which led to Cuolm d’Alp, the high pass, and the great town of Ursera on its other side. Mariarta wondered whether she would ever see Ursera. It was nine leagues away over the pass, two days’ journey. Her bab went there to talk to the governors—whoever they were. He had brought her home a white ribbon, last time: and Cla had

stolen it from her, and Mariarta had stolen it back, and almost strangled Cla with it...

The white stars of the Plough swung above the peak-snows of Giuv. Mariarta yawned. Everything was still—the *föhn* had stopped blowing for the moment, and there were only the tiny creaks and sighs of the house cooling and settling for the night. She turned, under the straw-stuffed coverlet, and fell asleep.

Mariarta never heard the breath of wind that went past her window, stirred the hangings as if looking in at her, then blew away toward the alp.

•

If you put your left hand on that scrubbed table (her tutor said), it would show you the fashion of the mountains all around Val Tavetsch. With all fingers pointing north, the little finger would be the long irregular massif ending in Piz Nascholas and the Pazolastock, and right above it would be Cuolm d'Alp and the pass into the neighboring Urseren valley. The ring finger would start (at the knuckle end) with Piz Ravetch, and end in sharp-shouldered Piz Cavradi. The middle finger would have Piz Blas at the knuckle, and Piz Nual at its tip. The first finger would be the peaks of Rondadura and Gannaretsch, and the glacier running from Tgiern Sogn-Gions, where years ago the Capuchin had left the tin box with the ghost of that bad man from Selva in it; you could still hear the ghost wailing in the crevasse if you went there. Then a long gap—where tiny Val Maler and Uaul Sogn Gions would go—and finally

the terrible peak of Scopi, at the thumb's knuckle, reaching to Piz Garviel, and the scrubby alp of Meidia Marscha. "So as long as you have a hand," her tutor said, "you're never lost."

Tschamut sat at the tip of the fourth finger, like a bit of peeled-back nail, rising higher than the road. It was fifteen houses, a church and an alp. That alp was a matter of cheerful rivalry between Tschamut and Selva, its nearest neighbor. Selva had thirty houses, and two churches, and one of them had two bells. Selva also had a grazing alp, Uaul Nual. But it was steep and hard for the cows to graze, and the Selvese looked at Tschamut's more level alp, with its long sweet grass, and muttered that the Tschamuts people should rent part of it to them. Mariarta's father laughed at the idea each time the *mistral* of Selva mentioned it over wine, for their alp was just big enough for their own cows, let alone the Selvese ones too.

The Selvese sometimes admitted the truth of what Mariarta's father kept telling them. That alp was just a scrap of green nestled against the mountainside. Right behind it was the slope of Cuolm d' Alp, and Piz Giuv's first craggy shoulders rose behind that, too steep to climb. Nothing grew there—not even the long pale yellowy grass that tufts all but the stubbornest mountains in that part of the world. Giuv's other shoulders spread a mile east and west, and the other mountains reared up behind, giving Tschamut no other high ground.

Low ground it had. Tschamut's spur of land reared out over the narrow valley through which the Rein ran—a fierce cold narrow river, fed from the glacier on Piz Curnera.

It was one of Mariarta's jobs each morning and evening to go fetch water for washing and cooking from the river. She hated that chore. *If I'm the daughter of the mistral of Tschamut*, she said once, *I shouldn't have to fetch and carry water like a maschnéra!* But her father had then asked pointedly how her Daoitscha was doing?—and Mariarta had hurried away.

This evening she was tired. Her lesson had been long, and Sandre the master had threatened to beat her because she refused to sing the Daoitscha song he was trying to teach her, some stupid thing about a bird. Mariarta couldn't see the point—it didn't rhyme, how was it supposed to be a song? *The stupid old cowturd!*

Across the river, the grey sheep bleated. Mariarta thought their bleating sounded like the master trying to sing, and burst out laughing. The bucket on its long yoke banged against the backs of her legs as she climbed the path leading to the dusty street.

She walked down it, trying not to stir the dust, and pushing her way past Cla's goats, which were shouldering their way to the barn for their evening milking. Mariarta walked on to pass the front gates of her house. With the low late sun shining on it, the house looked particularly fine: its old brown wood all golden-shaded, and the gilding in the letters of the house-motto catching fire from the sunset. No other house in town had such gilding, not even Paol di Plan the wooseller's, and he was rich. Mariarta walked by the gates, felt pride in her father for being so important—

“Stop dreaming, you’ll be into the ditch,” said Onda Baia from the kitchen door. “Give me that and get us one more.”

“But—“

“*Fudi!* None of that out of you, or you’ll get none of what’s cooked with the water.” Mariarta moaned, but she slipped out of the shoulder-strap of the yoke and watched while Onda Baia took the bucket and poured the water out into the big kitchen cauldron. Baia was her mother’s sister, and the resemblance showed in her face—the high cheekbones and dark blue eyes. But there it stopped, for Mariarta’s mother was much slenderer than Onda Baia. *Anyone* in town was slenderer than Onda Baia, Mariarta thought: under her linen shirt and gray skirt, she was immense. Onda Baia always said it was because a witch had ill-looked her years ago, so that she would lose a young man they both were courting. Mariarta thought it had more to do with how much fried porridge Onda Baia ate. Her mother said it was a scandal that someone should eat the food of three men and do the work of half a woman...but she never said it in front of Baia.

Onda Baia handed Mariarta the bucket, her glance falling on the street. Then Onda Baia’s mouth dropped open, and she crossed herself.

Mariarta turned to look. Cla’s goats were going by, with Cla behind them, poking them with his herd’s stick. But past them, twirling along past the front of the house, went a swirl of dust and wind. “It’s a witch, or a *tschalarera!*” Baia cried. “Don’t go out there, child, you’ll be—”

“Baia,” Mariarta’s mother said from behind her, “what’s the matter? Oh.” She glanced down the alleyway between their house and dil Curtgin’s, toward the street. “Is that all? If it’s a witch, this’ll stop it.” Her mother reached in for the broom and put it bristle-end-up outside the kitchen door. “And windbrides make much more noise. But don’t talk of such—it’s unlucky. Come in now, the meal’s boiling over!”

Muttering, Onda Baia vanished into the dark and heat of the kitchen. “Go on, Mati,” Mariarta’s mother said. “We need one more tonight. Then it’s dinner.”

Mariarta sighed and trudged off with the yoke. She made her way down to the water, got out on the stones near the dipping pool, and braced herself to let the bucket fill. As the bucket grew heavier, Mariarta looked westward along the riverbank, upslope, where the sun dipped toward the crest of Giuv in a glory of golden air.

The breath went out of her. Up there by the triangular brown Virgin-shrine on its pole, kneeling on the rocks, was a young man all in black, one she had never seen before. He sang to the shrine with his arms outstretched, and the hair stood up on the back of Mariarta’s neck, for the language he used was not hers, or even Daoitscha...and he had not been there a breath ago.

Mariarta pulled up the bucket and wriggled out of the yoke, staring. She had always thought the stories about *buttatschs* and witches were just things that happened to other people—

She was scared, but Mariarta knew what she had to do. Carefully she picked her way over the stones toward

the figure in black, while the eerie singing went on. He stood there silhouetted against the sunset, motionless—until her foot grated on gravel on a stone, and he turned and saw her—

Mariarta's stomach knotted. She could see no face in this light...if the ghost in fact had one. At least she knew what to do. "All good spirits praise God," she recited rapidly, "and I do too. The first word and the last are mine. What's the matter, and what do you need?"

The singing stopped. The black kneeling shape looked at her, expressionless, saying nothing. Very slowly it stood up.

Normally it should have told her right away what it needed done so that it could be put at peace. But it didn't seem to understand her. Was it a foreign ghost? That could be a problem—she didn't know the words in any other language. Nervously, Mariarta began again. "*Tuts buns sperts laudan Diu ed jeu e. Igl empren ed il davos—*"

The dark shape burst out laughing.

Mariarta got furious. "Stop that," she shouted. "I'm trying to help you!"

The black shape laughed harder. "*Pertgisei*, oh, do excuse me!" And he spoke Romansch after all, though his accent was strange. "*Buobetta*, who do you take me for, one of the *piavel de notg*?"

"Yes," Mariarta said, annoyed at being called a little girl, "and I'm not afraid of you."

The sun dropped behind Giuv, and the light changed. Now the black featureless shape was simply that of a man standing in the shadow of the mountain, looking at her with

amused dark eyes out of a long, thin face. “That’s good, for I’m not dead, and nothing to be afraid of. Who is it that’s not afraid of me?”

“I am Mariarta Agnete di Alicg,” she said, “daughter of the *mistral* of Tschamut.”

“Ah, well then,” said the young man, “*bien di, misterlessa.*”

Mariarta frowned, for some of her father’s friends thought it was amusing to call her mayoress, too: she was never sure she liked it. But if there was mockery in this man’s tone, it was different from that of her father’s friends. “*Bien onn.* And now I know what you are.”

“Tell me, do.”

“You’re a *scholar!*” And that was exciting. “Let me see your book!”

“You mean a student in the Dark Art?” His laugh was quieter this time. “No, I’m afraid you mistake me again.”

“I heard you, though. You were singing in the Old Language. *Scholars* need the Old Language for their spells, the way priests need it to make Mass.” She clambered over the rocks to get a closer look at him. His black was dusty—the cloth of his breeches and short cloak were patched. He was exactly the picture of the wandering *scholars*, who went from town to town doing odd jobs for lodging and food. In return for their hosts’ kindness, they would look in the black book they all carried, find treasures buried on their hosts’ land, or lift curses. They could heal sick cows, and tame dragons. Of course, all *scholars* had sold their souls to the Devil, but you could still get some good out of them—

The young man was shaking his head. “No, I’ve been with the monks, far away down the valley in Cuera, where the Bishop rules. I sang what you sing at night. But you say *Maria, seies salidada*, and I say *Ave Maria, gratia plena—*”

Mariarta smiled to herself. *Scolars* often preferred to do their good secretly, and if he wanted to be secret, she didn’t mind. “It’s supertime,” she said, burning to get him home, where everyone would see him and be astonished. “Come to our house and dine.”

He bowed to her. “*Bien engraziament*,” he said, and picked up his satchel from the ground.

Mariarta hurried to get the bucket and yoke, but the deep voice behind her said, “Ah no: let me carry that for my hostess.” The *scolar* hoisted the yoke onto his shoulder as if it was nothing, and went on up the path.

They came to the street. “This way,” Mariarta shouted, running off to the right: “this is where I live!” If everyone in the street turned to look at her in surprise, that was exactly what Mariarta wanted. And they all saw the *scolar* following her, and everybody stared at the stranger. And why shouldn’t they? Mariarta thought proudly. Twice, maybe three times a year, someone came through the village who people there didn’t know. And this was *her* stranger—

“Here!” Mariarta cried as they came to the house, and the *scolar* gazed at the gold letters over the doors, still flushed faintly with the rose light in the west. *Quei che vegn da cor va a cor*, said the curves and swirls of the letters Mariarta’s father had carved twenty years ago when he married her mother.

The *scolar* smiled. ““What comes from the heart, goes to the heart,”” he said. “May it be so.” And he walked around to the kitchen door.

Mariarta went after him in time to see her mother, in the doorway, looking with surprise at the young man who put the yoke and bucket down. Mariarta remembered her manners. “Mam,” she shouted, “here is someone who God has sent to dine with us!”

““Whom’,” her mother said. “Don’t screech, Mati. Young sir, come into the kitchen and warm your outsides, and take a glass of *vinars* to warm the rest. Mati, fetch your father.”

Off Mariarta ran across the kitchen and into the low-ceilinged frontway. There across the stone floor the cattle looked over the half-doors of their big dim-lit shed, the left-hand side of the bottom of the house. Stairs led to the hall with the storage-presses, and the bedrooms, but Mariarta knew her father would be in the big warm room at the right-hand back of the house, the *solér*. She ran to its carved door and knocked.

Only silence answered. This was a game Bab had been playing with her, ever since he taught her about knocking. Mariarta would burst in before he gave her leave, and he would scold; and the next time her bab would wait longer. Now she waited, and danced from foot to foot in an ecstasy of impatience, clenching her fists and making faces with the unbearableness of it.

“*S’avonza!*” he finally said. Mariarta pulled the door-hook and pushed the heavy door open. Her father was sitting behind his big wooden table to the right of the door, near

the shiny black fireplace-stove. One window-shutter on the far side of the room was open, letting in some of the sunset light that managed to slide between their house and dil Curtgin's. The parchments on his table crackled in the breeze from the window, and her father put down his knife and pen. "Well?"

"There's a man here!" Mariarta said.

Her father nodded. "So the whole town knows by now, since I heard you tell them so. Mariarta, when a *mistral's* daughter has important news, she does not run about in the street bawling it to the five winds, like a bullock out of its shed." He frowned, and Mariarta got subdued and unhappy. But then her bab made an absurd cow-face at her, and bawled "Owwwwwww'oooh! Owwwwwww'oooh!", so exactly like a bullock that Mariarta laughed. "That's how you sounded," her bab said. "Once, I forgive you. Don't do it again. We'll have more important visitors some day."

"When?"

"Who knows? Meanwhile, we'll ask this young man for his news after dinner. Your mother will want help. But help me first, though," he said as Mariarta started for the door. "Go see Stiafen Cadieli, and Old Gian at the mill, and Flep and Clau. Tell them the councilors should come here after the guest's fed, to talk to him. Go on now, or you'll be late to help your mam."

"But I want to *see* him—!"

Her bab frowned. "You have seen him. You will again, later. Go on."

She knew that tone of voice. Mariarta ran out.

At the end of the street was the mill, close to where the dirt road sloped down near the river. This early in the season the stones were still. Old Gion himself was by the barn-shed, leaning over the half door with another man and looking in.

Mariarta climbed on the half-door beside them and looked into the shed. The other man was Flep, so that was another part of her errand done. “Bab asks me to tell you both to come to him tonight,” she said. “There’s a guest, a *scolar*—”

“Hmm, well,” Gion said. “Tell your bab we’ll come. But what do you think, Flep? What’s her problem?”

From inside the shed came a mighty bellow. A wickedly horned head with one horn broken off short swung into the light, tossing the hay of her stable-bedding into the air. Mariarta looked at the golden-brown cow with delight. Old Crutscha was queen-cow of the Tschamuts herd, the pride of the town—for every year she beat off any other *pugniera* that was brought against her. The Selvese muttered and tried to buy in fighting cows who would give them the advantage, but it did them no good. It was always Crutscha who led the town’s herd, fighting any rebellious cow into submission, helping defend the herd against the wolves that got into the pastures. Bulls were no use for this: they were too testy, and too rare to be risked. Herd leadership needed a crafty cow, fiery in battle but thoughtful and wise—a *pugniera* who would give the town a good name at the cattle-fights in the summer. Everybody in town doted on Crutscha, and brought her treats in her winter quarters. But lately she

had not been well, and her bawling could be heard constantly.

Flep shook his head. “She’s had nothing but the best. Beer in the mash, hot milk— She’s just tempery. It’ll pass.”

“A week she’s been like this,” Gion said. “It’s not good for a *pugniera* to be tempery. She gets in the habit, shortly she’s no better than a bull—”

Crutscha bellowed, the small leaden stable-bell around her neck jangling. From behind them came an answering sound—a deeper ringing, more mellow.

It was Urs the stableboy, walking past with one of the big pasture-bells on its embroidered strap. He had just been polishing it, to judge by its shine. Urs was ringing the bell hard, like someone about to go out for the *chalandamarz*, the spring race that the boys do, ringing the bells to wake the grass. Urs caught Mariarta’s eye, grinning. He was skinny and dark-haired, and his eyes always glittered as if a joke was waiting to come out. Mariarta grinned back at him: he was one of her particular friends.

At the same moment Crutscha bellowed louder than ever, hitting the half-door with one horn, so that Mariarta almost fell off it. Then Crutscha put her head over the door and reached out toward Urs, sticking her tongue out as if she wanted to lick the bell.

“Is that it,” Gion said then. “Here, Urs, bring it over. That’s it, Flep. She wants to be in the pasture, the good creature.”

He opened the half door. “Come here then, you beast, come on,” he said, and put the bell on Crutscha. She moored, a much more cheerful sound, shaking her head so the bell

rang loud in the small space. Then she turned straight to her manger. Shortly no sound was to be heard but satisfied crunching, and the bong, bong of the bell as she moved.

“That’s her made happy,” Gion said. “But the grass up there must be ready now. We’ll ask the *mistral* about taking them up, eh Mati?”

“I’ll tell bab she’s eating again,” Mariarta said, and went back up the track to the street.

Urs went with her. “Is it really a *scolar*?” he whispered. “Did you see his book?”

“A *mistral*’s daughter doesn’t babble news,” she said proudly. Urs made a face at her, as he always did when he thought she was acting important. She grimaced. “I didn’t see it. But he has a bag he wears on his back. I bet it’s in there.”

“Maybe he has gold,” Urs said, awed by the thought.

Mariarta looked at him scornfully. “You *orob*, you know *scolars* are always poor. It’s other people they always give the gold to.”

“Are you really going to look in the bag?” Urs said, as they stopped by the mill. “You won’t do it. You’ll be afraid your father will catch you.” His eyes glittered, wicked and cheerful. “And there’s probably a spell on the bag—monsters will come out and hack you up so fine the hens’ll be able to peck you up.”

“I’m not afraid,” Mariarta hissed at him. She ran off, feeling furious. Urs always teased her until she itched with anger, as if the *föhn* was blowing, and he made her do things to show she was brave. Then she would get in trouble with her bab or mam. *Orob!* she thought again.

But she was going to look inside that bag.

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It was a long time before Mariarta got her chance. Dinner had to be gotten through first. Still, it was hard to be impatient with that night's dinner.

This time of year was not much different from winter in terms of what you got to eat. There might be toasted cheese, and some cold wheat porridge from the morning, sliced and fried in lard, or on Sundays, in butter. There would be a piece of wheat bread, or some oat bread if the wheat was getting scarce. It was a long time since the pig was killed; a scrap of bacon from the dwindling flitches hanging smoke-blackened in the chimney, or a chunk from the salt-meat crock, *might* go into a pot of barley soup for Sunday dinner; but until the sow farrowed, this would get less likely. To drink, there would be barley-water, for the cows weren't yet in milk. The supplies in the pantry were dwindling, and would do so until summer. Mariarta had been watching her mother's worried looks at the store cupboards, and noticed how their key never left her mam's belt.

So when Mariarta returned and was set to scrubbing the big table in the kitchen, she was astonished to see the porridge that had been boiling now set aside. The smaller butter-tub sat on the sideboard, with a great scoop out of it; and one of the old dry-spiced sausages that her mam tempted her bab with. Ten whole slices of it lay on one of the earthen plates: soup that smelled of oats and bacon was simmering in the pot that hung from the crane. Her mam was rasping

half a hard sweet cheese to go into it, the cheese that bab washed in wine and dried under the eaves. Onda Baia was stirring the soup pot, muttering: she kept glancing at the guest on the far side of the fire, where he sat in the chimney-seat talking to her father. Baia's glances weren't friendly, which confused Mariarta.

When the table was clean, her mother brought five bowls from the cupboard above the sideboard. "Be careful," she said. Mariarta laid them out gingerly on the table, stroking the bright, smooth painted clay as she put each one down. Normally they all ate out of one pot in the middle of the table, except at Christmas and Easter.

Her mother gave her the tin spoons one at a time, polishing each one on her apron. Mariarta put one by each bowl. "Nothing more," her mam said, smiling at her: "not till the soup's done." She glanced at the cushioned seat under the window. Night was coming on fast; it was already dim in the kitchen. Being close to the fire, Mariarta's father had not yet lit the tallow-dip hanging by the window in its tray. Mariarta crept to the seat, hitched herself onto it as silently as she could, and stared at her guest.

He was even younger than he had seemed before; the firelight showed a face that hadn't started a beard yet. "A long walk," he said to her father. "And a ways to go yet before I'm done...."

Onda Baia muttered something else to the soup, laid the ladle down and went out. "Not too much further, signur Guigliem," her father said, raising his cup to the *scolar*. Mariarta saw to her surprise that they were both drinking

real white wine, instead of “Adam’s wine”, as her father called water.

It was all too much for Mariarta to bear. “Guigliem, is that your name? We have a Guigliem here, it’s the miller’s son who had the tree fall on him and now he can’t talk—”

Her father’s expression was too kindly to be a warning. “Not my daughter’s problem, as you can see,” he said.

The young man smiled. “Guigliem I am, but to keep us all from being confused, you can say ‘of val Schatla’, since that’s where I came from.”

“I thought you came from the Chrusch’ via,” Mariarta said, bemused. “And the Devil teaches you spells there, and when he’s done teaching you, eleven out of twelve of you get away, and the twelfth *scolar* gets turned into a crow.”

“My daughter is educated,” Mariarta’s father said to Guigliem, “and knows the old stories.”

Mariarta wriggled with pleasure at being praised. The *scolar* laughed. “I’ve seen many a crossroads, *duonna*, but I never saw old Malón at even one of them. And crows I’ve seen, but none of them were anyone I knew.”

“The table’s laid,” Mariarta’s mother said. “Will you gentlemen sit? Mariarta, go fetch your aunt.”

Mariarta scrambled off the seat. As she did, her leg brushed something cool and smooth. She looked down in surprise—at the *scolar*’s bag. *I could have gotten in it, and now I’ve lost my chance! Urs is going to make fun of me—*

Out Mariarta went into the frontway, to find her aunt. Off to her right in the darkness, Onda Baia was kneeling on the stones, praying under her breath.

Mariarta went to her. “It’s dinner—”

Onda Baia kept praying.

“Onda, what’s the matter? Don’t you like the *scolar*?”

Mariarta stepped back at the furious, frightened look in her aunt’s eyes. “Like him? Mad child, don’t you *see*? He’s a witch, or something worse! What kind of decent person doesn’t stay home and work their land? No one walks the roads but gypsies who trick and steal, and soldiers who loot and kill, and traveling merchants who cheat you and run away.” Her voice was a hiss. “Travelers are the Devil’s people. They won’t settle, they won’t stay *still*! And the old blood will tell, for you’re too friendly by half with such, you and your father both—”

“Baia,” came Mariarta’s mother’s voice, quite cool. She was standing in the door to the kitchen, her face in shadow. “As for travelers, there are also saints who walk the world, looking for hospitality. And poor people who have no homes, whom we must help because God sends them to us. Now, dinner’s ready. If you don’t want yours—”

Onda Baia went straight into the kitchen.

Mariarta’s mother came to stand by her. “Mati—did your aunt frighten you?”

“A little,” Mariarta said. But it was more than that. *The old blood will tell. You and your father both—*

“Your aunt was raised old-fashioned, that’s all,” Mariarta’s mother said in her ear. “New things come down the road, and old stories whisper in her ear, and they both frighten her. You mustn’t let that happen to you. You were

right to say God had sent us someone to share dinner with: He did. Now go on in. The soup will get cold.”

•

She sat next to the *scolar* right through dinner, and was hard put to know what was better to look at—his smooth young face with its pale blue eyes, or the soup, all thick with melting cheese. She had a piece of sausage to herself, and another half a one the *scolar* gave her. He was kind. Mariarta thought of just asking him outright to let her see the inside of his bag: that would be so brave, even Urs wouldn't be able to say anything.

But as soon as they finished eating, her father's council began to arrive. They gathered around the table with Guigliem, and were given wine, and Mariarta's father sat at the head of the table, so that Mariarta knew the council was in session.

The *scolar* told them his name again. They asked him about the roads he had walked on leaving val Schatla, about the towns there, when he had left, and why. Mariarta was more interested in the bag. Her mother had told her to sit in the window-seat until it was her bedtime, but the bag had fallen on the floor. The tallow-dip was lit now. It would be hard to get at the bag without being seen...

“So they sent you away to be a student,” Flep said. The emphasis he put on the last word was amused, for everyone knew what Mariarta thought of the guest.

Guigliem smiled. “Not in the *scola nera*. I would hardly have arrived on foot without a *solida* of my own if I were accomplished in the black art.”

“But it’s well known that *scolars* can only do their wealth-making for others, never themselves.”

“Then it’s a wonder there are any at all,” said Guglielm. “What’s the point in learning a trade that will never do the craftsman any good, or maybe get you turned into a crow at the Crossroads?” They all laughed. “No, I was in minor orders in the Bishop’s monastery school at Cuera, where my father sent me before he died. I thought that after I took the tonsure I might work for the monks in Mustér, doing cattle-breeding for them. But word came that my old stepfather has died, too. I’m needed at home in val Schatla. So home I go, with my tonsure growing out. Just a farmer again.”

“A learned one, though,” said Mariarta’s father.

Guglielm looked wry. “Oh aye...I can speak Latin to the cows. But will they give enough extra milk afterwards to make a difference? And what’s the point of speaking to them in Daoitscha? The milk would probably curdle.”

All the councilors laughed. Mariarta’s father sat quiet, smiling.

Guglielm looked around with sudden concern. “Pardon me if I’ve spoken out of turn,” he said. “I did get the impression there’s no *saltér* here—”

Mariarta blinked. Why should the *scholar* care where the Austriac bailiff was? He was only a little fat man who barely spoke Romansch; even his Daoitscha was poor, coming out of him in short thick-sounding phrases, with

panting in between. He walked around Tschamut as if he owned it, and the one time Mariarta had tried to ask her bab why Reiskeipf acted that way, her bab had growled and stalked away, giving her no answer. She hadn't raised the subject again.

"No, our bailiff's not with us just now," her father said. "He's in Ursera. A few weeks of peace yet before he comes demanding his master's damned grass-penny."

"But surely you pay grass fee already to the monks in Mustér," Guigliem said.

"That's what we told him when first he came," said Cla. "And he just smiled and said, 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and to God the things which are God's.' *And*—not *or*." No laughter this time, just scowls.

"Where we're supposed to find his damn coin-money, I would like to know," said Flep. "You can only sell so much butter to Ursera, and our cheese we need to live through the winter. We've nothing else to trade for coin."

The young man nodded. "It's much the same everywhere else."

"Tell us about that," said Mariarta's bab. "We've had your own news, for which we thank you. But tell us what news there is in the rest of the world."

The *scolar* sighed. "There's nothing newer than this: the Emperor is dead, God rest his soul."

At this everyone sat straight. "When did this happen?" her father said.

"About a month ago, it's thought. The news only came to Cuera two weeks ago, just before I left."

"Who will be Emperor now?" said Gion.

Guigliem shrugged. “King Conrad, probably. But the Pope doesn’t like him, or Conradin his heir. The talk in Cuera was that he would put off crowning either of them, hoping they would die or be set aside by the Electors for someone he liked better. Like Rudolf von Hapsburg.”

Everyone sat quiet.

“Twenty years now those Austriac lords have been our bane,” Mariarta’s father said softly. “And it was only the old Emperor kept them off our backs—stubborn old falconer, insisting we did service enough, keeping the Pass open. But all that will go now. The damned Hapsburgs will want more coin-money from us, to buy out of our armed service—or we’ll have to give the service, worse yet. Steel weapons, where are we supposed to get the money for such? Do they think we’re dwarfs or Venetians, sitting on secret gold-mines and bags of jewels—?”

“It’ll be a while yet before anything changes,” Guigliem said. “The new ‘King of the Romans’ will have to go south first to be crowned.”

“Aye, that’s so,” Paol said. All drank quietly. Mariarta knew from her tutor how any new Emperor-elect had to make the *Rumagirada*, to receive his crown at the hands of the Pope. All his greatest nobles went with him, to show the Pope the new Emperor’s strength of arms. It would take at least eighteen months for the whole unwieldy group and their retainers to gather, get over the passes and down into Talia. After the coronation they would spend some months there while Church and Empire sized one another up. Eventually the Emperor would return home; the armies would be another six months or a year on the road.

“They’ll be this way twice,” Cla said. “Good business for us.”

Paol looked sour. “You’re assuming they don’t go by other passes. Or that they intend to pay for anything they take.”

“Ah,” Mariarta’s father said softly, “but they’d be on their way to Roma, and the Pope would be glad to hear any complaint against the new Emperor.” He chuckled, a dry sound. “They’ll pay for things on the way *in*, anyway.”

Mariarta kicked idly where she sat. The kick came up against something soft. It was the bag! Cautiously she glanced up. No one was looking at her. Mariarta slid down, and when her toes touched the floor, she slipped right under the table, into the shadows, next to the bag.

Above her head the discussion went on. Mariarta felt the flap of the bag. It had only a strap through a loop of leather stitched to the bag. She pulled this free, sucking in breath—then reached into the bag, felt something cool and hard: not gold, though. More leather. She pulled it out.

It was the black book. As quietly as she could, she opened it.

The book was written in big black round letters. The words made no sense, so this was probably the mass-Latin the *scolar* had been singing in. There were few pictures in this book. When Mariarta finally came to one, she wasn’t able to make much of it—a burly man holding a three-tined grass-fork. He seemed to be waist-deep in water—he had fallen in a river while haying, maybe. She turned more pages. Here was a picture of a man with a stick with snakes around it, holding the stick out to some creature that had

eyes all over. At first Mariarta thought it was a *buttatsch*, but then she saw that the eyed thing was just a very large man. Several pages further on was a picture of a pretty woman standing in a cart with sparrows and doves harnessed to it— Laughter rang above the table: Mariarta froze, but no one seemed to have noticed she was gone. She lowered her head, turning pages. More of the black words— She turned another page. A picture of a woman with a bow—

She stared. The woman was shooting. She was young, strangely dressed in some kind of flowing shift tied up with several thin belts to above her knee. Her hair was tied tight at the nape of her neck. The bow was bent deep, and she sighted along the arrow with a look that made the hair rise all over Mariarta: cool and dangerous, the expression of someone who might do anything she pleased. Beside her, as if tame, stood a beast like a chamois, but with odd branched horns.

Mariarta never heard the renewed laughter above the table, never heard the way the wind moaned to itself in the chimney. *She's shooting!* Until now Mariarta had never heard of any woman shooting; this had made her unwilling to ask her bab any more. But here it was, in a book, which meant somewhere it was true. Mariarta felt again the way she always felt when the hunters left town: she wanted to go along, not just to watch. To do it herself, to feel the quarrel leap away from the crossbow, to feel the force leaping away to do her bidding, to strike—

She gulped, shut the book. *Magic—it's put me under a spell! Now something terrible will happen—*

But nothing happened except that someone banged the table with their cup, and the laughter and talk went on. Mariarta put the book back in the bag, fastened the flap—then began to inch her way into the light. Her mother was drowsing beside the fire. Everyone else’s faces were turned toward Flep, who was filling the wine-cups again. They never saw Mariarta boost herself back up.

“They’ll never bother coming here,” said Flep. “They’ll come up the road from Caschinutta and over the Bridge, stop at Ursera for a week or so, then go up the Munt-Avellin pass. I would make extra butter this season, and more cheese.”

“It would help to have more grass to feed the cows,” said Cla. “Where are we supposed to get *that*? And what will *we* live on over the winter, when we’ve sold them all our spare cheese? Coin money eats too hard for me!”

“Damned bridge anyway,” Paol said. “It’s all coming true, the curse.”

“Which one?” said the *scolar*.

“You don’t know the story, you with your book and all?” Laughter, not least from the young man himself.

“Well then.” Gion took a drink. “You know the awful way the Reuss river valley gets there: gorges a hundred fathoms high, the river too fast and deep to sink piers in. But there was the road south from Hospental over the Munt-Avellin pass, and on the other side of it, the wine of Talia—”

“And the money,” someone put in.

“And the armies,” Mariarta’s father said quietly.

“Aye, aye. Everyone wanted an easy way to that southern road: pilgrims, traders, young men wanting to go south to fight and make a few *solidi* for themselves. But how to get at the pass road, with the Reuss running between Ursera and the northern lowlands, no way across, and the mountains blocking both sides? Anyone wanted to take trade south to Talia, they had to go all the way over to Mustér or Cuera on the east side, or clear over to the end of the Ródan valley, right by Martignei; fifty miles, or seventy, what difference did it make?, because each of those passes had its own road to the lowlands, and Ursera wasn’t getting any of the tolls or trade.”

“So the townsmen called in the great builders?—” said the *scolar*.

Gion smiled. “Every one of them went to the Reuss gorge, and left shaking his head. No way to do it! The Ursera councillors published a great prize to go to the one who could bridge the river, but the few schemes they looked at on the prize-giving day were no good at all. And old Sievi di Planta, who was *mistral* then, he banged the table in the Treis Retgs and swore that he would pay any price to see that river bridged.

“Then the man with the green feather in his hat came in.”

All looked at one another with pleasurable anticipation, for the green peacock’s feather, the sign of pride, was a sure sign of il Giavel himself, old Malón the Father of Lies. “Well,” Gion said. “In he comes, and they all know him. All dressed as he was like a respectable wealthy man, there’s still nothing he can do about the way

the left foot looks, or should I say hoof. He says to them, 'I understand you need a bridge built.' Now all are uneasy at the sight of him, for il Giavel, he's master of tricks and treachery. But they're desperate. 'Yes,' Sievi says. 'And what makes you think you can do better than all the other builders who've been here?' 'Ah,' the Devil says, 'I have my ways.' 'If you can do it,' Sievi says, 'the prize is yours.' 'I don't want your trumpery prizes,' says il Giavel: 'I want the soul of the first one to cross the bridge. For that payment, I'll build it in a night. Tomorrow morning, if you like, you can send a rider to Caschinutta and tell them the road through Ursera to Roma is open...after my price is paid.'"

Mariarta was watching the *scolar*. He had an odd narrowed look about his eyes that she couldn't quite understand.

"So they sent him out with a cup of red southern wine, and argued it. Some were against dealing with him, but all wanted that road more than anything: so finally they called il Giavel back in and agreed. Off he went smiling. Off the town counselors went, then, each to his own hearth in a hurry: Sievi di Planta went straight to Sontg Kolumban's church to talk to Bab Ladagar, who was a Capuchin monk before he settled in Ursera. Some who were in on the secret thought that Sievi was afraid for his own soul. But others remembered that Capuchins know how to do more than eat bread, and not all the things priests know are written in the mass-book. All that night, the bells at Sontg Kolumban's rang through the thunder, for an awful storm came up, and the Reuss rose in its banks and thrashed around like a bull-calf having the nose-ring put in. And toward morning the

storm died, and the day came up clear. All the Ursera counselors but Sievi met in the town street, too afraid to go down to the gorge: but Bab Ladagar came to them. They went along then, half out of shame, half because they thought all their souls had a better chance with the priest along. Then they met Sievi, and went with him all in a huddle to where the road ran closest to the gorge.

“And there it was, a plain arch, but one that seemed to have grown straight out of the stone of the nearer cliff of the gorge, right to the farther one. No pier in the water, just the simple arch of it, very beautiful, and uncanny. And there at the far end of it, picking his teeth and enjoying the sunshine, sits the man with the green feather in his hat.

“‘And have you brought my price?’ says he. ‘Yes,’ says Sievi: ‘here it is!’ And the crowd of them opens up, and with a big kick from Sievi, out jumps the worst goat of his herd, the crazy one that everyone had been calling il Giavel all this while anyway, because of its temper and the horns on it, like knives. This goat goes bounding across the bridge, furious, and the first thing it sees is Old Malón himself; so mad it is, it goes after him with those horns and butts him right off the bridge and ten feet down the road on the far side. He picks himself up, screaming, ‘You’ll pay for this!’—and at the noise the goat goes after him again, chases him around the bend and out of sight.”

The counselors laughed. “So the price of the bridge was paid,” said the *scolar*. “But no one tricks old Malón that easily.”

“No, no, you’re right there, young man.” Gion had another drink. “Il Giavel, he was furious: he ran right on

down the Scalina gorge, and lost the goat finally. At the bottom of the gorge near Caschinutta he picked up the biggest boulder he could find from the glacier-dump there, to drop it on the bridge and destroy it. And he was carrying the thing back up the road when who does he meet but old Duonna Burga, who lived at that old house at Uaul di Bastun south of town, she's dead now of course, but she saw his foot and signed herself. Il Giavel dropped the rock to hide his face from the Sign, and the thing took root there and wouldn't be budged. Still a nuisance, they had to move the road to go around it. So he had to leave the Bridge alone, and Punt dil Giavel it is to this day: but he cursed it, saying that because he was cheated, no good would come of its building." Gion shrugged.

"Doubtless," said the *scolar*, "the truth looks otherwise to others. Probably some say that the Austriacs offered to send engineers to build the bridge, and the Ursera counselors agreed: so the deal is a deal with il Giavel in effect, if not in truth. Until the bridge was built, there was no harm in letting this part of the world rule itself. The way to the Pass couldn't be blocked by anyone here. But now that gold comes through here from the south—"

"And possibly armies," Mariarta's father said again.

"Aye," Gion said. "Ursera controls that bridge, the Hapsburgs think...so Ursera and its country needs controlling itself. Who knows what ideas we might get about striking up friendships with the Talians...or blocking the Hapsburgs' way south to fight them? Suddenly we're a hole in their southern defenses." He sighed. "It's late to

wish the bridge unbuilt. But I wish they'd stop their foolish warring, the whole pack of them."

There were mutters of agreement. Mariarta's father laughed softly. "The Austriac *saltér*," he said, "even *he* calls it the Devil's Bridge. Or something that means that—I forget the word."

"*Teufelsbrücke*," Mariarta said from the cushion-seat, yawning.

"You still here?" her father said, surprised. "Why aren't you in bed an hour ago? Say good night to the gentlemen and be off."

Mariarta stood up, noticing the thoughtful look with which the *scolar* favored her. Earlier, it might have made her nervous. Now she just returned it, and made a curtsy. "*Buna notg*," she said, and everyone at the table murmured good night to her as she walked to the door. As she went by the *scolar*, he leaned back toward her and said softly, "*Gute nacht, präsidenterin. Erinnern Sie mich.*"

Mariarta smiled at being called "mayoress" again: but she was not sure what the rest of it meant. She went up the stairs, got into bed in the dark, and knew nothing more until she heard dil Curtgin's cock shrieking *kikiriki*...

•

She rose early, but he had risen earlier. Her mother and Onda Baia were baking, and the *scolar* was gone. "While it was still dark," Onda Baia muttered.

Mariarta's mother laughed. "Baia, he's going home:

what traveler wastes time about that? Mati, we need some water.”

Quiet and thoughtful, Mariarta got the yoke. Everything outside looked as it had yesterday morning, but everything was different, now, because of the *scolar* and his book.

“Did you see it?” a voice hissed behind Stefan’s barn. Mariarta jumped, for her mind had been on the woman with the bow. She turned to see Urs pitching cowshed dung from a cart onto the pile behind the barn. “Did you look in the bag?”

She blinked; the wind was whipping her hair into her eyes. Mariarta wanted to tell him everything. But she felt the woman’s cool eyes upon her. To say anything would be to let someone else in on their secret. “No,” Mariarta said, hurrying away. Behind her, she heard Urs laughing. Soon enough he would tell all the other children that the *mistral*’s daughter wasn’t so brave after all.

Mariarta didn’t care. What someone else thought was more important, now. She headed for the river, and the wind stroked her hair out of her eyes as she went.

TWO

The feasts and fasts went around with the seasons, as in all the mountain valleys. *Calandamarz* and the *alpigiada* came and went, the year got old and was born again: two years passed, three years. After the brief times of sun, the snows came and shut the valley away from the rest of the world. And around the time the *föhn* began to blow, when the snow was just beginning to thin on the lower pastures, the third year after the *scolar* had come, Mariarta noticed the old herd.

Everyone knew about those few men who preferred never to come into town at all, but lived on the highest alp that might be green, eating nothing but plain flour *fanz* porridge, and the milk and cheese they got from the cows. Their clothes were all leather, cowskin with the hair left on: their rough boots were hides bound with sinew. Usually these hermit-herdsmen were only seen during storms too violent to weather even in the stout alp huts—especially in the earliest, treacherous part of spring, at the beginning of the *föhn* time. Those storms dropped tons of snow, and

brought the avalanches crashing down. It hailed, too, and thundered, and the *föhn* came screaming over the house-roofs and ripped the tiles away.

It was just rising, that wind, when the last few herders came from the low pastures to the west. With them came the old herd.

The sight of him surprised everybody. No one knew quite what to do with him, except Mariarta's bab, who was taking charge of everything as usual, hurrying from house to house, telling people to get ready for the storm. He told the old herd he could stay in their shed until the weather broke.

That was when Mariarta first saw him, in the frontway shed, scraping up the straw to make a place to lie, while the cows moved calmly around him. As she peered in at him, he turned. His look fell on Mariarta—and he got a shocked expression, almost a look of outrage. Mariarta hurried away uneasily to the kitchen, where her mother was busy at the fire. “How is he, Mati?”

“He's making a bed for himself.”

“Good. There's some wheat porridge for him on the table. And here's hot milk too. Don't spill it.”

“Mamli,” Mariarta said, “is he mad?”

Her mother looked thoughtful. “Certainly he doesn't live like us. But he wouldn't hurt anyone, if that's what's worrying you. And even if he was astray in the wits, we'd need to be kind to him anyway.”

Mariarta nodded, took the porridge, and went to the cowshed, carefully pushing its half-door open. The cows shuffled aside for her. The old herd had made himself

comfortable in the corner, with a box he had pulled over to be a table, and he sat on the floor, in a clean spot by the manger. He thanked her, gruff-voiced, for the food. Mariarta fled, afraid that she should see that look of outrage again.

The storm lasted three days. All that time Mariarta brought him his meals, and all that time she felt his eye on her. It made her nervous, but the nervousness had something to do with those grey eyes that watched her sometimes. Mariarta mentioned it to no one, not even Urs, who was filled with curiosity about “the wild man”, and pestered her constantly for details about whether he ate straw or howled.

On the fourth day, the storm began to clear. The wind was still blowing, but the sun peered through the flying patches of grey. That afternoon, ashamed of her fear, Mariarta paused on her way to fetch water from the river, looking over the half-door.

The old herd was sitting there unwrapping something from that bundle of rags. She saw him bring out a crossbow and run his hands over it—down the stock of it, down the long groove on top of the stock, where the bolt would lie. Then he saw Mariarta.

“Do you like it?” he said.

Mariarta swallowed, nodded. Her fear of him was fighting with her desire to touch the bow the same way he did.

He smiled. “I saw that in you,” he said. “The shooting.”

Mariarta’s heart leapt. Did he know about the woman in her head? “I want to—” Her voice died in her throat.

The old herd shook his head, looking somehow pitying. “*Bischuna, bischuna*,” he said, “so young to be ridden.”

“I want to learn!” Mariarta said.

“A girl has work, *mistral*’s daughter. Hard to sneak away to the alp—”

That was true. Mariarta knew her father would not approve. She would have to make sure no one in the village found out. She looked at the crossbow lying there in the herder’s lap—the smooth layers of horn welded together, the soft gleam of the wood in the filtered daylight that came in through the cracks of the cowbarn; the soft oiled-sinew sheen of the bridle and wrapping of the bow. She had to shoot it. She had to.

“I’ll find a way,” she said. “Where do you stay?”

“The lower alp. Surpalits hut, until May. Then—” He shrugged. “We go too high for a *mistral*’s daughter to come except once in a while.”

She nodded. Still, it would be two months of learning. “And in the fall—”

“September,” the old herd said. “Two months then, until that starts again.” He gestured with his eyes at the weather.

“I’ll come,” Mariarta said. “Not every day. They can’t know.”

He nodded. Mariarta heard her mother’s step coming from the kitchen toward the entryway. Hurriedly, she ran off.

•

She couldn't come every day. But Mariarta said to herself, *I'm the mistral's daughter: what's all this schooling for if not to make me clever?* And clever she became. Her lessons went so well that she was often done early. Her tutor praised her—very unlike him. She sang as she pounded the washing in the big tub, and about all chores showed such a good will that all the children in Tschamut were disgusted with her, for she was endlessly held up as a good example.

In the afternoons, when they were still dawdling about their own chores, Mariarta would slip away—carefully, to make sure no eye caught her going. Then she would hurry up the cow-trail that led over Crappa da Scharina to the lower alp. Only the old herd was there as yet. None of the other herders were so averse to human company that they cared to be there so early.

The herd was as good as his word. He taught Mariarta the bow. But first he made her build one.

It was no light business, and took days. The herd brought lengths of cured alder from his hut, and the plane, adze and chisels to shape them. He taught Mariarta how to choose wood for strength. He showed her how to carve the stock and set the bow in it; how to twine the bridle of sinew or rope, fastening bow and stock together with it in the cunning way that would absorb the shock of the released bow and quarrel. The herd taught her how to carve the “nut” that would release the drawn string when the trigger was pressed. Most difficult of all, he taught her how to carve the trigger that kept the nut in place until pressed, and he

beat her in a friendly way until she got exactly right the crossbow's most important part, the socket out of which the trigger-tooth fell, letting the nut turn and releasing the string.

Then came the finicky business of making quarrels for the bow to shoot—planing them straight, setting the feathers in them; learning to carve quarrels that needed no feathers, but had gouges carefully whittled into them so that the wood itself stood out like fins. The crossbow Mariarta finally finished and armed was crude, not much of a thing to shoot with—but making it had taught her how to fix one that was: like his.

The herd's bow was a thing of price. The nut was carved of chamois horn. The bow itself was horn of the ibex, rare in these parts, but common near Cuera of the prince-Bishops. Someone there had sawn the straightest part of one of those horns thin—five, six, eight times—then glued the layers together: not flat, to bend with the way the bow drew, but vertically, *against* the draw. The herd made her the carved-horn hook that hooked through your belt, which an archer used to draw the bow. You stood with your feet on the bow-arch itself, inside it, and bent till the hook at your belt caught the string. Then you straightened up. It was the straightening, the strength of your legs, not your arms, that pulled the string far enough for you to latch it over the nut. Then you chose your target.

It was nearly two weeks before the old herd let her shoot even once. Mariarta's impatience drove her wild. A hundred times before the herd had shown her how, she lifted her eyes, hunting something to shoot at—to aim at, to strike.

The urge made Mariarta feel the way she felt when the *föhn* blew hot in spring—the itch under the skin, the testy, edgy wildness. It frightened her.

And there were distractions. Urs caught her, one afternoon, going up the cow-trail. She spun him some wild story about going out to look for the first *steilalva* of the year. Mariarta was furious when, instead of going away, Urs insisted on helping her look.

This happened several times, until Mariarta realized that Urs was watching for her departures. He would follow her, accepting whatever crazed story she told him; when he came back to Tschamut, though he would be beaten for slacking, he would just grin that odd grin and go off to his chores. *He's lonely*, she thought one day, while doing the washing. Urs had to spend all day mucking out the stalls or bringing water for the cows from the river. Come the summer, he would go to the alp with the other men: nothing but days of milking, stoking the fires for the cheesemaking, scouring pots....

Mariarta stopped, staring at the wash-house wall. *When did I last see any of us on the mountain?* she thought. *All the ones I envied while I was having lessons. Paol and Cla, they're cowherds now too; Duri hardly sets foot out of the mill...* It had never occurred to her that all their childhoods had ended—that what she was doing now would be what she would do until she died. Washing, cooking, cleaning, mending, tending the garden behind the house.... Mariarta's lessons, which had made it possible for her to escape up the mountain, were only a cruel mockery. What use would they ever be? What use was speaking Daoitscha,

except to old wheezing Reiskeipf the *saltér*? Not that she particularly cared to talk to him. Once or twice now she had caught him looking at her out of those little eyes like a man eyeing a dish with his dinner in it. ...But all the rest of it, the counting and reckoning, the lists of kings and their great lords...it was useless to her. The only thing that remained *hers* was the shooting.

Mariarta considered the tub with its worn splitting staves, the dirty water in it, the bowl of wood-ash soap, the splashed gray flags of the floor. Then she thought of the alp, and her bow. Slowly, with determination, she began to scrub again.

•

That night, late, the wind woke her; and there were voices in it.

When the wind rose, it often hissed past the carved eaves, moaned to itself in the chimney. When half asleep, hearing the soft hiss of it in the pines, you could imagine long sorrowful stories being told, a voice like her mother's saying "Su, su, su..." about something that couldn't be helped.

This time, she heard the wind say "Su, su..." ...in her mother's voice.

At first, it didn't seem odd that the wind should sound like her mother. But slowly, in the dark, Mariarta realized the wind had never talked about *this* kind of thing before.

"We've got to start thinking of it, Cilgia."

"It's too early."

“It’s not. Look at the way she’s gone up, this past year!”

It was her bab’s voice. Mariarta lay wide-eyed in the darkness. Voices could not be heard clearly through these walls—

“It is. But, Fadri, the body may be old when the heart’s still young.”

“I know.... It still has to be thought about. And the prospects aren’t good around here.”

“But there are plenty of likely young men—”

“They’re none of them likely, Cilgia. Don’t think I haven’t seen Urs chasing after her. The boy has no hope of finding a trade. All he’ll ever have is someone’s hay to sleep in, and a penny or two from his share of the cheesemaking each year. No. There are only three serious possibilities. Duri—I won’t have it—you see the way the father works himself at the mill, and the son doesn’t work unless he’s beaten. Mati would wind up being miller and mother both, and die before her time. Flep di Plan—”

Her mother’s voice sounded alarmed. “That *I* won’t have. The father never lifts his eyes from counting his money, but he hasn’t a crust for a poor man. And his son’s cruel: did you see what Flep did to dil Curtgin’s cat, as a joke? Or he called it a joke. I won’t see Mati married into that place.”

Her bab snorted. “I can’t say I disagree with you, but we’ve still her bodily comfort to think of. That would be taken care of, even if the son never did another lick of work—”

“So that’s two. But who else—”

“Well.” Her father sounded uneasy. “I haven’t had her schooled for nothing. I want her... I want her to get *out*. Have a better chance, somewhere else.”

Now her mother sounded really shocked. “Not in Selva, surely! You know how those people are!”

Her bab sounded reluctant again. “I had been thinking...well, if Reiskeipf—”

“Fadri. He’s an *Austriac*.”

“Cilgia, if she married him, she’d be mistress of a big house in Ursera. She would meet fine people, not just peasants.”

“Like us, you mean.”

Her father spoke softly. “Like us, yes. What is there for us here? We hang onto life—for what? To do it next year, and the next. And to pay taxes, and taxes, to one prince or bishop or another, and get no good of it—”

“But *Reiskeipf*—!”

“Cilgia, it wouldn’t have to be forever. When he dies—”

“She’s not even married yet and already you’ve got her widowed!”

“It’s not unlikely. Have you seen the way he gasps when he’s here? He’s the kind to die young. He’ll leave an educated young widow with money, who’ll be in a position to pick a second husband she likes—some well-off merchant. It won’t matter if she doesn’t marry at all; she’ll have her inheritance from him.”

The wind hissed softly to itself in the pines, then rose again. “Have you seen him look at her, Fadri?”

“I have.” Her bab’s voice was heavy. “At least he would be willing. And she’s a maid, Cilgia, she’s going to find out about it sooner or later: how do we know she would find out less kindly from him than from one of the cowherds in someone’s shed?...”

A long silence. “If your mind is set on this, Fadri, I don’t want her wed until she’s old enough to take care of herself alone with such a man.”

“But the agreement will have to be made soon. Otherwise he may lose interest. Remember, it’s her the match is good for. From his point of view, she’s just another Urner peasant’s daughter.”

“Su, su....” her mother said.

“Will you talk to her, Cilgia? I don’t want it to come as a surprise.”

“I’ll talk to her. Not right away.” Her mother sounded bitter. “I need time to be able to make it sound as if I approve.”

“Oh, Cilgia...if there were another way—”

“I know. I know.”

And though they kept speaking, the rest of their words began to fade away, until finally the wind spoke no more words but its own.

•

When she woke before dawn, Mariarta scrambled out of bed, the hair standing up on her, not just with the cold. She scrubbed herself with water from the basin, then struggled into her undershift.

Reiskeipf. Mariarta pulled on her overgown, belted it tight, pulled the rough brown linen down hard and smoothed her sleeves. She stared out the window. The pines swayed in the warming wind.

How did I hear them? How?

Mariarta, the wind said. The breath of it came in the window and stroked back her hair.

Mariarta swallowed. “What?”

No answer.

“All good spirits praise God,” she said hurriedly, under her breath, “and so do I—”

Gently, under its breath, the wind laughed at her.

Mariarta was determined not to let what listened get the better of her. “What, then? What do you want?”

No answer but the sound of amusement, ebbing on the wind. It was hard to be completely cross with what laughed. It knew her. Mariarta thought of the young woman, serene-faced, cool, holding her bow—

That was her business this morning. Let the wind laugh as it might. Mariarta pulled on her shoes and stockings and went quietly down the stair.

She was within reach of the herd-hut on Surpalits by an hour after dawn. The whistling of the marmots was all about her as she climbed. Everywhere she saw them watching her, small soft paws hanging down, as she went up the path over Crappa da Scharina. Once she saw an old buck chamois bound up the nearby dry stream-bed. It flourished its heels splendidly as it leapt a huge boulder, so that Mariarta laughed to see it go. She didn't watch where

she put her feet, and in mid-laugh tripped, came down hard on a rock, and sat up, bruised and gasping.

Down the slope, the bells in Sontg Gieri's church were ringing for morning prayers. Mariarta smiled, thinking of the song about Sontg Margriata, how she lived on the alp for seven summers less fifteen days, disguised as a herdboy, and no one knew it until she fell on a rock too, bruising her breast, and the cowherd saw her and threatened to tell. Mariarta remembered how strange it had seemed when Bab Luregn the priest had once heard Telgia singing the song, and told her to stop. Later Mariarta's bab told her it was because the song was about one of the old goddesses, turned into a saint by the Church, to tame her. Here, though, no one could hear but the stones. Mariarta went on up the hillside, singing it between gasps.

At the hilltop she paused. The snow had retreated further than she had expected; Mariarta found herself dressed too warmly. She took off her oversawl, folded it over her shoulder and started down the trail to the other side, singing louder against the wind.

“‘What a thing to find on our alp!
Our master herder must hear of this,
what a pretty lady we have here!’
‘Don’t tell him, boy; and if you don’t,
I’ll give to you three wonderful shirts,
the more you wear them, the whiter they’ll get—’”

The wind was warm, taking away the last of the mist that clung about the Surpalits alp. Mariarta could see the

herd's hut there, with the great stones scattered above it, leading to the scree-slope that ran up Vanauls. Mariarta scrambled down the boulder-strewn slope to the Surpalits brook and forded it without getting too wet, in no more time than it took to sing how the herdboy wouldn't take the shirts the saint offered him, or the cows that gave nothing but cream, or the meadow that could be reaped a hayloft full every time. Up Mariarta went among the rocks of the far side, singing as she saw the old herd sitting outside the hut in the sun.

“I don't want your gifts, I'll take them not:
The master herder must hear of this!
'Then if you're really going to tell,
then you must sink in the ground to your neck!”

And Mariarta burst out laughing—the herdboy had been stupid not to take the gifts, when keeping quiet would have meant the saint stayed and kept the alp green and the cows well.

Mariarta made it onto the grass, finishing the rest more softly as she came into the meadow; how the saint left the alp. It withered behind her, and all the cows called to ask where she was going; but the spell of her secrecy was broken, and she couldn't stay.

“Farewell, farewell to everything;
heaven only knows when I'll return!
And when she went, the bells rang so hard
that all their clappers broke clean away—”

The herd watched her come, making no sign. He sat there, the wrinkled, bearded face immobile, his brown eyes on her, sharp. The good crossbow was in his lap.

“I know that song,” he said.

Mariarta leaned against the wall, panting with her exertion. “So does Bab Luregn.”

The herd laughed. “He knows some things. But not all. Some scare him. He won’t go near Tgiern Sogn-Gions.”

Mariarta laughed, since the ghost there was shut safe in a tin box and could howl all it liked until Judgment Day. “I don’t care about Bab Luregn. Only about that.” She looked at the bow.

The herd handed it to her, then reached beside him, coming up with a fistful of quarrels. “Today you shoot.” He walked around the side of the hut. Mariarta followed him.

The hut as seen from the side looked peculiar, since the herd had been shooting at it for many years. The wood of it was all splintered into a surface so rough it resembled fur in places. In addition, limewash had been used to paint target patterns on the wall, the commonest one being the square-within-squares like the board you played *jouss* on.

“Here,” the herd said, handing her the quarrels. Mariarta stuck five of them in her pocket, saving one out, then stood on the curve of the bow. She hooked the horn hook through belt and bowstring, stood, felt the string thump smoothly into place. Mariarta laid the quarrel in the groove, slipped its back against the string.

“The center,” the herd said, indicating the solid-painted square, a handspan across, in the middle of the target. “Not from here. Back up.”

Mariarta walked some fifty paces from the hut, noting the slight wind she walked into. It would make no difference to her shooting, though it talked in her ears, a low sporadic rumble, as she walked into it.

“There.”

She turned around. That white patch looked tiny from here.

She raised the bow, sighting down its stock, noticing the way the notch carved into the far end of the stock leaned to the left. The wind pushed gently at her back, ruffling her skirts. Mariarta aimed—

The wind rose. Not in any way that could be felt in clothes or hair; but it seemed to be rushing past her shoulders, down the stock of the bow, rising. The fletching of the quarrel whined softly with it, as if in eagerness to be let go. Everything seemed to be pouring or leaning toward the patch of white. Mariarta breathed in with a great effort, as if the air were all rushing away from her toward the target—then let the breath out and pressed the trigger. The quarrel leaped away, the bow bounded in her hands—

She heard the hollow sound of the quarrel sinking into the wood. That Mariarta was used to. What she was *not* used to was the sight of the quarrel dead in the middle of that white patch.

“Again,” the old herd said.

Mariarta was already spanning the bow. She had never felt anything like that rush forward and away, the

striking: not as something remote, but as something she was *part* of. Mariarta straightened, the quarrel in the groove, feeling the wind stream past her, hurrying her into what she wanted to do, to aim, shoot, strike—

The bolt leapt again. She had not even aimed.

It split the first one.

“Again,” the old herd said.

Mariarta strung the bow, aimed. Her excitement made her shake. The wind roared in her ears, an incoherent sound of exultation. The quarrel leapt away.

It struck a finger’s breadth from the other two.

“Slower,” said the old herd. “Again.”

Mariarta strung the bow, nocked up, lifted it, fired. The fourth quarrel splintered the first two as it drove into them.

The old herd nodded. His mouth moved, but Mariarta couldn’t make out what he was saying for the roaring of the air in her ears, the thunder of her racing heartbeat. This was what it was about. To fire, to be one with the firing, to strike. *What would it feel like, she thought, to shoot something live? Would I feel the blood leap the way I feel the wood shake, even from here?* Mariarta spanned the bow, stood upright, felt the shot happening already in the rush of air pouring past her. She let the quarrel go, almost without looking. It split the fourth. The pieces fell to the ground.

Mariarta strung the bow, set the last quarrel in it, then began to walk back toward the hut. The old herd was already settling into his seat by the doorstep.

She stood before him, breathing hard. The old herd shook his head.

“Little more teaching you need from me,” he said. “She’s come to finish the job.” He looked away. “Hard to be ridden so, *mistral*’s daughter. Beware she doesn’t take more of you than you can give.”

Mariarta stared at him in a mixture of astonishment and fear. “How do you know her?”

“I know of her.” The old herd turned away. “Don’t ask.”

“What do you mean—ridden?”

“You know. You hear her speak.”

Mariarta felt those cool eyes looking at her from what seemed a great distance—but could become quite close. “I hear the wind—”

The old herd nodded. “Some do. Some hear voices in water. Or see pictures in fire, or stone. It’s all the same. Their advice, their commands.”

“Do you hear them too?”

The old herd looked at her. “Too much talking about them—*brings* them. Sometimes they don’t care to be brought.”

Mariarta fell silent. Then she saw the movement by the corner of the hut.

It was Urs. He was disheveled, smiling at the sight of her and her bow. It was such a smile as she had never seen on him. It reminded her of Reiskeipf.

“Look at this, then,” Urs said. “What a thing to find on our alp.”

Mariarta stared at him, astonished and indignant. “You couldn’t have followed me up! I would have seen!”

“I didn’t follow you up,” Urs said, grinning that wicked grin. “I came yesterday, and didn’t come down.”

She was shocked at his recklessness. “You’re going to get beaten again, worse this time. Staying out all night, I bet Paol thinks the wolves got you—”

“He wouldn’t care,” Urs said, quite calmly. “It doesn’t matter anyway. ‘Oh what a fair maiden we have here—the master herder must hear of this’—”

Mariarta flushed hot with anger. It had never before occurred to her that in his following her, Urs wasn’t just after her company. Now that he knew what she was doing, he wanted to make Mariarta do something *he* wanted by threatening to tell—who? Probably her father. Mariarta could imagine what his reaction would be. And what did Urs want?

Me. He wants me to press his suit with bab—

And Urs had been her friend. Mariarta didn’t want Urs, or anyone, thinking he could threaten her so. But she had nothing to bribe him with. At the moment, she would have settled for being able to make Urs sink into the ground three fathoms deep, as Songt Margriata’s cowherd had when he tried to tell.

Mariarta turned to the old herd. He sat silent.

Hot with hopeless anger, Mariarta turned back to Urs. She was confused to see him go pale. Then Mariarta realized what Urs saw—the crossbow, spanned, the last quarrel ready in the groove—behind her, buried in the wall of the hut, three other quarrels, each splitting the last. It had apparently

just occurred to Urs that there were any number of ravines nearby where a body might never be found. And who would be surprised, when the herdboys had already been missing for a night? Wolves, werebeasts, anything might have happened to him...

The wind began to whine past her from behind, pushing at the bow in her hands. Mariarta swallowed, feeling the *föhn*-anger swelling in her. "Herdboy," she said softly, "I have other weapons than words. Dare to say a word to anyone about me, and you'll pay the price. You'll never know from behind what stone or tree the shaft will find your heart. Easy enough to tell my *bab* how you caught me alone and tried to force me, how I had to do it. There will be trouble, but not much. And *you'll* be dead."

Urs stared, openmouthed. "Go home," Mariarta said, feeling sudden satisfaction at his fear. "Take your beating. And don't dare boast again to anyone of how you're wooing me. I have other wooers you don't dream of. Go!"

Urs stared at Mariarta a second longer, then ran down the valley like someone pursued by wolves. Mariarta watched him go, smiling...and the smile faded as she realized that it was not hers but someone else's. The words had not been hers, either. Shocked, she took a step forward. "Urs—!"

"Too late," the old herd said behind her. Mariarta turned, horrified.

"Ridden," said the old herd. "As I said."

Mariarta stared at him, tears coming to her eyes.

He held out a hand. Mariarta handed him the crossbow, swallowing. "When should I come again?"

“I think you will not need to,” said the herd. “This next day after Mass-day is the *alpigiada*, and the cows come here. Then we go to Val Surrein until May; after that, to Alp Tgom until July. Too far for you. Come after August, if you will.”

She nodded, uncomfortable. “*Bien onn*, then.”

“Maybe so,” he said, and lumbered into the hut: “maybe so.” The door closed.

Mariarta headed home. The strangeness was past. She was torn between upset and relief over what had happened with Urs. Yet now he would leave her alone. And until the summer began to wane, she would have a long while of remembering today’s exhilaration, thinking about the promise of the autumn. The mountains—possibly even the hunt. Mariarta went off across the stones, the end of the song breathing itself in her mind.

“Sontg Margriata quickly goes
and says goodbye to everything.
‘Farewell to you my good master,
farewell to you my cauldron dear,
farewell to you my good good hearth
where I have always had good sleep—”

She never noticed the stillness of the wind, a thoughtful, waiting silence.

•

All the herds came together, the next day after Mass-day, to lead the cows out for the *alpigiada*. The cows were in their summer bells, wreaths of greenery around their necks, bunches of white *steilalva* between their horns. Brown Crutscha came out first, taking her place in the lead. All the other cows fell in behind her. Everything was as it should be, until the herds counted their own numbers. The old herd was not among them. Everyone assumed he was at the Surpalits hut. But when they got to Surpalits, one of the herdboys came running back into Tschamut with a message for Mariarta's bab. Together with the rest of the men in town, Mariarta's father took a lantern and stick and went to help in the search. It was a long time before they found the body. Quite late, Mariarta's bab came home to sit heavily by the fire.

"Probably just a misstep on that cliff trail," he said to her mam. He looked into the fire, shaking his head. "A man gets to be that age, a moment's carelessness is enough. ...At least it was quick."

Mariarta, though, remembered what the old herd had said about talking too much. She resolved to be careful in the future about mentioning the wind.

Finally the herds took the cows off Surpalits, over to Val Surrein. Soon after that, Mariarta went to the old hut. The herds had naturally taken all the cheesemaking equipment, the copper cauldrons and cheese-harps—but one thing Mariarta knew would still be there. She pried up the loose stone by the hut's hearth, reached into the hole beneath. There, wrapped in its rags, was the good crossbow. She bundled it into a basket, covered it with new-picked

herbs, and took it home, hiding it under the straw mattress of her bed. Then she began to wait. All Mariarta had wanted, once upon a time, was to be able to shoot. Now she could; now she realized that her life was going to be about more than just that. What more, she had no idea. But she would find out.

THREE

It was a lonely time for Mariarta after that: some weeks during which no one her own age would speak to her. Especially she missed Urs's company, but her father seemed glad they had stopped being together, and she dared not complain of it to him.

Her mother was not there to help. Word had come that her widowed sister in Tgierns, past Selva, was sick with a growth, and needed someone to nurse her until she died, which it was thought would happen within the month. Off Mariarta's mother went, in haste, leaving Mariarta to manage the house. At any other time, the responsibility would have pleased her: but heartsore as she was over her estrangement from Urs, it seemed only another annoyance. She took up her duties, though, and did them well...until one morning when the world turned itself upside down.

Mariarta was walking out to fetch water when a sound she had never heard before made her look down the street. The sound was of small bells, a high, soft tinkling: not the

bells of any of Tschamut's goats or cows. Mariarta put the yoke down, staring as the sheep came up the rise in the village street.

Tschamuts sheep, like all sheep in this part of the world, were grey. But these sheep were white, with black faces. In the sunlight their fleeces burned astonishingly bright. Their light eyes and the curve of their mouths gave them a merrier look than that of the more prosaic Tschamuts sheep. The first few of them trotted past Mariarta. From down the street she heard a call.

The shepherds were coming. Onda Baia stood in the doorway to look out at the passing sheep: she saw the eight men walking up the street, too, and gasped. They were dressed much as herds elsewhere, in breeches and gaiters, soft shoes and tunics: but the clothes were surprisingly fine—light-woven linen instead of wool, glove-leather for the breeches instead of rough hide. Their packs were of leather too, instead of rough sacking. The men were dark-complected, only partly from the sun: their features were odd, finer than usual. And the men were small. No one of them was even as tall as Mariarta, but they were strong-looking. Their hair was shining black, except for one man's, a dark brown-red; on all of them it waved or curled. Dark eyes glittered in the dark faces of the strangers, and teeth flashed white as they smiled at the villagers who came out to stare at them.

"Venetians," Mariarta breathed.

"Dwarves!" said Onda Baia, crossing herself, and plunged back into the kitchen. "Fadri, Cilgia, 'Nanin are here—!"

This once, Mariarta didn't think her aunt was overreacting. Venetians were uncanny. Stories were told about their great riches, their wiles, and the secret places in the mountains where they mined their wealth. That the Venetians would go willingly into those mountains, or cross them from the South as easily as they did, meant something was unnatural about them—for everybody knew the powers left over from the ancient days were stronger in the mountain depths than anywhere else. But at the same time, the '*Nanin*' were known everywhere as the greatest traders of the world. There was nowhere they would not go for the sake of rare and precious wares that would add to the power of their city that ruled the seas. That said, Mariarta wondered what brought them here in the guise of shepherds. *Though how sure am I of the truth of all those old stories?* she thought. *Vaniescha is a great land as well as a city, the books say. Can everyone in it be rich from a secret mine or a dragon's hoard? Why shouldn't there be plain fields on the other side of the mountains, and shepherds in them like ours?...*

Still, Mariarta swallowed hard when she saw one of the Venetians coming toward her. There was nothing ugly about the man—but she took a step back as he got close.

Smiling, he bowed. "*Bien di, misterlessa.*"

She might be unnerved, but her manners were still in place. "*Bien onn, jestér,*" Mariarta said, dropping a curtsy. "And *beinvegni* here among us. What brings you to Tschamut?"

He gestured at the flock. "Market is tomorrow in Ursera, as you know, *misterlessa*. If the *mistral* will permit, we would graze our flock on your lower slopes for a night,

and be away early in the morning. We will be glad to pay—
”

“Not in gems or gold, I hope,” Mariarta’s father said behind her. She stepped aside. “We could hardly make change.”

“We have coin of various kinds,” said the *Nanin*. “*Solidi* of the Pope, *thaleren* of Swabia, *danér* of the Bishops of Cuera—”

“I’m certain we can come to some arrangement,” her father said. “Have your people put the sheep in the near pasture for the moment. Come in and take a glass, *signur*—
”

Mariarta followed them into the kitchen. Her father’s mind was much on coin money, since Reiskeipf would be soon demanding the season’s grass-penny. Well, he would get a few more pence from these travelers—

Mariarta went to the wine-cask with a pitcher. Onda Baia was peering out the window into the street, where one of the dark men was going by; Baia drew back hastily, crossing herself.

“Onda,” Mariarta said, reaching to the plate-press for two stoneware cups, “they’re just *jastérs*, after all.”

Her aunt wheeled about, looking frightened and angry. “Just strangers, you *would* say, you and your father both. But it’s no surprise you’re so friendly with uncanny folk, seeing what’s in your blood—” She turned away.

Normally Mariarta would have let this pass. But an odd mood was on her. The hair stood up on the back of her neck; a breath of breeze chilled her there. “You said that

once before,” she said, stepping toward her aunt, “and now you’ll tell me what you mean.”

Odd to see how her aunt took a step back, as Mariarta had from the *‘Nanin*. “Oh, come now,” Onda Baia said, “you must have heard by now. Your great-grandfather on your father’s side brought the wrong bride home; it’s the talk of three villages. Out the keyhole the curst *tschalarera* went three years after he married her, leaving your *basat* alone, with their son your *tat* a babe in his arms. Ever after, child and man, the poor creature would go wild when the bad wind blew.” She would not say the *föhn*’s name. “And when your *tat* married, and your *bab* was born, he was just the same. And now you—” She eyed Mariarta. “Too friendly with any *jestér* to come along, too fond of being in the heights—”

Mariarta flushed hot. “Be still,” she whispered. The breeze coming in the door blew abruptly stronger. “My doings are my business. And if my *basat* married a windbride, what’s it to you? At least he managed to marry.”

Her aunt’s mouth fell open as the wind whipped her graying hair around her temples. “Don’t dare say a word to anyone,” Mariarta said. And hearing a word the breeze whispered in her ear, she added: “Else I’ll have a word with *bab* about where his sausages have been going.”

Onda Baia flinched and turned away, but that brought her in sight of the window, and one of the *‘Nanin* outside. Moaning softly, Baia sank onto the settle, staring at the floor.

Mariarta went back up the hall. A *tschalarera*’s *greatgranddaughter*... So that was the source of the wind’s

strangeness in her life. There was argument about what exactly windbrides were—some kind of demon, the priest said: a *diala*, others claimed, more mischievous than dangerous. Windbrides rode the storm, blew thatch or tiles off roofs, scattered hay in the fields. She had heard stories before about men who caught and married *tschalareras*. They made good wives and mothers, but you had to be careful to keep the keyhole stopped (if that was how you had caught one). Otherwise they would escape at the first opportunity.

Still— She thought of the young woman with the bow. Where did she fit into this?....

Mariarta knocked on her father's door, stepped in with the wine and the cups. Her bab looked pleased; apparently he and the 'Nanin had driven a bargain he liked.

"*Engrazia*," her father said, and the *jestér* said "*Grazie*". Mariarta curtseyed and left. As she shut the door, her father said, "Now perhaps you might consider selling us a pair of your sheep, to better our stock—"

"Ah, you grey-wool people, you'd like that," the 'Nanin said, chuckling. "Only if you can better the price we'd get in Ursera, *signur mistral*—"

Mariarta went to the kitchen to start dinner. Onda Baia was nowhere to be seen. *Probably she's gossiping with Telgia*, Mariarta thought. *Good riddance....*

The street was clear, but nearly everybody in town had gathered where the rough fencing of the lower pasture met the road. *Looking at the sheep*, Mariarta thought scornfully. Whether a stranger to Tschamut was human or an animal, people would stare. But at the same time, she

thought of the way those fleeces had blazed in the sun.... So shortly she ambled down to where everybody else in town stood leaning on the fence, slipping in between old Paol and little Flurin to look down the pasture.

The sheep burned white against the green grass. The herd ram lifted a noble head with a great double curl of horns and chewed with dignity, gazing back at the villagers. Several lambs frisked about in the grass, or wandered after their placid mothers. The '*Nanin* herds sat on boulders near the river, dipping their linen shirts in the river and putting them on again to cool themselves. One of the herds was playing some meandering southern song on a pipe.

The village people muttered about the visitors. Most of the talk was about the whiteness of those sheep, and what price the villagers would ask if *they* had such to sell. Though who could afford such beasts except wealthy people? Like the dwarves. Talk turned to those hidden mines only the Venetians knew, guarded by terrible creatures tame only to the '*Nanin*. There was no good to be got from dealing with dwarves, everyone agreed.

All the same, no one stopped staring at the sheep.

Mariarta was about leave when she saw Urs leaning there, at the end of the fence, looking unhappy. She knew that look: the other herds had been at him again. Mariarta turned away. Urs saw her, the pained look turning to a scowl, bitter. He turned his attention back to the sheep.

Shortly the murmur of conversation began again. Mariarta stole a sidewise glance. Urs was still gazing at the flock. A lamb, white as a cloud, came gamboling out toward them. Mariarta watched Urs watch the lamb, saw the shadow

of a smile steal across his face: the first such expression in days. She should have been glad. But someone beside Urs poked him; laughter rang out. Urs smiled more broadly, glanced over to see if Mariarta was looking. His smile went broader, more cruel. He turned, calling to the lamb. “Ai, Agnete—”

The other herds, at the other end of the fence, snickered.

“One lamb’s just like another, after all,” Urs said. “If I can’t have one, I’ll have another. One that does what *I* say.” A soft chorus of “baa”ing broke out. Other voices, not just Urs’s, called, “Hoi, lambkins, *agnete*—”

Mariarta went off home to see about the soup.

Onda Baia was back, since suppertime was close. Mariarta put the iron trivet on the table, eased the soup-pot off its crane, and set the pot down. Her father came in, smiling, jingling the contents of one pocket.

“Did you get a good price, *bab*?” she said.

He nodded, sat, reached for the bowl she handed him. “Two silver *danér*.”

“So much!” She handed her aunt a bowl.

“It’s a good price, but they want to make sure their sheep look right for the morning market.”

“I don’t think they need much work,” Mariarta said. “They look like they’re just out of the bath as it is.”

Her father dipped his horn spoon into the soup. “It would be nice to have a pair of them. They have plenty of ewes, and a ram lambling.”

“I saw it,” Mariarta said. It was the one Urs had been watching.

“They won’t sell, though,” her father said. “I couldn’t match what they’ll get in town. Not that we have the money to spare.”

Mariarta filled her own bowl, sighed and sat down.

“You look tired, *buobetta*.”

Mariarta glanced at him. “Your mother will be back soon,” her *bab* said.

She had to smile at him. He knew why she was worn out...but he wouldn’t rub her nose in it. “Yes, *bab*,” she said, “she will.”

Onda Baia scraped her bowl noisily clean, then got up and hurried out, heading for the privy as she always did after the first serving. Mariarta listened for the sound of the back door shutting, and said to her father, “But one thing quickly, *bab*. Does *mumli* know I’m the *subbiada* of a windbride?”

Mariarta’s father stopped with his spoon halfway to his mouth: then put it down. “Baia told you that, did she.”

“Is it true?”

He finished his spoonful of soup. “She vanished suddenly, your *basatta*. It happened between night and morning.” Her *bab* put his spoon down and broke a piece of bread, dunked it in the soup. “Your *basat*, though, had just taken the plug out of the keyhole—the one he’d put in the day he found her in his house. No one saw her come. She was just there, one morning, this beautiful woman...so my father told me *his* father had said.” Mariarta’s *bab* shook his head, picked up the spoon again. “He knew the old stories, and treated her arrival the way they said he should.

She stayed three years. Then—he thought he was acting foolishly, he took the plug out....”

“But the wind,” Mariarta said, and stopped. She felt someone watching her.

“We have problems with it,” her father said, ruefully. “As you’ve seen.”

“Yes, *bab*,” Mariarta said, as Onda Baia came back in, sat herself heavily on the bench, helping herself to more soup. Mariarta noticed her father watching her. She smiled at him to let him know she was all right. He finished his soup methodically, got up, and went out.

Onda Baia noisily finished her soup and went to her closet upstairs. Mariarta waited for the creaking of the ceiling to tell her that her aunt was in bed. Then she took a long while about the cleaning, until dusk turned to dark. This was usually her mother’s job, putting the kitchen to sleep—smoothing the hearthfire, starting the wheat porridge for tomorrow morning. Her father went to bed too, the upstairs floor creaking under him. With the kitchen fire down, only the one tallow-dip burned in its sconce near the table. Shadows dwelt deep in every corner, the pots gleamed only dimly. With the starlight and moonlight outside, it was brighter without than within.

Mariarta finished the chores, moved to the tallow-dip to put it out—then changed her mind, and went out into the street.

She let her eyes get used to the flood of silver light from the stars and the moon at first quarter. No breeze blew; the air was still warm from the day. The river sang softly in its banks. And another sound: voices—

Mariarta went down the street, stopped and listened. The voices were too soft to make out words, but there were two of them, one low and amused, the other higher, insistent. Mariarta walked toward them.

She came to the fencing of the pasture by the river. No campfire was lit there. But in the starlight and moonlight she could see the strangers' sheep as they grazed or dozed on their feet. Darker shapes were there, too: most of them didn't move. One sat on a stone. Another stood nearby.

"I said no, herdboy. You've not enough money for one of these. Not even your *mistral* did."

"Please, *signur*. I have to have one. Just one."

Urs, and the chief 'Nanin herd. Mariarta shivered.

"So how much do you have, then?"

"An eighth *denér*."

The herder laughed softly. "That wouldn't buy even one of that lamb's ears. Go home, boy, and forget this."

"Please, I'd give anything—"

"If you had anything."

Why must he do this? Mariarta thought, as Urs kept pleading. Unless the other boys had shamed him into trying to get this lamb when he couldn't get "the other"—

"You said all your ewes bear twin lambs twice a year," Urs was saying. "If it's true, you'll have plenty more! Just one—for kindness—" He was stammering now, almost crying. "I saw it—I can't help it—want it so much, so much, the pretty thing—"

Mariarta turned to leave, her insides twisting with sorrow.

“‘If it’s true’,” the ‘*Nanin*’ chief said. “You’d make me out a liar, boy?” But the voice was amused. “Maybe there’s something in what you say. But what you have is too small to think of as a price. And a price there must be.”

Urs said nothing.

“Down on your knees, then,” said the chief herder. “Tell your beads once over, so I can hear. Then the lamb is yours.”

There was no telling whether Urs had his beads with him, but he could count. He said the *padernostras* and *salidamarias* in frantic haste, and the ‘*Nanin*’ herder listened in silence. That silence somehow smiled.

“There, then,” said the chief herder. “Take the ramling, boy. It’s weaned off milk. I’ll tell your *mistral* when we leave this morning that I gave you the lamb.”

Mariarta saw Urs’s black shape run across the grass to fetch the lamb. The other black shape didn’t move. It was looking at her.

She hurried away. Not until she was home in her bed did Mariarta feel safe again. Sleep did not long elude her.

In her dreams, the wind roared like a beast.

•

The herds left early. When Mariarta came down to restart the fire, just before dawn, she found a scrap of parchment under the front door, with her father’s name written on it. She gave it to him when he came into the kitchen for his bowl of porridge; he spread it out on the table with one hand, puzzling the letters out.

Then he frowned and started eating “Odd, this. They left Urs one of their lamblings. Says here he paid for it. What with?”

“It can’t have been money,” Mariarta said softly. “He had little.”

Her father pushed the scrap away. “I don’t like it. Dealing with the little people in cash, that’s one thing. But doing deals with ‘*Nanin* in anything but money...isn’t wise. The debt has a way of increasing.” But then her *bab* sighed. “Never mind. He’s just a poor boy. Why would anyone bother doing him harm?”

The rest of the village heard the news, and went to the lower pasture to see the lamb. Urs was the center of attention, and proud; but the lamb seemed to be the chief cause of his joy. It really was beautiful and loving, rubbing against Urs like a cat, bouncing away to graze, then running back to him like a child to its mother. He would carry it in his arms, petting it and talking to it, until it squirmed to be let down to graze. Always it would come running back to him, gazing at him with those odd light eyes, adoring.

The herdboys were singing a different song this morning, as Mariarta heard when she came to look at the lamb. When they had dared Urs into this, they had foreseen nothing but his failure and embarrassment. Now they were abusing one another about the sudden improvement in his status—for Urs had taken a jump upward in the village’s pecking order. When the lamb grew up, it would be in demand to be bred to others’ ewes. Now Urs stood to make enough money or goods to become, eventually, a moderately well-to-do man. Mariarta heard the other herdboys asking

each other bitterly why they'd been so stupid as to taunt Urs into this—

“Because you're idiots,” Mariarta said. The herdboys glowered at her. “You're all just a great mass of spite. Can't you even have the grace to be glad for Urs, that some good came out of your badness?”

“Baa,” said one or two of the herdboys.

Urs was running across the pasture, and the lamb frisked after him, bleating delightedly. Urs stopped, and it danced around him, burning white in the sunshine. Urs saw Mariarta watching him.

He paused—then bent to pick up the lamb, cuddling it, and turned his back on her.

Mariarta started back to the house. “Baa,” said the herdboys to her retreating back.

She went about her chores that day, and that week, and the week after that, feeling ever more heartsore. Suddenly all the others seemed artlessly eager to tell her how Urs and the lamb were getting on. No one had ever seen a pet like it; it even came when called. Alvaun, Urs called it, “silver-white”, a name for sun on snow. The buds of horns were beginning: its fleece was growing so fast, it would need to be shorn soon—that would be a pretty penny in Urs's pocket too. Suddenly the village girls found Urs worth courting. They followed him around whenever they were free; Mariarta heard their chatter, admiring and envious, go by the house often. She took to staying inside, once her morning's expedition to the high alp was over.

Her father, if he noticed, said nothing. Twice during that time he called the village council together, once about

the everlasting Selvese demand for a share of the Tschamuts alp, once regarding Nal Asturin's manure stand, which was getting out of hand again. Each time he told Mariarta to come sit in the meeting, quietly, listening to what he said and did. During the first meeting, when Paol glanced at her, her father said, "A girl who writes and reads Daoitscha and Latin and the home-tongue has better things to listen to than street gossip. Here, Mariarta, write what we say." And he pushed the quill, inkpot and old scraped parchment to her. Hot with pleasure at the praise, Mariarta wrote everything they said, until her head and hand ached.

Word got out, of course. The other children began calling her *misterlessa* to her face. Mariarta let the mockery pass. Urs might have his lamb, but never had there been a girl in the *mistral's* counsels. Afterwards, Mariarta wondered whether her father had done this to give the village something to talk about besides Urs. Whatever his intention, Mariarta was grateful. The nights of taking notes, and afternoons of transcribing them in more detail, interested her so that she had no time to spare for thinking about Urs.

Not that the subject didn't come up. The third council meeting, called to discuss the Selvese's response to Tschamut's latest refusal of their offer, slid away toward its end into gossip, the six men mulling over old feuds, new problems: Paol's lower field and its bad drainage, Mudest's maltreatment of his wife—getting worse, even after he had been taken out and beaten for it just last month—and Urs's lamb.

"Growing on well enough," Paol grunted. Mariarta put her head down, kept scribbling.

“Well enough, aye,” Flurin said, “but the problem is the boy.”

“He’s not neglecting his work, is he,” Mariarta’s *bab* said.

“Oh, no. Doing it better than usual, if anything. But he spends every other minute of his time with that lamb. Washing it, brushing it, talking to it. Finding it the choicest bits of greenery, bringing them to it in its stall. He sleeps with it, apparently.”

Paol said easily, “The usual thing. The boy’s realized how valuable it is. Wants to make sure it grows up.” His voice lowered to a growl. “I can understand why. Some of the other boys—”

“Jealous,” Flurin said.

“Aye. Heard a few plots being hatched about spiring the lamb off somewhere to throw a scare into Urs. Something else, nastier, about leading it onto high ground, having it come to grief.” Paol poured himself another cup. “I beat the boys I caught plotting—told them you would know who was responsible if anything happened to the beast. So now you know.”

“Yes, well,” Mariarta’s father said, “never mind it now. What *are* we going to do about poor Nonna? This is the second time this month that Mudest’s blacked her eyes—”

Mariarta wrote. Next morning, after her father was off on his rounds, she went to Paol’s barn, where Urs kept the lamb until it was time to take it to pasture in the morning.

She was shaking all over. At first it had seemed simpler to let Urs be angry at her. But the longer this went

on, the worse it would get. If she didn't do something soon, there would never be any chance of getting things back the way they were—

—but then what? Mariarta moaned softly to herself. Urs would surely want her to let him woo her. Her father would not permit it, lamb or no lamb. It would all start again.

But she couldn't bear him being angry at her—

So now she made her way to Paol's barn. Urs was there: she heard bumping inside the stall, rustles of sweet hay being put in a manger. And the voice. "Alvaun," it said, "my little Alvaun, my honey, my sweetheart, eat up, sweetheart."

Mariarta opened the barn door.

It took her eyes a while to get used to the dimness. Urs had just straightened after arranging the new-cut grass and hay. The lamb, shining in the dimness, was eating from its manger. Urs stared at Mariarta.

"I wondered when you would come," he said. "Come on and look. He doesn't bite."

"I know that," she said, and went to pretend to look.

"Everybody else came a long time ago," Urs said. It was hard to tell whether his voice meant to be matter-of-fact, or wistful.

"I've been busy," Mariarta said.

"Yes, we've heard." Urs laughed. "The great writer to the *mistral's* council! *Misterlessa.*"

"It wasn't my idea." *I came to tell him I was sorry about how wrong things have gone: why isn't anything coming out that way?* "Urs, listen—"

“But you didn’t say no. Well, there are more ways to be important than scribbling!”

Mariarta opened her mouth, but never had a chance. “I can be rich, with Alvaun!” Urs cried. “I can have anything I want, in a few years, when I have a big herd of white sheep, all my own! I can have any girl I want, build a house—”

“What you wanted once,” Mariarta said quietly, “was me.”

Urs turned away to caress the lamb. “Not any more,” he said. “I have Alvaun now. He’s my friend, he loves me.”

“I’m your friend!” Mariarta cried.

“But you don’t love me,” Urs said. “You don’t love anything but your high-and-mighty old father the *mistral*. Not enough to—” He went silent.

“To what?” Mariarta cried. “To make him do something he thinks would be stupid? Just to please your pride, so you can show everybody how important you are, that you caught the *mistral*’s daughter? Caught her by threatening her, by trickery?”

The lamb was rooting in its manger. Urs peered in, and after a moment muttered, “He loves me.”

Unhappily Mariarta thought, *This was the care he wanted to give me. If he can’t give it to me, he’ll give it elsewhere—* Urs straightened. “He wants more grass.”

“He’s not a *person*,” Mariarta said, desperately.

Urs glared. “He is too!” he cried. “He’s more a person than some people around here. He does what he *wants* to.” Urs took the scythe from the barn wall, turned to look at

Mariarta. Sunlight came in the cracks of the boards of the barn, gleaming off the scythe's sharp edge.

"He *is* a person," Urs whispered.

Mariarta stood mute, frozen by the glint of metal, the glint in his eye.

Urs went out to cut more grass.

The lamb rooted in its manger, bleated, and looked at Mariarta. It really was a pretty thing, delicately made, and so white, so clean-looking. The sweet smell of the grasses that Urs had been cutting hung about it. And those odd light eyes made it even more attractive to look at, somehow: human eyes, from the color of them—

Mariarta took a step backwards, unnerved—then ran out of the shed.

•

She threw herself back into her chores in desperation. The light of the hot day mellowed to gold, and her father came home for the nightmeal: Onda Baia came home from her crony's house, sat and ate as if she had done the day's work and not Mariarta. Father and aunt went to bed, while Mariarta, aching inside, moved about like the sorcerer's doll in the story, scouring the pots, putting the next morning's porridge on the embers. It was after dark before she came to herself, feeling released from the cruel constraints that daylight and the need to act normally had placed upon her.

Mariarta lit the tallow-dip, then sat at the table, staring into the darkness. She had said everything wrong. She must

go speak to Urs again, try to put things right. Otherwise—
A terrible shudder went down her neck, a breath of cool
wind from through the upper half of the kitchen door.
Otherwise something would go very wrong indeed.

She went out, eased the door closed behind her and
let her eyes get used to the dark. *No harm in asking for
help*, she thought, walking up the alley. She turned left
into the street, toward the church. Its belfry reared black
against the sky full of blowing silver cloud. In the wind,
the bell shifted and rang softly, sounding muted and
impotent in this uneasy night.

Cloud slipped over the moon and away, so the church
seemed to come and go like a silvery ghost. Only the
blackness of its doorway remained the same. Mariarta felt
unwilling to go into it. Nonetheless, softly, in she went.

Mariarta moved quickly sideways in case Bab Luregn
should be in the church and see her silhouetted in the
doorway. Hanging from its chain, the candle-flame of the
presence light above the altar shone softly red, like a
watching eye. There was no other light but the moonlight
coming through the windows on the southern side. That
went out as a cloud hid the moon.

And then a sound happened: the clank of metal on
metal. Mariarta's heart beat wild with fear. The clank
happened just once: and another metallic sound, a squeak.
Then silence.

Mariarta stood still, afraid it was bab Luregn, about
some mysterious priestly business—or worse, afraid that it
was *not* bab Luregn. *Who else would be in here? Whatever
they're doing, it doesn't sound like praying—*

She heard splashing. Mariarta moved further to the side. The moon came out, overlaying the floor with white arches of light. The radiance faintly showed someone in the right-hand side of the church's tiny apse, by the baptismal font. The font's shape looked odd—

Its top's open, Mariarta thought. She heard another splash. Mariarta pressed herself against the stone of the church wall, breathing easier as the moon lost itself in cloud again, the bright shapes on the floor fading. Footsteps went by in front of her. She held still as a human shape was silhouetted in the lighter darkness of the open doorway. It moved away quietly.

Silently, Mariarta made her way to the baptismal font. She ran her hands over it. It was a big stone bowl on a pedestal, with a hinged top of bronze, and a lock.

The lock was broken; the font's lid leaned against the wall. Someone had been stealing holy water.

But why would anyone—

Mariarta sagged against the font in confusion. Bab Luregn would give anyone holy water if they asked for it, and had a good reason. To throw on a demon, or sprinkle on the wheatfields to bless them. Whatever.

But if the reason wasn't good—

Abruptly her own words came back to her. *It's not a person.*

Yes it is—

And she also recalled bab Luregn's words to her and the other children, long ago, before they made their communion and confirmed the vows their godparents had made at their own baptisms: *No one really has a soul until*

they have been baptized. Until you are baptized, you are no one in particular to God. You might as well not have a soul at all.

The red eye of the presence light gazed at Mariarta, accusing. *He's going to baptize the lamb,* she thought. *The way the frer baptized the windbride in the story, and made her human, gave her a soul.* It was priest-magic, like making Mass—

Mariarta went hurriedly out of the church. One thing she felt sure of: baptizing *anything* with stolen holy water could have no good result.

Where would he be? she wondered. *Not in the shed. It was too hot today. The sheep would be in the upper pasture, on the alp. And Urs was watching them.*

Mariarta ran up the path that led to the higher pasture, the wind roaring in her ears. To that cool presence, inwardly she cried, *Help me stop him. Oh, help me—!* It was certainly the stupidest thing Urs would ever have tried.

And you drove him to it, the back of Mariarta's mind said. *If something happens, it will be your fault—*

She turned the last curve on the path which led to the pasture, straining her eyes to see in the fitful light. The moon went behind the clouds; from above came a rumble of thunder. Light failed. Mariarta stood still, listening hard.

She heard the random bleating of sheep as they wandered about in their usual midnight doze. Then, in the rising wind, she heard footsteps in the grass. And a bleat, small and cheerful: the welcoming baa of a lamb.

Mariarta stumbled toward it. Darkness grew: the clouds were gathering, the moon was shut away. Another rumble of thunder, closer— “Urs!” she shouted.

No answer. Had he even heard her? *Go away*, she said to the wind roaring in her ears; *how can I hear anything? Be still!*

To her astonishment, it obeyed, dropping off so suddenly that her ears rang with the quiet. For a moment she could hear nothing but sheep bleating, disquieted. Then Mariarta heard something else.

“Ego—bap—bap-ti-zo—Al-bus—”

“NO!” she shrieked. “*Urs, no!*” And she saw him, in a flicker of lightning from the approaching storm, near the great boulder in the middle of the upper pasture—a black shape, kneeling, with the white shape, so small, burning so white, gathered in his arms. The black hollows of his eyes, looking at her, were shadowed like the sockets of a skull.

“No, *don’t!*” she cried again. And deliberately, still looking at her, with the herdsman’s skin of stolen holy water in his hand, Urs shouted over the rolling of the thunder, so that Mariarta should clearly know what he was doing, and fully know the pain: “—*in nom-i-né Patris, et Fil-i-i, et Spiri-tu Sanc-tus—amen—*”

And smudged the lamb’s forehead with a hand already wetted from the skin.

Then the lightning struck, and the sound of it mingled with Urs’s scream as he rolled away from the boulder. Great rocks and smaller splinters were struck off it, flaming, and flew hissing through the air to bury themselves in the pasture. Mariarta, knocked sprawling, now scrambled up,

choking with the brimstone stink of the lightning bolt, and screamed, “*Urs!*”

Her heart leapt as he levered himself slowly to his feet. *Not dead*, she thought in desperate relief. A blot of white, burning white, stood near Urs. He reached for it.

It shook itself, began to darken like a cloud going stormy. In shock Urs staggered back. The thunder rumbled—not from the sky, but from that small fleecy shape, growing and darkening—its fleece going the smirched color of the clouds overhead, darkening to the color of night. And still that shape burned, horribly visible, and still it grew. For a dreadful few moments the thing held a lamb’s shape, monstrous, a lamb the size of a horse, of a bull. Then it lost that form, became huger yet. Great spreading horns sprouted, thick as trees, and the horrible shape shook its head wildly, bellowing in pain and rage, its eyes gone wide and burning like red flames. Bigger the eyes grew, till they burned like moons in raging eclipse; huger grew the head that bore the dreadful horns, and the great shoulders and chest and the massive hooves sharp as knives; a bull indeed, shaggy, twice as big as a house, and black. It threw its terrible head up and bellowed again. The thunder answered it from directly above, so that the sound echoed from Piz Giuv to Piz Val Ruinatsch and back.

Once more the lightning struck, this time further up the pasture, where it ran against the mountain’s skirts. In the lowering cloud, all the sky went white with the stroke; the only things not white were the bull, and the small dark shape of Urs. Mariarta was astonished beyond horror to see, by the light of the next lightningbolt, Urs reaching out

his arms to what had been his lamb. His voice rang out feeble against the thunder: “Alvaun—”

Those burning eyes dwelt on him as he staggered back, as the dark shape advanced. Thunder rumbled deadly in its throat as Urs’s awful godchild moved slowly toward him. Urs’s face was clear to see by the dark-burning light of the monster-bull. He wore a look of dreadful realization—that the Church’s magics *can* give a creature a human soul, but that souls do not come out of nowhere. If one is not already available, by some Power’s grace or other, then another will be supplied—or taken.

Urs fell to his knees. The bull reared up, a great black mass against the dark clouds, and roared. The huge razory forehooves, each as wide as a tall man was high, came down. If any scream came from Urs, it was lost in the thunder.

The mountainside shook. The earthquake-impact released Mariarta from her fear-frozen state—or perhaps what freed her was the look in those burning eyes, of a power with a thirst unslaked, as it snuffled about the poached and bloody ground its hooves had struck.

Mariarta fled down the path to the village as the storm broke, bolt after bolt striking the upper pasture. The rain, released from the sky, came pouring down. Below her in the village, the bell of the church was ringing wildly. *Too late*, she thought, as the wind pushed her, and the rain lashed her tears from her face. *Too late for us all. And it’s all my fault.*

Oh, Urs!

The thunder crashed behind her. In it she heard, unmistakable, the roar of the bull.

Mariarta ran.

•

The questions began immediately, and did not stop for many days. Everyone was horrified, as well they might have been: bab Luregn was beside himself for the misuse of the holy water. In the morning he reconsecrated the font, and went to the upper pasture to pray for the dead boy's soul. But quickly he came down, for rocks rolled off the mountainside at him when he spoke the holy names, and the grass seemed to wither away from the holy water he sprinkled. Some people said it showed how bad the boy's sin had been: others said it was a sign his ghost was not going to be quiet.

There proved to be more immediate concerns. The spring-stream that watered the upper pasture dried up. The whole alp began to sicken. The needles of the trees bordering the grass dropped away, leaving bare skeletons of wood that didn't dry, but rotted. The flowers, even the *steilalva*, holiest of them all, wilted to nothing. Worst for the town, all the grass started dying, not just where bab Luregn had poured his water. It died back in unhealthy-looking patches, revealing bare sour earth on which nothing would root. There would be no more hay from that side of the mountain: next year, half the village's winter feed for its beasts would be gone.

Shortly no beast would stay in the upper pasture. In the weeks following the lamb's baptism, animals put there began to die—simply sickening without warning after a

day or so. The villagers swiftly stopped bringing any animal there.

The deaths did not stop. A month later, the first sheep was found torn apart. The hunter from Selva who came to look at the corpse said no bear or wolf did such damage—this was something much bigger. Mariarta's father had told her not to tell anyone but bab Luregn what had killed Urs, for fear people would panic. Now, though, the talk began. Mariarta took to staying inside, to avoid the cold, frightened looks the village people gave her—some of them believing it strange that what killed Urs should have spared her.

Soon enough they had something else to talk about. It wasn't more than another month before one herdboy, on a dare, went to the alp after dark. About midnight Clau came screaming down the hill to pound on bab Luregn's door, shrieking for him to come with the Host and save him from the dark demon that had come roaring out of the blackness between one cloud-darkening of the Moon and the next.

Naturally it was to the *mistral's* house he was brought. The herdboy babbled to bab Luregn and her father's council about the terrible black bull—how it split the rocks with its hooves, pursuing him, and breathed a noisome dark fire as it hunted him down the hill. They looked at the scalds on his arms and legs and face, and could think of no more questions. Bab Luregn took him away to shrieve him and bind up his hurts. No one was much surprised when Clau fell ill next day of a weakness in his limbs, and died a week later. They buried him on the far side of the church, well out of sight of the upper pasture.

Then bab Luregn went to the pasture with the holy bread of Mass: other priests took the Host up after him, for he sent for help to Selva and Ursera, and to the Capuchin monk at Mustér, who had once exorcised a glacier. But nothing did any good. The alp withered. From the houses right to the stones of the mountain-scrée, nothing grew. Even the birds and insects left or died, and the alp fell deathly silent. Only in the nights could be heard the enraged bellowing of a huge bull. Seeing that supernatural remedies seemed not to have worked, a few men went there armed to try to deal with the Bull themselves. None of them came back. The last of them, the Hunter of Selva, the most skilled hunter from Ursera to Cuera, was found rent limb from limb, his skull crushed like an egg that someone has stepped on.

So Tschamut passed into legend in the countryside round. After all, there were haunted alps enough, but none of them were so haunted that the ghost or demon had cursed the ground barren. That first year was not so bad, since the feed for the livestock was already stored. But the next autumn a third of Tschamut's beasts had to be sold or slaughtered, since there would not be enough hay to feed so many during the winter. The village went hungrier during that second winter's nights than since the avalanche a hundred twenty years before. Many masses for help were offered, many stomachs groaned with hunger, many a tear was shed over the trouble, the sickness, the fear. But in all the town, only Mariarta wept for the first one the monster killed, the one the townspeople cursed: the one who created it.

With help, she thought. My help. I am the other godparent.

Sometimes the wind would whisper in her ear—cool words of encouragement, and strange promises of power to come. But she had no heart to listen. Her work for her father, helping him keep his accounts of the village’s business, took much of her time; she gave it gladly. She made no more journeys to the higher alp, and the crossbow lay in its wrappings under her mattress, where she would not have to look at it and hear a voice say, mocking, but still dear, ““Oh what a fair maiden we have here—the master herder must hear of this—”” Mariarta desperately welcomed the busyness of her life, which shut out the silences in which she must either hear the wind, or that other voice, lost now in the crash of the thunder, the roar of the Bull.

And in this way, reckoning from the night the monster first appeared, three years went by.

FOUR

“It’s coming much closer now,” her father said softly.

They were sitting together in his workroom on a fine spring morning, the third year after the Bull appeared. The windows were thrown open for the warmth, and the breeze stirred the parchments on the table, wobbling the feather of the quill which Mariarta had just laid aside. Her father’s eyesight was not what it had been; she did most of the writing and figuring for him, these days.

She looked up from the papers. “Bab,” she said, “think where the story comes from.”

“Yes, I know Flep’s half mad, these days,” her father said, and reached out to the cup. Mariarta lowered her eyes, thinking, *He never used to drink it unwatered, and never so early in the day.* “But even a crazy man can see straight sometimes, and when duonna Aia sees it too— We have to do something. If the lower pasture starts to go the way the upper one has—”

“Have you thought of something we haven’t tried already?”

Mariarta's father's face twisted. It hurt her to see how that particular expression, pained and helpless, brought out the look of weariness about his eyes. The last couple of years had dealt harshly with his looks and health, and more so with her mother's. She had been trying to keep Mariarta's father well and healthy as well as herself; the effort was showing.

Her father shook his head. "Not I. When even the monks at Mustér can't find a plan among all their books—" He drank, frowning.

Mariarta knew that expression. "Then what? Tell me."

Her father's voice was reluctant. "I had thought of asking the people what they would think of moving the village."

Mariarta was shocked. "The expense..." And the complications. How to explain to Tschamut's landlords, the lordly Hapsburgs, that one of their sources of tax was just going to move elsewhere? If they approved—which seemed unlikely—it would be at so extortionate a price that only four, maybe five generations' worth of tax would pay it off. Reiskeipf would be delighted.

"It could be done," Mariarta's father said. "Remember that house in Tamins? The one with the ghost in it that kept knocking things around."

Mariarta thought. "They took the house down, didn't they, and moved it a hundred yards to one side."

"And the haunting stopped. This would be like that."

"If they would let us take the houses—"

"That's what I was thinking."

Mariarta considered: but Reiskeipf's face intruded. She still remembered the argument her father had had with him last year. Her bab's position was that the grass-penny should be reduced because the upper pasture was now useless. Reiskeipf's position, which won, was that the pasture in question was useless because of the actions of someone native to Tschamut—so the tax would remain the same, and the village should consider itself lucky that the noble Rudolf von Hapsburg didn't *increase* the tax because of damage done to his property. However, being an understanding landlord, he would give the tenants another year or two to repair the damage. After that, though—

And Reiskeipf had regarded Mariarta. She knew what offer he expected her father to make. To her surprise, her father had refused to make it, and had sent Reiskeipf off without his usual glass of *vinars*. Mariarta was unsure what had caused this change of heart.

"I don't think they'll let us take the houses," Mariarta said slowly.

"Mati, we've got to try it. Or something else. People are getting restless, they say we're doing nothing—"

The breeze coming in the window ruffled the papers, turned up a corner of one: under it on another parchment lay a patch of faded color, traced with fine dark lines. Mariarta gazed at it, then reached out to the map, pulling it free. "You told me that the Urseren council is meeting at the end of the month..."

"In Aultvitg," said her *bab*. Mariarta traced with her finger the wobbling line of road that led from Ursera into the lower, northern country. Aultvitg was a town sited at

the bottom of the southernmost of the lakes into which the Reuss emptied. The Ursern councilors alternated their meetings between Ursera at the southern extent of their domains and Aultvitg at the northern end.

“Let’s go to the council meeting, then,” Mariarta said.

“For what? And besides, we’ve been. They had no help for us.”

“They might have some now,” Mariarta said. “*Bab*, listen. We need to be seen to be doing something, you’ve said it yourself! If you’re seriously considering moving the town, you’re going to have to get the councillors’ help anyway. We would have to have somewhere to move *to*. You should talk it over with them.”

Her father eyed her suspiciously. “You’ve got other things on your mind, *buobetta*.”

Mariarta dropped her gaze to the table again. *He’s withering here, like the alp. He looks far better when he doesn’t have to look at it every morning when he makes his rounds. Mummi sees it too, otherwise she wouldn’t push him to go away as she does—* Aloud Mariarta said, “It seems to me I should be out of Reiskeipf’s sight for a while. No other way to manage that but to take me away. Eventually he’ll get wind of what you’re thinking, and be hot after you to—”

“Enough,” her father said, frowning. “You’re not to think about him. All the same—”

He went briefly silent. “Very well. It’s in fifteen days, that meeting. We’d have to leave after Massday next week. We’ll stay a night in Ursera...travel the rest of the way with some of the councilors. That is, if any of them are still in

town with this nice weather. If I were them I'd have left already—you can never tell how long it'll hold, this time of year.”

“I shouldn't worry about that,” Mariarta said, glancing out the open window at the sunlight. “It's going to be fair enough next week.”

“Yes,” her father said, smiling, but frowning too, “you never seem to have trouble telling what wind's going to blow. You want to watch that, *buobetta*: bab Luregn—”

“I know,” Mariarta said. Bab Luregn's attitude toward her had been cool the last couple of years, as the Bull's malign influence began to spread toward the town. He did not come right out and say “*stría*”—for the Church had often enough declared that witches didn't exist. But everyone knew that nonetheless there were people who used *striegn*, the dark sort of magic that could make cattle or other people fall sick with a look or a touch. Mariarta was careful to clearly pronounce the holy names in church, and she carefully took the holy Bread to show it did not scald her or make her ill.

“Never mind,” her father said. “I'll tell your *mummi* that we're going off on another journey. Two times in three years, now: she'll think I'm tiring of her.”

Mariarta smiled, reached for another parchment. “A while to go before that. Now, *bab*: you wanted the count of the last old-summer cheeses?...”

•

Two days after the next Mass-day, they set out. Their preparations had been few: her father simply asked Flep for the loan of his horse, and sent to Selva to old Mang Lelias for the loan of another.

Mariarta's own preparations were as prosaic. She had only the plain linens and grey wools of a mountain girl, with a ribbon or two for her hair, now quite long and shining black after the auburn of her childhood. She packed what she thought she would need, and sat by one of the pools of Rein one day, looking into it, straining to tell if people would think she was worth looking at.

That night, the night before they were due to leave, Mariarta found herself, in dream, sitting by that pool, gazing into the water. Not a breath of breeze troubled it. The pale glacier-tumble of stone at its bottom seemed darker for a change, so that she could see her face more clearly. Another face she saw as well, as if someone leaned over her shoulder, gazing into her reflection's eyes. Mariarta shuddered deliciously at the feel of the breath on the back of her neck: warm, soft, the touch of the *föhn* at its gentlest, when it comes down the mountain in the late summer to stroke its fingers through the ripening corn and stir the leaves on the vines. She could not see clearly the face which gazed at her. Mariarta got an impression of grey eyes, and a cool expression in them: though the breath stirring her hair, and what seemed in the dream like the soft touch of fingers brushing the back of her neck, conveyed another message entirely. She stretched in slow pleasure in the dream, but did not dare to turn around to look her visitor—her wooer?—in the face.

Have you forgotten me, then?

Not in words, but through the touch, through the warm breath, came the sense of what was said. It was like when the wind whispered in her ear, but more intimate.

Mariarta shook her head. *Never*, she said.

But you do not come to be with me as you did. The touch wandered lower, stroking, gentle. It was warm here in the sunshine, and the stream murmured drowsily, murmured her name as she had heard the wind do: not in demand or promise, but soft-voiced, like a wooer indeed. Mariarta leaned back against the boulder, closed her eyes better to hear the voice, feel its sweet warm breath. Odd to lie here bare-skinned under the sun, but no one would disturb them. She had a protectress, someone hers alone.

Yours alone, said the other. Warmth breathed about her, the wind stroked her, and Mariarta moaned softly with the pleasure of it, the other's closeness, the sweetness of being touched. *It has been hard, I know. But you are almost ready for me. Soon there will be nothing you cannot have, nothing I will not do for you. Only wait, and be strong. I will be yours as you will be mine, wholly. Nothing will be denied you. Not this, or anything else. You will see.*

Mariarta gasped at the feeling which began to fill her, like the wind, rising. The breath stirred warm about her face. *Do not forget the best way to be with me*, the other said. *Remember the shooting. That was how we came to meet. That is how we will meet again, fully, this time. No more hints and promises. Power, and life. Remember it.*

Mariarta lay helpless in the pleasure. One last long stroking: then silence, and the rush of the water turned

suddenly into wind in the trees outside her window, in the light of the long twilight before dawn. She blinked, and pulled the covers close about her, cast forlorn on the shores of a dream of eternal summer, and suddenly cold.

•

There was nothing left to do in the morning but go. Nevertheless, her mother was in the kitchen wrapping food for them, more than they would need even if every inn between here and Aultvitg had been eaten bare. Mariarta wandered in, dressed and ready.

“What’s in the bag, dear?” her mother said.

“Nothing, just room for more food.” Mariarta picked up the smaller bags that already lay on the table, loading her own bag with them.

“Good, that’s the old cheese there, you can put that at the bottom. Ah, *zaffermess*, is that the biggest skin we have, Baia?”

“The other one’s wormholed.”

“Nuisance,” Mariarta’s mother said, handing Mariarta the smaller wineskin. “You two won’t have a drop to drink after the first day.”

“There’ll be plenty, *mummi*.” Mariarta took the skin. “Are we to take that bread too?”

“Yes. And sausages, the dried ones—there are ten of them, the ones your father likes—”

“And none left for us,” Onda Baia said under her breath.

“*Buseruna*, you old glutton!” Mariarta’s mother said, so sharply that Baia flinched. “Are you going to deny a little pleasure to a man going out into the dangers of the road—”

“We’ll be all right,” Mariarta said softly, and her mother paused in her hurrying to look across at her with that old soft look of understanding in her eyes. Mariarta could hear the thought on the sigh she breathed out, the way the wind might have whispered it to her: *who knows what might happen to him out there? Or, while he’s gone, to me? These pains—*

“It’s only a week to Aultvitg,” Mariarta said. “The same back, and only a few days of council in between.”

Her mother smiled, and said, “—without even some meat to comfort the poor empty stomach, Baia, how can you possibly—”

Mariarta smiled sadly, and went away to see about loading her horse.

An hour or so later, all the village was out in the street to see them off. Bab Luregn had come with his holy water sprinkler, and blessed them until they were half-soaked.

“Bring us an answer,” said Flep to Mariarta’s father.

Her father, looking fine in his linen shirt, simply nodded. “I don’t promise to bring back a troop of knights, or a Cardinal, but we’ll do what we can, Flep.”

He shook the reins and moved off. Mariarta went after him. Slowly they rode into the silence of the road, where nothing moved but dust-whirls in the wind, and nothing spoke but the *föhn*.

•

The first time they had done this trip, nearly a year ago now, Mariarta had been torn between agonies of excitement and dread. Everyone knew it was dangerous, sometimes fatal, to be “on the roads”: anything could happen. At the same time, it was a marvel to see something *new* every time you went around a curve: a vista of mountains, a beautiful woodland, someone else’s tended fields or alp.

The first night’s journey was the easiest. They stayed in Surrein, the next hamlet west, and spent an enjoyable evening with Sao Moser and the other two Surrein farmers, gossiping about the neighbors in Selva. The next day’s travel, though, was more interesting. Several hours of working their way down the Surrein pass road, length after length of stone-choked switchback, was nervewracking business even in summer. At last they came to the bottom of the hill, and in the valley before them lay Ursera.

It was a great town. The first time Mariarta had seen it, last year, she had thought that Roma must be like this—house after house, nearly a hundred of them, built of stone instead of wood, roofed in slate, and with streets paved with stone in two tracks, a *binario*, as wide apart as a cart’s wheels. Those streets were full of hundreds of people. They were rich, to judge by the houses—three, even four storeys high. It was three hours past noon when they rode in, and the town market was still in session: twenty traders, at least, were there. Mariarta saw great bolts of linens and colored

wools, even silks; grain, and fruits of the northlands; meat in incredible amount and variety, poultry and pork and game and venison, even beef. That in particular still astonished her. To kill and eat a perfectly good cow that might have given you milk, or could have sired more that did—you might as well eat coin money.

They made their way, as they had before, to the Treis Retgs, which stood next to the banks of the Reuss, by the bridge leading to the upper part of town where the finest houses were. As Mariarta helped her father unload the horses for the waiting groom, she caught him looking up the street, past the bridge.

“*Tgei, bab?*”

“Nothing. Oh, well—”

He pointed with his chin. “See that white one there?”

She looked. The third house in the street was a fine high one, four stories, its windows all shuttered. “So?”

“That’s Reiskeipf’s.”

Mariarta raised her eyebrows. “It must be trouble to keep clean. All those stairs.”

“He has three *fumegls* for that.”

“Good for him, then. No, *bab*, I’ll take that,” she said hurriedly, and got her bag off the horse before he could. “There, is that the last one?”

Her father was looking at her sidewise, a sort of approving expression. “You said, not so long ago, that you would marry him.”

Mariarta frowned at him, right there out in front of everybody, as the groom took the horses away. “I said I

would do what you wanted,” she said. “What do you want, *bab?*”

He grinned at her then. “*Su*, not even your mother seems able to get that out of me these days.” He glanced at the high white house, shook his head. “Come on, *buobetta*, let’s go see about some food.”

•

They went up the stone steps into the big slate-floored common room of the inn, and bespoke the innkeeper for beds and a roast hen, since he had such things. Mariarta’s mouth watered. At home no one would eat a chicken until it was literally on its last legs—what would you do for eggs, otherwise? But she had had one the last time, and the luxury had delighted her. Now she sat in a corner at one of the scrubbed, scarred wooden tables, with a clay cup of wine that one of the kitchen people poured her, gazing at the low sun shining from the white plaster of the walls, while her father stood talking to the innkeeper. More people were sitting in this one room than lived in all of Tschamut. It was unnerving, until you got used to it—all those eyes looking at you. Many of those eyes, among the men, dwelt on her at some length. Mariarta stared back with a slight frown, as her mother had advised her, until they dropped.

Her father came back to her after a few minutes. “Well, there’s only one of the councilors hasn’t left yet—that’s old Theo dil Cardinas from Realp. He caught a flux and won’t leave until tomorrow. Good enough for us: three in company’s better than two.”

For a pleasant hour Mariarta and her father sat talking with people at adjoining tables, and drank wine. At the end of the hour their chicken arrived, and (not coincidentally, Mariarta suspected) so did Theo dil Cardinas, who sat with them and accepted a chicken leg, and began gossiping as if he had known them all his life. He was small, bald and thin, with a brown, incredibly wrinkled face and small bright eyes; a man dressed in sagging woolens that were surely too hot for this weather, and smelled it. His voice sounded like a chough's creaking, and his laugh (which came often) sounded like a saw in a log. He seemed to have had a lot of wine, to judge by his breath as he leaned toward Mariarta to greet her, and she wondered if his prolonged stay here had more to do with the Treis Retgs' cellar than any flux. But she was polite to him, for her father had let her know that this was one of the wisest men in Ursera when the mood struck him.

"Nothing new from your part of the world? Thought not," said Theo, his eyes sharp on Mariarta's father's face as he said it. "Bad business, that."

"Very bad. What news out by you?"

"Nothing much. Some trouble getting the hay harvest in—had a *buttatsch* running around by the Lieg alp. Caused no end of trouble."

"Really?" her father said. *Buttatschs* were not as common as, say, chamois, but more common than brown bear. Some people claimed they were *striadira* done by annoyed gypsies or Tyrolians, others that they were roving spirits in bondage, looking for someone to say Masses for them. Whatever, they resembled a cowskin without the

cow—a rolling, flapping bundle of flayed hide and udders. Some *buttatschs* glowed in the dark, and made weird threatening noises, or spoke you in strange languages. People had died of the shock of seeing them, or had killed themselves running away. There were two kinds of *buttatschs*, the ordinary kind and the worse one, the *buttatsch con egls*, covered with glaring eyes as well as udders. Mariarta didn't particularly want to see either.

“Yes indeed. Thing started showing up in the evenings, when people were walking home from the field-meal. Pretty soon no one wanted to go haying, and the weather was about to turn, we could have lost the whole crop—”

“What did you do?” Mariarta said.

“Got the priest in from Hospental, that's what; these things, they don't like the three holy Names. Bab Vintgegn, he went there with his cross and whatnot, and took three other men with him, with spades. He told 'em the cold iron would do for it if the church-magic didn't. They saw the thing come rolling and glowing and howling along, and didn't poor Gion di Plan just run straight off down the hill to hide under his bed, took donna Eulscha half the night to get him out again.” Theo laughed, drank again, and said, “Bab Vintgegn, he throws holy water at the *buttatsch*, says a strong saying and the three Names, and *juhe!* the thing lets out a howl and flops down on the ground, all the voices and life gone out of it. He wouldn't let 'em touch it, made 'em dig a hole for it and lift it on their spades and bury the thing. Grass won't grow there now.”

“But you got the hay in all right.”

“Oh *si*, we did that at last.” Theo drank, looking sidewise at Mariarta. “What do you think of that, *duonna*?”

Mariarta thought that no one acting so drunk and slurred should have eyes so bright and seeing. “Was that the first thing you tried?”

“No. A traveler through town suggested it, said this Bab Vintgegn had done something similar in Ried. So we sent for him and paid him a silver penny for masses and services rendered.”

“Before or after he did away with the thing?”

“After, do you think we’re crazed?”

“But he did it straight away.”

“That he did. Must still be a few good priests out there.” Theo took the remaining wing off the roasted chicken. “All these wandering Capuchins and whatnot, you never can tell. Thank you for the snack, *duonna* Mariarta.”

“*Bun perfatscha*,” she said, thinking that his appetite hardly needed wishing well. He had eaten a third of their bird.

“Tomorrow early, *signur mistral* di Alicg?” Theo levered himself drunkenly from the table, making it look like he was bowing to Mariarta’s father.

“Not too early, *signur dil* Cardinas, if you please. It’s been a long day. An hour after dawn will be fine.”

“Till then,” Theo said, and lurched away, carefully taking the wine pitcher with him.

Her father’s mouth twisted in dry amusement. “We could have worse company on the road,” he said. “Don’t look so glum, *buobetta*, I saved the skin from him, and

there's more meat on this bird that he didn't get. Let me show you these good bits underneath—”

•

They rose at dawn, and went to pay the bill. Their horses were waiting in the flagged courtyard of the inn, along with one so splendid that Mariarta had to stare. It was no plowhorse, but a fine-boned, narrow-legged, dancing creature, black as night, with four white socks and a white blaze on his face. He was gelded, but had a wild, mean eye, and Mariarta was careful to admire him from a distance.

Old Theo came wobbling out of the inn door and down the steps, followed closely by the innkeeper. “Till next time!” Theo roared, and the innkeeper winced and turned away. Theo lurched past Mariarta, and those quick eyes glittered at her as he muttered, “Damned skinflint, it’s not like I don’t tip him a king’s ransom every time I’m here—*Which is too damn often, damn beds are full of bugs,*” he added at the top of his lungs. The inn door slammed.

Theo chuckled quietly and leapt into the horse’s saddle. It immediately began bucking. Mariarta and her father pulled their horses back to watch this performance, while Theo occasionally banged the creature between its ears with the butt of a riding-stick. Eventually the horse stopped bucking and stood looking sullen. Theo smiled at Mariarta. “He’s high-strung, and he knows it,” he said: “he thinks he has to do that. He bites you, you just hit him *here,*” and the horse jumped again. “Good boy,” Theo said, patting

the horse's neck affectionately, "good Camegio. Come on, di Alicg, you going to admire my beast all day?"

They got on their horses and followed Theo out of town. Once they were on the road leading south, the morning went from grey to sunny as the cloud burned off. Very soon they came to a long smooth span of stone that seemed to leap from the cliff on their side straight across to the other—a beautiful arch with no supports of any kind.

"There it is, the wretched thing," Theo said.

"The Devilbridge, yes," Mariarta said. Her mind was on the night she had last heard the story told, the shadows under the table, the pictures in a book.

The three of them passed over, the Reuss loud beneath them, and followed the road that wound precariously around Piz Tgilutta. The road wound down in tight switchbacks, littered with fallen stone, under the shadow of the great scraped-out scree-slope of Spranggi. This was the first of the places where the names began to change: from here on, the further north they went, the more the names were in Daoitscha. The travellers went softly, for whether you called it Spranggi or Currider, the height had earned its name, "the jumper"; rocks would move at a breath of wind. Several times slides happened just in front of them, or just behind. Mariarta frowned and said silently to the wind, *This is no time for playfulness—quiet!* And it obeyed, as for short periods it often did these days.

Two hours more on the road saw them into the Caschinutta valley, which the Tudestg-speakers called Göschenen. At one point, near a slope covered with pine trees and sheltering an old ruined house, the road kinked

around a huge boulder that seemed to have been dropped there on the stony ground. “Glaciers,” Theo muttered as he rode past it, “untidy things.”

“I thought *il Giavel* did it,” Mariarta said.

“What? The glacier? Most likely he did, the old beast. This was probably all good alp, before the ice came. Now look at it.” Theo glanced around in disgust. “The only thing that grows here now is millstones. But at least the *giavetschen* ice has pulled back. Aha!” he said suddenly, as the upper side of Caschinutta town came into sight around another bend of the road. He kicked Camegio in the flanks; the horse jumped a foot or two in the air and took off for town.

Mariarta watched him go, amused. “I don’t think he believes in *il Giavel, bab.*”

“He may have seen enough people in his time not to need to, *figlia.*”

Mariarta smiled. Odd to be called daughter instead of little girl: but her father had done this last time, too, when they came among strangers, and she was no longer merely the *mistral*’s daughter, but his assistant.

“He’s been *mistral* in Realp for a long time?”

“Fifty years.” Mariarta opened her eyes wide at that. “He saw the Tudestgs, the new ones that is, come into the mountains the first time, when I was born. He went down there, learned Daoitscha, came back to Realp and started to teach it. He was wise, I suppose...you can’t deal with your conquerors if you don’t understand their tongue and their thinking.”

“Conqueror” was a word Mariarta had never heard her father use before: she glanced at him sidewise. “I told you the last time,” he said, “be careful what you say here. This part of the world has seen a lot more of the Tudetsgs than ours. Some people here like them, because they’ve been made to feel secure from invasion. But our language sets us apart. The further north we go, the more likely we are to be seen as ignorant rustics—or disobedient rebels who insist on trying to govern ourselves when there are already perfectly good governors ready to do it for us.” He snorted softly.

“*Ich verstehe,*” Mariarta said.

Caschinutta was not as large as Ursera, but richer and more sedate. Its market place was as noisy as Ursera’s as they made their way through it, following the trail of disruption caused by Camegio’s passing. After a few minutes they came to a gateway that led into the courtyard of Chesa dil Alb’Cavagl, or “zum Weissen Rössli” as the Daoitscha had it. The white horse painted on the stuccoed wall of the inn looked plump and smug, and doves cooed under the eaves: flowers grew from crannies in the walls, and a fountain bubbled in a basin in the middle of the cobbled yard. Theo was already off Camegio, heading for the front door. “Enjoy it,” he shouted, as he disappeared from the afternoon sunshine into the shadows of the common room: “last inn until Aultvitg. You’ll be dreaming about it tomorrow night on the stones!”

Mariarta thought this likely enough, and ate well that night, so that her father teased her, and Theo bought a second chicken, presenting it to her with much flourish. She laughed

and made him eat as much as she did. The three of them were up late, chatting by the fire, picking the old hen's bones, while Theo maligned pitcher after pitcher of white wine, and emptied every one.

They were away early in the morning. Mariarta wondered at a man who could drink the way Theo did, and still have a clear head so early after bedding down so late. "Bad habits, my dear," he said, as they rode out of town on the road northward. "We're vintners—my father, and his *bab* and his *tat* and *basat* and heaven knows how many generations back. Milk and cheese we had to get from the neighbors, but wine we had from the time we were babies. You get used to it. Sometimes that comes in useful," he said, abruptly lurching in the saddle and leering at her, his voice gone slurred in an instant.

Mariarta laughed. "But you don't smell of it."

"Easily remedied, my dear. I always have a flask about me. A moment's work, no more."

She nodded, wondering how many confidences had been betrayed in front of him while the apparently oblivious Theo lolled in a corner and sang shocking songs. *Seeming what you're not*, she thought; *there may be something in it...*

They rode on for most of the day beside the Reuss, which paralleled the road. The river was growing wide, this far into the lowlands: still white-bottomed with glacial gravel, and icy cold, but more sedate. Afternoon was only half over when the sun slid behind the white scree-slopes of the Mutschen mountain to leave the Reuss valley all in shadow, only the eastern peaks shining in the afternoon

light—first golden, then rose-red as the unseen sunset began to flame behind the Intschaialp.

After Wassen were no more villages until Gurtellen and Ried, and no place to stay until Amsteg, the next market town north. “We might as well make for Ripplis-tal,” Mariarta’s father said to Theo. “There’s an old herd’s hut there.”

About an hour more they rode; it grew dark and still. Mariarta got nervous. It was one thing to watch sunset coming from inside a house with a door that could be barred. Another matter entirely, though, to watch the stars coming out without a door to shut behind you: without even the sound of church bells anywhere near, ringing with the sunset to remind the demons that night would not last forever, and there would be a dawn....

The clop of the horses’ hooves went on: Mariarta felt sleepy with the repetitiveness of them, even while so unsettled. *It’s silly,* she told herself: *there’s nothing to be nervous of—*

The wind whispered in her ear, an uneasy, warning mutter. Mariarta gulped, looked at her father and Theo. Theo had paused, was looking ahead of them. “Did you hear something?” he said.

Her father sat silent, listening. The only sound came from the horses’ shifting hooves. He shook his head. “Gone now, whatever it was.”

Mariarta swallowed again. Her father and Theo each had one of the long herdsmen’s knives popular in the gray-wool country, but— This time she heard it too, a rustle ahead. Not the wind in the pine trees, though these clothed

the slopes above them on all sides. The Reuss wandered by, too wide to make much sound, too wide to cross easily, especially in the dark. Whatever had made that noise was off to the left, on the same side as they. Mariarta strained to see through the swiftly falling twilight. The sound came again. She saw something glowing—

Mariarta's mouth went dry. Rolling among the trees, slow, moaning, it came. A light clung about it, pale green, and flew from the dreadful loose udders that flapped around the *buttatsch* as it rolled toward them. She saw her father and Theo exchange a glance, moving together to keep Mariarta behind them as they pulled their knives. The moaning got louder as the *buttatsch* rolled out from under the trees, onto the scree: a splotched bloody hide like something new-flayed, all shining in the witchlight it left behind it like a trail—

Her father and Theo backed as it got closer. The thing was slowing. Mariarta made up her mind.

Her *bab*'s horse shied, tossed him. His knife went flying, and he grunted with pain as he fell to the stones. The *buttatsch* howled, an awful wailing noise, moved toward him again. Mariarta came around in the saddle with her bag, whipped it off so that bread and cheese fell bouncing to the stones—then shook the wrapping free from the spanned crossbow, nocked a shaft, lifted it to aim. The wind roared amusement in her ear and poured along from behind her, filling her, pushing her— She fired.

The bolt went true. Mariarta heard a long squeal of pain. The *buttatsch* came no closer, just hunched down and wailed, more and more faintly. Mariarta threw herself from

the saddle, pulled free the hook that she had been wearing under the leather of her belt ever since they left home, and bent hurriedly to span the bow again, for the wind was still roaring. Hoofbeats came from among the pines, where Mariarta could see a track reaching upward. One horse: but footsteps too, and closer. Just as she straightened, she saw the man, in dark clothes, running at them fast, with something long and pale in his hand.

Mariarta swung up the crossbow, sighting on his chest. The wind roared encouragement in her ears, pouring past her so that she could feel it, see it, making a path or tunnel for the bolt. In the darkness there seemed actually to be a faint glow to this pathway, but not like the nasty light of the *buttatsch*. This light's color was unnameable. At the end of that corridor of pallid light she could see straight to the dark man rushing at them, straight to something hot and leaping inside him. His heart. The wind howled—

Mariarta jerked the crossbow aside, aiming for the shoulder instead, fired. The wind screamed in frustration, but the bolt flew true. The man shrieked, went down clutching and tearing at himself, rolled and howled on the stones.

Mariarta bent to span the bow, then straightened and put the bolt in place. The horseman came galloping at them from the pines. She tracked with him, the wind in her ears roaring. Down that path of light she saw twin patches of faint light and movement, the hearts of man and horse. The wind pushed her bow into line with the man's heart and screamed fit to deafen her. She was about to wrench the bow out of line when she saw the rider had a bow too, was

lifting it, pointing it at the easiest target, the man kneeling on the stones over the stricken one—

She shot. The wind shrieked triumph, the bolt went infallibly home—and Mariarta staggered, gasping, at the wave of dreadful power that went into her as the bolt struck the rider heart-high, as he tumbled from the saddle and the horse thundered off among the stones. He fell, and she felt him dying, for something of his went away on the wind, moaning silently, as the wind did: his soul? Mariarta couldn't tell. She crumpled to her knees with the horror and pleasure of it, for the shooting, the striking, were everything she had been promised. But the aftermath, the feeling of the soul gone flying, astonished—

“*Buobetta*, get up, get up, you're not hurt?” Her father was shaking her, staring into her face.

“No, *bab*,” she said, and with his help stood again.

He stared at her, and the bow, and her again, for a few seconds' worth of silence. “You know, your mother used to tease me, for never giving you an answer about this—”

She was suddenly too weary to even begin dealing with this moment, which she had dreaded for years. Her father shook his head, turned away from her. Theo had dismounted and was dispassionately examining the dead man. “Well shot,” he said, and turned to look at the *buttatsch*.

That Mariarta was interested in, weary and shocked as she felt. She went to it with her father. It was just a cowhide, almost flat now. But it still glowed. That Mariarta thought uncanny until Theo knelt, took a stick and scraped at the hide. Some of the glow came away on the stick. He

sniffed it, made a face. “This is something like that old Greek fire in the books,” Theo said, “but made to give light, not flame. And this—” He took the stick, prodding what was left of the *buttatsch*. It made a low moan that made both Mariarta and her father step back hurriedly: but Theo laughed, poking it again. Moaning more faintly, the thing went flatter yet. “Pig bladders inside. And a cow’s bladder, the biggest one. Reeds and such to make it squeal, I’ll bet.” He kicked the thing—it let out one last pitiful wail and went completely flat—then turned his attention to the wounded man, still lying on the stones moaning. Theo peered closely at him. “Why, Bab Vintgegn, what are you doing out on a night like this? You said you were going to make a pilgrimage. But you’re a long way from the holy shrine at Einsiedeln—”

Bab Vintgegn only held his shoulder and moaned. “I suppose we’ll have to pull that out,” Theo said, getting up. “Or maybe safer to wait till we get to the next town. Better leave you as is. This one,” he glanced at the dead man, “we won’t have any choice about leaving. Damned if I’ll carry him.”

Mariarta’s father eyed the false *buttatsch*. “This was meant to frighten us off our horses. We were to run away—the ones who waited in hiding, holding the other end of that thing’s leash, they were to get our beasts and whatever was in our packs. If we were bold and stood our ground—there was our friend there with his bow—”

“*Bab*,” Mariarta said, feeling wobbly, “I didn’t want to kill him. But he was going to shoot at you.”

Her father put his arms around her and hugged her as if she were still a little girl. “Indeed he was, *figlia*. Never mind. If I gave you life once, then you’ve returned the favor. Not many men can say that to their sons or daughters.” He frowned. “Though you’ll have a shricing and a penance to do.”

“I wouldn’t go to *him* for it,” Theo said, looking sidewise at bab Vintgegn. “Here, dil Alicg, I’ve no skill with these things. You take it.” He handed Mariarta’s father the dead man’s crossbow. “And you might want to put this about your person somewhere, considering how well you hid a bulky thing like that,” he said to Mariarta, and handed her the dead man’s long steel knife in its sheath. “Where *did* you have that?”

“In with the cheese and sausage,” Mariarta said, and then was distressed to think that her father’s favorite sausages were scattered on the stones. “Oh, *bab*, I dropped them—”

He and Theo burst out laughing. “You never mind,” Theo said, “just go sit under those trees—we’ll make a fire and camp here. Sausages—!” He walked off to start picking up wood. “Anyone who can shoot like that won’t lack for sausages in life! And more—”

Mariarta sat against the rock her father showed her, and straightway fell asleep.

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When she woke, the sky was clear, showing morning twilight already. Mariarta saw her father sitting with his

back against another of the rocks, the dead man's crossbow in his lap.

"*Bab?*" she said.

"We saved you some sausage," he said, and his voice was smiling. A great weight lifted off Mariarta's heart, for her dreams had been troubled by the fear that he would be angry at her about the shooting after all. And there had been another trouble. No words, but the sense:

Did I not tell you how it would be?

You did.

Was it good?

Yes. There was no lying in the dream. *Strong, fierce. But terrible.*

It will not be for long. The good...grows better with practice. But why did you not strike both targets as I desired you to strike them—to kill?

They were men, Mariarta said desperately.

The cool voice seemed not to care. *Men. Life is not so dear that one or two lives may not be lost for my purposes, which are great.* Was there a thread of threat running through those words? But a moment later something like a kindly hand stroked her brow. *Never mind. You will see how it is soon enough. You did well. You will do better yet....*

"You're not hungry?" her bab said.

"Oh, yes!" Mariarta said.

He brought her bread, and cheese, and some sausage toasted on the embers of the fire. Mariarta ate ravenously. When she was finished, she sat back sighing. She was sore all over, but contented, as she glanced around. In one direction, though, she would not look.

“We buried him,” her bab said. “We’ll send a priest back this way when we get to Reid. At least,” and he looked over his shoulder, “one who hasn’t been out playing robbers’ tricks on people.”

Mariarta glanced that way. Tied to a tree was “Bab” Vintgegn, the bolt still in his shoulder. Dozing against another tree nearby was Theo, with a knife in his hand and a smile on his wrinkled face.

“He drove off the *buttatsch* in Realp, then,” Mariarta said, “only as a man will drive off his own dog.”

“Yes. And how many other villages in Uri and the Grey Country has he bilked that way? Well, we’ll see he gets to Aultvitg to be judged.”

Mariarta dozed until the light of day opening more fully in the sky awakened her again. So did Theo’s voice, indulging in one-sided raillery with their captive as he fed him. Mariarta got up and made her way to the river to wash and take care of necessities. When she came back, Theo was putting away the food and undoing the rope. Bab Vintgegn, or whoever he was, glanced at Mariarta coming across the road, winced and turned away.

“Doesn’t want to look at the *pugniera* that gored him, there’s a good one,” Theo said, laughing. “Don’t moan at me, ‘bab’, there’ll be enough time for that in Amsteg, at the barber’s. Go on with you!”

Theo had rope among his baggage: he haltered the false priest, fastened the other end to his saddlebow. “We won’t hurry,” he said. “Di Alicg, are you all packed up?”

“All but Mariarta’s things,” said her *bab*.

“They’re all away but this,” Mariarta said, and started to pack the crossbow.

“No,” her *bab* said. “You carry that.”

She looked at him curiously. Theo was nodding, looking thoughtful. Bemused, Mariarta just clambered into the saddle again. Her *bab* led the way as they rode back onto the stony road. Mariarta went second, her bow spanned and loaded. Theo came behind, singing something shocking about dogs, and leading Bab Vintgegn on his leash.

An odd procession we’ll look, Mariarta thought as they followed the road downhill toward the village of Ried under its high cliffs. As they went through the first part of town, people turned out into the road to stare at the cursing, leashed man with the monk’s tonsure. They jeered at him, and the children threw stones.

Mariarta sat her horse quietly as their party stopped to borrow another horse. She was fighting with something inside her. Every time she saw a person—housewife, townsman, small dirty child—all she could see, in her mind, was that tunnel of light, down which each person’s heart beat. The thought would not go away: *if I were to shoot another of them, would it be as good?* For she could not deny the horrible pleasure of the moment when she shot the second attacker—the flow of dreadful power, the jolt of satisfaction.

And these awful thoughts kept coming up. *Would a bigger man, or an angrier one, have felt better? Would a woman have felt different?* She shuddered and crossed herself.

Shortly a horse was brought out; they went their way again. They made Amsteg after noon, and stopped for a bite at the inn there, conveniently close to the barber's small stone house. Her father delivered "bab" Vintgegn to the barber, came back smiling. "A relief to be rid of him," he said. "Even tied up as he was, I kept feeling his knife in my back..."

The road eased downward from Amsteg without any more loops. They followed it at an easy pace, seeing, between the heights of Attinghausen and Burglen which framed the valley below them, the shining slate roofs and pointed green-capped towers of Altdorf in the slanting afternoon light. Altdorf covered maybe five times the area of Ursera; its roofs seemed as many as pebbles in a scree-slope. Above the city the castle of Attinghausen perched like a thoughtful hawk on the eastern heights. Down through the valley, under the shadow of the hill, the Reuss wound, wide and blue-green, its cold color mellowed by the burning summery blue of the sky. The river seemed bound by the bigness of the town, fastened there by the arches of its bridges.

They rode past the Schattdorf hill on the right, and took the bridge over the Schachen river, which flowed into the Reuss. The bridge was commanded by towers which protected it from unwanted crossers—Mariarta saw one of the tower guards leaning on the stone. She lifted her crossbow to him: he nodded, uninterested—then took another look, surprised. Mariarta smiled.

The road from the Schachen became hemmed in by high stone houses, opened out into the noisy market,

narrowed again. Finally they came to the street by the Reuss where the Lion Inn rose. It had a great gravelled courtyard that faced the river, over low walls and stairs leading to a terrace. Large stables stood off to one side, and three wings of rooms. Mariarta dismounted, handing her horse to a waiting groom. Theo was already having a genial argument with a tall, dusty man in faded dun hunting clothes, who had been standing by the terrace wall. The tall man kept pushing the fair hair out of his eyes, laughing at everything Theo said.

Mariarta and her father paused by him on their way in. Theo laughed and waved them on. "An old hunting partner," he said, "can't you tell from the mud on him? Can't get him off the Schweinsburg. I'm surprised to see him here at all."

"Hark to you, dil Cardinas," the man said, laughing, "with your wandering ways, who's seen you in your own town for a month?—" Smiling, Mariarta followed her father into the inn.

The innkeeper was in the common room which had so astonished Mariarta when she first saw it. The ceiling was thirty feet high, supported by big stone pillars that ran its length. Iron brackets on the walls and pillars held pairs of torches: a candelabrum hung from the center of the ceiling, its candles unlit by day. Big scarred wooden tables were set in the middle of the room. Around the edges of the common room were smaller tables seating fifteen or twenty, with stonework and wooden screens around them so people could be private.

After talking to the innkeeper, they found the room meant for them—little more than a closet with two beds wedged in—then unpacked the few bags they had brought with them, and went for a meal to while the time away until the evening and the meetings.

Mariarta fell easily enough into the role that she and her father had worked out between them for such occasions. She became his shadow, seeing him seated and cared for, then seating herself nearby, with quill, ink and parchment ready. Last time, when some of the councilors had first seen her, some annoying remarks had been made about where one or another of the men thought Mariarta should be: kitchens were often involved. Most of those remarks she ignored. Only a few, the rudest, had made her frown them into silence as her mother had taught her. “They may be idiots,” her mother had said, “but they all had mothers, and they’ll react to you the same way as to their mams if you don’t give them time to think about it.”

Meantime, Mariarta was busy with her spare bag and some thin rope from their pack, rigging them into a soft quiver that would sling over her back— she was not going to leave her bow in their room. Mariarta shrugged the bag-quiver on to test it, slipped in the stock of the bow: it went in and settled there...mostly. The bow end stared most satisfactorily over her shoulder. And the reloading hook hung at her belt, from the same eyelet where a housewife’s keys would have hung. Mariarta saw the men at the nearest tables watching her, and the bow, with a whole spectrum of expressions—unease, too-obvious amusement, scorn. She smiled gently at them, careful to miss no one. It was amazing

how interesting their wine or their food suddenly became to them. Over their heads, she saw her father coming with a pitcher and cups. Mariarta rose and bowed him into his seat, took the pitcher for him, filled his cup. She was the only one close enough to see the slight flicker of smile pass across his face as their eyes met and he bade her sit.

Mariarta smiled, reached into her other small bag, came up with a small knife and sharpening stone and a handful of quills, and began cutting fresh pens.

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The afternoon drifted by, and the early councillors began to settle around one of the big tables at the end of the common room; Mariarta and her father went to join them.

Some she knew—Walter Furst from Altdorf itself, a big white-haired man, blunt-faced but subtle of tongue; Konrad Hunn from Brunnen, lean and dark, with a face that never changed; Konrad von Yberg, an unprepossessing-looking small man, white-blond from beard to eyelashes, with his pale eyes and big smile—which Mariarta did not trust, for she knew it could mean anything; and the Cellarer of Sarnen, with his soft persuasive voice. Theo was there as well, halfway down another pitcher of wine as usual. There was one northern townsman—Werner Stauffacher from the city Schwyz, all sarcasm and dark jokes on the surface, but always with some anger burning underneath, fire to the smoke. Mariarta saluted these men, then seated

her father and herself, and put her quills and parchment ready.

The men gradually started their discussion (or rather argument, since that was what it always turned into). At the moment, it was about the Pope's behavior. The argument went on while shadows began to fall in the courtyard, and lamps were lit inside. Two years ago King Conrad had gone on the *Romagirada*, arriving in Rome eight months later, around Christmas. He was there yet, arguing with the Pope about his coronation. The Pope refused to crown him until Conrad admitted that all his authority as King came from the popes: but Conrad, with all his chief knights waiting on him, would not make the admission. He said no, loudly, while his people dickered with the Pope's representatives in the Curia, quietly. Meanwhile, the Pope began bribing Conradin, Conrad's son, with money and promises of land. Conradin, being greedy but not a fool, accepted the bribes, but did nothing, temporizing as the Pope did. There they all sat in Rome, no one doing anything conclusive—while the knights of the King of Rome either sat there with him, or got bored and went home to run their fiefs as they pleased.

"Rudolf von Hapsburg being one," growled Konrad von Yberg.

There was a mutter from the others. Von Yberg said, "They and their bailiffs grow bold. But their master the King is a long way from home, his power is still limited, and even if it weren't, news of what's happening here is easy to control..."

"And would he care?" said someone behind Mariarta. Those sitting on her side of the table, looking more toward

the window, glanced up with surprise, and everyone stood. Mariarta stood too, turning. Beside her stood the man Theo had been arguing with outside the inn. He had changed his clothes for better ones, dark-dyed linen and leather, and a fine woolen tabard: a sword was belted at his side.

“How long does it take you to take a bath?” Theo said from the other side of the table. “I thought you’d have been here by now.”

“*Figlia,*” her father whispered in her ear. “Down low.” Mariarta curtsied to the man until her face was down against her skirts. “Noble sir,” her father said, “my daughter Mariarta. Child, do honor to the Knight of Attinghausen.”

She held the curtsy, then reached up to kiss the Knight’s hand. He raised her and smiled. “Sit, maiden: I greet you. Here, *dil Alicg*, let’s pull that other table over—there are more coming, aren’t there? I’ve sent for more wine—”

After some rearranging of furniture, Mariarta found herself sitting between Theo and the Knight. Werner was his name—she knew that from her father—but none of the councilors called him that, though they chaffed him about his hunting. It was surprisingly casual treatment from mere civilian councilors for the man who was the lord of Altdorf, under the Hapsburgs, master of the land for thirty miles around. But as lords went, the Knights of Attinghausen were not considered bad. They came of a local family who had gained the King’s favor two centuries back, and had chosen to take their own birth-country as lordship, rather than someplace richer. The Urseren councilors considered the Attinghausen family to be people of their own sort—

ennobled, yes, but at least not foreign lords foisted on them. All the same, the councillors treated the Knight with caution. Should an Emperor be crowned, this man would be the sword in his hand in this part of the world.

“I came as soon as I could,” Attinghausen said, grinning at Theo. “Bath indeed, you old scoundrel, when did *you* last have one? But I come now,” he said, taking the winecup that Mariarta’s father passed him, “because I cannot really come later. Can I, gentlemen?”

Everyone looked away. “You mean, sir,” Mariarta said softly, “that a knight of the Empire cannot be seen to be supporting those who are beginning to be, in some sort, in league against it.”

A mutter of protest went around the table, but Attinghausen lifted a finger; it went away. He eyed Mariarta with interest. “At the time,” he said, “I meant more that I know things must be said among the councilors which would be unwise for me to hear: things which would not be said if I were in attendance...but must be said.” Mariarta bowed her head to that, agreeing. “And I also know the men of the Forest-lake cities intend to reclaim old rights and protections that the Empire has already guaranteed—not throw over those protections. So be at peace, gentlemen.”

“Sir,” said Konrad Hunn, “do you then say that you feel the old Emperor’s right of exclusive protectorate of Ursera still stands?”

“If you mean, should the Crown do as it swore to do, and administer Ursera and the road south over the Devilbridge directly,” the Knight said, “well...I stand by the law as it is written.”

“Oh, come on, Werner,” said Theo, “speak plainer!”

“But I have to stand by the law, Theo. It may have changed: who knows what messenger will arrive tomorrow, making the sunset’s good intentions the next dawn’s treason? Do you *want* that young blackguard Gessler here?”

Looks were exchanged around the table. “Oh, yes,” the Knight said, “the Hapsburg’s young *landvogt* would love an excuse to add a southern castle to his collection. So, by your leave, gentlemen, I will be seen to uphold the law. The Old Emperor made Ursera a Crown protectorate. But he is dead...and his successor the King of the Romans is not crowned Emperor yet. So those to whom the old Emperor delegated the protectorate will use it as they will.”

No one said anything. “So,” said the Knight, “let us pass an hour pleasantly. Then I can go about my business, and when Gessler, or Lord Rudolf, asks me whether I knew of your meeting, I can say yes, I was there: and when he asks whether I heard anything treasonous, I can say no, on my faith not.” He raised his cup.

They all drank with him, and after the hour, when night was fallen, the Knight took his leave. All rose to bid him farewell.

Then food was called for, the fire was lit, and for a while there was not much talk. Meat pies came, more wine, fried porridge and a loaf of sweet dried-pear bread. The shutters were closed against the windy night. The lamps and torches smoked gently, their light wobbling in the drafts as the food vanished and the talk went on.

It started to be about matters that Mariarta’s father would want notes of; she took up her pen. Taxation was

most of it—taxes rising everywhere, not enough money to pay them. Mariarta sighed. Hearing everyone else's troubles, it was hard to feel that Tschamut's were so terrible by comparison....

The wind gusted, moaning down the chimney, scattering sparks. The back of Mariarta's neck prickled. On the far side of the fire was an inglenook seat. In the shadow of its carved headpiece, she could see the gleam of eyes—gone a second later, the eyes hooded. Mariarta pursed her lips, thinking. In answer, the wind blew hard down the chimney. Smoke came down, the fire flattened and went dim. In the dimness she could see that shape more clearly—a man, not large, dressed in old dark clothes, booted, dark-haired. Something lay in his lap, a darker shape. The fire burned up again.

Mariarta turned back to her writing. Shortly her father lifted his head. "I've been silent a long while," he said, "trying to hear whether anything you've been trying for your problems might bear on ours in Tschamut. I've heard nothing new. Now I have to ask: who might have some idea that hasn't been tried?"

The men around the table glanced at one another, drank their wine, shook their heads and began the old discussion again. Mariarta sighed and wrote more or less what she had written at the last meeting. Churchmen, from bishops downward—useless. Councillors chuckled, and were angry, at her father's tale of the false Bab Vintgegn: some looked approvingly at Mariarta.

Her father told the councilors his thought about moving the village. Heads were shaken. All saw the

difficulty of it, and the way the landlord would see it—not kindly. No, no...there must be some other way...

“What, then?” Mariarta’s father said softly. “In God’s name, what?” The despair broke out naked in his voice.

“Since you ask,” said a quiet voice from by the fireplace. All heads turned at that but Mariarta’s—she suddenly had no desire to look. “There is an answer.”

“Who are you to be listening to our counsels?” Konrad Hunn said angrily.

“A traveler,” said the voice. “Two turns of the glass, I’ve been here, and no one said a word. You all saw me come, surely?”

No one wanted to admit they had not. “So then,” the stranger said, “I might know a thing or two. There are more books to read in than the priests’ mass-book, or the books of hunting and weapons and war.”

At that Mariarta’s heart clenched. She put down her quill, turned to look at the man. He leaned forward, now, so that the fire was no longer a barrier to seeing him. His hood was thrown back to show, under long dark hair, a face sharp-nosed and thin-mouthed, with small black bright eyes: in his lap lay a black-bound book. The stranger fingered the cup of wine that rested on the arm of the seat. He said, “This part of your talk at least is no secret—the story has gone all about the south these past three years. But it was written that some would now come here seeking a remedy to the curse. So I came as well, for I have one.”

“‘Written’ where?” said Konrad von Yberg.

The stranger stroked the cover of his book. "I won't ask you for your secrets, master, if you won't ask me for mine. But I can tell you what to do about the black Bull."

"What are you going to charge me for this remedy?" Mariarta's father said.

The stranger laughed. "You're wise to ask, master *mistral*: 'ill the advice that has no price,' they say. Not too much." He stroked the book. "Seven fills of this cup with red wine of the South, and seven gold *solidi* of the Pope, or other coin to the same value. My needs are small."

Mariarta watched her father. "I will pay your price," he said. "Theo, get the innkeeper to bring a skin of wine for the man."

Theo called the innkeeper. When Amadeo was gone, Mariarta's father found his moneypouch, counted the named sum out of it. "Odd," he said, handing over the coins, "that you knew just what was in my purse except for what will pay for our way home."

The stranger smiled and put the money away. Amadeo came with the wineskin, frowned at the stranger. "I didn't see you come in."

"So busy a man will doubtless not see me go out, either," the stranger said. Amadeo left, muttering.

Silence fell for a while as the stranger drank, with relish. "The sun of Talia," he said, lowering the cup at last: "it lies calmer in the cup than on the poor torn fields there, now that Urseren men and northerners from the Lakes march over the Bridge to the King's and the Pope's wars. Ah, well." He drank again.

"The remedy," Mariarta's father said.

“Indeed, master *mistral*, to business.” The stranger opened his book. Mariarta swallowed, finding herself doing as the others did, leaning forward to see: but without volition—as if the book pulled them close to read *them*. The stranger glanced down the pages. The writing was none that Mariarta had ever seen, a strange writing half curls, half strangely-marked circles. “Your curse is not one easily undone by Church-magic. The power in water is old—it was there long before the poor frightened Church started taming water by blessing it—”

“Heresy,” Konrad Hunn whispered.

“More than likely,” the stranger said, paging through the book, “but orthodoxy has done the *mistral*’s town no good.” He smoothed a page toward the center of the book. “Here it is writ plain. Master *mistral*, you must search the valleys until you find a white bullcalf, born this spring. No other will do. You must take this calf home and rear it on milk only. One cow at first, then three cows it will need, then six, finally nine. It will grow great. You will be fortunate,” and the stranger smiled maliciously, “that it will not be interested in grass. —You must raise this calf until it is ready. Then you must lead it to the alp, when the black Bull is there. The white Bull will vanquish the black one, the curse will be broken, and the alp will be healed.”

Mariarta’s father swallowed. “It seems simple enough...”

“These things always do,” said the stranger. “But a moment. For it says here that a pure maiden dressed in white must lead the Bull up the hill to its battle. It will obey none other.”

Mariarta's heart clenched.

"What will happen to the maiden?" Mariarta's father whispered.

The stranger peered at the book. "The book does not say what will happen: only what *must*." And he closed the book, smiled that malicious smile again. "It all depends on what you do."

"I suppose," Theo said, "that if this doesn't work, we can meet you back here and demand the money back."

The stranger laughed out loud. "Ah, master dil Cardinas, who doesn't know your wit? If it does not, of course you might do that. —But it *will* work." He smiled, sat back, drained his cup.

"If you can find the right bullcalf in time," the man added. "And the right maiden."

"Where is the bullcalf?" asked Konrad von Yberg.

The stranger laughed again. "Ah now, master, that needs another price, a much higher one." He closed his book. "You must decide what to do now. For your sake and your people's, *mistral* of Tschamut, I hope you choose rightly."

The right maiden. Mariarta swallowed.

The wind gusted again, blowing the fire flat, blowing smoke out into the room so that fits of coughing broke out. Mariarta's parchment and quill went flying. She bent to grope after them, then glanced around.

The chimney seat was empty.

Several of the councilors crossed themselves. "Never mind that," Mariarta's father said, "it's *striadura* that this man spoke of: *scolar* or whatever he was, he seemed to

know what he was talking about. I'm willing enough. Will all of you take word home? We'll pay well when the creature's found. But it had better be quick—everyone will be weaning their spring calves shortly.”

“Money will be needed for messengers, if speed is wanted,” Konrad Hunn said.

“I'll provide that,” Mariarta's father said, heavy-voiced. She knew why: the town's ready cash was already low enough. “What you pay, I'll reimburse you.”

Mariarta put the fallen pen aside, found another one, and started to write as the councilors turned gradually from the uncanny to the gratefully normal, from Brunnen's trouble with the fish dying in its river, to the troubles of Zug by the lake, where two whole streets had fallen into the depths one night because of a man's love affair with a mermaid. All the time she wrote, though, Mariarta could not get the stranger's eyes out of her mind—and the feeling of someone else looking out of them.

•

The meetings went on for two days before they left Altdorf in company with Theo. Messengers had already gone out southward into the valleys reaching out to either side of the Reuss. The other councilors took the news home. On the day Mariarta, her father and Theo were to leave, a man in dusty clothes and a long brown cloak awaited them in the courtyard of the inn. The Knight of Attinghausen handed Theo a bag of boar sausage, saying, “Don't let me hear you jeering at my hunting any more! When you live

on the Schweinburg, you do what you can to keep from being overrun by pigs!”

He turned to Mariarta’s father. “I am sending word to my people, east and west. There are some good cattle breeders in the Schachental; we’ll see what can be found.”

Mariarta’s father bowed deep. Mariarta curtseyed low. The Knight raised her, saying, “Good luck to you, maiden. Take care of your father.” He eyed the bow on her back. “And take care what you shoot at!”

They made their way up the valley and parted from Theo at Ursera, staying there only a night. Two days later they rode into Tschamut, and the whole town came to meet them in the street. Mariarta’s mother was there first; as her *bab* swung down to hold her, she wept and scolded them for not coming back sooner. The town council gathered around, and Mariarta’s *mamli* turned on them. “Fools, would you have the poor man faint from hunger on his own doorstep while you press him for news?! Were you raised in barns? Go away and come back later!”

It was an odd meeting that evening, half the village hanging about in the street to hear the news from the council, the councilors themselves intrigued and outraged by turns at everything that had happened, especially the *buttatsch*. About the stranger in the inn, and his remedy, they exchanged thoughtful looks. “It sounds like something out of an old story,” Paol said.

“It sounds like something that would work,” Flurin added.

Heads were shaken—a lot of calves had already been weaned, and white stock weren’t that common. But it had

to be tried. Tschamuts people got used to the sight of messengers from south or east or west—though they also got used to the messengers' news. No white bull calves...

A week after they came home, Mariarta's father took to his bed. The hard-stretched hope that he had been holding on to during their trip now failed him, and his body showed it. He looked pale and thin, had no energy for walking, and the news, or lack of it, from the messengers depressed him—more so each time he paid one of them from Tschamut's sinking store of coin.

It came time for a town meeting then. Her father called Mariarta to his bedroom, and said, "You know what I would say to them. You say it." When the town council arrived at the house the day after Massday that week, it was Mariarta they found waiting for them, in the big carved chair behind her father's worktable. Seeing her there, they laughed, but kindly, as they had when she was small and they called her *misterlessa*. Mariarta told them to go upstairs and have a word with her father. When they came down, they sat down around the table, looking chastened, and got on with it.

After that there was little trouble. Mariarta knew the town's finances even better than her father did, and from watching the councilors in Uri these two years, she had gotten many a hint on how to bring even such stubborn countrymen's minds around to compromise, if not agreement. She also had a weapon her father did not—for men don't like to look cheap before a woman. Within a short time Mariarta had them vying to seem the most generous; shortly the village was good enough shape to last

the winter. *Spring...* she thought uneasily, *that will be another story. We'll see...*

Mariarta was standing outside the front door, the morning she thought this, and felt like laughing at herself. *I'm beginning to sound like him.* She glanced at her father's window, still shuttered. In the old days, he would never have slept past dawn. And his legs had been losing their strength. *Mamli is right: we may need to call in a barber from Mustér...*

Hoofs sounded down the street. The wind muttered in Mariarta's ear, a warning note. Mariarta brushed her apron off and walked out to see who it was. Any news would be welcome, for no messenger had come for a tenday—

Mariarta swore softly. The horseman turning the bend in the road by the pine trees was large and round, dressed fine in vest and linen; his horse panted under him.

Mariarta moved not another step. After a few moments Reiskeipf rode up, smiling on her with his acquisitive grin. "Duonna Mariarta," he said, bowing in the saddle. "I hear you were in Ursera. My desolation to have missed you."

Mariarta smiled. "A busy time," she said, not bothering to give Reiskeipf name or title, "and soon to be busier."

"Ah, your curse-remedy," he said, puffing as he dismounted. "You are expecting news then?"

He knows we've had none. Foul man— "I expect it momentarily," Mariarta said. *Dreadful lie that it is, there will be penance for that later—*

“I would have thought,” Reiskeipf said, leaning conspiratorially close, “that a woman with higher hopes of life would be busy devoting herself to taking herself out of such troubles, rather than staying in them.”

He smelled of sweat and unscoured laundry: even Urs would have scorned to smell so— “But there we mountain-bred differ from lowland folk, maybe,” Mariarta said. “The familiar trouble is better than the unfamiliar relief.”

“Ah, well,” Reiskeipf said, “perhaps not now. I have come just now from Swabia. I fear the noble Rudolf’s patience about your trouble is at an end. The house-tax in Tschamut must now be doubled to compensate for the lost grass-fee.”

“Which we have been paying anyway,” Mariarta said, losing her smile.

“True, all true,” Reiskeipf said. “I have talked to the noble Lord, but—” He shrugged. “It seems there’s nothing to be done.”

He eyed Mariarta sidelong. She saw in Reiskeipf’s eyes, one more time, what he thought could be done. Mariarta simply raised her eyebrows and gave him a cool look.

Put off his stride, Reiskeipf said, “It is a great shame. Your worthy father will be distressed, and he on his sickbed—”

Mariarta stepped toward Reiskeipf. “That would be a shame indeed, since the last man who distressed my father, I killed. One shot it took, right about *here*—”

Reiskeipf backed away from Mariarta and her pointing finger, his face flushed with fear and anger. Mariarta gave him no time to go into one of his blusters. “Beware your ambitions, master bailiff,” she said.

“My ambitions—!”

Mariarta smiled, and hearing the sound of hooves in the street, concealed her surprise and turned. Around the bend the rider came, a slender young man on a big dun horse. The man wore a tabard with a sow and four piglets, a crossbow at his shoulder, a sword at his side. He rode to Mariarta. “Maiden, I was told to seek the lady Mariarta Agnete dil Alicg in Tschamut—”

Mariarta bowed. “You have found her, young sir.”

“Then the Knight of Attinghausen greets you by me,” he said, “and sends to tell you the white bullcalf is found, in the Schachental. It was lateborn, almost at the end of the season, and is still on milk. The farmer keeps it for you, waiting your word.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Mariarta saw the shock on Reiskeipf’s face. The wind brought her his frightened thought. *The Lord of Attinghausen-Schweinburg sends messages to her person! Can it be that she—*

Mariarta smiled. “And you, young sir, have your father’s face. Which of the noble Knight’s sons are you?”

That young face broke into a great smile. “Arnulf I am. Ludwig and Johann are on their way south to Talia; I came with them, but will be returning north on my father’s business.”

“I hope you’ll stay the night and eat something,” Mariarta said. The young man started to say no, but she smiled at him. After a moment he said, “Well—”

“In with you, young sir,” Mariarta said. “A cup of wine first. But you have brought us the best news of the whole spring.” He swung off his horse, and Mariarta opened the front door that led to the inside stables, taking the horse’s headstall with one hand, the young man’s arm with the other. She had just time to glance at Reiskeipf. He bowed and took himself away in a hurry.

•

That night the whole village stood around in the street, trying to get a glimpse of the guest. Finally they all had to be invited in, one by one, to gaze at him and admire his sword. The Knight’s son of Attinghausen took it all well, munching his cheese and bread solemnly while his blade was passed from hand to hand. Though the *vogten*, the landlords, admitted that the uplanders needed bows and boar-spears to hunt with, and to protect them from wild beasts, swords were forbidden. So now the Tschamuts councilors passed the sword around, commenting on its balance and the temper of its steel, for all the world as if they had seen or touched one before. Mariarta saw the merriment behind Arnulf’s own gravity, and kept her smiles small.

When dinner itself was ready, Mariarta’s mother threw the council and everyone else out of the house, and served forth an astonishing loin of pork stewed with dried

prunes, fragrant in a dark sauce. *Where has she been hiding that?* Mariarta thought. *It seems she's impressed with him.* And so she might have been, for the Knight's son was an easy, cheerful talker, full of tales of the places his father had taken him and his two brothers—Talia twice, now, once on the last Emperor's *Romagirada* while Arnulf was quite young, and again this last time: but since Conrad sat arguing with the Pope to no purpose, the Knight and his sons, like many others, had gone home. "But Conrad and the Pope will now solve their differences in the field," Arnulf said, "so my brothers have gone with some of our people to discharge our obligation to the King."

The talk of strange places went on a good while, but finally the Knight's son said he needed an early start, and offered to bed down in the hay. Mariarta and her mother and father were all shocked in unison: it was her mother's and father's bed he would have. When Arnulf downright refused, they compromised and gave him Mariarta's. He protested that too, but Mariarta took him to the door, ostensibly to show him how well housed she would be for the one night. Out in the darkness of the hall, she took him by the elbow again. "Arnulf, I will ride with you in the morning. As far as the Schachental, at least."

Even in the darkness, she saw the slight smile form. "*Duonna*," he said, "my father suggested you might, and told me to ride that road with you if you asked. Good luck with them." He nodded at the kitchen.

She smiled, took Arnulf to her room, warned him where the lumps in the mattress were, and left him.

•

The argument was brief, for even Mariarta's father had to admit that, so close to the *alpigiada*, no one else was free to send. Next morning the neighbors' horse was borrowed again, and Mariarta and the Knight's son of Attinghausen rode off together. Town gossip had them betrothed lovers before they were out of sight. Mariarta didn't care, being too full of the new morning, the horse she rode, and the feel of the road awaiting her.

"Before we go too far," Arnulf said, "will you show me a thing?"

"Gladly."

"What has this creature done? I've heard the stories, but my father charged me to look for myself and bring him word."

Mariarta turned in the saddle. They had just passed the bend in the road that hid them from the village, but the lower slopes of Piz Giuv were clearly visible. "See there—" She pointed at the long brown barren scar down the side of the mountain, from the snowline straight to the fringes of the village. "And here—"

She nudged her horse around the next curve, and showed him the Plans' house: what was left of it. The roof was smashed flat, the walls broken out sideways. Splinters of wood and lumps of stone from the house's foundations were everywhere. "Toni Plan went up the mountain, thinking to hunt the Bull alone. It chased him around the alp a while, then let him run—and followed him home." She turned away from the wreckage. "His two children were

in bed, his wife was there with the new baby at her breast. The Bull came—” Mariarta shook her head. “Toni lives with Paol now, but for how long, we don’t know. He won’t eat or speak, he gets thin....”

Arnulf, pale, stared at the shattered house; then reined his horse back to the road. “Let’s go get you what you need,” he said.

•

They rode with good speed, but Mariarta had no feeling of haste; the easy, eager nature of her travelling companion made sleeping on stones a pleasure, and eating bread by the roadside a feast. It was altogether different from traveling with her father. This was more like adventure, even though she knew the country—and her companion she knew nowhere near as well, and found his talk eternally interesting. Only once she wondered how quiet the wind was on this trip, whispering to her not at all....

They saw few other travellers, and had no trouble along the way. In four days they struck the mouth of the Schachental valley, which runs east from the Reuss, south of Altdorf. It was rich pasture country, alp after lush green alp rising on the south side of the vale. They spent the night in Unterschachen, the main town of the valley. The next morning they left early.

Mariarta looked at the mountains as they rode. “That alp over there, under Eulen,” Mariarta said, as they rode down the slope to cross the Wanneller Bach, “that’s where the herd lived who invited the screech-owl to dinner, isn’t

it? —and the owl became an owl-headed man, and ate everything in the herd's hut, and almost ate the herd too, except the Virgin saved him?"

Arnulf laughed, shook his head. "A silly story, but they say it's so; and the owl turned to stone, so you can see its head there. An odd sort of thing for you to be interested in."

"I might be interested in other people's hauntings, and not have to explain it," Mariarta said. "But it's news from elsewhere. We are far from the great cities, and the rich alps—even their foolish stories have some weight with us, in the heights."

"You could easily—" Arnulf said, then closed his mouth abruptly and turned his attention to fording the stream.

—*Come to live somewhere else*, the wind whispered his thought to her on the wind; then it dissolved into an image of the heights of Attinghausen, all wrapped about with cloud.

Mariarta smiled sadly. Despite all Arnulf's traveling and knowledge, he sometimes seemed impossibly carefree and innocent to her. "Someday," she said, "perhaps I will: but for now—" Their horses struggled up the bank onto the road, barely more than a rocky track. "Where is the farm?"

"Right at the head of the valley," Arnulf said, pointing left and upward. "Gurtenstalden—see that cliffwall, where the green runs to that spur of stone?"

Mariarta nodded. A tiny brown house was just visible there; the track they rode was the last thing it led to.

It took an hour of climbing to reach the house, on that bad road. "Whoever's up here likes their privacy," Mariarta said.

"Or peace and quiet," Arnulf said, as they came around the last bend of road. "Or the hunting."

Up the cliffside, the calm brown shapes of two chamois stared at them. Further up the cliff that backed onto the heights of Chli Geissberg were five or six more. "They're bold! Usually they flee even the sight of people."

"Which shows you how few people come here," Arnulf said. They reached the last patch of green before the cliff, a wide, fair pasture starred with flowers, full of handsome golden-brown cows. Mariarta and Arnulf got down to walk the horses to the brown house that lay in the pasture's center.

Before they had come far, someone came stooping out of the low door at the front of the house. He was tall, dark-haired, broad-shouldered, with a somber look about him, but something cheerful in his eyes. He wore milking-clothes. "Welcome," he said, in a warm deep voice: "will you have something to drink?"

"Gladly," Arnulf said. The man led them into the house. It was like one of the huts that the herds kept on the alp, but better furnished, with a handsome carved bed in one corner, near the fireplace. Hanging on a hook above the bed was a noble crossbow of laminated horn, the stock inlaid with graceful designs in bone. The morning's milk stood in wooden pails, waiting to go into the big copper cauldron over the fire. The man dipped big wooden cups into one pail, handing one each to Mariarta and Arnulf.

They drank them greedily. When they finished, and thanked their host, he said, "You didn't tell me last time that you had a sister, young sir."

Mariarta blushed; enough light came in the open door to show her that Arnulf did too. "I haven't," he said, "but I'm told I ought to have one like this."

"I am from Tschamut, sir," Mariarta said. "My father the *mistral* could not come, being ill."

The farmer regarded her oddly. "Then you— No, wait for that. Come see the calfling."

He led them out around the back, where an open-sided cowshed was built against the house-wall. Inside it, one of the handsome brown Schatla cows was tethered; busily sucking from her was a white bullcalf, well-grown. It was more than white: it was silver, and seemed to shine of itself in the shade of the byre. Mariarta was reminded of the lamb....

The bullcalf stopped suckling and looked up, licking its nose with its tongue. The look was altogether that of a baby beast, thoughtless, innocent, mild—but those eyes reminded her of someone.

"This is the one," Mariarta said, shivering.

"That's well," the farmer said. "Then he's yours."

Mariarta straightened up. "I'm sorry—I don't even know your name."

"Wilhelm," he said; "there's not a family name, people usually just say 'of the Schachental'."

Some memory smote her, then fled before she could seize it. "That's well. Signur Wilhelm, my father would bid me ask what price you want for the bullcalf."

“As for that—” The farmer paused. “You’re really the *mistral’s* daughter of Tschamut?”

Mariarta’s memory struck her again. This time she saw in sunlight what she had not been able to see in the house, in shadow: that face in the firelight of her own house. *But back then he hadn’t been that interesting: there was something else more important—* Mariarta laughed. “‘Gugliem dil val Schatla,’ you said it was—but of course in Daoitscha that would be ‘Wilhelm von Schachental’—”

“Just ‘Tal’, sometimes,” he said: “people here will always be shortening names. *Duonna*, it’s hard to believe. *You* were the little girl who—” He laughed. “But it’s been six years. I’m flattered you remember me at all.”

“A *scolar* comes to our town, how should he not be remembered?” Mariarta turned to Arnulf, who was thoroughly confused. “Arnulf, this gentleman and I have met. He came to our town on his way from the monks’ school in Chur, while I was small. And he—”

“—drank her father’s good wine, gossiped with his town council—and came away with my skin intact.” Gugliem, or Wilhelm, laughed. “I got home safe, eventually, and took up the family property. This is all that remains of it, this alp and the next one: taxes—” He shrugged. “I do well enough. This winter I’ll wed an old friend of mine from downvalley, once I convince her father that my herd prospers.”

Mariarta nodded. “The bullcalf—”

Wilhelm shook his head. “I can’t take your coin for that, *duonna*. Not with the trouble you’ve been through.

And your people were kind to me once— Just take him. I have two bulls already—”

“But it must be worth a *solida*—”

“You’ll need a cow to suckle him by until you can get him on home pasture,” Wilhelm said. “Take his dam; you can send her back in the fall with the traders.”

“Sir,” Mariarta said, “if we were ever kind to you, you’ve paid the debt now: we owe you more kindness yet, should we meet again some day.”

Wilhelm bowed. “You’re more than welcome. Take him, with blessing: and may he free you of your trouble at last.”

•

She brought the bullcalf home. Comment was passed as they went through Ursera about how Mariarta traveled, and with whom: but mostly people stared at the calf. It burned silver-white like sun on snow, and onlookers crossed themselves when the calf, tethered by a neck-rope to its mother’s bell harness, glanced innocently at them.

Mariarta understood their nervousness. As she and Arnulf made their way along the road that would lead them to Tschamut in a few miles, she wondered whether the villagers would be so eager to have the silver bullcalf when they saw it. Its eyes were those of a beast, but also Urs’s— an Urs too young to know what speech was. She wondered what might come later.

The Tschamuts people too crossed themselves, shaking their heads at the beauty and uncanniness of the

bullcalf. Arnulf led the calf and its mother into the pasture beside Toni Pal's. Everybody, even Mariarta's father new-risen from his bed, came out to lean on the fence and gaze at the brown shape and the white one as they grazed.

"There's a punishment if you like," Paol muttered. "Play around with holy things the way he did, there's what happens."

"More to it than that," said Old Gion. "Holy water's not going to hurt you normally. It doesn't hurt thirsty people who drink it when there's nothing else. But go baptizing dumb animals—there's the damnation. Church-magic is for men, not dumb beasts with no souls—"

"The holy sacraments are nothing to do with *striegn*," Bab Luregn said sternly. Gion shuffled his feet. "But it's true enough that the sacraments are for men alone. See how the wicked boy is born into a beast's body, to learn first hand what manner of creature he wasted the blessed water on."

"Maybe it's so," Mariarta said softly, as Arnulf came up beside her. "But will you at least bless him?"

The priest glanced unwillingly at the Knight's son, for the *bab*'s father-house was at Einsiedeln, in Attinghausen's demesne. Finally he said, "In a blessing there can be no harm. But what good it will do a soul already being punished by God—" He went away.

Arnulf smiled half a smile, then said to Mariarta, "I must go home. Send word if you have any need, and tell me how the calf gets on."

"I'll do that," Mariarta said. For a long moment they smiled at each other.

Arnulf turned away. “Master *mistral*,” he said, bowing to Mariarta’s father, “my father salutes you by me, and says to you: ask for help, if in any way we might help you in days to come.”

Mariarta’s father bowed too. “I will do that, young sir. Ride with God.”

Arnulf mounted and rode off. Mariarta watched him go, breathing out sadly: then turned back to gaze at the silver bullcalf.

The wind laughed softly in her ear, and Mariarta shivered.

•

“We need more cows,” Mariarta said to her father, three weeks later. Her bab leaned back on the father-bench, sighing.

From the pasture, bellowing floated to them. In this short time the bullcalf had already grown as big as a full grown bull. The three cows were having a hard time with him: he would chase one after another of them around the field, sucking them dry in turn. When they tried to stand him off, he rampaged around the field, ripping the good turf, banging into the fences. *What he’s going to be like in the fall—*

“At least,” her father said, “he’s living up to the tale we were told of him. And the priest’s blessed him.”

Mariarta smiled. It was only unwillingly that Bab Luregn had done so—and the bullcalf had chased him out of the field when he was done. Mariarta had seen a glint of

amusement in the bullcalf's eye. His amusement—Urs's? There seemed no doubt. That was the worst of it, of course: the sense of someone waking inside that body, the look growing sharper, more intelligent. And more tormented. Mariarta went to check him no more often than necessary, for she was finding it difficult to face the expression in those eyes—innocent and uncaring so short a time ago: now, longing, trapped, desperate. And the wind brought no breath of Urs's thought to her.

Up the street toward them came young Paol, the wooseller's son. Paol had noticed Mariarta's friendship with the Knight's son of Attinghausen, and apparently thought her value had increased. Her father was not amused...but was also still considering what to do about Reiskeipf. The thought had occurred to him that if Mariarta was safely married elsewhere, that particular problem would end. To make matters worse, he had fallen several times in the past couple of weeks, usually when climbing stairs. *It's starting*, the wind had whispered to Mariarta in her bab's voice, *the way it did with my bab. Oh, God, not so soon....*

"Good morning, *mistral*, Mariarta," Paol said.

"Good morning," Mariarta said.

"Will you walk?"

"I was just about to see how the bullcalf is getting on," Mariarta said, getting up: "certainly you can walk there with me."

They walked to the fence, leaned there, looking into the pasture. "He's coming along well," Paol said.

"He is." Mariarta watched the silvery shape, blinding in the sun, go thundering off after his dam. The cow dropped

her head and shook her horns at him, belling like a *pugniera* about to start a fight. The bullcalf shied, then went off after one of the Tschamuts cows, which fled him, mooing desperately.

“He must be four feet at the shoulder already,” Paol said.

“Four and a half. Cla managed to measure him yesterday.”

“He’s very wild. What’s he going to be like by the fall?”

“Bigger, I hope. We’re bringing another three cows.”

The bullcalf gave up on the second cow, went for the third. “And what then?” Paol said. “After the six, and the nine.”

Mariarta glanced at him. “You know perfectly well.”

“A pure maiden. Of which there are only four in the village—”

“Barbla, who has been holding off half the boys in town, to the great frustration of all of you,” Mariarta said, “and little Telgia, and Eulscha, and me.”

“It doesn’t have to be you,” Paol said, quietly.

“What??”

“If you wanted to stop being a maiden—”

Mariarta swallowed. That, above all things, was what made a girl marriageable. To simply give it away—oh, some did, but—

But for the sake of your life—

“Paol,” Mariarta said slowly, “think about it. In how many stories with maidens in them does the maiden walk away from the meeting with the monster?”

Paol looked shocked. Plainly he had not thought about this.

“Whoever has to do this,” Mariarta said, “is probably going to die. Do you want it to be one of them? Who—” She stopped herself from saying, *who hasn’t done anything to deserve it.*

But still—the chance to simply be out of the danger, set free from fear—

She glanced up, breathed in sharply: Paol cried out and jumped back from the fence. The silver bull was standing not a foot away, its huge face inches from Mariarta’s. How had it come up so softly, like a ghost—

Its eyes dwelt on her. The sorrow in those eyes, the fear and pleading, were unmistakable. It showed no anger, though. If this was Urs, it was not all of him—none of the spite, the black moods. Mariarta glanced at the alp, scorched and shadowy even in full sun. That dark side of him, perhaps, was elsewhere, serving out a different punishment.

It would be so easy, Mariarta thought. *To be free—*

She slowly reached out to rub the huge head between the brows. “No,” she whispered. “No, we’ll see this through together. Don’t be afraid.”

It was a useless warning. He *was* afraid, would continue to be: perhaps that was part of the punishment this part of Urs must bear. Meanwhile Paol ran off, terrified. Mariarta was terrified, too, but there was no one to console her. Even the wind was still.

She stood there, bearing what she felt: and so came into her womanhood.

•

The summer ended. Mariarta's father stopped trying to come down to the bab-seat, preferring the shame of being bedfast to the embarrassment of bruises. He was not eating much, either—he complained that food seemed to have little savor. This gave Mariarta an idea...and shortly she scandalized Onda Baia and many others by openly taking up hunting.

The scandal got worse, not better, when Mariarta was immediately successful. But she refused to fail just to placate the village hunters: her father's appetite mattered a great deal more. Her first brace of hares, and the three *pernitschs* she brought home the day after that, cost her no effort, for the wind blew behind her as she aimed; she could not miss. The chamois, two days after that, surprised even her. Mariarta had been whistling for it, the way the old herd used to do, mimicking their call. But the wind took up the whistling and bounced it from crag to crag—and a one-year buck came bounding down the cliffside at her. She aimed through the swirl of suddenly fearful light, found the beast's heart, let its blood go. It was a bitter two hours' work, hauling the carcass home, but Mariarta would have died rather than ask anyone for help. That night, the village's hunters (along with everyone else) were too busy eating its roast meat to give Mariarta any trouble. And the skin would bring coin-money in Ursera—not a great deal, but every *solida* helped.

The boys avoided Mariarta more than ever. That suited her. She still chaired the tenday-meetings of the town

council, passing on to them her father's instructions, or giving them her own when lacking other guidance. But Mariarta longed for the time when her bab would be doing his work again, and she could turn her attention to other things.

She was desperate to see the Bull's business finished, one way or another: that way her father could start getting well again. The meat seemed to have been helping, he had put back on some lost weight: but it was not enough.... Mariarta told Ramun, who was master-herd now, to bring another three cows for the silver bull, for the six were now not enough. The creature was the size of three bulls, growing more uncontrollable by the day. No one could get near him any more but Mariarta. One night when she had stepped out of her father's work room to fetch something, Mariarta came back in time to catch a breath of whispered conversation on the breeze in the hall. "Agnete," old Gion was saying, "that was her baptismal name, her bab said. It seems she'll go that way after all..."

She had paused in fear. *The lamb to the sacrifice, yes. Or to the slaughter?*

Mariarta spent more and more time on the mountain. There, the only voices to be heard were the beasts'—real beasts, innocent and thoughtless—and the wind's. It was the only thing that comforted her any more, its voice growing stronger by the day. *Be brave, soon it will be over: trust me. Soon you will be free...*

To do what? Mariarta wondered. Did whatever spoke to her on the wind even see oncoming death as something

to be feared? Or did it mean she was *not* going to die? That was certainly her preference....

She whistled, her back against the cliff in a favorite spot, overlooking the spring-rill that ran around the mountain-roots to the Reuss pasture. The wind took the whistle, flung it to the surrounding peaks, thinning the sound. From eastward came an answering whistle. Mariarta waited. She had learned there was no need to go seeking. The game came to her. Being ready was the challenge.

Mariarta watched the sun dim behind a veil of cloud streaming off the upper heights of Giuv. All color went out of the world. Mariarta huddled into the fleece of the hunters' jacket her mother had made her, whistled again.

Shadow fell over her. She glanced up—

—darkness, *not* a cloud, but a huge shape like the cliffside preparing to fall on her. Eyes, hot red like coals in the fire, glared at her. The Bull leaned over Mariarta, and roared.

She lifted the crossbow, trembling. The Bull was alive enough, for the wind blew down the line of her aim, and amid the colorless swirl she could see a heart beating dark, behind a hide like armor. She wasn't sure any shaft would pierce that skin. The Bull bent in toward her, raising one huge hoof—

The wind screamed at Mariarta, gusting past the peak. She gripped her bow and fired, saw the bolt plunge toward the burning black hide and splinter as it hit, the pieces flaring into bright coals, blowing away in sparks. The Bull roared, in rage this time, lifted that hoof higher—

The wind screamed until it drowned out the Bull. Her hair whipping her face, Mariarta stared into those dreadful eyes, enraged: she was not ready for the Bull to kill her, that would come later. Infuriated, powerless to do anything else, she screamed too—

The sound filled the world. The rotten granite of the ledge beneath the Bull suddenly crumbled like dry cheese under its weight. The Bull scabbled for purchase, found none, slipped bellowing out of sight. Mariarta fell back against the stone, terrified, exhausted and confused.

I whistled. I whistled, and it came.

The stone— She examined the ledge by which she had come to this spot: or rather, where the ledge had been. It did not exist any more. The wind itself was dying away, but still she prickled and twitched with the feel of it, a whole day's worth of *föhn* crammed into an instant, carrying with it all the *föhn*'s force.

Mariarta got up, bracing herself against the cliff, carefully looked over. The stone beneath was smashed as if a boulder had fallen there, and blackened as with fire. *I have a weapon,* Mariarta thought in desperate hope. *The anger, or the wind itself—whichever. Whether it comes to me from my grandmother the tschalarera, or from—* Even in thought, Mariarta was reluctant to be too intimate with that grey-eyed presence. *But a weapon, even if the crossbow isn't enough.*

And what if the silver bull was there to help?

She started for home. The Bull could not fly. It might appear without warning, but if one were going to fight it,

the fight should be in a place from which it couldn't run. If it could be called to a given spot—

Mariarta felt hope for the first time. It was a great relief to go into a house, after the houseless wild and the shriek of wind, and hear nothing more threatening than the roar of a fire in the kitchen chimney. Mariarta kissed her mother, got out of her climbing clothes, and went to see her bab.

He was sleeping, as usual at this time of day, huddled under the covers. "Bab?"

He didn't answer. He was always a heavy sleeper: she shook him, laughing. "Bab, wake up!"

—and stopped, for he would not shake properly. He seemed heavy—

Mariarta leaned over him, saw how still his face was. She looked at his throat.

No pulse beat in the vein there. It was always one of the most noticeable things about him, the way his neck veins beat so you could see them—

Mariarta sat on the stool by his bed, going hot and cold with shock. Her glance flicked to the tiny ghost-window above the eaves, as if she half expected to see something struggling to get out through the mesh of wood. But only blue sky showed. It was a long time before she could make herself go downstairs: before she could go into the kitchen and say, "Mamli, I think something's wrong with bab." She could not make herself say the word.

Her mother put down the pot-cloth and slowly went upstairs. Mariarta held still, listening for what would happen

next. It was not loud: a name spoken aloud, no more than that, barely audible through the kitchen ceiling.

It was Onda Baia who wailed and ran out of the house tearing her hair, screeching the news to the whole village. It was Baia whose grief went so loudly next day before the shrouded body, into the churchyard, that Mariarta was embarrassed. Her mother's face, straight-lipped and still under the black veil, said she was embarrassed too. *What's Onda Baia hoping to prove?* Mariarta thought dully. *He wasn't her kin except by marriage. Why should she fear that mamli would turn her own sister out?...* It was not until much later that Mariarta thought of the other reason: their own enmity, Baia's fear that Mariarta would turn Baia's sister against her. But at the moment, other thoughts were in Mariarta's mind.

The Bull. It knows it's in danger...from me. It came for me. And when it could not get me, it took the one nearest.... It killed him. It has been killing him these four years, now.

The godchild. My godchild. The Bull killed him: and except for me, there would have been no Bull....

Those who went with the body to the grave commented on how bitterly Mariarta wept, what a good daughter she was. She could have laughed when the wind bore those words to her, but her heart was too sore. In later days, though, she set out to make them true.

I will have my revenge on the Bull...and pay the price for my father's murder.

•

The ninth cow that Mariarta sent for seemed to make a difference. No longer did the silver bull chase its milk-mothers around the field. It went leisurely from one to another, and the sight of a beast as big as half a house suckling them, almost picking them up bodily with its huge head, might have been funny in another time and situation.

A new *mistral* was going to have to be elected, but the councillors were in no rush. The week after her father died, Mariarta sat at the table and argued the disposition of cheeses just as she had a week before. But her heart wasn't in it. Before, there had always been someone to tell what had happened at the meeting. Now only emptiness lay in the upper room; her mother would not sleep in that bed any more.

Her mamli went about the house, pale and silent, making meals and cleaning as usual. But all the meals were enough for four, and she spoke rarely. Mariarta tried to hug comfort into her as she had in the old days, but the hugs that came back had a stiff feeling about them, as if it were a statue she held, hollow inside. Slowly Mariarta began to realize how much her mother had lived for and through her father, and how little anything else, even her daughter, meant to her by comparison. Frightened, Mariarta pushed the thought away, burying it under her own pain.

Two weeks after her father died, Reiskeipf came to town. He paid his respects at the grave and to Mariarta's mother, going on in flowery periods about the great loss. His inward glee could not be hidden from Mariarta. She was angry enough to consider speaking to the wind and

dropping some piece of someone's house hard enough on his head to finish him. But she could feel her father frowning at her, somehow, and it never happened.

At least Reiskeipf didn't follow her around any more. Only once he met Mariarta, as she came back early one morning from hunting the chamois. Reiskeipf was on his way to Paol the wooseller's. He thought (correctly, in Mariarta's estimation) that Paol would be the next *mistral*. Mariarta had a near-yearling buck, small enough to carry over her back for short periods, clearly showing the unerring heart-shot that had killed it. With the blood of its gutting on her hands and coat, Mariarta met Reiskeipf in the street. She paused, thinking how easy it would be to end him. In his own way, Reiskeipf had killed her father as surely as the Bull had: his years of casual cruelty had worn away her father's strength. Mariarta stood and considered, the wind rising behind her. But as she thought regretfully of the trouble a bailiff's sudden death would cause the village, she was astonished to see Reiskeipf take to his heels, running for Paol's house as if the Bull were after him.

She smiled. Maybe it was.

A day came when Mariarta realized that the silver bull was getting no bigger, but much wilder. The fences shuddered alarmingly when the silver bull crashed into them. It spent the day bellowing, more insistently than ever. The cows huddled in a corner of the field together, mooing in distress.

She leaned on the fence, watching the bull thunder about, flourishing those terrible horns. Mariarta gloried in them. *It's time*, she thought. *Now—*

And now, on the brink of the last step, she wasn't sure what to do. Her father wasn't here to ask; her mother— Increasingly her mother had become a shadow, sleeping fitfully in the chimney-corner seat, thin and pale. Each day Mariarta went about her businesses of hunting, or helping the council, and was afraid to come back to the house, not knowing what she might find. But today, as on all the other days, she went home as the sun began to set.

The chimney-corner seat was empty. Mariarta's heart seized. She made her way upstairs, touched the door of her parents' room, eased it open.

Her mother was in the bed, under the coverlet, lying there open-eyed, gazing toward the soul-window. Mariarta stood in the doorway, afraid to come any closer.

Her mother turned her head on the pillow. "It's no use, Mati," she said, the words faintly sad, the way the wind had sounded once upon a time. "I couldn't do it. I tried: I tried for you: but nothing seems to matter, really. It's all just..." She trailed off. "Surely you see how it is, without him. I can't, that's all."

Mariarta's throat swelled with her own tears. "Mamli, please...I didn't know what to do..."

"There was nothing you could do, Mati," her mother said softly. "Nothing at all... I just can't, without him. I can't."

Her mother said little else for the next few days. That robust and lovely face fell in on itself, the bones growing sharp, the face growing old. She would not speak to Mariarta about the Bull. And on the last day, when it became too much for Mariarta at last, and she hid her face in the coverlet

and sobbed, her mother said, "Oh, you've been a good daughter. But not mine." Her voice was like the wind's now, a mere breath. The hand touching her hair seemed hardly there at all. "Your body was from me, but your spirit..." She shook her head. "Your father's blood...too strong for mine. He knew, too. Some other mother's child...some other voice...."

Mariarta swallowed. "Mamli, who is it?" she whispered. "*Whose is the other voice?*"

Her mother only closed her eyes.

The next morning, in the dawn, she died. Onda Baia's crying had tired her out hours ago, so that she slept now in the chimneyseat. By the bedside were only Mariarta and Bab Luregn. In that last silence they looked at each other, and Mariarta reached out to fold her mother's arms on her breast. The sacraments were long given, the eyes already closed.

They buried her mother next to her father, a day later. To this funeral, Reiskeipf did not come. Mariarta followed the cart with the shrouded body, her eyes fixed on the ground, and through the service never raised her eyes but once. Near the end, in its pasture near the burying-ground, the silver bull came to stand near the fence on the eastern side. As the dirt was cast on the body, it threw up its great head and bellowed, a sound like a trumpet-blast, imperative and terrible. All the other people standing around the grave crossed themselves hurriedly. But Mariarta looked at the bull with a feeling of rage and bizarre elation.

One more night she spent in the house, though not in sleep. Onda Baia watched her in thinly disguised horror

from the chimney-corner seat that night as Mariarta went in and out about her business. Mariarta was beyond caring about her aunt, except to be glad her scolding and prying seemed to have stopped.

Mariarta went to her room, opened the chest standing at the foot of her bed. The cloths and clothes inside it were to have been her wedding-dower. Linens, shifts and a skirt were there, the black embroidered vest and red-brown skirt that a married woman of the village would wear to church on Mass-day. Mariarta put these aside, reaching to the bottom of the chest for the first thing her mother had woven with linen bartered for the grey wool of their sheep. She shook the lavender and rosemary from it and laid it on the end of the bed, pale in the light of the rushlight she had brought with her. It was the only white outer dress most girls from the grey-wool country would ever have: her wedding dress. She reached down and brought up something else, small and round—a coil of white silk ribbon, which her father had bought her in Ursera market on their first trip there. It was for a bride's garland, to weave with the fillet of white linen a bride wore, and tie the garland's sprays of white *steilalva* blossom in place. Mariarta knelt there, holding the tight-coiled ribbon in her hand, hearing the uncaring shout of the Ursera marketplace and her father's laughter, smelling roasting chickens, cow dung, spices, wood smoke....

She came back to herself, looking through the dimness at the sheen of the white linen of the wedding dress, and her eyes blurred once more with tears.

•

That noontime Mariarta came downstairs and told Onda Baia to go around to the councillors, asking them to come to her. At first her aunt bridled. "I'm your elder, and mistress in this house now," she said; "who are you to order—" Then she started to have second thoughts, as Mariarta simply stood there in the bride's white shift and dress and stared at her, her grim expression more suited to a shroud than to bridal array. Hurriedly, Baia went.

Mariarta sat at the table and finished weaving the garland. *If I must wear a bride's dress,* she had thought, *I'll wear the rest of it too.* The *steilalva* she had picked last night, by moonlight, as tradition said was best for the bride's luck. Her mood was slipping unpredictably between bitter grief and peculiar elation. The wind was singing in her ear even in this stillness, filled with excitement and promise—but she trusted it no more than she trusted her mood. Mariarta put the garland on, and waited.

One by one the councilors came and sat, and Mariarta greeted each. Last of all came Paol, sliding in to sit in his usual place by the window. After him, someone shuffled in the doorway. It was Reiskeipf.

"Go away," Mariarta said.

"Ah, mistress, the *mistral* your father is no more, alas. Since you cannot—"

Mariarta frowned at him. "There is no new *mistral* yet, for these gentlemen have wisely put off electing one until the Bull is dealt with. After I am dead they can do as they will. But a dil Alicg lives yet to act for the old *mistral*."

You are not welcome in our counsels, Reiskeipf, though Paol will doubtless afterwards lick readily enough at your salt. Meanwhile, *tudestg*, get out of here. If I see you again while either of us are yet alive, for the sake of the pains you cost my father, I swear you shall die of me!”

Paol and Reiskeipf both began to stammer protests. Mariarta stood up.

Reiskeipf fled.

Mariarta sat down, smoothing the linen of the wedding dress. “Should I not return,” she said, “as none of us think I will, the house passes to my aunt. Should she die without wedding or issue, as seems likely, I will that it be made into a place of refuge for those who have no homes of their own, as orphans, herdboys and such. Let a woman who desires no husband, or one whose family dies untimely, care for it and the people who live in it.”

The men around the table nodded nervously.

Mariarta breathed out. “What I have to do must be done tonight, at sunset: when light and dark have an equal chance. Let prayers be said in the church for our souls. And no, the fight will not be near here,” she said, glancing around at the panicked expressions. “When we’ve gone to such trouble to keep the Bull out of the town, would I bring it down on you? Surely not so soon after we finally solved the problem with the manure stand.”

No one laughed. Mariarta’s mood swung to sorrow for them. They were all afraid: if she and the silver Bull failed, they had no hope. They would never move the village. They would all go out on the roads, a fate to them more terrible than dying.

“Tonight,” Mariarta said, “I will take the silver Bull onto the alp. Then...”

Silence fell. The men left, Paol being the first out of the room.

Mariarta sat back, cut a piece of bread from her mother’s last-made loaf, slowly growing dry on the table, and waited for sunset.

•

All that afternoon the air above the mountains grew glassy clear, and the southern wind began to blow. The town grew still. Few of the normal smells of the afternoon were about, for when the *föhn* blew like this, sucking the moisture out of everything, people put out their cooking fires lest a chance spark should land on someone’s barn and light a conflagration. Whirlwinds of dust went by, and at sight of them people hurried inside, slamming the doors.

But when the sun dipped below the pines on the western ridge of Piz Cavradi, and Mariarta came out into the street, she found the whole village waiting there for her, looking like people going to a most unusual funeral. Mariarta just stood there, taking them all in—old men, young boys, older ones, looking at her with horrified fascination—old women, younger ones, drying their eyes of tears shed in pity for her: the people of Tschamut, whom she meant to save. She could not bear to look at them long, for their dear ordinariness reminded her of what she must now lose forever, whether she lived or died.

She walked down the street, the wind whipping at the fine linen of the wedding dress. At the pasture gate, the silver bull waited for her, seeming in the early evening half the size of a house, indeed. At the sight of the townspeople it stamped a hoof and let out another of those terrible trumpeting bellows, like an army wanting to charge.

“Be still,” Mariarta said as she came to the gate. The bull stood quiet, gazing at her.

Paol opened the gate. Mariarta slipped in next to the silver bull. Its head was easily five feet above hers.

“Down here,” she said, reaching up to her bride’s garland. Obediently the bull put its head down. Mariarta pulled loose one ribbon spared from the weaving, the last ell of her father’s present. She doubled it and put it through the bull’s nosering, slipping the loose ends of the ribbon through the loop to make the knot. The townspeople stood aside as Mariarta led the bull out through the open gate. The silver shine of it prickled on the skin, making it feel dangerous to be near, like a tall oak when lightning is brewing.

Mariarta led the bull past her house. All her old troubles now seemed unimportant, with the slow tread of the silver bull shaking the ground behind her, and evening drawing on. The silken ribbons of the garland rustled about Mariarta in the wind as she made for the end of the street.

There it turned two ways: one into the narrow stony path which was the road to Val Mustair and eastward to Cuera: the other way, upwards along the grassy, cow-poached path that led to Tschamut’s alp. Mariarta stopped there, saying, “No further than this, until the fight is done.”

Bab Luregn stepped out with a green branch and holy water to bless her. Mariarta considered how holy water had started all this, but kept her peace. Bab Luregn asperged the bull too. It shook its head, and sneezed.

“Come on,” Mariarta said to him, and led him up the alp track. *How many times have I walked this road?* she thought as they climbed. *For alpagiadas, every year till I grew: and to learn the shooting: and with Urs—*

Behind her, the bull walked easily, its breathing briefly louder than the sound of the wind. It would not be so for long. The wind was rising, for which Mariarta was grateful. The wind was her ally. If only it would not turn fickle—for the *föhn*'s nature was to gust, and drop away, then treacherously blow twice as hard again.... Clouds were piling above, their leaden-grey lower reaches pouring like water over Piz Curnera and Piz Blas. Mariarta welcomed them, for sudden storms like this were the *föhn*'s great weapon.

The darkness above her grew. Behind her, the heavy tread of the silver bull began to sound dreadfully loud in the confined path between the overhanging ridges. So many times she had come this way with Urs. How different it had looked then: sun on the pines, the clean wind blowing, *steilalva* blossoming between the stones. All changed now, with the lowering cloud, and the thunder-mutter in the clouds above, like the building roar of something dark—

From behind her came an answering bellow. Mariarta turned in time to see the sudden rage in the silver bull's eyes. She jumped out of its way. Up the narrowing track it leapt, bellowing. Mariarta scrambled after.

She came out at the top of the track where it met the bottom of the withered alp. It was more terrible than ever in this odd light, with the sunset reflecting underneath the heavy black clouds, making them look like the ceiling of Hell. All around, like skeletal sentinels, the dead pines stood; the rotted turf, once so green, now squelched underfoot like bog. The silver bull ramped across the black ground, bellowing in rage, clods of thrown-up mud and shattered stone flying everywhere.

“Stop it!” Mariarta shouted above the rising wind. The bull came down from one last bound and stared at her, head hanging, a furious look of frustrated power.

“You’ll get your chance,” Mariarta said. She had visited this spot last night, wanting to make sure of the ground in the dark. Now she went to what was left of the great lightning-shattered boulder in the middle of the field. She saw the silver bull’s glance follow her uncomfortably.

“I know,” Mariarta said. “Not much longer now.” She put her back against the stone, closed her eyes. *God, she said, mortal’s daughter or tschalarera’s, or whatever I might be, hear me: help me now!*

Laughter came down the wind, stronger than usual, crueler. *And you, she thought, who have followed me for so long: this is your work. As you asked, I give you this deed. Be with me!*

The wind rose. Mariarta opened her eyes, gasped for breath. Her chest seemed suddenly tight to bursting, as if the wind were inside her, coming from her, trying to get out.

She drew on that breath as best she could, and whistled for her quarry.

At first the sound was lost in the rising howl of the wind. Then, as before, it grew, carried outward and hurled in echo against the surrounding peaks—but this time the sound got deeper. Thunder crashed in response. The silver bull waited, burning white in the growing darkness, only its eyes going shadowy.

At the screeward end of the alp, where not even the pines had ever managed to grow, black cloud poured down the mountain-ridge. It puddled at the bottom of the slope, unnaturally dark. Mariarta's heart turned with fear and joy at the sight of it. The puddle of cloud seethed, grew, crouched into itself. Two sparks of red fire glared from it, glowing, growing.

The silver bull lowered its head, narrowed its eyes, scraping the dead turf with its forefoot. The blackness began to hunch up, now; wisps of cloud reached out to either side, twisted and spiraled, solidified to horns. The shape grew darker, reared into solidity, the massive shoulders, the huge terrible hooves: a great black Bull, half as big as a house. But no bigger. Mariarta sank back against the stone, exhausted already, but burning with fierce satisfaction and joy. *We have a chance—*

The same joy lived in the silver bull's eyes, dark though they had gone now, burning dark against the brilliance of the silver-white hide and the horns like smooth-curved lightning. It lifted its head and bellowed, a cry of gladness at the beginning of the end of captivity.

The black Bull pawed the ground too, lowered its head and bellowed with hate and rage. For the first time Mariarta clearly heard Urs's voice trapped in the monster's bellow—the sound of part of a human soul, not the good part, trapped in hell all these years, hating itself and everyone else. The Bull's eyes went to Mariarta; the fires in them burned with the rage of the frustrated murderer. It reared, ran at her.

The silver bull charged in between them, catching the black one in the flanks, bowling it over sideways. They were well matched as to size. The black Bull scrambled to get up, pushing itself away as the silver one tried to trample it, missed, came down and drove a pit an ell deep into the ground. The black Bull swung its horns up, missed as the silver bull managed to pull its forefeet free of the mire, danced away, ran at it again—

Lightning began to strike the crests surrounding the alp. The Bulls stood apart from one another, making small rushes, each testing the other's nerve. Mariarta gulped in hope and fear, for the black Bull's movements had something nervous about them, for all its fury when it charged. A moment more they stood glaring, black Bull with its burning eyes, blazing white Bull with its dark ones. Then the black Bull charged again, and the silver Bull met it headfirst, the way chamois butt, skull to skull. Thunder crashed among the mountain crests as they met; both staggered away, shaking their heads. The silver Bull recovered first, and leapt at the black one, not to headbutt this time. It thundered past it, the black Bull spinning to

follow, and the burning white horns went down to gore. One horn came up black with blood that smoked.

The black Bull screamed, lowered its own head and charged. For a few moments the two Bulls ramped about the field, charges being missed, or started and broken off. One moment the silver bull stood still, panting for breath, and the black one ran at it; the silver one moved not quite quickly enough, and one of those black horns caught it, sicklewise and slashing, in the right side. The silver Bull crashed down, bellowing—

Mariarta stood there horrified. She had been using the word *battle* so casually, all this while: but it had never seriously occurred to her that the silver Bull could be hurt. It was on the side of good, wasn't it? And it had to win—the stranger at the inn had said so. Now the silver Bull struggled to its feet, but the black Bull stood over it, reared and stamped with both forefeet. Desperately the silver Bull twisted away, but not far enough: the black Bull's hooves came down on one of its legs—

The scream was awful to hear. The silver Bull managed to scramble up, three-legged now, limping, bleeding burning crimson. The black Bull tossed its head, bellowing evil joy, then charged again. The silver Bull wheeled, meeting it horns down. Again they hit head on head, and both staggered away—

Mariarta scabbled at the base of the stone. The stranger's words were with her again. *The silver Bull will vanquish the black, and the alp will be healed. A pause. If you find the right girl—*

The black Bull rose again. On three legs the silver-white Bull ran at it, hit it broadside, knocked it over. But the white one could not keep this up much longer. The wind screamed around them, lightning struck the ridges above them as the black Bull got up. The silver bull was watching it, fighting for breath, its eyes beginning to show the shadow of fear—

The lightning was striking among the dead pines. Fires were starting, fanned by the awful wind. Silhouetted against them, the black Bull reared, struck at the white one. The white Bull backed, limping, its head down, threatening as best it could. Twice more the black bull charged at it, and was held off by the flourish of the white-blazing horns: it backed away, shaking its head, as if they pained it. The third time it charged, the silver-white Bull tried to sidestep and came down hard on the bad leg. It collapsed. Roaring triumph, the black Bull reared—

Mariarta, kneeling by the stone, horrified, screamed “*NO!*” The *föhn* got into the scream, into her chest, tore her open, leapt away. The look of delighted fury in the black Bull’s burning eyes suddenly gave place to shock as the ground cracked open beneath its hind feet, and it slipped into the sudden crevasse. Mariarta hoped it might fall right out of sight, but its scrabbling forefeet stopped it, found their purchase, began to haul it out—

Mariarta stood up, the wind pouring past her, howling in her ears. The silver bull was trying to get to its feet. The black Bull reared over it one more time, bellowing in triumph, and reared, hooves and horns all angled downward, ready to pierce and crush.

Mariarta's crossbow bolt took it in the eye. The eye's light splashed and went out. The black Bull shook its head desperately, screamed, plunged downward. The silver bull half-lifted itself, bracing with its forelegs, and swung its head up, bellowing as well. The right-hand horn, gleaming like a spear, buried itself an ell deep in the black Bull's chest. They crashed together in a heap.

Lightning whipped the crests of Piz Cavradi and Piz Paradis, and a crash of thunder brought the avalanche down on Piz Alpetta. Mariarta hardly cared—her bones were still burning with the awful rush of power that had come flooding into her with the bolt into the monster's eye. She staggered toward where the two bulls lay. Almost she fell into the crevasse her scream, or the *föhn*, had made. She picked her way around it as her vision began to clear. The wind was dropping.

The bulls lay still, their bodies twisted. The black one's own force had driven the silver Bull's horn into its heart. But the silver one's middle was trampled nearly flat by the other's hooves, and its bones were broken by the black Bull's weight. For a moment all their three eyes were fixed on Mariarta. She wept, for all the eyes were Urs's. Mariarta went to her knees beside them, put a hand on each huge head. Each body shuddered with final breaths. Was it the light changing?—or was the white of the silver bull darkening down, the burning darkness of the black one paling? It was the light, perhaps. The sun lay behind Piz Cavradi, and the lowering clouds, just beginning to break, cast a premature twilight over everything. For the last few breaths, both bulls seemed black enough. Then there seemed

to be only one bull, dark, but with horns showing pale white, and the light in the closing eyes was at peace.

The eyes closed. The last light went out of horns, body, everything: the shape darkened further, the colors leaching out of it, cooling like ash, graying. After a while, feeling cold, Mariarta found it was not beast's flesh she leaned against, but stone. An outcropping of the nearby Platta hill, it seemed, an old worn grey rock shaped strangely like a bull: an oddly benevolent, sleeping shape. Mariarta wiped her eyes, feeling cold and wet, seeing the sodden ground beneath her. Water: where was that coming from? She got to her feet, leaning on the great stone, and saw the cracks in the stony bull's once-gored side—saw the cold, clear spring-rills flowing down the slope of the alp, strengthening by the moment.

The wind was almost gone: the quiet was deafening. The last of the clouds were drifting away. Mariarta stood by the stone, looking at the alp. Its haunted feeling was gone. Water chuckled softly from the new spring; in one of the trees furthest downslope, a blackbird tried a note, then another.

Mariarta went back to the other stone, where she had hidden her crossbow and some clothes: her father's legacy of pragmatism, that, though she had been none too sure she would survive to use them. Mariarta took off the wedding dress and shift, hurriedly putting on the breeches, shirt and hunting-coat that her mother had made her. The dress was too fine to leave, and the shift she might need later: those she put into her bag. But the bride's garland she tossed onto the broken ground, with a wry look.

The townspeople would be here soon. They would find the stone and the spring, hear Mariarta's story, and take her home to—what?

They thought me half a witch before. Who among them will believe otherwise, now? And even if they could tolerate her—what remained for her in Tschamut? Her life would become a round of housework, every day the same, trapped in that house with Onda Baia until she died: trapped alone in it afterwards....

No, there were other possibilities more interesting. *No one would be surprised if I were never to be found again. Even I thought I would die.*

Let it be so, then. I've seen a little of the world: I will go see more of it. Maybe I'll die indeed...but I will have lived first.

Mariarta smiled at the discarded garland. She knew these mountains well enough not to be seen, whichever way she chose to go. She gazed southward. *The trail past the far peak of Piz Paradis—* Then eastward over the knuckles of the mountains, past Tgiern Sogn Gions, where no one knew her by sight, and she would travel faster than the news of what had happened. With her hunter's coat, hat and bow, she looked enough like one of the young chamois hunters who traveled in those heights. She had a little coin money, enough to keep her until she could shoot chamois to sell in the markets. The market at Mustér that she had never seen: perhaps even the great market at Chur, where the prince-Bishop reigned under the ibex banner...

She shouldered her bag. The clouds were drifting eastward. In the west, behind Piz Cavradi, the sunset was

burning golden-clear, fading now to the dark blue above it, with here and there a star. Its color brought to mind the color of that sunset by the Rein, the shape silhouetted against it, the strange song it sang; and her feeling then that there was magic in the world, that nothing would ever be the same. Mariarta wiped her last tears on her sleeve. She had been right. Now, perhaps, she would find out what voice spoke in her ear—and what it wanted with her.

She turned, making her way off Tschamut's alp, onto the tiny track that led to the trail around the base of Piz Hiern: and the south wind blew warm around her.

•

The townspeople came up the mountain as soon as they thought it safe, wondering at the flow of water that passed them. On the alp they found the great sleeping stone shape of a bull, with the miraculous spring gushing from its side. This their priest blessed, seeing from the signs that God had worked a miracle, killing the demon-bull by the sacrifice of an innocent maiden and the silver Bull's great strength.

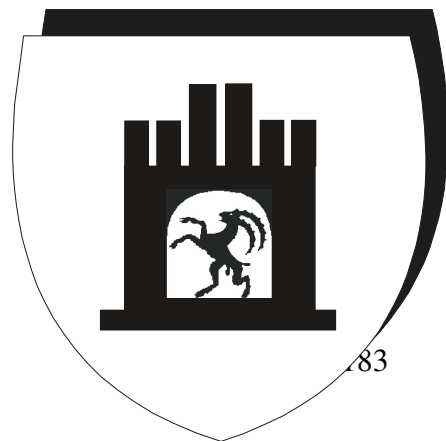
They mourned Mariarta in the church, and spent ninety days' worth of wonder arguing about what had happened. Some said the priest's story was right, of a misused sacrament, a devil sent to punish the town, and their deliverance by sacrifice. Others, less willing to state the opinion openly, said one of the Old Powers, whose influence had never gone away in these mountains, had been

meddling—trying to turn men to its ends, and failing. But the tale spread through the valleys.

The alp soon was healed. The birds flocked back; the next spring, beasts cautiously left there prospered, and the alp grew grass in abundance such as no one had seen in its best days. The steadier heads in the village, like Paol the new *mistral*, said that this was because of the new spring—it made the grass grow thicker, and the ground thus became more fertile. Others pointed instead to the great dark stony shape from which the spring flowed. Gray it had been at first, but it weathered black. Most said this meant the black Bull was no longer their bane, but their protector, made so by the maiden's sacrifice. When one of Tschamut's sons went away to fight in the King's wars, he made a banner with the black Bull's head on it, and took it along. Men from Ursera and Aultvitg, who heard the story, saw how that young man never took hurt in battle when he had the banner with him. Some of them made such banners for their own companies, and the Bull's fierce face went before them on many a battlefield in Talia where they fought in obligation, or for pay.

Tschamut heard little of this. Its life of herding and harvesting went on as ever. And in its church, no water but that from the Bull Spring was ever thought good enough to be made into holy water again....

Part Two:
The White Chamois



Il mal ven a cavagl e va vi a pei.
Misfortune arrives on horseback and leaves on foot.

(Raetian proverb)

ONE

The road approaching Mustér from the westward was wide, descending gently in broad curves from the shoulder of the Tujetsch hill on which the houses of Mompe Tujetsch perch. Once down the hill, it wandered from side to side through the rich green plain. All that plain was a patchwork of fields scattered with brown houses, clustering together as they approached the two great square grey towers of the Abbey, north of the town. It was a calm place. No one living could remember any enemy coming from the great south-running Lucomagno pass. This land was under the protection of the prince-Bishops of Chur: it was their chief larder, their second library, and their western gate, and they watched it closely.

On that spring morning a young man, a chamois hunter by his clothes, trudged down the road through Funs village outside the town. Behind him, led on a rein, walked a small grey donkey piled with six chamois skins—an excellent haul, folded outside in to spare the fur.

Three streets ran through the middle of Mustér; the young chamois hunter followed the route that led to the middle one. The market place was a space three roads wide, cobbled for its most part, with a *binario* down the middle. Stalls were set up and half sold out already, for the Mustér market started before it was light.

“Mattiu, *beinvegni*, Mattiu!” one of the stallkeepers shouted at the chamois-hunter, waving. The young man turned his red-kerchiefed head, grinned, and led his donkey over.

“*Bien di*, Sievi,” said the hunter, grinning at the florid man in his leather apron. “What, ready for more already? I had thought I’d try Hendri this time.”

The stallkeeper spat good-humoredly on the stones. “He’ll cheat you like he did the last time.”

“I wouldn’t call it cheating,” Mattiu said. “You weren’t buying that day. Your own fault.” The hunter began to undo the knots on the leather straps that held the bundles on the donkey’s back.

“Don’t know where you’re getting these,” Sievi said, unfolding the first hide the hunter handed him, stroking the pelt. “No one from here seems to have shot one in a month.”

Mattiu shrugged. “There seem to be plenty there. I whistle for them.”

“Know a few who wouldn’t mind learning that whistle,” Sievi muttered. “Two each, Mattiu.”

The hunter burst out laughing. “And you said Hendri cheated me!” He reached out to take the last pelt back.

“Mattiu, I can’t do better—”

“When nobody else has been shooting any? Never mind, Hendri will—”

“Oh, never mind then, two and one!”

“Two and *two*.”

“I can’t—”

“You’re going to sell to the Abbot for four. Never mind, I’ll go see the Abbot myself—”

“*Fudi!*”

“I will, Sievi. Him, or Hendri. Come on now.”

Sievi scowled. “Oh, well, two and two.” They struck hands on it. “Ow! Where did you get a grip like that, a runt like you?”

“Skin enough of these beasts,” Mattiu said, smiling, “you’ll have one too.” It was their old joke, verse and response: no deal between them would have been complete without it.

Sievi counted out the money. “Where to next, Mattiu?”

The young hunter shrugged. “North, maybe,” he said. “Heard a story about the white one, by Alp Russein.”

Sievi laughed out loud. “Nothing there but dragon’s bones, my lad. Chamois don’t go there. Certainly not white ones.”

“You said there weren’t any chamois by the Buora glacier, either,” said the hunter, still smiling. He patted the pile of hides.

“You were *there? Ridischen!*” Sievi crossed himself. “There are dead people walking around there!”

“Oh, then you won’t want the hides after all—”

“Get out of here and spend your money,” Sievi growled. “Reckless young pup.”

Mattiu coiled the leather straps, stowed them on his donkey’s pack. “Drink later tonight, Sievi?”

“After supper, aye, if herself lets me out. *Tgau*, Mattiu.”

“*Tgau*.”

The young hunter wandered off through the market, stopping to look thoughtfully at a pile of Talian lemons at a fruitseller’s stand. “Nice young fellow, that,” Sievi said to the stallkeeper next to him when the hunter was out of earshot. “Crazy, though; doesn’t care about his skin, the places he goes to get these.”

“Not afraid of ghosts, I guess,” said the other stallkeeper, a bell-saddler.

“No. Crazy, as I said. Good hunter, though. Hope he doesn’t find out *how* good, or he’ll raise his prices.”

A wind ran through the marketplace, flapping the awnings. Over by the fruitseller’s stand, the young hunter smiled, strolled on. *Another few months*, Mariarta thought, as the wind breathed Sievi’s words in her ear, *and I’ll start asking him for more*.

It had been six months since Mariarta left Tschamut: a bitter, difficult winter, spent mostly in the abandoned herds’ huts on one alp or another. They had fireplaces (for the herds used them for cheesemaking in the summer), so with dry wood, snow melted over a fire, and skins for bedding, it was possible to at least survive in the huts, if not ever to get completely warm.

Mariarta had often gone hungry, for the weather was sometimes so bad, even the chamois refused to go out; her hunger, worse than usual because of the cold, made her swiftly use her stores of dried meat. Over time she learned to manage her stores. As she brought home more skins from her hunting, staying warm became easier even without a fire. And the hunting itself was no problem. Any time that the chamois *did* venture out, Mariarta could infallibly shoot them.

To her surprise, Mariarta had not been lonely. She *had* been terrified, for the first month, that some hunter would come upon her and either try to take her back to Tschamut, or betray her disguise. After a while the fear lessened, for few hunters were out in this dreadful weather. Gradually Mariarta relaxed enough to enjoy the mountains, which had always seemed somehow threatening and barren to a villager. Only once during that winter did she actually weep for loneliness—on Christmas eve, when she knew that below her, lights shone in all the windows of Tschamut, warmth and singing dwelt by its firesides, and children were sneaking into the sheds to hear the cows talk about what would happen in the next year. Mariarta wept for the thought of her house, which might have all the lights in the world in it, and a fire right up the chimney, but would not have the two most important sources of warmth. They were in the churchyard, under the snow....

It was a bitter time, but mercifully brief. The next day food had to be shot as usual; Mariarta went about her business, finding some solace in the fact that she was alive at all. When she had been growing up, it had been assumed

that no girl or woman could have lived alone in the mountains in wintertime; not even Sontg Margriata had tried *that*.

When the weather started to break, Mariarta knew she would have to leave the huts before the herds came. This frightened her. It seemed likely that the first townsman who saw her would know her for a woman and denounce her to everyone in sight. All the same, she was determined that this should not happen. She was not big in the chest, which was a help: a tight linen binding under her shirt made her look no different from many men of her height. She was not as broad in the shoulder as some, but she was young: no one would think her size odd. She didn't seem of an age to have a beard, either. Mariarta would not cut her hair—the memory of how her mother had loved to comb it always got between her and the shears. But many hunters that Mariarta had seen wore their long hair bound in a kerchief, and everyone wore hide or fleece hats during the cold weather. The hot summer weather, when everyone stripped, would be more of a problem—but at such times Mariarta could be in the mountains, in the solitudes where not even the herds went, because no grass grew there.

When the *föhn* first started to blow, in the beginning of March, Mariarta took her courage in her hands, made a roll of chamois pelts, and left the hut on Alp Rondadura where she had been staying, making her way to the great road leading from the Lucomagno Pass. Down she went to Mustér, trying hard to look like just another traveler. She was shocked to see how no one paid her the slightest notice until she got into the market place. Then Mariarta's aching

back was gratified, for the pelts sold fast. Had she come a month earlier, Sievi had told her cheerfully, she could have made twice as much, because of the scarcity of hunters mad enough to be out at such times. He had then given her more coin money for her pelts than Mariarta had seen since her father last paid Tschamut's grass-penny: he asked for her business next time, and asked her name. "Mati," she blurted, not ready for the question, and blushed fiercely: but "Mattiu" was what Sievi made of it, since it never occurred to him that he wasn't talking to a man. By the end of the conversation, "Mattiu" she had become, from somewhere up the hills on the other side of Ursera. Mariarta had gone off in search of the town's inn, stunned by the easiness of it all. She still felt as if the word *femna* was branded on her forehead.

Mariarta had not intended to stay in the inn—just to eat there: the thought of a chicken properly roasted over a kitchen fire had been making her half-mad for the last month. But in the next few hours Mariarta's courage burgeoned as she discovered that no one thought she was anything but a young man, slightly mad to be out hunting so early, certainly brave and strong, and a skilled shot (for Sievi came into the inn later and bragged about the quality and number of the pelts Mariarta had brought). He might have been doing it to drive their resale price up, but Mariarta didn't care—the praise, after a long winter without another human voice, was like wine to her, and went to her head. She ate and drank with the townsmen by the big fire, and no one thought it odd when the cheerful, modest young hunter (how he blushed when you praised him!) went off to

bed early, after only a couple of cupfuls. “Just like a mountain man, up with the sun, gone with the sun,” they said to each other. When Mariarta insisted on a basin of water with which to wash privately in the room, it merely fastened her new *persona* tighter (“These upcountry people, they’re so modest, they won’t even let you see them pee. No, really!”).

She had been back to Mustér three times now, each time with a bigger load—for before leaving town after her first visit, she went to one of the local farmers and bought a donkey, a small broadbacked creature with a mischievous look in its eye. Mariarta added to the price a half-soldi for shed-room for the donkey that winter. For the spring, summer and early fall she would have a stronger back than hers to carry the pelts of the chamois she would be shooting. She would be able to put away a pretty sack of coin by the fall. Then—

There Mariarta’s planning failed her. But it would be a long while yet before she would have to make any decisions. Meanwhile it was enjoyable enough to be free, to have money in her pocket, and nothing to do but what she pleased. Now she made her way to Il Cucu, the old white-stuccoed inn that stood to one side of the town’s central street, giving Catsch the donkey to the yard-boy to stable.

The place was full of tradesmen already finished with the day’s selling, as well as townsfolk and town-farmers who were through with the morning chores and had time to spare for food and gossip. Mariarta made her way to the huge fireplace, sat herself on a nearby bench.

Turté, one of the kitchen girls, came over to Mariarta and greeted her with a smile. “Well, how hungry are you today, Matti?” she said. This was getting to be an old joke too: the kitchen girls laughed that such a slender young man should have such a huge appetite.

“A chicken’s worth at least,” Mariarta said, “and what else have you got?”

“Barley soup with cheese, coneys baked in milk and pepper,” Turté said, “and fried dumplings and bread dumplings with onion.”

“The soup, if you would. And a pitcher of the nice white wine.”

“Only the soup? Not the coney too?”

“Maybe later,” Mariarta laughed. Turté laughed too and took her broad blond self away, swaying her hips under the long black village girl’s skirt as she went. It had taken a while for Mariarta to understand why the kitchen girls took such good care of her, and seemed to feel safe flirting with her. During her second stay here, she had watched the way the men in the common room tended to treat the girls—shouting things at them that made it sound as if the girls weren’t chaste, and pawing them. A breeze wandering in from the kitchen brought Mariarta their anger at the gibes—and their praise of the modest young mountain boy who *didn’t* treat them so. A gem, worth taking care of—for who knew who might catch him some day? Mariarta had at first been shocked at this consequence of disguising herself, which she hadn’t foreseen. But now she simply smiled at their flirting, and went on treating them as she would have

treated any other woman she respected: which pleased the kitchen girls well.

Before long the wine came, and the soup, thick with fat sliced mushrooms as well as barley and cream. Sievi arrived for his midday sup, his friend Giohen the bell-saddler with him. They sat with Mariarta, sharing her wine. Sievi leaned back against the fireplace-stone, sighing. “Hot one out there today, and not a moment too soon. Thought I’d go mad if this winter lasted another day.”

Mariarta smiled. The *föhn* had been blowing for almost two weeks; the snow was well melted from the lowest slopes. “I’ll have to go higher now,” she said. “The chamois won’t stay low when the herds start coming to the alp.”

“Higher, *fudi*, higher than you’ve been already? Up by Buora, if you please,” Sievi said to Giohen.

Giohen sucked in breath. “Not a healthy neighborhood.”

“If people have been dying into the glacier there,” Mariarta said, “they haven’t been coming out again. But I wasn’t looking for ghosts. Just chamois.”

“And your white one,” Sievi said.

Giohen chuckled. “Enough like a ghost, the white one. They say you shoot at it and miss, you’re the one that dies.”

“A good thing I don’t miss, then,” Mariarta said. Neither man challenged her on that. They had been at the shooting contest, when Mariarta had last been to Mustér, and had seen her carry away the prize.

Giohen shrugged. “Still, you might find your chamois: or chamois and dead people, both. You know

Menrad, Sievi: the weaver? His cousin used to hunt way over on Cima della Blanca, and got out onto Gletscher dalla Tuor. This cousin, Callist his name was, he was chasing a chamois, and had to cross this glacier. On the way, he came to one of those snowbridges over a crevasse. You know the kind—step on them slowly, the snow welds together and bears you. He didn't do it right; down he went into the crevasse. Fell a long way, got knocked out before he hit bottom."

"Probably that saved him," Sievi said. "You fall limp, you don't break as many bones."

"That's right. He came to himself at the bottom, not hurt. But there he is in a deep black dark like the bottom of the devil's mass-bag, and he can't see to move. Luckily he has a stump of old candle with him, and flint and steel as usual. So he lights the candle, looks around. He's been lying on a big stone slab. Except it's not a slab, this slanted bit: it's slates, it's the sides of a roof! And he sees a tower, with a bell in it. '*Zachergiavel*,'" he thinks, 'where did this come from?' So he climbs down, and look at that, it's a whole church, gates and all. He pushes one of the gates open, goes inside. All this time everything's quiet, except for water trickling and dripping, you know that gurgle you hear in the crevasses in warm weather."

"Not me," Sievi said, shaking his head. "I don't know nothing about it, nor want to."

"So there's young Callist inside this church," Giohen said to Mariarta. "He lifts the candle and sees an altar down at the other end. And kneeling on the floor before it are all these people, praying. All dead quiet, but for the water

dripping, not a movement anywhere. It gets to Callist, finally, so he goes over to one of the people nearest and puts a hand on his shoulder and whispers, ‘Friend, what are you doing here?’ And the man slumps over sideways and crumbles away to dust. Young Callist, he’s never been scared in his life nearly, but *this* scares him, as the man next to the one he touched begins to crumble, and the dust starts to rise, and Callist thinks he’ll breathe it and crumble too— He ran out of there and started climbing out of that crevasse, didn’t know what he was doing even, he was so scared. Finally he got out—hours, it took, but he found himself up on the glacier at sunset, and it was before noon when he went down.

“Midnight it was before he got home. His friends at the Pardatsch hut were waiting for him. He told them what happened, and they decided they’d go back to the glacier in the morning with ropes and ladders, and find this church. But they could never find the right crevasse with the church again.” Giohen shook his head and drank. “Still down there somewhere.”

“You’ll probably stumble on it sooner or later,” Sievi said to Mariarta, amused.

Mariarta finished the last of her wine. “Not if I can help it.”

“You’ll get stuck halfway down the crevasse, the way you’re eating,” Giohen said admiringly, as Turté came along with Mariarta’s chicken and set it on the table.

Sievi reached out and pinched Turté’s bottom; she glared at him. “That’s what it’s there for,” Sievi said jovially.

“You’d be offended if I didn’t. Just go get some more of that wine, Turté.”

As Turté went off, Mariarta raised her eyebrows and gave her a commiserating look. Turté smiled. Giohen caught it, snickered.

“They’re good girls,” Mariarta said, taking a leg off her chicken.

Sievi laughed. “They will be once they’re safely married.”

“Oh, come on, Sievi.”

“Taking a fancy to them, are you? They’ve taken enough of one to you. Young Turté there, even that proud-looking Frona—”

“They’re good girls,” Mariarta said, more softly.

“They wouldn’t be if they were let run loose,” Sievi said, “and it’s only Sep watching them night and day that keeps them out of trouble. Why, some of the men around here would...” He shook his head. “Never mind, you’re from the country after all, no use mentioning other people’s bad habits.”

“That the men would jump them the first chance they got, that’s the girls’ fault, is it?” Mariarta said.

Sievi laughed harder. “It’s Turté for sure. You may have a problem, youngster. She has another lad after her—”

The wind gusted outside. The front door of the common room blew open with a slam: a figure stood in it, silhouetted in the sunlight from outside. “Speak of il Giavel,” said Giohen, “there’s young Flisch himself. I wonder—”

He broke off at the sound of a man's scream. The dark shape in the doorway collapsed.

People ran to the man, shouting after a moment for cold wine and hot spirits, for blankets and hot stones for his head and feet. Along with Sievi and Giohen, Mariarta went to see what was happening. The closer bystanders had got the man onto a table. Turté was stroking his head with one hand, holding his hand with the other, moaning, "Flisch! Flisch!" The young man, stocky and strong as he looked, was pale as a corpse ready to be buried. But sweat stood out on him, and he twisted and moaned softly. His eyes were squeezed shut.

Mariarta leaned over him, put a hand to his head. "He's burning up. Turté, stop it and help me get his coat off. Where's he been?"

"Balzer says they saw him coming from the pass," said a big deep voice behind them. That was Ramun, the innkeeper.

"He went there two days ago," Turté said, "he said he heard the chamois were good there—"

Mariarta shook her head. "But what's come to him?" Inside, though, she had an idea. Poor Flisch looked a lot like the first boy who had met the Bull, after the shock wore off—

"This is no good," Mariarta said. "He ought to be somewhere quiet. Ramun, put him in my room, and send for someone from the Abbey—"

"Bab Stoffel, he's the leech. Duf, go bring him. Sievi, Lucas, give me a hand!"

They got Flisch up to Mariarta's small room, onto the narrow straw-mattressed bed. Flisch's eyes never opened. When the others went away, all but Turté, Mariarta shut the door and sat beside him. "Flisch—"

He moaned, his head turning from side to side on the pillow.

"Something's bewitched him," Turté said, the tears running down her face. "What if he—"

Another moan. The handsome dark face was all twisted like a child's when it's trying not to cry. "Turté," Mariarta said, "open that shutter, would you? It's close in here."

Turté swung the shutter open. A warm breeze flowed in, a momentarily gentle breath of *föhn*. "Flisch!" Mariarta said. "What happened? You have to tell us!"

A louder moan. This time, as she leaned close, Mariarta caught a breath of windborne thought: *...put that there...why... Cold. I'll go in... No! What...no!*

Mariarta shook her head. "Turté, he doesn't know me. Ask him what happened."

"Flisch—Flisch, it's Turté, dear one, what happened, what happened to you?"

...just a little fire...warmer...what? Mariarta's eyes flew open as she felt what Flisch had at some point in the past two nights (for the thought was all dark): a huge crashing blow, followed by another, and another, not to the body, but inside it, the soul struck by something that knocked as if at a door.

“Flisch! Flisch!” Turté sobbed. The wind brought Mariarta the sound of something creaking, wood in a high wind, perhaps? a building?—and more crashes—

“No,” Flisch said, aloud this time. The knocking got louder—no, it was really someone at the door this time. Turté opened it. A slight man in a rusty black cassock came in and knelt beside Mariarta, taking Flisch’s hand to feel the pulse.

“Bab Stoffel?” Mariarta said. The monk nodded, brought his hand away from Flisch’s head wet with sweat.

“This is your room?” Bab Stoffel said. “Bless you then, son. He spoke just now, I thought—”

“Just the one word.”

The monk touched one of Flisch’s eyelids. It twitched, but stayed shut. “Flisch!” he said. “In God’s name, tell us what’s come to you!”

No, the wind said in Mariarta’s ear. But Mariarta thought some other question was being answered. *No, I won’t...I won’t...* And Flisch screamed: “*I won’t! I won’t open it! I won’t open it!*”

Mariarta and Turté and the Bab stared at one another. The Bab stood up. “I think we should let him rest, while we try to find out more. —You come too, Turté. No harm will come to him here. Come along and go do your work, for the meantime.”

Mariarta shut the door and followed the Bab downstairs into the common room. Ramun was waiting there for them: he handed the Bab a cup of barley-water, which Bab Stoffel gladly drank. “Have you found anyone else who saw him come from the pass?” he said to Ramun.

“No. Just Michel at the upper farm: says he was driving the cows out and saw Flisch just walk by, not looking right or left.”

“*Striegn*,” someone whispered.

“I don’t know,” Bab Stoffel said. “I have to go back to the Abbey and bring some medicines good against witchery. If they don’t work—then this may be exhaustion compounded by fear of something that happened. If the fear was of something natural, then it will fade, and Flisch will recover. But if he saw something unnatural, a demon, a ghost—”

“Then the demon has to be driven away, or the ghost laid?” Ramun said.

“If it can be. His fear ties him to it. The tie must be broken. Otherwise....”

The sound of weeping came from behind them. Bab Stoffel turned to Turté. “Don’t give up yet! We still have the medicines to try: and there are the holy Sacraments as well. Cry less and pray more, Turté, and you’ll do Flisch more good. Ramun, I’ll be back.”

•

Bab Stoffel returned with a leather bag, and went to Mariarta’s room. When he came to the common room at last, it was mid-afternoon. He went to sit by the fire, where half the patrons of the inn were gathered.

“Nothing,” he said to them. “He is not changed.”

Turté had followed him to the fire: her face puckered again, but she held the tears back hard. Mariarta’s heart

clenched for her. “He cries out occasionally,” Bab Stoffel said, “but the words make no sense. I fear there’s nothing to do but keep him warm and quiet.”

The men around the fire muttered. Mariarta couldn’t bear it any more. She went to Turté. “Look here—”

Sievi laughed. “Not wasting any time, are you?”

Mariarta turned, frowning. “Sievi,” she said, “you are an honest tradesman, but in other matters you have a mind like the bottom of one of your vats. I am going up the Pass.”

A shocked silence fell. “Mattiu, you’re a fool,” Ramun said. “You may be good with a bow, but—”

“I can bring back some news of what happened to Flisch,” Mariarta said. She took her coat off the back of the bench. “Besides, other people come down that pass. Will you have *them* fall foul of whatever’s happened to Flisch? Enough of that happens, sooner or later no one will use the pass any more. Then where are your livelihoods?”

Bab Stoffel said, “If you will do something so dangerous, Mattiu, will you at least take a blessing with you?”

Mariarta nodded, shrugged into her coat, and knelt, while everything got quiet. Bab Stoffel traced the Cross over her, and after murmuring under his breath in Latin, said, “Go well, and come back to us safely.”

“That’s as God wills,” Mariarta said. “As for me, I’ll do what I can. Ramun, maybe your kitchen can give me some bread and meat—”

“Come on,” Turté said, and led Mariarta out.

•

The road up the Lucomagno from Mustér is gentle at first, a series of zigzags that roughly follow the course of the Rein da Medel. As the road bends, the traveller can look back from this spot or that to see Mustér framed as if in a doorway between the hills that rise to either side of the Rein gorge: gentle sloping hills all greenclad, with pines at their tops. Then the road swings eastward, up the Acla slope, to Curaglia village at the mouth of the Masauna side-valley. Mariarta asked at the village inn there, barely more than someone's front room, whether they had seen a man walk through town that day, a chamois hunter, possibly talking to himself? The house-husband, a gaunt unsmiling man, shook his head at Mariarta and turned away, so that she knew he *had* seen such a man, and was frightened by him.

She climbed the pass road for some hours. Afternoon was drawing on toward evening, the shadows of the pines lying across the left side of the pass road as it climbed, with few turns, up Val Medel and past its scraggly rocky alps. The *föhn* had been blowing all day, in the desultory manner of early spring: nothing spectacular, just the endless hot whining wind that wore everyone's tempers to shreds. That whining was in Mariarta's ears as she climbed past the hamlets of Pardé and Fuorns to where the road curved eastward.

She stopped there a while to eat, looking past the ford where the Cristallina Rein, running from the glaciers, met the Rein de Medel. Above the peaks the sky had gone apricot-colored, and fans of radiance struck upward from

behind clouds on the far side. Those clouds worried her. If the *föhn* decided to blow a sudden fit of bad weather at her, she might have much worse to worry about than ghosts. Hail the size of apples could kill you as dead as fear, and faster.

Mariarta crossed first the small river, then the bigger one, and turned southward. Another hour's walk brought her under the shadow of fanglike Scopi, the road running close to the steep cliffs at the mountain's feet. There Mariarta stopped, for the feel of the air had changed. She glanced upwards toward Cuolm Lucmagn, the actual top of the pass. Over it, light shone, the paling radiance of side-reflected sunlight. Everything was still, but the sky was turning that dangerous, too-luminous blue: the silence was only the kind that was gathering itself for a night of terror.

Mariarta went on to the top of the pass. There she stopped, looking down the other side.

Now what in Heaven's name is that doing there—?!

By the side of the road was a hamlet called Pertusio. It had probably started as a group of herder's huts, and had slowly been made into houses over time—probably by herds who hated leaving their families for the whole summer. What was new there was a small wooden building separated from the others: a building *in* the pass road itself.

Or what remained of a building. It was splinters of wood, now, lying all flattened toward the neck of the pass, like trees after an avalanche.

Mariarta went down, remembering what sound had come to her from Flisch's mind—wood creaking in a terrible wind. *Not the föhn*, she thought to herself. *This was*

something different. She passed the first of the Pertusio houses, and shouted, but no answer came. “Gone,” she said to herself. Or fled.

The other three houses were empty also: though not completely—pots and pans, dishes, some clothes, were still there, when Mariarta looked in windows that had come unshuttered: but no people. *They had some warning,* Mariarta thought. *Took whatever was valuable, anyway. Then got out—*

She turned her attention to the broken building in the road. It was no bigger than a cowshed, with doors at either end where the road met it. The building itself was totally smashed—except the doors. They stood upright in their frames, and they were shut.

Mariarta stood there in the deepening dusk, thinking of Flisch’s scream. *I won’t open it!* For a long time, she stood staring at the downslope door.

Finally she unlimbered her crossbow, kicked aside some of the smaller fallen roof timbers, and sat on the biggest one. Mariarta took some bolts from their quiver, sticking them ready in the neck-binding of her shirt. She sat a long time, while the dusk turned to night, and the stars and moon came out. The moon was only a half at the moment, but bright enough here to light everything well. The wind kept quiet for the time being, but Mariarta was not fooled by this. She had seen the sky at sunset, the sunbeams too bright, seeming to swim in their own radiance. Rain was in that air, or snow, depending on what the wind did: the wind itself had not made up its mind.

In the middle of the road, Mariarta thought, glancing at the fallen timbers. *And it's quite new*. The slopes of the Scai and Foppone hills drew close to the road here. And they were rocky—no way over them except by going a long way around. Suddenly something Mariarta's father had said came back to her. *A toll-house?* And built where the people staying in the Pertusio houses could keep an eye on it. If they had some connection with whatever bailiff ran this land, they might have made it work for a while, until the next lord over made it an issue.

She moved around among the remains, while a breeze stirred her hair. A blackened spot here— She kicked at the ashes: the charcoal showed bits of pine bough, not hay. *Definitely not a cowshed...this was brought in from outside*. Again Flisch's thought came to her: *...cold. I'll go in. ... A little fire—*

There were no clouds: the moon shone clear. But the wind built, blowing warm from the south even in the middle of the night. Mariarta stood inside the door on the downslope side, facing into the wind.

The door began to rattle in the rising gale, as if someone was trying the latch. The wind blew harder, and Mariarta could hear sounds and voices in it: not the usual way. Horns, she heard, and the barking of dogs, distant. A great tumult was coming toward her on the wind: thundering, crashing sounds growing closer and louder. But the sound was not in the sky. It was in the farside valley, coming toward her. Peering around the side of the door, Mariarta stared all around in the moonlight, but could see nothing.

The sounds came closer. She heard the deep clatter of big wheels over stones and ruts: dogs again, barking, not in distress or in the hunt, but cheerfully, like beasts whose masters are near. Shouts she heard, wordless like those of herdsmen driving their cows, *hoi! ayai!* And horns again, not only deep-voiced ones, but bright horns like the trumpets Mariarta had read about as a child. Hooves she heard on the stones, the quick ones of horses, the slower clop of oxen. But stand there and strain her eyes as she might, Mariarta could see nothing in the road but the dust that the wind blew toward her. And still the roar and clatter of hooves and wheels and voices came closer, until it was surely right before her. Mariarta stood shivering with astonishment, and kept her bow ready.

Then *CRASH!* came the blow on the door: and Mariarta felt it inside her, as she had felt the blow struck at Flisch's soul. The door shook in its frame, the timbers bent inward. Mariarta staggered back with the force of the blow, gasping with fear and pain: but she found her footing, knowing that what struck her was a matter of the spirit, not the body, and the pain would pass. *CRASH!* the blow came again, and this time she was readier, but she gasped at it, as much from wonder as from fear. *Why can't I see anything, what is it—*

CRASH! came the third blow, striking her less painfully still; though the thunder crashed with it, and a flicker of heat-lightning danced about the peak of Scopi. Mariarta sucked in a great breath of the strange warm air, and cried, "*Tuts buns sperts laudan Diu ed jeu e. Igl empren ed il davos plaid ein mes. Tgei maunca a ti e tgei drovas?*"

A great deep voice, from right before her face, answered her. "The Frisian folk are here. Once we have knocked, and been refused, that never knocked or were refused before. Open and let us pass!"

Mariarta swallowed. "In God's name, I will do that," she shouted over the wind, making her way back to the passward door, which was still on the latch. She undid it, then went back to the door that led downslope. Mariarta slid the bolt back, and with some difficulty hauled the door wide.

The wind blew through. Mariarta stepped back to look through the door, and the breath went out of her in astonishment at the sight of the great crowd of people, more than she had ever seen in her life before, all strung out down the road into the valley, over the next rise and out of sight: a mighty host of men and women, horses and cattle and sheep, wagons and running, barking dogs. In the moonlight upheld spears glittered, banners flapped in the wind, trumpets brayed. Right before Mariarta stood a tall man in armor gleaming like fish-scales, with a tall sharp shining helmet and a spear in his hand; a bearded man in a great fur cloak clasped with a shining spiral brooch. He looked kindly at Mariarta, but not quite at her. Mariarta stepped aside, and bowed to him. The huge man stepped forward and went by, a brief cold breath on the warm wind. She felt something cool against her leg, and was astonished to see the man's cloak brush, not against her booted calf, but through it.

Many more passed the same way: how many, Mariarta never knew. All came through the one door and went out the other: many more warriors, dressed as their

leader had been—some more roughly, in skins of bulls or deer; some in the finest linen. Their weapons and armor were beautiful, some helmets winged with ravens' or eagles' wings or ornamented with little brazen horns, the hilts of their swords carven silver, the gleam of polished steel everywhere, the horse-furniture as fine as the men's clothing when the handsome steeds came through. Huge wagons passed, with hooped roofs or canopies of cloth; women drove them, and young girls and children looked out from under the canopies, laughing, shouting in a strange language: the dogs followed, barking, keeping the cattle in order. Thousands of fine cows were driven past Mariarta, many herds of sheep and goats, and then came more wagons and more warriors. It was a whole people on the move; it seemed to go on forever. Every time Mariarta thought to look up, the stars had wheeled into some new pattern, and still the slow stream of people went by her, blown through the doors on the wind.

No wonder poor Flisch came back as he did, Mariarta thought, shivering—she was not cold, but the strangeness wore at her. Rooted to the spot by his fear, or by some ill magic that came of his not opening to these people— No wonder he was so stricken. Well, if this opening cures him....

She yawned, and saw suddenly that the stars were leaning toward dawn, the blackness of the sky paling. For once, the doorway before her was no longer full. Far up in the neck of the pass, in the light of the westering moon, she saw the glitter of a last company of spears. She turned to look through the downslope door at the now-empty road,

dusty white in the last of the moonlight, the dead-black shadows of the peaks beginning to encroach upon it.

One last figure was approaching slowly: a rider, huge, on a huge horse. He seemed to be dressed as many of the other men had been, in shaggy skins with armor underneath, over quilted clothes; though Mariarta could see no sword or shield or spear about him.

She waited, holding her bow, watching him come. Slowly he rode, as if he or his beast was weary. The big grey horse that bore him stepped strongly enough, though its gait seemed odd. Sometimes it seemed to have more legs than it should have: but the moonlight was dimming, after all—

The rider paused at the doorway, looking at Mariarta oddly. She stared too, for this man was the first to have seen her. He was even bigger than she had thought, with a great mane of hair that might have been red, in daylight, and a beard to match. An odd glimmer lived in his eyes, and pale light clung about him without the moon being involved.

“Do you see me, maiden?” he said, in a big gruff voice.

“I do,” Mariarta said, now far beyond reciting formulas, “and that you see me is a wonder, for almost none of the others have.”

The man laughed, and some of the belongings hung about his horse shifted. Mariarta heard a crackle, smelled something like the smell after lightning. Her attention was attracted by a big square hammer of stone hanging from the man’s saddle. The odd light that clung about him, like

heat-lightning made lasting, seemed to burn dimly in the stone hammerhead.

“They don’t see much,” the man said. He spoke the Romansch of the over-the-mountain people, who spoke it vilely and usually had to explain every third word. But Mariarta had no trouble understanding him. “It’s a long time since they first came this way.”

“Who are they?”

“They came from the north,” the man said. “It was a beautiful country in those days, but there were too many of them: and there were floods and disasters. So their king sacrificed to the gods, and the gods told him to send one man of every ten, with his family and goods, to the far south to live. That they did; this is one of the roads they found. They settled, and cleared the forests, and farmed, and died, and their children married the people there.”

The man sighed. “But you know how it is: you get homesick. Even in their graves, they longed for the sound of the cold grey sea they were born by. So they rise and ride back the way they came, until they see the sea again. Then they’re satisfied; they fade away into their graves, and lie quiet a while longer. Never *much* longer,” the rider said, with an air of affectionate annoyance. “And up they get and do it again, when the wind blows right.”

“But you’re not one of them,” Mariarta said softly, looking at that hammer again.

“No,” the rider said. “Yet I can’t rest either, for I came with them. When they wake, they wake me too, calling me to follow. They have the right to.” He smiled sadly.

“It’s a pity; all my other kin rest, some of them hereabouts, since the Cry went up.”

“The Cry?”

“That great Pan was dead,” said the rider. The horse stamped its feet, and Mariarta saw that it definitely had feet to spare. “The other gods,” the rider said, “according to their power, they made delves for themselves and went to ground, waiting to come back; it was written that they could, in various ways. They lie there, with their pleasures and memories, waiting their time. But I never could.”

Mariarta gazed at him, uncomprehending. The rider shook his head. “The Northern gods told their worshippers what to do,” the rider said, “but the gods were bound by the saying as well. One out of ten of *them* had to go find a new home too. The lot fell on me. At least I was able to borrow this lad to keep me company.” He patted the big grey horse. “As well for him, maybe, for shortly he wasn’t needed there any more.” He shrugged once more, and the light of the hammer glittered in his eyes: a deadly light, but humorous with the capricious humor of the lightning bolt. “You, though,” he said, those eyes bearing down on Mariarta, “should know about this, for I feel the breath of another of the Old Ones about you. Not one of my nearest kindred, but some sister from over mountain. East of here, or west: east by the mitred city, or west by the lakes. One of those two—”

His voice was getting fainter, just as he was. Mariarta realized abruptly that the sky was paling, and the rider with it. “Sister!” Mariarta said desperately. “Is she someone—is she a goddess who shoots?”

She found she was talking to nothing but air filled with the colorless radiance of approaching dawn; and down the valley, toward Talia, a cock crowed.

•

It was a long walk back to Mustér, but Mariarta did it by noon. In the villages above Curaglia, every door was bolted and every window barred, though Mariarta felt eyes peering at her from the other side of knotholes in window-planks and doors. *Yes, she thought, they passed this way, all right.*

In Mustér the story was more confusing. Mariarta went to Il Cucu and was descended on by everyone but Bab Stoffel. He, when she met him by the fire, took Mariarta's hands and told her that about dawn, Flisch had awakened suddenly and asked where he was. Mariarta thanked him, and God, and told Bab Stoffel and the circle of eager listeners of what she had seen—though she did not mention much of her conversation with the big rider with the hammer. She described him, though. Bab Stoffel crossed himself and frowned, but would say nothing more on the subject.

On the business of what had happened in Mustér that night, there was argument. Some had seen shadowy riders, some had heard only a great wind: some had heard horns blowing, bells ringing. No one could agree. Bab Stoffel, though, said, "The Frisian Ride, it's called past the northern lakes. The country people there know to build their houses or sheds with doors that can be left open for the Ride to

pass: it always passes without harm. I wouldn't have thought that the Frisian folk ever came so far south, though. This must be recorded." And Bab Stoffel took himself off to the Abbey to write it all down.

Mariarta laughed, and went to bed. When she rose, fairly late that night, she was haled off to the common room and given food enough for even her appetite, and enough drink to have swum in. Every kitchen girl came out and flirted with her, though not Turté, who Mariarta understood quite well was busy elsewhere. Her, and Flisch, Mariarta saw the next day, when she was leaving.

"Where to this time?" Turté said, shyly. "A brave fellow like you can surely go anywhere you like—"

Mariarta shook her head and laughed, taking Catsch's reins from Flisch, smiling at them both. "East," she said, "to the mitred city. I will sell my skins to the Bishop of Chur."

And Mariarta walked off down the eastward road, whistling: the carefree hunter, with money in her pocket and no one to please but herself. Yet all the while there were mountains on her mind—the mountains above Chur being close. Under one of them or another was a goddess in hiding. Mariarta meant to find her...along with answers to questions that had spent a long time borne on the wind.

TWO

A bishop of Chur must have three qualifications. He must be a man, and a Christian, and from Chur. But some of these qualifications are less important than others. We'll settle for a Saracen woman Bishop —*as long as she's from Chur.*
(Churer saying, c. 1000 AD)

It was late summer when Mariarta came to Chur at last: for, mystery or no mystery, one must have bread. An empty belly drives away curiosity, and having had one hard winter, Mariarta was determined not to have another.

Mariarta took the main road which leads northeastward along Val Tavetsch, meandering through the broad valley until it begins to pinch in on itself again. In those eastward parts, the finger-and-space arrangement of the mountains begins to tangle, more like fingers interlaced,

with fewer valleys running north to south, more running east-west. These cross-valleys south of the great Rein are paradises for the hunter. Sheltered both from the north wind and the fury of the *föhn*, their lower slopes seem to go green of themselves. The chamois grazing there get fat as cows—for many a lush and hidden alp has no village anywhere near.

It was exactly the country Mariarta wanted. She ambled south from Ilanz, following the road that runs south past Piz Mundaun, and struck eastward where there was no road but the rocky gorge up Uaul da Sax. Right to Crap Grisch she went, and down the other side into the Safiental, that peculiarly straight valley in a land where so few things are straight. She did not linger, despite the greenness of the grass, but went through the east-side peaks toward Thusis, in a valley not nearly so straight but just as green. There, in the crags above Vaz, she shot eighteen chamois and dry-cured their skins. Then she felt she could safely go north to Chur (a big town, and, she had been warned, expensive). But she could not resist hunting on the other side of the Alvula river: and that was where the trouble started.

The chamois were bold there. Mariarta shot two from behind a boulder that sat in the middle of the green slope running down from Crap la Pala. She was finishing skinning the second one when a third came bounding from la Pala. Mariarta picked up her bow. *They told me the inns in Chur are pricy*, she thought, *and anyway, winter's coming*—She sighted, the wind poured past her toward the distant, softly-beating target of the heart; she shot, and the chamois fell.

Mariarta laid the second hide over the rock to stiffen, and went off to see about the third chamois. It had fallen in a slight depression, a spot where the ground was gently curved, as if someone had set a heavy stone bowl there. The ground squished under her feet with wetness from the last rain; white anemones, which like the wet, were sprinkled around. Sprawled on them was the chamois, the upward eye staring sightlessly at a single anemone. Mariarta felt the ridges on one horn, judged its thickness. *Three years old. The horns on this one will be worth something to a knifemaker. I'll keep the head.*

She hauled the chamois off to one side, stuck its throat to bleed it. A high-pitched cry from above got her attention: she saw two tschéssas circling, gazing at the other two carcasses, which she had purposely pulled aside to keep them away from the hides. Mariarta already had taken what meat she wanted from them: it was hanging at Catsch's pack, and the mountain vultures would not trouble it while carcasses awaited their attention.

She turned her attention back to her skinning, starting the difficult work of cutting the hoofs free. She had to sharpen the knife twice, sweating in the sun, while behind her the first of the tschéssas landed on one of the skinned carcasses, shrieking at another that was trying to land too.

The first two hoofs came off relatively easily. The third appeared to be held on with sinews of iron; it took two more sharpenings to get it off, and she almost cut herself twice, her hands slippery with blood and sweat. Mariarta stared at the fourth hoof. *I wouldn't mind something to eat*

before going on with this. She stabbed her knife into the ground beside her.

And she stared as it stood there quivering in the turf: for something had stopped it, and the sound was not that of a knife hitting stone.

Mariarta pulled the knife out, put it in again, more carefully. That sound again. Definitely not stone. *Metal?*

She took the knife and slid it into the turf, diagonally this time, prying upward. A fibrous mat of grass and roots came up in a piece. It was as she had expected, for in places where an alp ran close to a scree- slope, the turf was rarely more than years' worth of roots, the dead ones decaying at the bottom and feeding the live turf above them.

Mariarta put the knife aside, pulled the mat of grass and root-fibers up. It resisted at first, then gave way. Something lumpy and wet came with it, buried just beneath the surface: a hen could have pecked it up, as the saying was. A metal thing, a foot or so long—

She pulled the clinging roots off with difficulty. The thing was oblong, with pieces sticking out. It took some minutes' cleaning for Mariarta to see that it was a statue: two arms, both broken at the ends, two legs, one of them broken off short, the other attached to a round pedestal. The statue was probably bronze; it was all crusted in green.

With handfuls of dry grass, Mariarta rubbed the dirt and wet off the statue. Everything seemed to have gotten still: even the tschessas were quiet.

The statue was of a woman. She had on a long gown with a short-sleeved shift underneath. The gown itself was loose and draped, tied once underneath her breasts, with

the skirt pulled up and belted at her waist, leaving her legs bare. Her hair was tied on top of her head in a braid coiled into a bun. Her face, as all the rest of her, was worn and pitted by her time under the ground: but it was clear enough to be made out. The expression was cool, detached—the face of someone choosing a target. One of the woman's arms was stretched out before her: the other reached behind her head, its elbow bent. There were no hands, but Mariarta knew what they had been doing. One would have held a bow, not a crossbow but the plain arched kind that she had once seen a picture of. The other hand reached back to a quiver, about to string and draw.

One of the tschéssas behind her screamed. The wind was still. *It's her*—The picture in the young *scolar*'s book could have been drawn from this: the only thing missing was the *cervin*, the horned stag.

Mariarta could not get rid of the idea that the statue was looking at her—the same sort of cool look she had felt on the back of her neck, the back of her mind, so many times before. *This is her. Whoever she is. Who are you?*

No answer came. Mariarta put the statue aside, went back to work on the chamois. And all the while, the statue looked at her...

Turning it on its face seemed rude. Mariarta took it to Catsch's pack, where she rummaged until she found a piece of chamois leather kept for cleaning her gear. She wrapped the statue in it carefully, stowing it in the inside-opening pack. That gave her some relief from the feeling of being watched. Still, nervous as she felt—and that was odd, too—Mariarta felt elated as she walked back to the

third chamois, glancing from it to the mountains to the east. *I'm on the right track, she thought. I'm going to find out....*

•

Mariarta kept on going eastward, following the Alvula into the next valley over. The Rein turned northward, running with the main road to a tiny hamlet called Parpan, by a lake which the townspeople had named, in an access of imagination, Igl Lai. Mariarta passed “the lake” on her left, looking rightward at another mountain, the Parpan Redhorn, which was forested halfway up its height and dissolved into a maze of folded cliffs. The early evening sun rested rosy-red on it, and the eaves of the forest seemed welcoming. *There's no inn there. I may as well spend the night on the mountainside. It looks like there are caves. Even if there aren't, we won't get wet under those trees.*

Carefully she led Catsch among them. They went silently: the ground was feet thick with pine needles in places. Twilight fell early, the late afternoon light blocked away by the close-growing pines. Mariarta found a spot that was completely dry, indicating that recent rains had not touched it. She took Catsch's bundles off, put the donkey on a long tether; he promptly threw himself on the ground, rolling and squirming, getting himself tangled, and braying in annoyance.

Mariarta sighed, hauled him to his feet and started undoing him, while Catsch went on braying. “You're a nuisance,” she said, “a good-for-nothing—”

Something rustled behind her. Mariarta whirled and saw a brown blot shuffling toward them, brushing low pine branches as it went.

Mariarta snatched up the bow and spanned it faster than she ever had. She pulled a quarrel out of her shirt-neck, slapped it in the groove, aimed, the wind began to pour past her, she saw the beating of the beast's heart down the tunnel of air—

“No!” someone shouted. The shock of it made her loose. Too late, the shaft was gone—

It missed. The shaft whipped past the bear's ear and buried itself in a nearby pine. The bear turned to stare at it, then sat back on its haunches and bawled like a calf.

Mariarta stood there with her mouth open. *I missed!* *But I can't miss—*

“Now what did you do that for?” demanded the voice. She turned and saw a little old man. Little was the word: he was so bent with age that it seemed a miracle he could stand or walk. He was dressed in what might have been a cassock, the black of it faded to a smudgy charcoal. The man's face was almost all one wrinkle, like an apple left drying too long; but the wrinkle was a smiling one. The man went to the bear and clouted it on the head. “Now stop that,” the man shouted, “or I'll give you something to cry about!”

Mariarta, shocked as she was, started to feel like smiling too. “I'm sorry,” she said, “but all I saw was a bear coming at us. It didn't occur to me that it might belong to somebody.”

“Don't know about 'belong',” the man said, “but I've been stuck with him for a while, that's certain.” He clouted

the bear again, more affectionately this time. It stopped bawling and merely sat and sniveled.

Mariarta unstrung her bow. "Who are you?"

"I'm the hermit of the mountain," the man said, as if this were as much a nuisance as the bear, which was nuzzling him like a lamb looking for a teat. "Always been a hermit here, probably since there was a mountain. Stop that, you dim creature, I don't have any more apples!" The hermit whacked the bear's snout away. It moaned, then got up and ambled off into the woods.

"Well, I'm sorry to have disturbed you," Mariarta said. "I'll find somewhere else to camp—"

"Don't be silly, you stay right here," the hermit said. "And what's a fine young woman like you doing running around in the back of nowhere shooting at things? You ought to be married."

Why does everyone think this except me? Mariarta thought. Then the shock set in again. "Excuse me," she said, "but—"

The hermit eyed her. "It's not obvious, if that's what you're worrying about. Never mind, we don't see many people here, you come along on up the hill and stay with us."

"I thought that was the point of being a hermit," Mariarta said: "not seeing a lot of people."

"You can have too much of a good thing," the hermit said, turning his back on her and heading upwards through the trees. "You come on up."

Mariarta reloaded Catsch and followed.

The way the hermit led her wound back and forth across the face of the mountain; the path was rarely more than a ledge several feet wide. Quite suddenly, after the path's third turn northward on the mountainface, it broadened, and the opening of a cave showed on the right-hand side. "There's plenty of room for him inside," the hermit said. "Emerita, we've got company!"

Mariarta followed him in, finding the cave high-ceilinged once she was past the curving doorway. It was large, the size of a house: stars of lamps burned against the walls or on stones on the floor. Great icicles of stone hung from the cracked ceiling. Under one of those cracks a fire burned brightly on the stone floor, the smoke venting itself through the cracks. "Yes," the hermit said, seeing Mariarta's glance as she unloaded Catsch again, "we get a nice draft through here—might as well be living in a fireplace. But rain is a problem, puts the fire out half the time. Emerita!"

"Oh, hush your shouting." A woman came out from the back of the cave. She looked better kept than the hermit, though her clothes were easily as old: all dark too, except for the dingy white of the old-fashioned wimple. The bear brushed against the woman, who patted it, then turned to Mariarta. "Welcome, my dear: sit down and I'll bring you a drink. Just water of the mountain, but it tastes good enough."

"Thank you," Mariarta said, seating herself on a flat stone, looking about her in interest. The cave was far from empty. Pots and kettles sat against the stone wall nearest the fire. Various dark lumps piled against other walls were bags. Provisions, perhaps: Mariarta thought she smelled dried fruit.

“Here you are,” the woman said, coming back with a wooden cup. Mariarta took it and drank gratefully. “I’m Emerita. Luzius you’ve met. I’ll bring you something nice to eat, and then you can tell us what you’re doing here. Do you like wheat porridge? Good. Luzius, is that last batch of mead ready yet?”

“It would be if you didn’t keep opening the vat to see how it’s coming along. I swear, anything that takes longer than water boiling is too long for you—”

“It’s ready,” Emerita said, smiling. “You sit there, dear. —I wouldn’t throw stones on that account if I were you, Luzi—not after what you did to the porridge yesterday—” Luzius snorted and turned his back on her.

Mariarta spent more time looking around while Luzius and Emerita carried on their argument. One thing drew her attention: a series of rough pine planks propped against the cave’s most distant wall, with rocks between them to hold them one above the other. Racked on those planks were roll-shaped objects, and more easily recognizable oblong ones. Books—

Luzius came to her, put a wooden bowl of porridge into Mariarta’s hands. “Here’s the spoon. Mind, it’s hot. Emerita, where’s that hare this boy was eating yesterday?”

“Over by the fire warming. You know he likes to smell what he’s eating.”

Mariarta had been wondering what the rank odor was. She turned her mind away from it and concentrated on the porridge, which had not only wheat in it, but hazelnuts, and tasted unexpectedly good after her recent diet of mostly meat.

Luzius and Emerita sat beside her to eat. Neither of them said much until Mariarta was finished. Then Emerita filled her bowl again and handed it back, saying, “Now when you like, tell us what’s happened to you, for this isn’t the kind of life a young woman usually lives these days.”

Mariarta found herself telling them almost everything, from her first realization of the desire to shoot. Finally, after Mariarta had told of her night in the Lucomagno, and her decision to go to Chur, Luzius frowned. “Where *is* that mead?”

“In the vat, where else? Do you think I’m going to mess with your precious stuff, the way you carry on about it?”

“Don’t get all fired up,” Luzius grumbled, getting up.

“The cups are on top,” Emerita called. She smiled at him behind his back as he went, saying to Mariarta, “My brother has his quirks, but I wouldn’t have him otherwise. —But my dear, you look troubled.”

Mariarta shook her head. “Forgive me—I’m feeling strange. I’ve never been able to tell anyone these things before. I don’t know why I’ve told you now. So long I’ve been secret—”

“But you have our secret as well,” Emerita said. “Hermits don’t stay that way long when people find out where the hermitage is.”

“But you—but Luzius invited me in anyway.”

“When God sends guests to dine with you, you don’t ask questions, my dear,” Emerita said. “You feed them. I don’t think you’d tell our secret.”

Mariarta nodded. "Will you tell me your story, then?"

"As much of it as we remember," Emerita said. "It's odd, though, as you get older, how much of what was once so vivid just fades, doesn't seem important any more.... Thank you, Luzi," she said, taking the cup her brother handed her.

"Chur, now," Luzius said, handing Mariarta another cup, smaller than the first. She sniffed at the contents, smelling honey, flowers, the scent of summer, better than wine. Mariarta gulped it, and spluttered.

"Take it easy with that," Luzius said, "it's murder to get out of your clothes."

"You put too much pepper in it this time," Emerita said. "I warned you."

"I didn't put *any* pepper in it. It's the rosemary."

"What about Chur?" Mariarta said, when she stopped choking.

"An old place," Luzius said, "old indeed. I was a priest. I wandered around for a while with only Emerita to do for me, preaching to whoever I found. Then I fetched up in Chur. I was there some years, in the church. Eventually I got old, and they let me go my way, and take my books with me to study and pray. So up here we came when my work was done. But I still think of the church, Sontg Martin's: you can't miss it, you must go there, a wonderful place. Though not as old as some things there, indeed not. Cuera," he said, drawing the word out with the western valley drawl, "that's just Latin worn down: Curia it was, Curia Rhætia, the Courts of the Raetii. And other names it had, before the legions came and warred down the tribes.

They left writings of odd things they found, carvings in the mountains, like letters, ones they couldn't read: and older things, in the ground. Carvings and statues—

“Look here,” Mariarta said. She got up, went to Catsch's pack, and came back with the statue, unwrapping the chamois leather to lay it on the stone she had been sitting on. Luzius and Emerita gazed at it in the firelight. “You're a learned man,” Mariarta said, “you have all these books. You must know. Who is she?”

Luzius shook his head: not denial, but recognition. “They never did like her much,” he said softly. “Too dangerous. Some of the other Old ones they managed to domesticate, put wigs on them and dressed them in saints' clothes— Sometimes it worked. Not with her.” He got up.

For a few minutes Luzius was a shadow, rummaging among the books. “Here,” he said, coming back to the fire with a book in his arms: old, bound in a reddish leather. He laid it on the stone. Slowly he opened it, the leather of the binding creaking. The pages were bumpy, time-yellowed parchment, written across with big black letters.

“Before Christ came,” Luzius said, “other powers were loose in the world. They were angels that fell in the first battle, but not so far as Hell, not being evil enough: though they would not admit God was their maker, but set up as gods on their own. And for a while they were let to do so, and men believed them when they came in great power, doing miracles, saying they had made the world themselves. And they ruled. Never doubt that.” Luzius glanced up, and the way the firelight shone in his eyes made Mariarta draw back, with the knowledge of darkness outside, and the sound

of the wind hissing in the pines. “They were capricious and cruel, as gods might well be who had not created men, whatever they claimed, and didn’t really care about them. When God sent His Son, who would not play with man’s lives, being one Himself, the Old gods feared: and when He died and rose again in His glory and power, they fled into the waste places, knowing their day was done. That was when the cry went up that great Pan was dead—he was one of the oldest of them.”

Luzius turned pages. “But before that happened, one great family of them ruled all this part of the world,” he said. “Our own *dialas* of forest and wind and fire and water were their children, or servants, but no match for the great ones in power. Each of these great old gods had many names, but their characteristics were always the same, because they couldn’t create themselves anew every while, as God can. You would always know which one you were dealing with by his attributes, as you may know a man by his face no matter how he changes his clothes. But here—” He turned one last page, showed Mariarta the book.

It was she, the huntress: garbed as in the statue, bow drawn, that cool, measuring look on her face. The crescent moon crowned her; a hind, looking small as a dog beside her, stood alert at her heel. The hind was white. Outside the wind went shrill in the treetops, the fire fluttering and smoking in the downdraft from the crack above.

“She has as many names as the rest of them,” Luzius said. “Hekate, Artemis, Diana—they shouted that name at Ephesus, not so long ago—Isis, Astarte—many another. She was changeable. Sometimes she was the Moon in the sky,

sister of the Sun. Sometimes she was the Huntress on earth, in the forests. Down in the caverns, she was the Lady of Death. But at all times, she was the one who strikes invisibly, the lady of the insubstantial that has power. The rays of the moon, that make folk mad. The wind, the lightning, anything that smites mortal things, changing them. The aim that cannot miss.” Mariarta shuddered. Luzius turned the page idly to look at the other side. “She shot her own lover, they say. One story says her brother the Sun tricked her into it, out of jealousy. Others said her lover tried to take her maidenhead without her leave, so she killed him. Either way, she was said afterwards never to have much use for men.”

“What does she want with *me*?”

Emerita shook her head. “Something to her advantage...of that you can be sure. But beyond that—”

“They were waiting their time, he said to me,” Mariarta said. “The one on the horse. But for what...he didn’t say.”

Luzius looked thoughtful. “Waiting their time...”

“I have to find out what she wants of me,” Mariarta said. “I must find her.”

“It’ll be the death of you if you do,” Luzius said. “Or of your soul. But at the same time...” He was troubled. “There’s no use you running away from her, either. She’ll find you eventually, and bring you to her. She *has* been doing that, maybe, for a long while....”

He pushed the book at Mariarta. “It’s Latin,” he said. “You can read that? Good. Much though I dislike spreading the old bad pagan knowledge, you’ve got one of the Old

ones haunting you. You'll need to know them, to have any chance of coming away from her with a skin, or a soul, in one piece."

Mariarta took the book. Luzius reached out and folded the chamois over the front of the statue; respectfully, like someone covering a body. "Come on, Emerita," he said, "it's time."

Mariarta clutched the book, mildly confused. "We keep the church hours, and pray the offices," Emerita said. "After a while you don't need to hear a bell to know when. And it's how many years now, Luzi?"

"Twice as many, it feels like, when the cold gets into my joints. Here, take this," Luzius said, handing Mariarta one of the small clay lamps, like a tiny pitcher with a wick out the spout. "There's plenty of skins there by the wall."

He and Emerita went to the back of the cave, knelt, began murmuring. There was a peculiar businesslike attitude about it. These two, obviously used these many years to having no one watch them but God, went about their prayer as matter-of-factly as if they were doing the milking. Softly Mariarta went where the skins were piled, found a soft old cowhide, pulled it over her, put the lamp close enough to be useful but far enough away as not to singe her hair, and settled down to read.

•

She had no memory of losing the light; but the next thing she knew, the sun was shining into the cave. Mariarta had a moment's worth of terror as she turned over to find a

bear peering at her. She managed a sort of strangled gasp before remembering where she was. Then the bear pursed its lips at her like an aged aunt expecting a kiss. Mariarta burst out laughing.

Emerita's voice said, "I do the same thing when he pulls faces like that, dear. He'll just be after your porridge; you smack him on the nose with the spoon if he gets too friendly. Do you want honey on it?"

"Yes, please."

"Luzi?"

"Of course I want honey on it!" said Luzius from outside the cave. "I've wanted honey on it for the last thirty years, why should I change my mind now—"

"Luzi, be quiet. Here," Emerita said, handing Mariarta a bowl, and went outside.

Mariarta spent the next while eating her porridge as quickly as possible and keeping the bear out of it. A while later, Luzius came back in with his own bowl, picked up a rag and began scrubbing. He looked at Mariarta and the book. "How did you do?"

"I read it. I'm not sure I understood a lot of it. So many names...."

"If you remember the attributes," Luzius said, "that should be enough. Like a face or a voice, no disguise of them can be complete, or permanent. Sooner or later, the truth slips out." He sat on one of the rocks that did duty as a seat, took a burnt twig from the fire. "Here—you'll want to know where the market is in Chur."

On a smooth part of the stone floor, he sketched a shape like an arrowhead, pointing downward to the left.

“The city wall,” he said. “And the river runs here.” He drew a line that ran from the upper left to the lower right, past the bottom of the arrowhead. “Here are the big gates—along the northern side of the wall. The ground slopes up from the gates to the hill at the back of the town: that’s where the Bishop’s palace is, and the cathedral. Now, the market—” He quickly sketched in streets and squares, then pointed to an open space north of the Bishop’s palace, looking at it thoughtfully. “There’s a tavern there,” he said, “that had the best red wine—”

“It was there,” said Emerita, pointing to another spot. “I should know, since I had to get you out of it enough times—”

“Don’t get all burnt up about it, you’d think I came back drunk every night—”

Mariarta laughed, and got up to do her packing.

She said her goodbyes to Emerita, and Luzius and the bear saw Mariarta into the forest. The hermit would not go out from under the trees. “Not in daylight: too many eyes.”

“*Here?*” Mariarta said. As far as she knew, no human being was closer than Vaz.

“You’d be surprised. But secrets are hard to keep, and we like to keep ours. No matter: yours is safe with us. Just be careful....”

Mariarta nodded, then led Catsch down the slope. Behind her, the bear bawled: Mariarta turned and waved, but Luzius was gone. Only the bear sat there, looking forlorn.

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The road to Chur was broad and well kept, running through big prosperous-looking towns as it went north. Mariarta had started from the hermitage about two hours after dawn. It was after noon when she came around the shoulder of the mountain, to the top of the Araschgen pass, and stood above Chur. It was the biggest town Mariarta had ever seen. Its walls were two miles across at the base of the “arrowhead”: high gray walls forty feet tall, with six great gate-towers on the northern side, some having square towers, some round towers with conical roofs. Within those walls were crammed hundreds of houses, each with its peaked roof of slate, and more churches than Mariarta had ever seen in one place. It was the southern side of the city, sloping up to mimic the mountain behind it, that stood out. The square-turreted inner keep of the Bishop’s palace, a small city within the city, perched there as if to peer into the rest of the town: a watching, brooding presence, darker grey than the walls. Only one great church looked down on the Bishop’s palace—the cathedral, perched on the top of Chur hill. From behind it the walls fell away. On the steep ground under the walls, a vineyard was planted. At the feet of it all, past the city walls, the Plessur river ran, ice-green with limestone sand from the glacier, gleaming like a mirror in the sun.

Mariarta followed the road downhill to where it ran beside the Plessur, between the river and the deeply crenellated, arrow-slitted walls. She was so busy looking at those walls that she almost missed the first gate by the

river, simply a broad fifteen-foot arch with huge thick wooden doors lying open inward. She walked in, glancing at the guard there. He ignored her.

The walls gave Mariarta a strange feeling of being indoors, even though the sky was quite visible above the roofs in the street. Not even an alley lay between most of the houses. The fronts of them were stuccoed, many painted with pictures in bright colors: a life of Mary on this house, a procession of cows on that one. Plastered saints with peeling haloes, solemn kings with odd clothing and helmet-like crowns, stared at her from under the house-gables as Mariarta led Catsch down the cobbled, curving street, into the center of town, toward the marketplace.

It lay right under a sheer wall, over the top of which the towers of the Bishop's palace peered. It was an unnerving feeling, this being overshadowed: all the marketplaces Mariarta had ever been in had felt freer. But one thing they could not keep out of it, walls or no walls—the wind. Mariarta turned her attention to it, listening for words or thoughts that would guide her.

She walked slowly around the edge of the marketplace, gazing at the houses while her attention was bent elsewhere. The wind had shifted into the east; by the time she got around to the west side of the market, under the square tower of a church, the wind brought what she wanted, chat of pelt weights and the “hand” of skin, its softness. As much to the point were the smells, tanners' smells of rank old urine, and acid enough to make the eyes smart. She smiled: a market big enough to have the tanners in it meant good prices for her skins.

The tanners were four—a narrow man, his narrow wife, and their two sons, like giants next to them. They had barely one smile among them, but Mariarta found herself unable to dislike them. The wind brought her the taste of womb-sickness in the mother, like a grinding ache in the belly, and some old unhealed heart-pain in the father, a dull weight lying inside him like a swallowed stone; and in the two sons, a twinned desperate longing to be out of this terrible place, doing something else, anything else: being cowherds, perhaps, in the mountains where the air smelt of something besides piss...

They stared at her suspiciously as she came to their stall. Mariarta greeted them courteously, started unfolding the topmost hide to show them.

“Garbage,” the father said, turning his back: “take it out of here.” This was a common gambit, but Mariarta almost didn’t understand it, he spoke Romansch so strangely. They began arguing, while the dour father pawed hide after hide and grudgingly began to admit that he might be able to make something out of them. Mariarta kept her smile in place, but she was astonished by the smell of mistrust that the wind brought her in plenty from all four. *They really don’t like people they’ve never seen before*, Mariarta thought. This was something she had been warned about, in Mustér. She simply hadn’t believed anyone could be so vehement about it.

The father finally got around to offering money—almost twice as much as Sievi would have. Mariarta bargained with the attitude of someone who can take her business elsewhere without a second thought, and

reluctantly the tanner went up another three in copper for each hide. Mariarta accepted that. When she finished unloading Catsch, and the tanner had opened every hide and gone over it with hands and eyes, looking for the quarrel-holes, he finally paid her the money and turned his back on her without even striking hands for luck.

She walked away with Catsch behind her, feeling the window-eyes of the Bishop's palace on her, like the eyes of the people behind her. The wind shifted again, bringing her their thoughts, every one of them a variation on "Damned foreigner..."

Mariarta sighed. She should have felt cheerful: in her purse she had money that would have paid Tschamut's year's grass-penny five times over. But she felt desperately lonely. Here she was, no more than thirty miles from her birthplace, and she was a "damned foreigner". Would everyone else in this place treat her so? *If they do*, Mariarta thought, *they can keep their 'great city'; I'll go somewhere else like a shot.*

For a while she wandered the streets, looking for an inn. She found one in a triangular cobbled space where the view of the peering castle on the hill was blocked by a tall square church tower painted white. Making the leg of the triangle nearest it was a long row of houses, painted different browns and russets, all pushed right together as seemed the style here. One of them had a wrought iron sign bracket sticking out from between two of the windows, with a circle of iron, and inside it three men, each holding up one hand, each wearing a crown and a gilded halo, and painted robes.

It was another Three Kings, like the one in Ursera. Mariarta went straight to the door, tied Catsch up, and went in.

It was darker inside than any country inn, for there were only windows at front and back: all the same, these windows were not stretched hide or shaved horn, but glass. When the innkeeper came to her, Mariarta was already so far gone in admiration that the man lost his hostility at her accent immediately. He let himself be haggled down over the cost of a week's bed, board, and stabling. Shortly afterwards Mariarta found herself esconced not too far from the fire, in a half-niche by the wall, with a wooden cup of the local beer, and the promise of a roasted chicken.

She was left strictly alone thereafter. *No one would have treated a stranger so in Mustér*, she thought. Mariarta wondered how many times she might have to come back before anyone but the serving-girls would speak to her. A circle of men sat before the fireplace, some of them as young as she, some much older: they all hunched in toward that fire with their backs to her, not one of them looking her way. Mariarta felt lonely again.

When the chicken came she ate in sorrowful silence, listening to the occasional snort or chuckle of the men between her and the fire. She had finished the second leg of the chicken and was about to start work on the breast meat, feeling for once doleful that she had no one to share it with, when someone behind her said, "*Bien di, Mati!*"

She turned, astonished. There, shedding the first layer of his outdoor clothes, was Flisch.

"Why, *bien onn*, Flisch!" she said, so glad to see any friendly face that she leapt up and shook him by the hand,

waving at one of the kitchen girls to bring more wine. “Here, have a drink; do you want some of my chicken?”

“Wouldn’t mind,” he said. “I thank you!” He sat and started on one of the chicken breasts.

Mariarta went to work on the other. “Flisch, it’s fine to see you, but what brings you this way? I thought you said you were going west.”

“Oh, I was, but when you said you were going off to the Bishop’s city, I thought, ‘Now why have I never thought of going that way?’” He laughed. “It’s easier, I guess, when another countryman goes before you—” He grinned slyly.

Mariarta laughed. “Well, you’ll find a market for your skins here, though they’re not as friendly as they are in Mustér. Never mind. How’s Turté?”

“Ah, she’s well,” said Flisch, “but after that—” He gestured back with his head in the general direction of Mustér. “I had to get away. The way a girl gets after something like that, you could be stifled.”

“She was worried about you.”

“Yes, Sievi told me.” He reached out to the cup that the kitchen-girl set down for him, drank deeply.

Mariarta wondered at the odd look in his eye. *I wonder what else Sievi has told him? The old gossip—* “No matter. Tell me how you came. How was the hunting?”

“Not as good as yours, I dare say.”

“Ah, who’s been gossiping now?”

“Oh, those folk in the market. The tanners.” Flisch wrinkled his nose. “They were waving your hides about, saying they were the best they’d seen in weeks.”

Mariarta smiled. “Oh well: good news travels.”

“Yes, they went on and on about the nice young man who brought them these fine hides—” Again that sly grin, the sidewise look.

“Doubtless they thought they’d got the better of some mountain boy who didn’t know how to tie his purse to his belt.”

“Doubtless.” Flisch was grinning from ear to ear now. Mariarta found the expression disturbing. “Never mind,” she said. “How did you come?”

“Oh, up the Lucomagno, no further than the lower villages—then over the mountains eastward. Down by Vaz, and the main road here.”

“Why, that’s how I came. I found the hunting good enough.”

“Eight skins, I have,” Flisch said. “Not too bad. All the same, I shall go up again in the next few days. More to the point, now,” he said, drawing closer to her, lowering his voice, “I think I saw your white one.”

“What?”

“Your white chamois.” He poured more wine, finished the pitcher, waved at one of the kitchen girls who was passing. Behind him, Mariarta saw one of the men in the circle nearest the fire look over his shoulder.

“It was near Vaz,” Flisch said. “I was on the west side of the valley, and suddenly I saw it. It just stood there by a pine wood on the far mountain. I went after, and thought I was going to get a shot at it; it didn’t climb. But as soon as I got within range it ran into the woods—”

Mariarta drank thoughtfully. The place Flisch was describing was the way to the hermits’ cave.

The man who had looked at them now said, "Strangers, I couldn't help overhearing. Where did you see this beast?"

So now everything had to be explained again, as one after another the men around the fire got interested. Slowly Mariarta found all their attention turned on her and Flisch, and she found this as unwelcome, at first, as their inattention had been. They were something she had heard of, but never seen before: soldiers. Their talk of their work in the town, a word dropped here and there, made it plain. The one closest, the man who had first spoken, a fellow with a big bushy beard and broken nose, had a plain enough shirt of coarse-woven linen: but underneath it, his chest had a hard look. Mariarta guessed there was a leather breastplate underneath. Though unarmed, the men had a dangerous look about them. Mariarta was determined to have as little to do with them as she might. Flisch, though, had no such concerns, and told them about the chamois he had seen.

"Dangerous ground that way," one of the soldiers said, a small wiry man. "Haunted."

"Not as badly as further east," the first soldier said. "But this was probably just one of those pale ones."

"Pure white it was," Flisch said, with some heat; "whiter than your shirt." Some laughter went around. The man with the shirt leaned back, regarding Flisch with narrow-eyed amusement.

"Dangerous to shoot at, though," said another soldier. "They turn into things. Monsters."

"Women, I heard," said the man with the shirt.

“Yes,” Flisch said, “I heard that too.” He looked at Mariarta.

She had another drink of wine, hoping her sudden hot flush of fear was not as visible as it felt.

“Fellow over at Davos had that happen to him,” said the wiry soldier: “saw the white one on the cliff, shot at it, didn’t die—though the rockfall came down, nearly took him off his ledge—” He went on with the story of how the man took his second and third shots, almost dying after each one, and finally found himself sighting on a princess of Mailand, enchanted years before. Mariarta, though, had other concerns. *He followed me. How far? And how does he know what he knows? What does he want? What will he do?*

“Well, after all, she was Talian,” one man was saying: “you’d believe anything of those people. I mean, look at all those dwarves in Venezia, with their jewels and bags of gold. It’s not *normal*.”

“But men here are bold,” said Flisch, gesturing grandly, “men here know how to deal with troubles like that.” He kept coming down on the word *men* and glancing at Mariarta.

She put aside her cup. “It’s true enough. This young hunter is too modest to boast about it, but everybody in Mustér will tell you how he climbed the Lucomagno, some months back, where people had complained of hauntings, and he stood in the pass in the middle of the night when the Frisian Ride came through, and returned to tell about it—”

The other men were interested. Mariarta called for more wine, enjoying the sight of Flisch sitting there with

his mouth half open. She told the story, leaving out not a rider or a carven sword. The soldiers watched her with pleasure, either skeptically or like men enjoying a good lie. Flisch settled down to smiling and looking modest: though the smile had a simmering look under it.

When she was done, one man, the one with the shirt, called for more wine. “You’ve been a busy young man, with such adventures,” said he, raising his cup to Flisch. “And you were in Mustér to hear the tale?” he said to Mariarta.

“I was there,” Mariarta said, looking at Flisch: he shifted in his seat. “It’s all true.”

“Things get stranger as the winter draws in,” said the wiry man. “Maybe such a bold young man ought to go try his luck at the Wish-hole.”

“What’s that?” Flisch said.

The wiry man sat back in his seat. “South of here, east of the main road, there’s a circle of mountains. No people live in the center valley—there’s just a herder’s hut. I think they call the place Arosa. This Arosa hut is in the middle of the circle. But higher, in one of the valleys, reaching right across from spur to spur of that big mountain at the back of the circle, Weisshorn they call it, there’s a wall. The wall has a door in it. And the door can only be opened by a golden key. Now you have to be a Sunday’s child—”

“Don’t tell lies, Gunt’, you don’t either,” said the bushy-bearded man in the white shirt. “Giachen Mello from the townlands supposedly brought back that cow of his, and he was born on Tuesday.”

“Whatever, Baseli,” said Gunt’, “he had to find the key, and get the door open. Once you get it open, in the very mountain there’s a big room all hollowed out, piled with gold and gems: and there’s a dwarf who guards it. And a beautiful maiden, too, enchanted, from the olden times. You have to tell the dwarf your choice. You pick the gold and jewels, or else this golden cowbell that’s there, or else the maiden. And depending on which you pick, you either get incredibly rich, or the dwarf gives you the most beautiful cow in the world, or else you get to be lucky in everything for the rest of your life.”

Mariarta looked thoughtfully at the soldier Gunt’. “It’s a strange tale. I don’t know what day I was born on: but I’m bold enough to go to this mountain-ring and seek the wall and door, to tell if the story’s true. What about you, Flisch?”

They all looked at him. “Why, certainly,” he said, stammering, “I’ll go see as well.”

“Tomorrow morning, then,” Mariarta said to the soldier Gunt’. “If the weather holds. Does the story say how you’re supposed to find this golden key?”

The soldier shook his head with a smile. “Doubtless you’ll tell me when you come back.”

Everyone drank to Flisch’s and Mariarta’s boldness; Mariarta drank too, but not as much as she saw Flisch was drinking. That suited her well, for if Flisch had somehow come upon her secret, she preferred he tell it to people while dead drunk. Anyone who heard it would be that much less likely to believe him.

The talk went around for a while. After an hour or so, as darkness fell, Mariarta found herself bereft of even Flisch's unnerving company: he had fallen asleep in his chair, wine-sodden. She found the bushy-bearded soldier, Baseli, looking at her. "Your companion," he said, "seems weary from his travels."

"He's not usually my companion," Mariarta said, "but yes, he seems to have come a long way."

"You don't seem happy about it."

"I am mountain-bred, and always did find it hard to mind other people's business." She smiled, to take the sting out of her words. "But if I'm right, that *is* part of your business: so I'll say you ask courteously." And she looked at the leather cuirass underneath his shirt.

Baseli laughed. "You are no danger," he said, "so I think: but it's my business to notice people. I am a Captain of the Bishop's guard, and of the watch; these are some of my men." He glanced at Flisch, who was now snoring open-mouthed. "You know each other well?"

"Not well. We met in Mustér."

"And he followed you here. Do you have a quarrel?"

"No. At least, I can't think of one."

"That's well," Baseli said. "I advise you not to have quarrels here: my master looks harshly on such, especially when blood is drawn. He feels it reflects badly on the peace of his town."

"We will be away tomorrow," Mariarta said, "if Flisch here doesn't lose heart."

Baseli nodded. "Out of sight of the town walls, out of our fields, you can do as you like."

Mariarta had another drink of her wine. “Why was it you started to talk to us when you heard of the white chamois?”

Baseli laughed. “I heard something else that interested me more than what my men were saying,” he said. The far door opened; on the draft that came down the room past Baseli, Mariarta heard, *The sound of anger—*

Mariarta nodded. “It’s a strange old story,” she said, finishing her wine. “If I’m to find the truth of yours, it’s an early start for me. And him.” She got up.

Baseli’s eyes were on her. Mariarta said, “Thank you for your hospitality. It’s good to know there’s a welcome here, even if it’s a careful one.”

“Cities are good places to be careful,” Baseli said. “But so are the mountains. Have a care for your companion.”

Mariarta nodded and went off.

•

Sleep came late and hard. Plainly Flisch knew her secret; all Mariarta’s desire now was to get away from him. She would be able to manage that tomorrow, or once they got into the mountains. She could even leave early herself, lose him now— But Mariarta had said, in front of men of the town, what she was going to do. Breaking her word now might give credence to any tale Flisch might tell. *And what if he does tell? Everybody will know—*

She shivered. The fate of a woman discovered alone among men was certain—the only reason most mountain

people knew for a woman to be on the roads was that she was “no better than she should be”. At worst, if caught, she would be considered fair game to be dishonored; at best, she would be packed off home— Either way, she would lose her freedom. *It will never happen*, Mariarta thought. Her hands itched for her crossbow, remembering the feeling of power that came with her first shooting of a man. *How pleasant*, said something in her, an oddly caressing voice, *to have the chance to do that again; and to be justified in it—*

Mariarta ground her teeth. It did not have to happen that way. *But why did Flisch follow me?* She didn’t believe Flisch’s tale of “just feeling like it”....

Yet the soldiers’ tale of the mountain valley above Arosa kept coming back to mind. “A beautiful maiden, enchanted from the olden times...” And the Old one, what was his name, Tor, had said one of the old goddesses was in a mountain near Chur. *I’ll find what she wants of me at last.....*

Dawn came, and the bells of Chur began wrangling with one another. Chur had about ten churches, each with a bigger bell than the last. One after another they began to ring the Angelus, first the big deep-noted single bells, then the smaller bells that rang in pairs, one high, one low. The melodious jangling racket went on for half an hour, and when they stopped there was no question of anyone in Chur still being asleep.

The last bell, the big one in the cathedral near the Bishop’s house, was still bonging away when Mariarta got to the common room for a hot drink before leaving. She

found Flisch sitting in a corner, holding his head. “What do they put in the wine here?” he muttered.

Mariarta called one of the kitchen girls to bring them hot apple-draft and their reckonings. Both came together; Mariarta paid for both. The innkeeper stood counting the money obviously, while Mariarta grinned. “Afraid we won’t be back to pay you anything you’ve missed?”

The innkeeper grunted at her, turning away. “Donkey’s outside.”

Mariarta helped Flisch fetch his baggage. Outside, the day had gone grey. A soft mist was falling from low cloud that drifted among the city’s heights, hiding the tops of the church towers.

“Which road are we taking?” Flisch said.

“Out the far side of town. A road goes up the Schanfiggtal as far as a town called Peist. Then—around the corner of the mountain into the Arosa valley. Twelve miles: we’ll be there tonight, if we waste no time.” Mariarta smiled. “You don’t have to go if you’ve changed your mind—”

“Don’t be foolish. We’ve said what we’ll do; let’s do it.”

“Indeed,” Mariarta said softly, “what man would do otherwise?” And she tugged at Catsch’s rein and started walking.

Silently they passed under the walls of the Bishop’s house, the Hof, making their way to the tower at the upper corner of the city’s “arrowhead”, the Schmiedenturm. It was a smaller gate than the Obertor Gate; the soldiers there looked even more bored. Flisch hurried past them without

a word, but Mariarta nodded at the two men standing there—then swallowed, for one of them was Baseli, the guard captain. She had hardly known him under the helmet, and the armor, not leather but bright steel, with the Bishops' ibex-and-gateway device on the tunic over it. He saw her, said nothing.

Mariarta shouldered her crossbow with the air of one who has no concerns, and went after Flisch.

The road degenerated quickly to a rutted dirt path after it turned a corner in its climbing and got out of sight of the great grey Hof. Mariarta was glad: the dark windows in the blank grey walls made her nervous. There was something else to be nervous of, though—Flisch. He proved a silent companion, as the hours passed, and he walked with a frown on his face not caused by the road or the climb.

"You might at least tell me what your real name is," Flisch said suddenly.

"That's my business, I should think. The one I wear suits me well enough."

"It *is* your real name, then." That sly, malicious look Flisch had worn last night reappeared. "Let's see: what kind of girl's name might turn into 'Matti'? Matilda—Madleina, maybe—"

Mariarta merely shifted her crossbow to the other shoulder. "What *were* you doing in that pass in the middle of the night, I wonder?" she said. "Hunting in those parts is poor this late in the year. But then—those houses. All empty. Plenty of things still in them. Perfect for a little sneak-thieving...."

Flisch turned red. “I would never have stolen anything!”

“Then it was bad judgment that led you there,” Mariarta said, “and kept you there when you’d seen how the place looked. Then when the wind started to rise, and you heard the voices—”

Flisch turned his back on Mariarta, hurrying ahead.

Two can ask questions, she thought, with some satisfaction.

But what am I going to do about him? One way or another, he knows. No matter what we find here, sooner or later he’ll go his way, I mine. And Mariarta could not believe that sooner or later, Flisch would not tell someone.

They kept walking, Flisch ahead, Mariarta and Catsch following, always upward. Passing through through the hamlet of Maladers, they saw new snow covering the sides of the mountain-ring that held Arosa; chief among those peaks was the upreaching antler-prong of the Whitehorn, hardly to be seen against further layers of pale grey-white cloud behind it. At Peist, less a village than a collection of autumn-houses built by the same herding family, they stopped and ate. Here, to Mariarta’s relief, Flisch seemed less angry, looking around him with interest. “Never been this way.”

“Neither have I.”

“It seems as if you like that, though.”

She nodded. “I like new places.”

“Where was your old one?”

Mariarta frowned at him. Flisch said, “You’ve got an Urner accent.”

“Is that what it is?”

Flisch shrugged.

“So where’s your old place, then?” Mariarta said.

“Berschis,” Flisch said, “north, over the mountains; by the big lake.”

“Family there?”

“My father and mother. A sister.”

Mariarta noted the look on his face; and the wind was blowing. “You quarreled with your parents.”

“Yes.” Flisch looked at the snowy ground. “I always wanted to shoot and hunt, but they wanted me to be a blacksmith. So—”

“Well,” she said, dusting snow off herself—it had begun sifting down at last, that fine light snow that always means feet of it before it stops. *Always wanted to shoot....* Mariarta pushed her pity aside. Flisch had already caused her too much trouble. “Let’s go,” she said. “We want to make that hut in the Arosa valley before dark.”

They turned eastward with the road. The snow kept falling gently on them from greyness that seemed to start right above their heads.

There were no more villages after Peist. The road was now well up the encircling mountains. At the foot of the cliffs to the left-hand side, the Plessur and its other smaller tributary-streams could be heard shouting along among the stones, far down in the gorge. Mariarta and Flisch kept well to their right, hugging the upslope side.

After two hours, the road finished rounding the Langweis spur of Piz Pratsch and bent back on itself, southeastward. Mariarta leaned against a boulder on their

right, breathing hard; they had finished a section of path that was steep, and the fear of missing her footing was strong. Flisch was walking on ahead. She called after him, “How is it up there?”

He simply fell sideways and vanished. Mariarta ran up the slope, dragging Catsch after her, stopping short of the spot where she had lost sight of Flisch. The path looked normal, except for a half-circle of snow—and path—suddenly missing on the left-hand side. And below that, something dark, grunting and struggling—

Mariarta pulled the reins off Catsch’s bridle and wound them around her right arm several times, then threw herself on the snow before the crumbled-away part of the ledge, dangling the loose end down. The dark shape flailing around down there caught at them, cried out in despair. “I can’t—”

“Do it!” Mariarta shouted. She saw Flisch grab at the end of the reins, catch them, lose them again, catch them once more. One foot lost its purchase and kicked air, but not before Flisch managed to wind the reins a couple of turns around his wrist. Something cold and wet nuzzled Mariarta’s neck. Bless him, it was Catsch, trying to graze as he always did when she took him off the rein for any period of time. Mariarta caught his bridle, then threaded one loose rein-end through the bridle ring by his neck. Catsch squealed at the sudden added weight, backing hurriedly away from the edge. Stupid he might be, but he was strong: he hauled Mariarta back with him. Flisch’s head and shoulders appeared at the edge of the path. Mariarta grabbed the sleeve of his jacket: with the other hand, still

wound in the reins and pinched tight, she whacked Catsch about the head so that he backed further. A few moments later, Flisch was sprawled on the path, beet-red in the face and gasping. Mariarta sat and undid her bruised arm from the reins, her heart drumming in her ears.

After a while Mariarta managed to look at where Flisch had fallen. Not much path was left, only a couple of feet right next to the cliff-slope: what wasn't there any more had been covered by one of those snow-bridges which wet snow can form with time over even the widest gaps. "We'd better use a stick from now on," she said. "Here—" She unfastened her climbing-stick from Catsch's packs, handed it to Flisch.

He got up, still red in the face, and started walking again, testing the snow with the stick. Mariarta got Catsch's reins back in order and followed slowly. She was surprised when Flisch stopped and threw the stick at a boulder.

"What's the matter?" she said.

Flisch stood there with his back to her for only a second, then wheeled on her. "Won't you leave me *anything*? You save my life, *twice* now, damn you!—then you make me out to be a hero in front of half of Chur when, when it happened otherwise: won't you leave me any pride at all?"

Mariarta glared. "I saved your life, yes, but that was for Turté's sake, not yours! Why did you follow me, then, and threaten me?"

"I never threatened you—"

“With all your talk of men in the inn, and your sly looks, you did! What do you want of me? What harm have I ever done you?”

They walked along in silence for a while. Finally Flisch said angrily, “I want my honor back! I don’t want my life being saved by women!”

Mariarta’s hand itched on the crossbow stock. “One can take it, then, if you like...”

Flisch gaped at her. “I didn’t— I mean—”

“You don’t know *what* you mean. I wish I did, for then I could be shut of you, one way or another.”

“I don’t know,” Flisch said.

“This is all your fault,” Mariarta muttered. “I wish you’d never climbed the Lucomagno that night.”

“I wish I hadn’t, too,” Flisch said. He started to go around a boulder that lay in their path, stopped and poked the snow with Mariarta’s stick before going around. At last he said, “Sievi told me that you and Turté had been getting friendly—”

“Precisely that: friendly! I talk to her, I don’t pinch her, I don’t shout words at her that sound like I think her a slut: that will make a woman feel friendly indeed! Are you completely an idiot, Flisch?”

“But I thought you were a man.”

“Oho. So what was the plan then? Find me in the mountains, put a bolt into me? An accident: could happen to anyone. Eh, Flisch?”

He swore, and fell silent.

“So you followed me,” Mariarta said, as they topped the saddle between the last spur of Pratsch and the Maran height above Arosa. “How did you find out, finally?”

Flisch laughed. “I saw you pee. Once, I thought you were doing something else. But the second time, before Vaz, I was sure.”

Mariarta’s eyes narrowed. To be betrayed by something so small! “At least then you realized that I was not after Turté.”

“No, but that made it worse.” They edged around a thin part of the path, sloping downward from the saddle. “A man saving my life, that was hard, but it happens. A woman, though—”

“And someone you had been hating until then. ...Ah well. You’re a fool, Flisch, if you think a life saved is honor lost.”

“But a woman can’t—”

“Oh, shut up,” Mariarta said as they made the bottom of the slope, turning the last curve of the path: it ended in snow-covered scree. “Where your soul would be now except for me I don’t know, but it would be seeing more clearly, I’ll wager that much.”

She stood there, breathing hard. The valley of Arosa lay beneath them, an empty bowl, white with snow; nothing to break the pristine view but the roof of one hut, half-buried, visible only by the outline of its eaves. Near the hut lay a dark oblong lake, not frozen yet. Across the white valley-bowl were pine woods; above them, the great mountain Whitehorn. The valleys at its feet were hidden in mist and drifting cloud.

“I don’t care who you’re angry at,” Mariarta said, “yourself for being fooled, or Turté for being friendly, or me for not being what you thought I was; I just wish you’d stop. If I start thinking you’ll betray me, I’ll probably kill you. But that’s what I get for my folly in risking myself to do you a good turn.” She started down the slope, not looking behind.

The wind was flowing into the valley over the saddle they had climbed. On it as he followed her, Mariarta could catch Flisch’s anger and confusion, but all irresolute. *Maybe that had been the problem in the pass. He couldn’t decide what to do, and so bore the brunt of the Ride’s anger. If he had opened to them, and not panicked, everything would have been fine. Possibly he knows it. He thinks himself a coward...*

Mariarta walked into the heart of the valley. The going was surprisingly easy, the ground fairly even, as she made her way to the hut.

Its eaves were thick with huge icicles. Mariarta was careful to avoid them as she came to the door, which faced the northeastward opening of the valley. *Odd, that,* she thought, as Flisch joined her. *If I had built this, I would have had the door face the lake: it must look fine in summer...*

“Strange way to have this facing,” Flisch said, as Mariarta climbed the two steps to the porch that shielded the door.

“I was thinking that.” Mariarta pushed at the door. It swung inward into darkness.

“The wind, maybe. You wouldn’t want it blowing straight in.”

“Yes, the wind...” The hut had a fireplace, with a crane. The windows, one to each wall except the one with the door, were shuttered tight. The usual narrow *sennen*’s pallets were stacked one above another, three of them, near a bench. Over by the granite hearthstone was a pile of kindling; in the corner near it, some bigger wood.

“It’s too late to do anything else today,” Flisch said. “I’ll go to those pines and get some deadwood.”

“Mind the edge of the lake,” Mariarta called after him.

Flisch’s footsteps crunched away. Mariarta chose some kindling. *What am I worrying about? she thought. If he should fall into the lake and freeze, there’s my problem solved.* Then Mariarta frowned. Where were these cruel thoughts coming from? They had become frequent since Flisch appeared.

She concentrated on getting a fire going. There were no pots here, but she had a small one of her own, among Catsch’s baggage. She went out for the donkey, hauled him up the steps. A ring was set in the far wall, on the side of the fireplace away from the beds. Mariarta tethered Catsch to it and put some grain on the floor for him.

After a while, satisfied with the fire, Mariarta went outside to look for Flisch. Dark was falling fast; the haze in the air was thickening to gray fog. The mountains were nearly invisible. *Hurry up, Mariarta thought, you’re going to lose your way!* But then, wouldn’t that solve her problems too? Many a hunter was killed by being caught out in the cold—

Mariarta shook her head. *What's the matter with me?* she thought....but her hands still itched for the bow— “I am not going to kill anyone,” she whispered, “least of all this poor fool. Be still and let me be!”

A breath of laughter, as if heard down the wind. Mariarta peered around the corner of the house, westward toward the pines. *I'm getting closer to her. Her thoughts are getting stronger in me—*

Flisch loomed up, a dark indistinct figure. “Plenty of deadwood there,” he said, brushing past her into the hut. “Come in and shut the door: why are you wasting the warmth?”

Mariarta went in after him.

•

They ate a hunter's meal of soup made from dry meat and barley, drank water melted from snow; then talked, somewhat unwillingly.

“That slope on the northwest side of the lake,” Flisch said, “it looks gentle enough. We can climb that way, then circle the whole place at that level. Whitehorn's spurs come to about that height, too—we can look a good way up the valleys without actually having to climb them.”

“The problem is,” Mariarta said, “heaven knows what we should do if we find the story to be the truth.”

“Gold for me,” Flisch said cheerfully. “You can have the magic cowbell if you want it. The enchanted maiden, or whatever she is, I don't want her, and she's no good to you.”

Mariarta had other ideas. “But what happens if neither of us passes this test of questions the dwarf is supposed to give us? Or what if he only wants one of us, not the other?”

“If that happens, we’ll choose for it. The other one waits to see what happens. And if we don’t pass—we leave, I guess. At least we’ll be able to tell people the story is true.”

“You hope we’ll leave. I hope this isn’t like missing the white one when you shoot at it.” Mariarta had another bite of meat. “What *did* you see, back there at Vaz?”

Flisch stared. “I told you, the white one. Did you think I was making that up?”

“Yes.”

He stared, offended. “Who would lie about a thing like that? It could be the death of you, saying you’d seen it when you hadn’t.”

Mariarta stared back. “But then you let drop that line about it turning into a woman—”

He smiled, malice in his eyes. “Yes. You should have seen your face. But that was just me joking. The white one—” Flisch looked sober. “I saw it there, all right. It went into the trees, like I told you. I followed it. Got good and lost there...I had to sleep under the trees that night.”

Mariarta sat silent, considering the mystery. *Something to do with the statue?...* “Was it big?”

Flisch shook his head. “The usual doe size. Maybe two years.”

Mariarta breathed out. It suddenly all seemed too much for her. Her legs ached, she was weary, she was

trapped with someone she didn't trust, about to spend a night waiting for a morning when they would go out looking for a magic that might make them rich or kill them—no telling which. But this had been her idea...

"Never mind," she said, settling herself on the far side of the fireplace. "Better wrap up in that blanket of yours. The fire won't last until dawn."

"Ah, well, what a pity," Flisch said. "But there are other ways to keep warm."

Mariarta reached over from where she sat, laid her crossbow in her lap. It was spanned, and armed.

"A lot of times," Mariarta said, "you get a warm afternoon in the rocks, the sun shining, and you're lying there, waiting for the chamois. You drowse off. But your ears aren't asleep. A tiny sound comes—a pebble falling, a hoof on the stone—"

Flisch threw himself sideways. Mariarta stared in horror at the bolt that sprouted from beside where his ear was now, where his eye had been a second ago. The bolt was still quivering.

"I sleep lightly," she said, shaking as she reached for another bolt, and restrung the crossbow. "Good night, Flisch."

He folded his arms and began, ostentatiously, to snore. Later on, when his breathing evened and the snores became genuine, Mariarta leaned back against the wall, and slept too...lightly.

•

Dawn came, and three hours later the sun came over the mountains, forcing its way in through the cracks of the closed shutters in beams that danced with dust like sparks of gold. Mariarta was shocked to find she had slept so long. Flisch, like Catsch, was still sleeping hard.

Mariarta slipped out quietly to take care of morning business. The sun shone blindingly from the snow. The sky was bitterly blue, the wind blowing from the south, though not a *föhn* wind. Snow was blowing in great misty plumes from the southern peaks, making a light haze in the upper air; closer to the ground, the wind carried a storm of stinging glitter with it. *Not the best day for exploring. But damned if I'm going to sit in the hut all day with Flisch...*

Mariarta went in and untied Catsch from his wall-ring. Flisch was knuckling his eyes at the brightness. "We'll be blinded by noon—"

"Don't you have eyeblinders?" Mariarta said, surprised.

"Yes, but—"

"Just complaining... I see." She rooted around in her pack for the long band of thin linen she used to shield her eyes, put some more dried meat in her pockets. Then she hauled Catsch out the door, tied him on the porch, and put down more grain for him. Quickly, before Flisch came out, Mariarta dug into Catsch's pack for the skin-wrapped statue, tucking it in the small bag she wore on her back. *Should we find her, no harm in having something for her to know me by—*

Flisch came out while she was still fastening her backsack, and went hurriedly around the side of the hut.

When he returned, he said, “The sky is that bad blue...there’s more snow coming.”

“We’d better get our looking done early, then.”

Mariarta got her stick and bandaged her eyes with the linen band. It was thinly enough woven that a few turns of it around her head left her still able in this brightness to see shapes, as if through a thin fog. Flisch went through his bag, producing a similar cloth. With the firewood, the night before, he had brought a long narrow branch with the smaller branches stripped off it. This he took as his own walking stick, not much of a weight-bearer, but strong enough to test the snow.

They set out northwestward, passing through some old wind-crabbed pines, and began climbing the snowy rocks. The Whitehorn mountain towered on their right: they would come to the level of its two main spurs, then work back to their left again, across the feet of Whitehorn, toward the mountain to its own left.

The climb was not a bad one, the snow not too deep. An hour or so they spent climbing the slope. At the place where it first topped out, they paused to eat. At this level, a sort of flat shelf a quarter-mile wide worked its way around the valley, rising and falling where the spurs of the surrounding mountains broke its levelness. Flisch stood a while, scanning the ring. “I can’t see any wall or door.”

Mariarta started off to their left. “Let’s look up these valleys and see what we see.”

They started with the one closest, directly above them northwestward, climbing until they reached a point where further climbing would have been dangerous. There they

strained their eyes for a glimpse of anything unnatural. Seeing nothing, they came down the valley and moved on, leftward and southward, to the next valley, doing the same. By noontime Mariarta and Flisch had climbed and descended four of these vales, with nothing to show for their pains. Mariarta had a pulled leg muscle, and was in a foul mood. Flisch, though, seemed to be enjoying himself. Mariarta suspected this for the enjoyment of a man who is supposed to be on a dangerous adventure and finds, to his relief, that he's in no danger of finding what he was looking for.

They ate again and went southward around the ring. The first spur of the Whitehorn had numerous small valleys cut into the side of it, as well as the main valley running up the mountainside. They took the big one first, finding nothing but stones, and caves no deeper than a few feet. As they started, the afternoon shadows, earlier so sharp, started to blur. The weather was changing—thin hazy cloud was coming in from the south. The sun was a pale silver ball; they took off their eyelanders. It started to get cold.

“Enough for one day,” Mariarta said, as they made it to the bottom of the great valley, and looked southward to the next Whitehorn spur. “Let's go back through those pines, and get some more firewood on the way. We're going to need it tonight.”

“Ah, come now,” Flisch laughed, “giving up already? Now we see who's really bolder, girl or man.” He started toward the next spur.

“Flisch, you were the one who said the weather was going to go bad!” Mariarta shouted. “Look at it! You were right!”

He laughed.

Mariarta swore. *Let him go*, said that cruel voice inside her head. *The cold will catch him, or a rockslide, or the snow itself, and you’re free—*

“Not to please *you*,” Mariarta muttered, going after Flisch.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him. Flisch just kept climbing one of the tributary valleys of the north side of the first spur.

She followed him. They found nothing. Shortly, snow began to sift down, and the sun veiled itself completely. Turning back, they swiftly became lost in a solid whiteness of cloud, mountain and sky. The only things visible were the lees of stones uncovered by snow, and the blowing snow itself.

“The sun’s going to go behind the mountain soon,” Mariarta said. “Let’s get back while we still can!”

Flisch stood there indecisive. *Here it is again*, Mariarta thought; *what almost got him killed in the Lucomagno. Well, it’s not going to kill me. “I’m going down,”* she said, in as kindly a tone of voice as she could manage. “You follow me when you’re ready.”

It was hard to tell which way was downward, except by walking: so Mariarta took a few steps, and shortly found a downward slope. She looked behind, saw Flisch beginning to follow her.

Shortly he caught up and went ahead. Mariarta was glad enough to let him take the lead. She followed him downward, quite steeply at first, then more shallowly: then began to climb. “Wait a moment,” she called, “this can’t be right!”

She caught up with him. “Flisch, whichever way we’re turned, ‘up’ is the wrong direction. Find some down—”

But there seemed to be none. Every direction led only to an upward slope. Mariarta grew frightened. They had no wood with them. A night out in this cold wind, without enough food, without fire—

Flisch began to run. Mariarta went after him, not daring to lose sight of him, for both their sakes. *He’s panicked again.* “Flisch!” she shouted after him. “Flisch, don’t—”

He ran along the level, bulling his way along blindly. Mariarta ran after. And suddenly, he was heading downward, Mariarta after him: a slope, no matter how steep it was. *Oh, thank you,* Mariarta thought to whoever might be involved. *We’ll make it after all—*

Then Flisch cried out, and fell.

Mariarta hurried after him—put her strained leg down the wrong way, grunted with pain, went sprawling behind him. She pushed herself up on her arms. “Flisch, are you all right—”

Then she saw what he had hit. It was a vertical wall of ice, pebbled with old melt-drops, like a slab of glacier ice; the blown snow hissed against it. “Come on,” she said,

getting to her feet and tugging at Flisch's jacket. "We've got to get down from here—"

Flisch sat up, clutching his bleeding head. "Where did— We didn't see any glacier here."

"It's probably stream-fall—"

He stared at the wall. "Matti, look at it!"

It took Mariarta a moment to see the faint glow from inside the ice; a golden-colored light, getting stronger—

"We're fools," Mariarta said softly. "What were we looking for? A stone wall, with mortar? *This* is the wall. We may die of having found it. But the story's true..."

Flisch, staring, began to laugh. "You're right," he said. And he staggered around, grabbed Mariarta by the arms, shook her. "You're right! We found it!"

"Yes," Mariarta said. "And now what? We can't leave. We'll die trying to get to the hut."

"We have to get in there." Flisch turned back to the wall, his face alight. "It'll be shelter, at least."

"How do we get in? We don't have any golden key."

Flisch pulled out his hunter's knife. "Let's try this." He began chipping at the ice.

This proved useless. The ice would not chip. Flisch's frustration grew; he began to hack harder at the wall. His knife broke, half its blade flying in front of Mariarta to bury itself in a nearby snowdrift.

Flisch stared at the broken handle-end of the knife, then threw it after the first half, cursing.

The glow from inside the wall was stronger. Mariarta put her hand against it, held it there: then brought her away again, shaking it to get rid of the numbness. It was wet.

“Flisch,” Mariarta said, “it melts. That’s it.” She looked at her stick, then at Flisch’s. “Here, give me that!”

“What?”

“It’s pine, it’ll burn better than mine. Give it to me!”

Flisch handed Mariarta his stick. She fumbled in her breeches pocket for flint and steel, then broke the endmost third of the branch off, handing it to Flisch. “Strip some needles off that,” Mariarta said. *Thank heaven he wasn’t careful enough about it to get rid of them all!* She brushed snow off a nearby stone. Flisch piled the needles there, cupping his hands around them. “Hold this now,” she said, handing him back the pine stick. “When it’s going—”

Flisch nodded. The wind rose around them. *Stop it, Mariarta thought desperately, stop it now! Just for a few moments!* But the wind ignored her.

She started striking sparks into the pine-needle tinder. The wind blew the sparks away. It got darker; the capricious wind started to howl. Mariarta tried to pay no attention to that—tried to hold all her intention on the pile of needles, the fire catching in them—

A tiny pinpoint of orange, a smolder of smoke that the wind fanned until it scorched Flisch’s hands. He didn’t move them. “Brave man,” Mariarta said, thrusting the end of the pine branch into the tiny flames. They died down. Mariarta and Flisch both leaned in and blew—then got their noses singed as the fire caught the larger branch, and the resin in it sputtered and lit. Flisch held the longer end of the pine stick to the shorter one; the fire went to it, reluctantly.

“Put it to the wall,” Mariarta said. “Hurry, it won’t last long. Keep yourself in front.”

Flisch got up, shielding the branch with his body, turning to the wall. Mariarta crowded beside him, trying to help. The fire flared at the branch’s end as it touched the ice; water ran quickly from where the branch was held. They might have been holding a whole hearth’s worth of fire against the ice. The water hissed as it ran.

Flisch looked at Mariarta with tremendous excitement. “This is it! *This* is the golden key—”

Chunks of ice began to fall from the wall. After only a few more seconds a space was there big enough for them to walk through. Through it the golden light streamed, unimpeded and brilliant.

Flisch ducked through first. Mariarta followed. To her surprise, the cold air did not follow. The wind could be heard moaning outside, like a beast left in the cold. And inside, the source of the golden light—

All around them, on the floor, piled to the sides of the cave behind the ice-wall, were vessels, ornaments, coin of gold, all in heaps, like grain in a storehouse. The light came from the gold itself; it burned. Mariarta thought of the way the white lamb had burned, and the black bull, and began to shiver.

Flisch picked up a fat-bellied golden ewer with loops at either side of its rim. He went “oof!” with the unexpected heaviness of it, fumbled it, tipped it sideways. A flow of glittering-cold fire poured out, cut gems in every color. Flisch cried out, fell to his knees, casting the ewer aside,

and clutched at the gems, pouring them from hand to hand like a child playing with pebbles.

Mariarta bent to a pile of jars and jewels, lifting a great pectoral of hammered gold, figured with shapes of men and horses. The cold weight of it warmed swiftly in her hands. *Would it not look fine on you,* something said.

The thought of what it would look like, against her sodden linens and soggy hides, made an unhappy contrast in her mind. Mariarta put the pectoral down, turned to see Flisch starting to fill his pockets with gems. “No!” she said.

He glared at her. “No!” Mariarta said. “Not until we find whatever... owns this place. Until we find the owner, taking the treasure is stealing. And you know what happens in the stories when you steal treasures—”

Flisch growled. But he turned out his pockets, letting the bright gems fall to the floor. Slowly he got up, looked at Mariarta again. She flinched. It was not quite Flisch who looked at her. There was suddenly something missing in those eyes: the gleam of gems had dispossessed something that properly lived in them. And she thought of the soft voice that spoke in her mind, urging her to the gold. *I'll touch no more of it—*

“Look,” she said. At the back of the cave was a deeper darkness, embracing a more subtle glow. Flisch pushed past her toward it. Slowly Mariarta followed him, her eyes drawn by the strange signs scribed on the walls; spirals, connected one to another by their tails, like nests of snakes: columns of sticklike letters, written up and down in lines, the letters lying on their sides. The walls drew apart, slowly; the way trended upwards. It was not a cave Mariarta and Flisch were

in. Sky hung high above them, though clouded with a low-hanging mist. The light ahead, itself dimmed through mist clinging closer to the ground, showed rosy against the downhanging cloud.

Flisch was walking like a man in a dream. He and Mariarta walked on turf, now, the way toward the light still trending upward. Shadowy shapes could be seen through the mist to either side: trees, with long graceful bowed-down limbs, stirring in a soft breath of perfumed breeze that came from ahead, the source of that rosy light.

Mariarta walked on behind Flisch, heading slowly toward the light. It was like a sunset seen through fog, growing brighter as they approached. Flisch began to hurry. The trees drew closer together, so that Flisch and Mariarta had to brush among their branches. Odd how the branches seemed to brush back, almost a caress. Up above them in the trees, birdnoise sounded softly—the twitter of sparrows, the coo of doves.

The light before them was brightening. *Sparrows*, Mariarta thought. *That means something....* But it was hard to think, as she pushed her way through the trailing branches of the last trees, coming out behind Flisch into the open, nearer than ever to the rosy light. The air was growing so sweet, it was hard to breathe it. It coiled into the mind, darkening it to everything but the musky fragrance. A great open sward lay before them, starred with flowers. There, veiled in mist, stood a long low roofless house. The front of the house had no windows, only a great copper door, richly carved. Before the door stood a naked child.

Flisch came to the door now, nearly reeling, as Mariarta was, with the rich fragrance and warmth of the place. The child gazed at them, mild-faced. He might have been ten years old; his hair was fair, his eyes were summer blue, but had a blindness about them. "Longed-for," he said, in a voice like song, "waited-for, enter my mistress's house."

The great doors parted without hand touching them, swinging inwards. The child led them in. A soft languor stole through Mariarta's limbs as she followed the child. Walking was suddenly too much trouble, even thinking or being was too much trouble. She wanted to sink down in the sweet-smelling warmth and never do anything again. But there was not time for that yet. The child led them on. Idly Mariarta trailed her hand along the copper carving of the door, where beasts were carved, two of each kind together, pairing after the manner of their kind. Her hand stroked the back of a carved lion in passing; the lion, warm under her hand, twisted and rolled luxuriously, rubbing its face against its mate's, and its mate moved too, taking it by the scruff. Mariarta saw all this in sleepy-eyed wonder as her body took her through the doors in the child's wake.

They passed into a great square courtyard, of which the front wall had been only one side. All around the courtyard, pillars held trellis-work smothered with sweet-smelling flowers. The pavement of the courtyard was of some pale polished stone; doves strutted and cooed there, peering at themselves in the wide pool of water which mirrored the rosy glow. All about the translucent pavement, golden things and jewels were scattered, uncounted riches, shining in the glow. Flisch and Mariarta drifted after the

child toward the source of the light, the far side of the courtyard, veiled in mist as the house had been from the outside. There were pillars and flowery vines again, the vines this time hanging thickly about a wide couch, to make a bower. Almost the flowers brushed the creamy silk of the couch, the sweet smell distilling from them so strongly that anyone who came there would have no choice but to sleep. Before that couch, Flisch dropped to his knees. Mariarta could not resist doing the same, letting the bag fall beside her. The drowsiness that stole over her was so sweet, almost a physical thing, touching her body everywhere like gently stroking hands, warm, irresistible. Her eyelids fluttered, trying to close; but at the same time she could not look away from the source of the light—rosy, beautiful, the woman who lay on the couch, drowsing too, her body brushed by the flowers as she turned slowly and raised herself on one elbow to look at them.

In Mariarta's memory, every beautiful woman she had ever seen seemed to have been trying to look like this one; and not one of them had succeeded. This beauty was the perfect blush of young womanhood, full, ripe and enticing; you wished desperately that it would take you to its breast, hold you there, only brush your lips with its own; surely you would become as immortal as she. For unquestionably, this was a goddess. Anything she touched would partake of her beauty; anything those divine lips touched would become deathless. An eternity of delight seemed to wait in her regard, pleasures that soothed and burned. On her knees, Mariarta's body moved, yearning toward the goddess, desperate for her touch.

“Yes,” the soft voice said. Mariarta had no strength in her limbs, but that voice pulled softly at something inside her. Warmth flowed, her body moved without her will. Her eyes closed; she no longer needed them to see the Lady. She could see her better without them; only the rosy glow was there, a living essence of love and power. Here she might rest forever, and worship...

“Yes,” the voice said. Old reflexes died hard; Mariarta managed to open her eyes enough to see the beautiful shape rise gracefully from its couch and step forward. She bent to Flisch, reaching out arms to him; he grasped them, his face empty of everything but desire. “Ahh,” the Lady said. Mariarta saw Flisch stiffen as if transfixed, saw his face twist in ecstasy. “Yes,” she said in that beautiful voice, like the doves cooing about her feet, “here you shall stay forever, and be my lover, the lover of the Queen of Love. Feel *that*. You shall feel that forever, again and again. You know how much you want that. You will never leave me, will you?”

“No, oh no,” Mariarta heard Flisch whisper. The Lady let him go: he collapsed at her feet, like a puppet with cut strings.

That beauty turned to Mariarta. She could feel the Lady’s presence on her skin, as if she were another sun. The presence itself was a caress, so that Mariarta closed her eyes and bit her lip for the deliciousness of it. *The Queen of Love*, Mariarta thought, dazed with the overpowering sweetness of the Lady’s closeness. That was it. The book...doves and sparrows followed her; the blind boy was her son and servant... One of the Old powers indeed. Not the one she had been looking for...but that hardly mattered.

The Lady reached out, and Mariarta's hands came up, reached out; were taken—

The blast of power that went through Mariarta was like lightning, blissful lightning. She was blinded, felt nothing but that burning glow, like roses set afire. The sweetness filled her, paralyzing. Mariarta wanted nothing more than to feel that terrible beauty in her body again and again, forever. *Oh say the words, she begged, say what you said to him—*

“So,” the voice said, from the heart of the burning glow. “She would have a jest with me, would she.” There was an edge of danger in the sweetness, the thorn of the burning rose. “A maiden! What she sees in you milk-and-water creatures, I will never know. But no matter. You think you can serve two mistresses, young virgin? How wrong you are.” Mariarta writhed with pain at the sudden cruelty in the words, but still wanted that pain more than anything. The hands pulled away. “Not when my sister rules you still. Oh, you shall feel my power, young virgin. You shall tell my sister, when your soul comes to her at last, what it means to mock Duonna Vrene. My sister shall find little left to play her hunting games with.”

Mariarta crumpled at the goddess's feet, moaning like a beast, her body wracked with the loss of the bliss that had coursed through her while Vrene held her hands. She sensed the goddess moving back to Flisch, reaching down to draw him to her. He grovelled in an ecstasy at her feet, whispering, “Great Lady...great one...”

“Yes,” the Lady cooed, still bending over him, “worship me, mortal man. Worship me, and I will reward you well, reward you forever.”

“Please...please,” Flisch whispered.

“Yes,” the goddess said, sitting upon her couch again, gathering Flisch to her beautiful breasts. He stiffened again, all his limbs in a rigor. “Worship,” said the goddess, “so that I may taste your little desire of me, and drink it deep. Lifetimes of desire you shall have, until I weary of you. And even then you will desire the fate that comes to you, and love it as you love me, blessing and worshipping my name even as your soul is consumed. For am I not the Queen of Love?”

Flisch moaned with pleasure. Duonna Vrene laughed, stroking Flisch’s hair. “You shall stay here forever, my lord,” she said. “My servant shall do your bidding as he does mine. Everything you desire he shall bring you, all the riches of the world. And even I will be yours, for eternities...until I tire of you.”

Mariarta groaned and pushed herself up, desperate to see what happened to Flisch, desperate that it should happen to her. But *You are bespelled!* something said inside her: a more familiar voice, cooler.

She groped about her, tried to find strength to get even to her knees. Her hand was cold. Someone was standing near her. “Help,” she whispered, looking up. The naked child was gone; standing in his place was a dwarf, one of the small dark Venetian men, such as had brought Urs his lamb. Mariarta thought suddenly of the other picture in Luzi’s book, standing against that of the lady of the

sparrows and doves; her beautiful son, winged, irresistible, once maybe the greatest of the Old gods, but now, since the Cry, dwindled into her slave, wing-clipped and blind, a malicious creature that went about her errands with never a care for who he struck with his arrows. Sometimes he seemed like a new-weaned babe, the book had said. Sometimes like a fair youth. But always blind—

The dwarf leered at Mariarta, milky-eyed, and his laugh was like the hiss of a cat.

She tried to move again. Suddenly the naked child was back, mild-eyed, sweet-faced, smiling. Mariarta blinked. Her bag was open; a scrap of something dark showed in it—the bronze statue. Her hand had been on it.

Bronze, Mariarta thought. Gold she saw everywhere, and copper, and every kind of precious stone: but never a wink of bronze, or iron.

Desperate, Mariarta fumbled in her pack. But bright eyes fastened on her, hungry, like claws. The pleasure struck Mariarta again, running down her nerves like sweet fire. It was not the warmth she had felt once in her dream; that was strangely chaste beside this, as if it was herself provoking herself to it. Here was a clear sense of another, of soft lips, warm breath, something that breathed quick and soft with desire, in her ear, in her open mouth—breathing her breath, her own lungs falling into synchrony with the other's desire, her body moving of its own accord, feeling the other's body clasp hers: astounded, near senseless, she writhed with the delight of it. *Nothing but this*, said the sweet voice in her mind, honeyed, caressing, warm, wet, the voice that spoke with the tongue that brushed

her lips, and slipped deliciously inward. *Nothing but this, forever. Forget dreams, forget the sight of the sky, the life of the world. Know only this dusk, this pleasure, forever: my arms, my lips. Mine, mine...*

Yes, the most part of Mariarta cried inside, *no more searching, yes, yours, this pleasure forever, yes!* But some other part of her moaned, *Never more any stars? Never more the sunlight?* Stubborn, desperate, that part of her groped Mariarta's hand about, came on the hide wrapping of the statue, fumbled with it. The pleasure was too great, the hand fell away, defeated; then slowly tried again, slipped away again, slipped—

Cold against her hand, cold like the ice of the outer wall. She hunched up, the pleasure lost at a stroke, her body shivering in reaction. Trembling, Mariarta fumbled the statue out of its wrapping of hide, clutched it and her bag to her. There was the dwarf again, stepping back from her, amusement still in the dreadful twisted face, but also fear. Mariarta looked around, shaking with cold.

The pillars had not changed. The flowers had not changed, or the rosy light. All about, the gems and gold things lay.

And the bones. “Flisch,” she cried, “the bones, the bones!!”

He knelt, blind at Duonna Vrene's feet, heard nothing. The skulls lay everywhere among the gold; some cracked the long way, as if dropped like a tortoise from above; some smashed open topwise, like eggs a weasel has bitten open to get at the sweet insides. The long bones lay about, thigh-bones, arm-bones, every one cracked and sucked for the

marrow. The sparrows bobbed about among them, picking at the scraps of flesh. Mariarta crouched in on herself at the horror of it, the treasure and the charnel all tumbled together, as if the mistress of the place could not tell the difference.

And the mistress of the place—

Only her voice was unchanged. Nothing could change that: “the imperishable laughter,” Luzi’s book had called it, and that voice rang out sweet and caressing, promising every pleasure, able to perform. But the body was sere, wearing no rich bloom of flesh, but brown-mottled skin dry as parchment with age, gone to flapping wattles that hung from lank arms. The silken robes hung in webby rags on those limbs; the moth had been at the silks, and worse than the moth. The face— Mariarta hid her eyes, moaning. *How did she ever look beautiful*, she thought, yet wanted to weep for the beauty lost. *Bones, the bones!*—a skull as dry as any of those lying on the floor, the skin stuck to it like old paper; the balls of the eyes rotted to black, the rest of them the color of too-old curd, white with a touch of green, the corruption just coming— Mariarta hid her face, understanding where Duonna Vrene’s servant got his blindness. The rest of her was as terrible, but Flisch was blind to it. He could not see what bones and rags of flesh clasped his head to the hollow, bladdery breast, could not see what white horrors of hands softly turned his slack-jawed, swooning face up to be kissed, could not see the mouth and what moved in it as it came down, eager too—

“Flisch!” she screamed. “*Tell her no!*” For that was all it would need—

“Is that what you want, my lord, my darling?” said the soft voice, caressing. Even now, her hands tight on the statue, Mariarta felt that voice fighting with someone else in her for dominion. Mariarta and the someone were winning—but only for the moment. Eyes the color of corruption fixed on Mariarta, filled with hatred, but willing to love her again, as long as the love led to the devouring at last. “Tell her so then, so she leaves us in peace. Do you want to tell me no?”

Flisch’s head slowly turned to look at Mariarta. In his eyes was Vrene’s blindness. Only a look of slack pleasure lived in his face. “No. I want you...whatever you want...anything. Yours...yours forever....”

Flisch’s head turned back to pillow itself against the worm-eaten silks; turned up again, lusting, waiting for the kiss. Only a moment more, Duonna Vrene looked at Mariarta, with an expression of imbecile triumph. Then she turned away and slowly lowered her face to Flisch’s again....

Mariarta fled, hating herself for her cowardice, but not daring to stay, fearing to hear the screams. She ran past the treasures, out through the stroking wood. No screams followed her; only a long, soft coo of pleasure that went on and on, and slowly became double, echoing in the dusk behind her. That was worst of all.

Out through the graven, gold-strewn cave Mariarta fled, into the screaming night, the snow whipping around her.

•

She would not stay in the circle of mountains. When it was light, she made her way to the hut, got Catsch, and started walking. She did not stop until Pietsch, where she fed the donkey, then sat on a stone, and found she could not rise for weeping. One of the townspeople finally overcame his shyness, coming out to ask what the trouble was. They could get little out of her except a tale of what seemed a hunting expedition that went badly—the young hunter’s companion somehow come to grief in a cavern on the mountain. They fed Mariarta, left her in a spare bed, and let her sleep until the next day: she thanked them and went slowly down the road that led to the Bishop’s city.

It was only a few hours before Mariarta turned the last curve of the road and found the grey towers of the Hof staring at her. Their look was less grim: there seemed to be a shade of pity in it. Mariarta walked gladly enough under the shadow of those towers, to the back gate of Chur.

Baseli stood there. He said no word to Mariarta, but he noticed she was alone. She felt his eyes on her from behind as she walked into the town. She would have to deal with him later, but right now other matters were on her mind.

She took Catsch to the inn, stabled him, then went out and walked across town. Not far from the back gate was a steep, broad flight of steps that led into the bottom of a great square tower: “the Bishop’s doorstep”, the townspeople called it. Mariarta climbed the steps, passed under the tower’s dark arch, and came out into the square outside the Bishop’s palace.

The palace itself was simple enough, grey stone with shuttered windows. Over the door was carved the Bishops' ibex, prancing in its castellated gateway: the arms of Chur. Mariarta only glanced at this, and the guards by the door, then turned to the cathedral across the square.

It was the mightiest church she had ever seen, with a great tower topped by a shining bronze dome; the huge doors were all figured with carven shapes of saints and wise and foolish virgins and all manner of others, seemingly struggling to get in. Mariarta went to one of those doors, pulled it open and entered.

It was a long time since she had been comfortable in a church—not since before the night she came into the church in Tschamut and heard someone breaking open the font. Mariarta's intention was to go in, light a candle for Flisch's soul, pray for forgiveness for having led him to so terrible a fate: then to get away into the wilderness, where she could do no one else any harm. But the wonderful inside of the church distracted her. It was not a bright place: the windows ran down only one side. But by the altar, banks of candles burned in iron holders, and a great radiance spread from them to the altarpiece, a triptych of praying forms, all gilded and jeweled. Mariarta wondered that the sight of gold didn't make her shudder. But here it was different.

She went to one of the candle-banks by the side of the altar, lit one, knelt on the stone floor to pray. It seemed much darker when she opened her eyes again. *Maybe I slept*, she thought, embarrassed, and got up. She passed before the altar, bowed, and went past the side altar on her way out. On the altar, Mariarta noticed, was a reliquary, rich

with gold in the dimness. Momentarily curious, she bent close to the small crystal set in the face of the reliquary. It was hard to see, but there seemed to be a scrap of singed cloth in there, and a chipped off spinter of stone.

Mariarta shook her head, stepped away from the altar—and stopped, staring at one of the paintings on the side wall.

It was a little old man, in a monk's robe; so bent with age that it seemed a miracle he could stand. His face was kindly, wrinkled everywhere like a dried apple with smile-lines. Next to him sat a calm-looking bear. The man's hands were raised in prayer. Off to one side were smaller paintings: the oddest of them showed the bear and an ox, bizarrely yoked together and pulling a wood-cart with a peasant woman riding in it, while the man walked alongside. Mariarta turned her attention back to the main painting. In it with the man were a great number of people, sitting on the ground, listening to him. Painted smaller, behind him, was a woman in a nun's habit; the paint was flaking off her face, possibly from a wet place in the plaster—but Mariarta didn't think she needed to see it. What surprised her were the haloes around the man's head, and the woman's.

Soft footsteps approached her. "My son," said a calm voice, "is there something you seek?"

Mariarta swallowed. "Father, who are these people, please?"

"Why, that's good old Saint Luzius, Chur's patron saint, who came to preach to the heathens in this part of the world, long ago. He was king in a country called Bretagna, somewhere near Irlanda of the monks; they say he

renounced his throne to come here and preach. They made him the first bishop of Chur—it would have been seven hundred years ago now. And that is his sister Saint Emerita, who came with him, and left a princess's life for a hermit's."

"So long ago," Mariarta whispered.

"Yes. They are with God in glory, for they died a holy martyrdom. Luzius the savages stoned to death, at last, though he laughed at them; his sister they burned as an enchantress." The priest shook his head. "But many were converted by their witness, so we keep their relics, and holy Luzius does many miracles, even to this day."

"Yes," Mariarta said softly. "Father, I thank you. Take this for the saint's shrine, if you will." She gave him a coin, the worth of her night's stay.

He thanked her and went away. Mariarta stood a moment longer, looking at the stiff gestures of the people in the paintings, and finally turned away to go out into the sunlight again.

It was well into afternoon. *I must have slept....* She found herself grateful, for she felt less bitterly grieved, more somber; a better attitude for someone seeking penance, she thought. She went to the inn and sat by the fire, waiting for the night, and Baseli.

•

He came late, which suited her. He came alone, and sat by the fire—no one else had joined Mariarta there, sensing something about the young hunter that might be more wisely avoided.

Mariarta poured him wine, sat silent. “Well?” Baseli said.

She told him what had happened. Baseli did not speak through the whole tale. When she was done, Mariarta said, “Now tell me, captain of the Bishop’s guard: am I a murderer? If I am, you must do justice on me.”

The firelight played with the shadows of the furrows in Baseli’s face. “Do you think you are?”

“I hope not. But you must judge.”

He sat silent.

“From the tale you’ve told me,” he said, “I would say that the young man chose his death. He did not have to go with you. That he could not resist—that one—is hardly your fault. Nor that he would not follow your advice. Otherwise—” Baseli shook his head. “If I can help it, no one will go that way again.”

“Where is Berschis, then? He had family there: I must at least take them the news.”

“Berschis— It lies near Walenstadt town, on the north-east shore of the Walen lake, a ways upriver from where the Seez river runs into it. Follow the great road that follows the Rein northward; the Seez valley branches off to the west after about fifteen miles. A two days’ journey, no more.”

Mariarta nodded.

“You need not be afraid to come back here,” said Baseli. “Though I will watch you still, for you have secrets.”

“And have you none?”

“Yes,” Baseli said: “that I fear them.” He looked at Mariarta, and did not smile, but did not frown either. He finished his wine, got up, and left the inn.

The next morning Mariarta headed north.

THREE

<i>leuora</i>	Out
<i>grescha</i>	there
<i>la notg</i>	the night calls
<i>siu requiem</i>	its requiem
<i>e leuen</i>	and in there
<i>davos umbrivals pesonts</i>	behind heavy curtains

<i>va speronza</i>	hope passes
<i>da maun tier maun</i>	from hand to hand
<i>mo ti has ligiau</i>	But you have bound
<i>tes mauns sil dies</i>	your hands at your back
<i>e bragias</i>	and weep
<i>e speras...</i>	and hope....

(*A ferm* / Held fast,
Felix Giger)

The road was easy, and at first Mariarta refused it. She climbed the Calanda mountain, north of Chur, and from there took herself into the Taminatal on the other side, a place astonishingly deserted for all its closeness to the

oldest, busiest city in the Gray Country. The chamois were plentiful. Mariarta hunted, but her heart was not in it.

The wrong goddess, she thought repeatedly as days passed. It had never occurred to her that she would not immediately find the right one. All she had left were the rest of old Tor's words: ...*west by the lakes*.

Mariarta sighed, that afternoon, sitting in the thinning sunlight of late fall, on a broad terrace under the peak of the Vattner Chöpf mountain. All the world she knew lay spread below her, looking southward: from Chur, invisible behind the intervening Calanda peak, to Mustér, just visible in the misty distance behind Panix and Crap Sogn Gion. Her knowledge of the lands abutting this area northward, though, was poor. Mariarta knew that the lake on which Altdorf sat was the first of a chain of them, stretching northwest. Until she could come where people could give her better directions, she would have to stumble along as best she could—for she was not willing to go to Altdorf yet. There were too many memories there, too many people who might know her, and betray her secret. *I've had enough of people knowing, for the moment...*

But next morning her impatience drove Mariarta onto the well-paved northward road, which ran through rich farmland. The road was made by the Romish people—so Mariarta was told at the inn she stopped at, in a town called Sargans. She was astonished that something made so long ago should be in such good shape.

“You'll see more like that as you go north,” the innkeeper said. Sargans was a tiny town; all its people seemed to be in the low stone-built inn that night, but still

the master of the place, a skinny, busy man, had time for her. “The Rein valley was their great highway, the Old Roms. They marched armies up and down it when they were fighting with the oldest people, the tribes. There’s a road like that leading to the Walen lake and the Over lake, and it runs right to Turitg, though I’ve never been that way. Great King Carl’s armies used it too, in their time.” He grimaced as he put down Mariarta’s cup of wine. “And now the Austriacs run up and down it like rats, taxing everything in sight—”

Mariarta nodded. “Bailiffs...”

The innkeeper spat on the floor. “Twice last year they raised the tax on this place. Old Rudolf wants more all the time. Anyway, you’ll find enough old Romish work on your way up. In fact, you said it was Walenstadt you were going to—well, there’s an old fort of theirs on the way: ruined, and it’s haunted, but a harmless sort of ghost. Oh, by the way, don’t mind ours.”

“Your inn is haunted?”

“It’s my great-great-grandmother,” the innkeeper said. “She used to keep the place, years ago; but she gave short measure when she served beer. So now she walks around, some nights, saying ‘Thirty thumbs to a measure, thirty thumbs to a measure’. She used to pour the beer like this—” The innkeeper took an empty stoneware flagon from a nearby table, with his thumb inside it, and mimicked pouring beer. “Thirty times you do it and you’ve cheated the customers out of a measure’s worth. Well, either she had a bad conscience when she died, or God thinks it’s bad to cheat people out of beer, because she’s been wandering

around here now for how many years—” The innkeeper put the flagon down, started counting on his fingers. “Oh, who knows. Anyway, she’s good for business: people come to see her. But she won’t go away, even though people ask her what she needs to be freed. The old bat, I think she just likes being difficult. Anyway, if you see her, ask her what the problem is. What do you want to eat?”

Mariarta ordered a chicken, ate it thoughtfully, and went to bed, lying awake in hope that something might happen. Despite her terrible experience of the week before, plain old ghosts were common enough in the Grey Country; this one sounded domesticated enough to be interesting. But nothing materialized, and Mariarta awakened to the sun coming in the cracks of the shutters. She had her morning meal and paid the innkeeper, who had Catsch ready for her. “You should charge me less,” Mariarta said, “for not seeing the ghost.”

“Ah, well, maybe next time,” the innkeeper said pleasantly. “Come back soon.”

Mariarta grinned. “How many people just passing through, around lunchtime, decide to stay after you’ve told them that story?”

The innkeeper waved at her, grinned back, and went inside.

Mariarta rode northward, admiring the broad fields which in summer would be full of grain, the vineyards terraced against the nearer, lower hills, like dark ranks of soldiers against the blanketing white. She wondered what village life would be like in a place where you actually grew your own wheat, rather than having to buy in meal at

great price. Once these people would have seemed incredibly rich to her. But here, as in the poorest mountain town, the bailiffs seemed to take so much that people were left struggling. *How did this come about?* Mariarta wondered. *We've always paid them, it's true...but when did it start? How did we let it start?*

She trudged down the snowy road, making for the inn she had been told about at Berschis. It all came down to armies. Country people had no way of stopping an army sent to discipline them: so they paid the landlords' bailiffs whatever tax was charged. *But when was the last time an army was seen in the Grey Country? Are the great lords relying on bluff as much as on their own power?* No matter how big your army was, it had to be a nuisance to move, even on flat ground. In mountainous country like this...couldn't it be made more trouble than it was worth?

She passed one more curve in the road, peering ahead through the snow that was starting to sift through the early dusk. The valley was narrowing, the mountains drawing in. They were jagged, thickly wooded, and their closeness to the road made them seem higher than they really were. Two of them ahead leaned in so close to the road as to suggest the uprights of a door; faintly, through the snow, Mariarta could make out a light atop one of them.

The local castle, she thought. Mariarta's thoughts went back to the great pile of Attinghausen, looming above Altdorf. *The Knight's son. I wonder how he is...* She sighed.

The road curved one last time, running close to the noisy Seez river on the left, under the shadow of the mountain-cliff on the right. It was not truly a cliff, but a

small peak in its own right, a cub of the mountain behind. Atop it, the light burned against the darkness of the pile crowning the lesser peak. *A window—* But as she squinted through the gently blowing snow, the wind swirled it, changed the view. Mariarta's mouth fell open. There was no wall there for there to be a window in. The castle that topped the peak was hardly there at all; ruined walls slumped against one another where they were tall enough to do so. Elsewhere they resembled a cake with bites out of it, gapped and crumbled.

But still the light shone; square, like the light through a window. A warm light, like firelight, friendly—

Mariarta stared. Her first intention was to hurry on. Berschis was close; the thought of having to find Flisch's relatives was heavy on her mind. But that light drew her. *Suppose this is something to do with my Lady? If I pass by, I'll never know—*

She saw the second light, then. It was not single, but a cluster, as if someone carried a many-branched candelabrum up the hillside. Some pale shape, paler than the snow that blew between them, seemed to be carrying it. Mariarta tried to see it more clearly. The wind changed direction, clearing the air—

—showing her the white, four-legged shape that paced the mountain. Mariarta's heart leapt. *The white one!* But no chamois had such a spread of antlers. From the tips of those antlers the light, like single flames, sprang up, making the illusion of the carried candlestick. The great *cervin*-stag wearing the antlers was whiter than the snow

through which it paced. And it bore something else, on which the light of its antlers shone: definitely a rider....

The innkeeper had said the ghost was a harmless one—“Come on,” Mariarta said to Catsch, tugging him off the road toward where a path, winding around the side of the peak, was visible in the snow. Mariarta led Catsch carefully to a spot where the trees overhung the path. Under one tree, far enough in to elude casual notice, she tethered the donkey and kicked the snow aside, putting down grain. Catsch started eating.

Mariarta went back to the path, curiously kicked snow aside again, bent to feel the bare stone. The road was quite flat, set stone to stone, close together. *Romish*, Mariarta thought. *My Lady is Romish...or older, even*. She headed up the path, minding her footing; the snow was deeper here.

The path was carefully made, switching back and forth across the side of the peak that faced away from the road. Mariarta climbed it slowly, watching the top of the peak through the changing thicknesses of pine. The light persisted. Near the top of the peak, the road made one last turn under the ruined walls. Mariarta found herself standing before what was left of a gateway. Some rotted timbers lay on the ground, their shapes mostly concealed by snow. Brush and pine seedlings had rooted around them, sticking out in places from the wall; the solid square shapes of the old wall-edges were crumbled with time. She readied her crossbow. *Let's see—*

Mariarta picked her way around the broken timbers, peered through the gate. Inside were fallen stones, all shrouded in deep snow—a big courtyard full of odd humped

shapes, snow unevenly melted, refallen and melted again. Across the courtyard was a tower, at the bottom of it a doorway, the door itself long perished, the snow swept in by the wind to lie on the first few steps of a stair. High above it shone the light—

Mariarta stepped in through the gate. And it all changed—

The stone of the courtyard lay bare. Torchlight shone on it, from torches fixed in brackets all around. No wind blew through the courtyard; not a feather stirred in the crests of the helmeted men who stood around its walls, guarding this doorway or that. Not one of them gave her a glance. This suited Mariarta, for the soldiers were not entirely there. She could see the stonework of the thick walls through them; the sheen of their armor was more like glass than metal. Quietly Mariarta walked across the courtyard, toward the door in the bottom of the tower.

She passed through the tower door, climbed the coiling stair. Above her was the light, spilling down the stairwell. Mariarta came to the landing, looked through the door. *There should be nothing here,* she thought. *Empty air—*

The room was as wide as the whole tower, round-walled. Rich tapestries hung from the walls, figured with men and beasts in a strange old style. The stone of the floor was overlaid with carpets, red, golden, dark moss-green, woven in repeating designs. Furniture stood about—old couches, great presses near the walls, handsome chairs draped with rich stuffs, cushioned in colors that gleamed dully in the light of the torches and candles that filled the

room. Slowly, softly—for the place was full of a stillness she was afraid to break—Mariarta stepped over the threshold.

A pillow on the couch nearest her rustled. Mariarta stared—then found she was staring at no pillow, but an *erizun*, uncurling and shaking its spines, looking back at her with piggy eyes in the candlelight. From all around the room came rustles, movements of wings being unsettled, snorts of surprised beast-breath—a raven, sitting on the back of a chaise, absently sharpening its beak on the woodwork: a mountain lynx on the carpet before the hearth, stretching like a lazy cat: a group of choughs, with their red feet and yellow beaks, roosting on the stone windowsill like so many chickens, staring at Mariarta with interest out of their bright yellow eyes. On a rug underneath the farthest window, lying on its back with its legs lazily spread out, a grey wolf lay looking bright-eyed at Mariarta, upside down, with its tongue lolling idiotically out of its face.

Off to one side, near the tower's third window, big enough to be a door, a branched candlestick moved. But it was not a candlestick. The huge white stag now shook the snow out of its coat, gazing at her thoughtfully from where it stood behind a silk-cushioned chair. And folding her cloak by the chair was a young woman.

Mariarta stared. Not only because the young woman had a shadow—unusual, for a ghost. But her clothes were strange. She wore a sort of golden-colored shift, and over it a voluminous wrapping of rose-colored material, heavy and lustrous, with a wide border intricately worked in a geometric pattern, wine-color and blood-color. Her hair fell

long and dark from under a headdress like a broad flat crown, beautifully chased in plain gold. The only other ornament she bore, if it could be called an ornament, was a great bunch of keys, iron, silver and bronze, which hung from a chain attached to her girdle, and chimed when she moved. The young woman finished folding her cloak, as anyone might who had come in from out in the weather, and draped it across the back of the chair. Then she seated herself, favoring Mariarta with an expression as thoughtful but untroubled as the stag's. She was fair, this ghost, with an outlandish kind of beauty, her eyes turned up at the corners, gazing out of an oval face which somehow managed to look both serene and severe.

"All good spirits praise God, and so do I," Mariarta said softly, for this ghost seemed a gentle one. "The first word and the last one are mine. What is your trouble, and what do you need?"

The maiden looked at Mariarta thoughtfully. "Your tongue is changed from the one I spoke, but not so much as the tongue of the people hereabouts. I greet you, stranger. I am the maiden of the castle, and my name is Sosania Furia Rufillia; though folk hereabouts, my friends tell me, call me the Key Maiden."

"I can see why," Mariarta said, wondering that any human being could carry such a weight of metal without being half bowed-over forward. "What keeps you here?"

The Maiden looked out the broad window, across the moonlit wood. "My fate," she said sadly, "and the old sin of pride. My parents were of noble stock—my father a praetor and son of the great Caesonia gens, my mother a

niece of the Emperor of the East. They told me when my father became governor in this province of Raetia Prima that I must uphold the family dignity and make a noble match. Their pride became mine, but worse, so that every suitor who came from the princely houses to the south, I refused. And indeed I was too busy to care about them, for I fell in love with this country as my father had—especially with its woods and waters and beasts, which I loved as I came to understand their ways, and something of their speech.” She smiled at the wildlife sitting around her—the lynx stretched, yawned and laid its head on the carpet, the wolf’s tail thumped the ground; the hedgehog snorted, made a ball of itself, and began to snore.

The Maiden sighed. “But my heart fell at last to a young man of Walastad, a prince’s son of the Raetii; he shared my other loves, the beasts he showed and named to me. My parents would have none of him. He was no citizen of either Empire, a mere barbarian, they said. So they set him terrible tasks—to ride horseback around the battlements, to fight the lake-beast. My suitor completed all the tasks. Then, rather than wed me to him, my father had him thrown from the fort’s battlements, down the cliff.” She stared straight out the window, not looking that way. “I could not taste food or drink water for grief. Eventually my body could not bear my grieving, and freed itself from my soul. Which remains here, as you see. All the good beasts come to me here as they used to while I lived.” The Maiden stroked the stag, which nuzzled her neck. “They tell me the news they hear, from the mountains to the sea. I know much

of the business of the world through them; but here I must remain until someone completes the tasks that set me free...”

“What tasks?” Mariarta said. “Who set them?”

“They are three,” the Maiden said. “You must kiss my lap-dog: and the beast that guards the door to my chamber: and the one who guards the door of the fort.”

“Well, this hardly seems difficult,” Mariarta said. “But how is it I didn’t see the first two as I came in? And who set—”

“None have succeeded, though the tasks seem easy,” the Maiden said. “I pray that you, brave young man, may succeed where others have failed. For I long for Heaven, and the sight of my love.”

Mariarta bowed to the Maiden. *There are questions she will not answer. Or cannot?* But ghosts sometimes could not tell you exactly in what manner they must be freed, that being part of their burden. “I will perform the tasks,” Mariarta said, “God helping me.”

The Maiden rose from her chair, moving toward the far side of the room. Mariarta followed her, going carefully; for suddenly the room seemed to skew, becoming unpredictably larger and smaller by turns. The white stag with the candle-burning antlers went after its mistress; Mariarta followed them across what seemed a vast hall, stretching off into the distance. *There’s not room for all of this here*, Mariarta’s reason insisted desperately. While she could hold that thought, the tower room seemed small. But it was hard to hold it. Her eyes kept insisting that the ceiling stretched away half as high as the sky, the walls dwindled into distance like a misted horizon—

“Here is my lap-dog,” the Maiden said. In the huge wilderness of rich carpets and furniture, across which she and the Maiden and the white stag wandered like rabbits in a field, Mariarta made out a sort of dais. *A pillow, really*, her reason insisted: though no reason could imagine a pillow the size of a great bed. Sitting on the worn velvet was a monstrous liver-colored dog. As a lap-dog it might have been amusing, even endearing, with its fat-chopped face, bulging eyes, and squashed nose, its bandy legs and big paws. But at its present size, Mariarta disliked the idea of kissing it. Its wet tongue slopped in and out; it drooled, goggling at Mariarta and the Maiden. It smelt like it had needed a bath for some months.

“Ah well,” Mariarta said. “If it’s to free you—” She clambered with some difficulty onto the cushion. The lapdog turned to watch her—and suddenly its face was Reiskeipf’s face as well. The same fat chops, unshaven, the same stale smell, the goggling eyes, the drool—

Mariarta quailed, but she would not refuse the task. She reached out, took the ugly face by the ears, tried to kiss it on the chops. It turned its face as she moved, “missing”, as Reiskeipf always had, so that it caught Mariarta on the mouth instead, and the slobber got all over her. Nonetheless she held the kiss for much longer than she wanted to, just in case, then let it go. The “lapdog” with Reiskeipf’s face immediately fell over on its side, beginning to wash itself in a place that made Mariarta glad she had kissed it before that, and not after.

Mariarta jumped from the pillow. The Maiden was looking at the lapdog with an expression exactly matching

Mariarta's revulsion. As Mariarta came to join her, the Maiden smiled, saying, "This way now."

Once more the room's size skewed, sometimes seeming small as a normal tower room, then stretching itself out big as a field. It did not seem quite as huge as it had during their first trek across the vast deserts of carpet; but to Mariarta the two of them still seemed no larger than children as they made their way toward the door of the chamber, by which Mariarta had come in. The stag followed them, itself seeming no more than lap-dog sized. The doorway that led to the stairs towered before them, huge as the castle gates, dark—the torchlight did not reach into the shadows of the stairwell. It glimmered only fitfully on something that crouched in the bottom of the doorway, filling it; a squat, paunchy shape, glistening with dark-green and dark-brown lights, a tarnished, brassy gold glittering in its eyes. It was a toad, a toad as wide as the whole doorway, crouched there, watching them come.

"This is the beast that guards the door to my chamber," the Maiden said. Her voice was steady, but full of fear. Mariarta stared at the great ugly thing, which seemed, at present, even bigger than the "lapdog"; she was revolted again, but she went to it.

It watched her out of unblinking eyes. Mariarta was within reach of it when she caught the smell: not of wet toad, of marsh and weed—but corruption, the smell of the grave. It was what she had smelt so plainly when they dug her father's grave up, to put her mother in it beside him. *How long in the ground*, Mariarta thought, thrust back into that memory, *how long must you lie before the smell goes*

away— And she looked into the toad’s face, and saw her father’s.

Mariarta cried out at the cruelty of it. Her father had never been handsome. He would tell jokes about it, preempting the jokes of others. The big wide grin, the round face—they were there now: but so was the liquefaction of decay, the features fallen in, the ruin Mariarta got a glimpse of when the shroud slipped aside during the second gravedigging. She had wept then with the horror of it, that someone so good should be reduced to this. The indignity, the unfairness of it—

Angry with the spell that caused her such pain, Mariarta reached out to the toad. It had no ears to grab. Her hands slipped on slickness: she nerved herself, and kissed the dreadful thing full on the mouth, refusing to be caught “by accident” again. The charnel stench gagged Mariarta, but retching, she held the kiss; then staggered back, wiping her face desperately on her sleeve, wondering if she would ever feel clean again.

Her eyes teared, whether from the retching or the bitterness of her memories, Mariarta wasn’t sure. The Maiden’s expression was sympathetic. “Come,” she said, leading Mariarta down the stairs toward the courtyard.

Shuddering with disgust and the growing cold, Mariarta followed. They came down, the stag following, into the torchlit courtyard Mariarta had seen on stepping through the gateway. The soldiers stared straight ahead.

“The beast that guards the gate,” the Maiden said softly, turning away as if she could not bear to look.

Mariarta looked. The distortion of sizes had stopped. She and the Maiden were their own right heights; the white stag's head towered above theirs as it should. Looking at the gateway, Mariarta saw it still empty, no gates in it: the humped shapes of the fallen, rotted timbers lay there. Something was odd about them, though. The snow that lay everywhere else, outside the gate, lay on the timbers no longer. They were bare, brown, and the long angular shapes of them spread over the space inside and outside the gate, like spread wings. Slowly they shrugged together, the wings of a bird that lay felled there, recovering itself, finding its footing. Huge, square wings, long-feathered, dark. *Eagle*, Mariarta thought. But then the head and neck reared themselves up, the wicked bright eyes glaring. Mariarta gulped, took a step backwards. The head of the bird was naked and wattled, the skin stretched taut and dry to the great blood-smeared beak. It was a *tschéssa*, not one of the bearded ones, which were handsome in their way, but the *tschéssa-barbet*, skin-faced, ravenous. Mariarta made herself take a step forward, and another. On the third, she recognized the look in the bird's eye, malicious, humorous—and buried her face in her hands, moaning. It was Flisch.

No! she cried inside herself. But she would have to kiss it. And this was a Flisch after the image of his new-chosen goddess; sucked dry, nothing left but the spirit of malice and hunger. *It's not him*, she kept telling herself as she tottered forward, *it's not him*— But the leathery-dry skin, as she reached out to grab the thing's terrible head, was that of Duonna Vrene, like time-dried parchment, loathsome; the huge beak struck at her eyes as she tried to

close with it, its throat grunting a dreadful parody of Flisch's drunken laugh—

Mariarta kissed the *tschéssa*, and held its beak tight closed as she did, feeling it straining to get open, to pick at her eyes; then pushed herself convulsively away, staggering back to sit hard on the pavement. Her head swam, and she wept again, from pain and grief. It was some minutes before she could see that the dark shape in the gateway was only a pile of old rotted wood. Light stood above her. The Maiden was smiling with a great joy, and the white stag, its antlers burning still and bright, stared at her curiously.

“Stranger, you have freed me,” the Maiden almost sang. “I bless you, for I will be in Heaven tonight. Now you must take your reward.”

Mariarta got up, scrubbing at her eyes. “I really don't want—” she said, then paused, as the Maiden went to another doorway in the courtyard, one Mariarta had not seen. The Maiden lifted that great bunch of keys, went through it, picked one great iron one and put it into the lock of the door. It turned with a groan; the door swung open.

Mariarta went to stand beside her, and the stag behind. The candle-flames standing up from the tips of its antlers shone in on the heaps of gold and gems. Mariarta thought of the valley above Arosa, and shook her head. “I don't want it, but I thank you.”

The Maiden seemed troubled. “You have earned it,” she said, and stepped forward, reaching into the pile of gold and taking a double handful. “Come now—”

Reluctantly, Mariarta found her purse and let the Maiden fill it. "Thank you," she said, stowing it away. "But tell me—"

As she glanced up, darkness fell, abrupt and total. Mariarta looked around, astonished. Nothing but darkness and snow, all around; the last traces of a fading dusk were erasing all details. Black walls, starless darkness above, and the wind, blowing new snow into the empty courtyard.

But Mariarta's purse was heavy.

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The inn she had been told of at Berschis was just a goodwife's front room, and a bedroom set aside for the occasional paying guest. The house was pleasantly sited, though, in a grove of trees outside the village proper, not far from the fortress peak. It was pleasant, too, to be someplace more like a house than the public hall of an inn, and to be fussed over by a motherly woman less interested in gossip than in feeding her paying guest better than she deserved. "Look at you," the goodwife said, "you're nothing but skin and bone!—" and Mariarta spent all that night eating, and thinking about the next day's task.

The goodwife told her in the morning that yes, there was a smith, Riccard his name was; a difficult man, but you could get him down to a fair price if you needed a beast shoed. Out Mariarta went, with Catsch in tow.

The snow was blackened outside the smithy. A great racket of forging and swearing came from inside it, the smith shouting at his bellows-boy. Mariarta waited. After a while

the smith came out, hammer slung on its hook at his belt, wiping his hands on a grimy cloth. He stuck the cloth into a pocket of his leather apron, looked Catsch over, and said, "Two, and the iron." Mariarta nodded. The smith went into the smithy for shoes that were a close enough fit.

He was on the second one before Mariarta could nerve herself to say, "Sir, you had a son named Flisch—?"

The smith spat, went on paring Catsch's hoof. "Had one once," he said, "but the fool went off hunting. Haven't seen him in—" He frowned, considering. "Five, six years now." He eyed Mariarta suspiciously. "You know him?"

"Yes," Mariarta said. She had to force the next words out. "Sir, he died. An accident in the mountains."

"Good riddance," said the smith, and went to poke the fire.

Mariarta stood there, her breath going out and in with amazement. The smith came out again. "Never could get any work out of him," he said, matter-of-factly: "wouldn't do what he was told and stay home; always told him he'd come to a bad end. This one," the smith tapped Catsch's third hoof as he pared it, "you want to watch it, it grows faster than the others. Like to lame him. Be a shame; he's good stock."

Mariarta nodded dumbly. She could manage hardly a word more until it came time to pay. After that she was still so shocked that she walked back to the house-inn and let the goodwife overfeed her for the better part of the afternoon.

When she recovered from the sight of a parent so completely uncaring about his child, Mariarta wanted to

leave right away, but it was too late in the day. She fed Catsch, then sat a while with the lady as darkness started to fall. It was a clear night, one of those pellucid mountain sunsets burning peach-colored above the shadowy heights. Mariarta, standing on the porch, looked at the fortress peak. The woods of it were still.

And there was another light as well—

Mariarta stood there, staring. A warm light, like firelight or candlelight seen through a window. “Mistress Leina,” Mariarta said over her shoulder, “what’s that light?”

The goodwife came out beside Mariarta, then tsked as she polished a mug, looking upwards. “Oh, that. Well you might wonder. That’s the light of a poor maiden who’s been there all these years, dead, the poor thing. She loved a boy, and her parents didn’t approve. They killed him and she died of grief—”

“Yes, I know the story,” Mariarta said, looking at the castle height with annoyance, “but what’s she doing there *now*?”

“Ah, well,” the innkeeper sighed, drying her hands on her apron, “many people have tried to free her, and they’ve all failed—”

“Indeed,” Mariarta said. She put her hand to her tunic-waist, at the spot where her purse lived underneath. Nothing was missing. Or rather, no more was in it, and no less, than there had been last night, before the Maiden filled it with ancient, but ephemeral, gold.

“Now this isn’t fair,” Mariarta said. “Not at all. Not to her—and not—” She ducked inside the door, got her pack. “Mistress, I’ll be back later.”

“But your dinner—!”

“Later,” Mariarta shouted, already halfway down the path that led to the road.

•

She found everything as it had been: the empty courtyard, filled with light; the silent soldiers; the stairway leading upward. Mariarta climbed it, annoyed. *What’s the point of doing a good deed if it won’t stay done? It’s not fair!* The firelight and warmth of the upper room reflected off the inner walls of the stairway as she climbed, and came to the threshold.

Mariarta stepped in. A figure arose from the cushioned chair by the window. “I greet you, stranger. I am the maiden of the castle—”

“Yes,” Mariarta said, “I know. Why are you still here?”

“My fate, and my pride. I must set you three hard tasks—”

“No. I did that yesterday, and it didn’t do any good. And after what I went through—!” Mariarta shook her head.

“—and when you have done them, I will be free—”

“No!” Mariarta said, more loudly. “The first thing I’m going to do is get you out of here. This place is bad for you.”

The Maiden gazed at her, not seeming to understand. *Anything that defies the way her spell’s set,* Mariarta thought, *she just can’t hear it, can’t grasp it—* She went to the Maiden, took her hand. It was solid enough, if chill. To

one side, something rustled: the milk-white stag with the bright antlers stood there, shining faintly, looking troubled. "I won't hurt her," Mariarta said. "Come on—"

She got the Maiden on her feet. It was like leading one blind and half lame. Mariarta could get her no further than the doorway. There all movement stopped, as if the Maiden had struck a wall that Mariarta could not feel. *The spell binds her here. Others might conquer their own fears, but that's no good to her. How many have come here, taken the reward and gone away satisfied, never looking back: while she remained....*

The young woman leaned against Mariarta, immobile. The light of the stag, behind them, threw both their shadows against the stairway wall. Mariarta's eyes filled. *Ah, poor Maiden, there must be something—*

Then, *Maiden*, Mariarta thought. She recalled Duonna Vrene's scornful words: *What she sees in you milk-and-water creatures, I will never know.*

Mariarta reached into her back-bag and came out with the hide-wrapped statue, unwrapping it. "Here," she said to the Maiden. "Put your hand on this."

The Maiden did nothing. "Come on, here—" Mariarta put the Maiden's hand on the statue, clasped her own around it.

The Maiden's eyes flew open. She tried to wrench her hand away. "No!" Mariarta said, and held it. "Step forward. There. Now turn— Look around you!"

The Maiden looked, with an expression that suggested she had not been able to do such a thing for a long time. Inside herself, Mariarta said, *Lady who watches*

me, grant me this, who never asked you for anything before. Put forth your power for this other maiden, as you put it forth for me—

The Maiden stared at Mariarta. “What has happened to my house?”

“Time,” Mariarta said softly, with pity, for the rich room was now only air and outward-poking timbers, and the white stag stood uncomfortably crowded onto what remained of the threshold. “Come down the stairs, and look.”

They went down into the dusk. Mariarta led the maiden to the fortress wall. The Maiden shook her head, as if her eyes dazzled and she was trying to clear them. “Everything is changed! These trees were never here: they would never have been let grow so near the walls. The tribes—”

“Gone,” Mariarta said. “Come with me and see.”

She led the ghost through the gates. The white stag followed them past the rotted timbers, onto the road. The Maiden stumbled as she went, as if her eyes saw one thing, but her feet felt another.

“Lean on me,” Mariarta said. “Come on. It’s not far.”

They turned the curve of the path where it straightened, leading to the road below. On glimpsing the rocks to their left, the Maiden stopped, like someone suddenly struck blind: a helpless, terrified look.

Mariarta pressed her hand harder against the statue. “It’s only trees. Come on—”

“It was not before,” the Maiden whispered. “I cannot pass there. He died—”

“He did,” Mariarta said, knowing that flinch, that dread. The thought of the vale above Arosa brought it to her constantly.

“If I go there, I will see—”

This is what kept her so long bound in a past of her own making. She dared not see the present she thought she had made— “Duonna,” Mariarta said, her eyes filling, “you will see what is. Not what was. You are done with that. Come with me now.”

“He lay there all broken,” the Maiden said, her voice growing thick. “They made me look—my father said, ‘That is what your lack of pride in your family has brought you. His blood is on your hands—’”

“It is not,” Mariarta said, the tears running down her face now. “No one forced him to do what he did. He made his choice. You are innocent of his death. Come—”

They struggled, but the Maiden was a ghost, and no match for Mariarta. It was the vale above Arosa that Mariarta was seeing, and the man who had followed her on a fool’s adventure; *of his own choosing*, Mariarta thought, and stepped forward, willing to flinch no longer, taking the Maiden with her. Behind them, the light of the white stag rode along like an inquisitive moon, casting their shadows from behind—a solid black one, and a greyer one, the Maiden’s. They leaned together as they walked, clutching the bronze statue; one of the shadows got steadily blacker, one of the shadows went faint. Mariarta and the Maiden both sobbed as they came down the path together and paused.

“Look,” Mariarta said. “Ah, don’t be afraid! Look there.”

The Maiden gazed across the cliffside. Standing there, just visible in the moonlight, was a young man, dressed in what Mariarta recognized from Luzi’s book as the Frankish style, brought by King Carl in the ancient day. He looked at them, alert: he was smiling. He was dressed as a bridegroom....

“I killed him,” whispered the Maiden. But she could not look away.

Mariarta smiled through her tears. “He’s been waiting for you a long time, it seems. How much longer will you make him wait?”

The Maiden yearned toward him. “Look down,” Mariarta said, gesturing at the ground. The Maiden looked. The thin ghost shadow that had been following her was gone. She looked behind. The white stag’s strange glow had died away; even the whiteness was gone from its coat in the moonlight. A plain red stag stood there, bigger than others, true, but it had a shadow like Mariarta’s. It looked at the Maiden out of dark liquid eyes with something like joy in them.

The Maiden cried out in joy, throwing her arms around the stag’s neck. It bent its head to her carefully, nuzzling her. “Oh, take care,” the Maiden said, and turned her face to Mariarta: “take care of him!”

“I will,” Mariarta said, smiling through the tears. “Go on, now, he’s waiting—”

The Maiden reached out to Mariarta, pulled her close. Mariarta hugged her, finding her solid still, but suspecting

this would not last much longer. “Listen,” the Maiden said. “You’ve freed me, and I have no way to thank you, no gold or rewards to give...except what I know. Take him and go to Aultvitg.”

“Aultvitg?” Mariarta said, surprised.

“You must go! The raven told me this last night, after you came: now I’m free to understand it. You seek a maiden—you must seek the maiden between the lakes. There you’ll find what you desire. Promise me you’ll go!”

She was so vehement, suddenly, smiling through her own tears, that Mariarta had to nod. “I will,” she said. “I promise. Go on now!”

The Maiden fumbled at her belt, flung the great bundle of keys clanking away, picked up her skirts, and ran across the stones, a bride to the bridegroom. The young man held out his arms to her, gathered the Maiden in. Mariarta watched them hold each other, and had to rub the tears out of her eyes. When she looked again, blinking, she could see them no more.

Behind her, the stag stood snuffling her collar thoughtfully. Mariarta reached up, tentatively, to pat him. “Will you have me, friend?” she said. “It’s a busier sort of life I lead.”

The stag nuzzled Mariarta’s hand. His expression said, *Tell me where: I’ll go with you, and bear you there.*

Mariarta considered Walenstadt in the moonlight, the silence of it, and the peace—then looked at the old shell of the castle, empty of any light but the moon’s, looking for all the world as if it had never been haunted at all. “Altdorf,

then,” she said. She took the path toward the town and the northward road, the stag following her.

FOUR

Tut vul flurir e sto s flurir,
All wants to bloom and all must fade,
mo sper la fossa stat la tgina.
but by the grave there stands the cot.
Ei datsil mund negin murir
The world is not for dying made:
il vegl vegn niev e viv'adina.
the old comes new, and passes not.

(Gian Fontana)

Altdorf in the early spring was a lively place—a winter's worth of bottled-up trade beginning to flow again, like glacier-melt. The roads from north and south were raucous with travelers, the market was chaotic, the inn was full most of the time—so Mariarta was told when she came from the mountains in February, with an unseasonable load of skins.

She had kept Catsch with her that winter, while working her way across the mountains from Walenstadt to

Altdorf. Her own way was easier now, for she rode the stag; a swifter or more sure-footed mount could not be imagined. The stag could carry her places Mariarta would never have dared climb to herself. As a result her hunting had been even more successful than usual, and Mariarta had been able to stop early.

Mariarta took a little-frequented way, thinking the stag was not exactly meant for use on the high road. She struck straight westward into the mountain country of the land of Glarus, and stayed in Glarus town for Christmas, leaving the stag to amble about his own business in the woods above the town until after Sontg Silvester's day. Mariarta had no fear that a hunter might chance upon him. She had noticed that, when away from her, in the snowy weather, the stag had a tendency to pale to white. All it took was a call from her, and he flushed warm red again.

The first of February saw her bidding him farewell on the cliffs of the Schachentaler Windgallen, above the road that led down the Schachen valley toward Altdorf. All that valley was white. She was troubled, for she could see no smoke from any of the chimneys of the houses scattered within sight. "A bad winter, maybe. Those who can have moved downcountry—"

The stag snorted in her ear, an uneasy sound. Mariarta elbowed him gently. "*Grugni*," she said, and laughed: "grunter", it meant, or "snorter", and was settling into a name for him. The stag made a "huhh" noise, affectionate acceptance.

"We'll go," Mariarta said, taking Catsch's lead-rein off the saddle she had bought and altered to fit the stag.

The saddle, too, she removed, cinching it around Catsch. "I won't be too long," Mariarta said, stroking the stag's neck. "A week at most. You take care."

The stag breathed out a cloud, paced into the pines above the road. Mariarta watched him, trying as always to catch the point when she saw not a red shape, but a white one: as always, she missed it. Whiteness moved into the shadow of the trees, vanished.

Mariarta took her time on this road, for the footing was no better in the winter than it had been in spring with the Knight's son of Attinghausen. She paused by Wilhelm Tel's old valley-house, and found it buried in snow, empty. *A bad winter—?*

She went to the Schachen bridge. Cloud was pouring past Schweinsburg on the peak of Attinghausen, obscuring the castle proper, though the church below it was visible. Faintly Mariarta could hear its bells ringing for afternoon prayer. *Arnulf*, she thought. *Later, perhaps...*

Mariarta went into town, got rid of her hides in the marketplace, and made her way to the Lion inn. There was no problem about a room; fat old Amadeo haggled over the price for ten minutes without recognizing the young girl who had been there years before.

She spent a pleasantly boring evening with not just one, but two roast chickens, and two jugs of wine. It surprised Mariarta, that evening, to see old Conrad of Yberg there, sitting off alone in a corner with Kellner von Sarnen, deep in conversation. She yearned for a breath of wind to bring her what they were saying: but all the windows were shuttered too tight for drafts. She heard not a word that

night: nor the night after, nor the next, which was the night before Massday. The snowy weather was closing in on the lake country again. Mariarta thought, on that third evening, as she ate one last chicken, that she would leave next morning before wasting any more of her coppers.

Still, the Key Maiden's words were with her. *Go to Aultvitg: seek your maiden between the lakes*— But there were many lakes in this part of the world. She had talked to two or three travellers since she came here, standing them a great deal of wine for little information. Westward, lakes were as plenty as blackberries in the fall, but no one knew anything about maidens between them.

Mariarta yawned, stretched. At the end of the common room, one more man got up, bade his mates good night, headed for the creaking front door. As he went out, someone outside laughed like a saw in a log.

Mariarta's head snapped up. The door opened again, creaking. In came a man in a long shaggy cloak and leggings. He threw his hood back. His head was so bald it shone, and his face was all one wrinkle. Two other men came in behind him. Mariarta swallowed, for she knew them too: Konrad Hunn and Walter Fürst. They got out of their coats, shaking off snow. In front of them, Theo dil Cardinas shouted at Amadeo, "Damn it all, you old robber, what do you mean you didn't know I was coming?—"

Mariarta swallowed. That one noisy laugh had brought it all back to her: her father's shocked look in the dusk as the rider came at him, the early mornings on horseback, that whole time when the world was still mostly safe, if troubled by the Bull. Mariarta waited while they sat

on the far side of the room, were brought food and wine, and had a chance to eat and drink. Then she went to where they sat.

Theo glanced up. “Youngster, if you’re looking to cadge drinks—”

“Signur dil Cardinas,” Mariarta said, “I meant no such thing.”

He stared at Mariarta, no recognition showing. “You know me, it seems.”

“Theo,” Mariarta said, desperately, “it’s me. It’s Mati!”

He stared at her. “Why, so it is,” Theo said slowly. He pulled her into the remaining empty chair by the table, while the two others eyed him oddly. But Mariarta was past caring. She seized him by the forearm and shook him, fighting back the tears. Suddenly she was sixteen again, and her father...her father...

Theo gripped her arm too, then pushed her away. “I know this young man,” he said to the others. “I’ll vouch for him.”

“No,” Mariarta said. “Not ‘him.’”

Almost no one was left in the place, and no one was paying attention. Carefully Mariarta lifted her headscarf a little, to show the braids underneath it.

“Put it back on!” Theo said. “Great God, youngster, what brings you here like this?”

“My mother and father have died—”

“I heard about that,” Theo said, looking sad. “I was sorry. Couldn’t come to be with you: I had problems of my own...as you’ll hear. —Our conversation’s safe with her,”

he said to Fürst and Hunn. “Don’t you recognize the young—the youngster who came from Tschamut, those times? The *mistral*’s writer?”

“My Lord,” said Walter Fürst. Konrad Hunn whispered, “But I heard that she—you—”

“Yes,” Mariarta said. “That was what I intended.”

“You deserve some wine,” Theo said. Mariarta laughed, seeing how careful he was to pour for himself first.

She spent a while telling them her story, with parts left out. Theo was noting, Mariarta knew, those spots where she paused too long. “But Theo,” Mariarta said at last, “what brings you here in this weather?”

“Well,” he said, much more softly, glancing around. “It’s been bad up my way for a while: bad all over, frankly.”

“Was it the winter? I came down the Schachen and not one house in five had someone home—”

Walter shook his head. “Not the weather,” Theo said. “The *vogten*, the bailiffs.”

“And the *landvogten*,” Walter said, “the governors. A bad winter all around.”

Mariarta was surprised. “What have they to do with us?”

“More than usual, lately,” Theo said. “Rudolf’s back from Italy.”

“Von Hapsburg?”

“Ssh,” the other two said: but the common room was empty now. “Yes,” said Theo. “The damned bailiffs are running crazy. Half those farms are empty because the bailiffs have thrown the tenants out to please their lord.”

“They can’t do that—!”

“They’ve done it. They’ll put friends of the family in those houses. Spies in the valleys.” Theo spat on the floor. “Walter, you should tell her about your lad.”

“My son-in-law,” Walter said, leaning back, turning his cup around on the table. “He was passing the lake crossing at Zinnen, you know where the ferry is? Here’s a man pleading with the boatman to take him over: but the *föhn*’s coming, the boatman won’t go out. My son-in-law asks what’s wrong. ‘The bailiff,’ says this man, ‘came to my house while I was away, told my wife to heat a bath for him, he had been hunting and needed one—some such garbage. She does what he says—what else can she do?—then he starts telling her what a fine woman she is, wouldn’t she rather live in a big house, he can fix it—’” Walter’s mouth worked. “The man came home, found the bailiff pulling his wife’s clothes off and the poor woman screaming for help. He took the woodaxe he’d been carrying and split the bailiff’s skull with it. Naturally he had to run. But the bailiff’s armed escort was coming hard on his trail...and here’s the boatman refusing to budge. My son-in-law practically threw the poor bailiff-killer into the boat, and rowed him across himself, in the middle of one of those big blows that come shrieking down when the *föhn*’s in that mood. A miracle the boat wasn’t swamped.”

“Where’s your son-in-law now?” Mariarta said.

Walter sighed. “I don’t know. He’s a hunter, like yourself: in the mountains nine days out of ten, comes down only when he has something to sell to keep the family in bread. I don’t think Gessler’s people know who saved the

other fellow. I don't *think* they do. There are spies everywhere...."

"That's what brings me," Theo said. "Things like that have been happening up my way too. Foreclosures without reason, man-killings, rapes and prisonings, all kinds of cruelty. Appeals do no good, for it's a town's word against the bailiff's. You know which side the lord is going to believe—" Theo shifted in his chair. "It's not the kind of thing any of us feel comfortable sending messages to each other about. So, as we can, we slip away and meet. This time of year is good. The governors' people don't willingly go out on the roads in this weather...."

"The taxes," Konrad said, "they just keep getting higher. The governors, the bailiffs, they take and take. There has to be something that can be done. But there won't be any use in doing it separately. We're scattered...."

"It's a strength, though," Theo said. "We can make them stretch. Throw corn all over the barn floor, watch the hens run around pecking it up! By the time they're done, they're exhausted. That's what we need to do. Seem to act separately....but act together."

"To do what?" Mariarta whispered.

"We're still working on that," Konrad said. "Be a few months before the details are in place."

Mariarta knew the sound of an almost-stranger being told to mind her business. "No," Theo said. "Mati...you know what we need. We're our own people. We need our own judges. Not foreigners who don't know our customs. We need our own councils to parcel out land; our own guards or enforcers to see the laws fairly kept. If there has to be an

empire, fine. But let the people be our *own* people who make and enforce the Empire's laws, as it was under the Old Emperor. And us answerable to the Throne directly, not to rich lords who see us as a way to make a profit."

"Their armies," Mariarta said after a few moments. "If we defy them, they'll come."

Theo beamed at her, and Mariarta realized she had said *we*. "So they will," Walter said. "That's the next thing to work on. But for the moment...we make plans. Quieter than making swords."

"And cheaper," Theo muttered. "Money's another problem." He looked at Mariarta thoughtfully. "What are your plans?"

"I ought to go back up the Schachen," Mariarta said after a moment. "I can come again, though. A couple of weeks."

"Would you help?" Walter said.

Mariarta looked at her wine cup, as Reiskeipf's face appeared in her mind, now indelibly part slobbering pug-dog. "A bailiff killed my father, partly. I would help, if you would have me. If you can think of something I can do."

The two men glanced at each other, then at Mariarta. "Mati, is it," Walter said, holding out his hand.

"Mariarta," she said, "but Mattiu at the moment, I think: unless there's some other kind of need." She took Walter's hand.

Konrad put his hand out too: Mariarta took it in turn. Theo held out no hand to her, only rocked back in his chair, and smiled. "*Genosse*," he said: *confederate*.

•

There was more talk, generalities mostly. Finally Konrad and Walter went to their beds. Mariarta and Theo sat alone for a long time by the fire, Mariarta doing most of the talking.

When she was done, Theo stretched. “It’s been bad here...but nothing on some of the things you’ve been through.” He drank wine. “I’ve had reports of you.”

“What??”

“News gets around. The young hunter who never misses. Mattiu dil Ursera, they usually call you. That accent of yours—” He laughed. “I think I know where you got that northern sound, though your father would be scandalized. Young Attinghausen’s gone further north yet.”

Mariarta blushed. “How is he?”

“Well enough. Rudolf called in the rest of Attinghausen’s oath-service. The eldest two are in Talia: so off went the youngest son to Vienna with fifty spears.”

“I hope he does well. But Theo, reports from *who*?”

Theo laughed, the saw rasping away in the log as always. “Mustér first, then Chur. A man called Baseli—”

“Ah,” Mariarta said, smiling.

“One of us, in a way. Closemouthed, though, which is as well. His master is watching us closely. —No, not that way: he’s friendly. Anyway, Baseli didn’t mention this Arosa business. But my God, girl—were you mad? Messing with *them*’s not safe.”

Mariarta laughed, a hopeless sound. “Theo, going into haunted places makes no odds. *I’m* haunted, have been for years—will be, until I find her. And all I have to go on are hints and riddles.”

Theo sighed. “Maiden between the lakes....” He shook his head. “I can’t think what that might mean. But we can ask. Meanwhile—other things are moving. Might be wise for you to be a townsman for a while. Keep *that* hidden,” he said, glancing at the crossbow in Mariarta’s bag. “The bailiffs haven’t been able to forbid weapons in the mountain lands, where the herds need protection from the beasts. Down here is another story.”

Mariarta nodded. Theo said, “One of the stories I heard about you, though—that you were hunting ‘the white one’.”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever see it?”

“No. Others claimed to have...but it was some magic of *hers*; I don’t understand it.”

“Pity,” Theo said, getting up. “Some of the old stories you really want to be true. Then it turns out that some of the stories are true after all...just not the ones you want.” He laughed. “Mati, meet me around noon tomorrow and we’ll go make you known to some people. Then you can put your head together with ours while we work out how to get these damn Austriacs dealt with.”

She nodded and watched Theo go: less spry than he was a few years ago, the creaking in his bones as well as his laugh. But intent, for all that, and as sharp as ever.

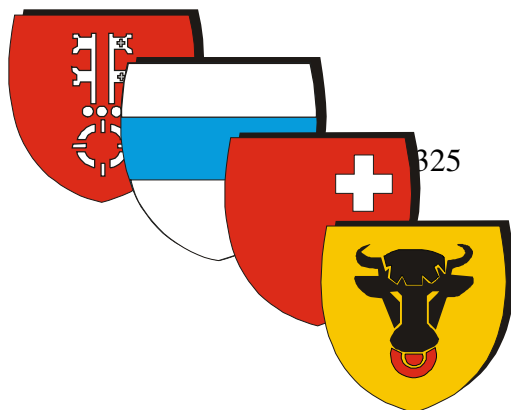
Mariarta went to her bed and slept sound, except for one dream near dawn. She saw the white one, through the mist, on a granite mountainside, within easy shot. She reached for her bow: but she had none, she had hidden it away as Theo had told her. Mariarta shivered, for it was fatal to see the white one and not fire, or to fire and miss. Then a blink, a change of viewpoint, and she found herself staring at the white chamois, lying at her feet; a bolt had hit it heart-deep, a bolt with her fletching. Mariarta gazed at this for a long time in the dream, not understanding.

She awoke to the sound of Altdorf's bells quarreling with one another, and lay there blinking. It was strange, how much she suddenly felt at home. And with something to do besides hunt her own destiny. That was important, no question: but there were other destinies too, ones which would go on after her own was settled. It was right to do something about them as well.

Mariarta got dressed, and went to see about her breakfast, and Theo.



Part Three:
The Pugniera



Give us freedom such as our fathers had,
Or death: otherwise, life self-governed—

(Dichter, *The Confederates' Oath*)

ONE

Spetga ed hagioz pazienza,
Just wait without impatience:
Sch'il da ei grevs e stgirs,
if days have leaden skies,
Sche tut tias rosas han spinas
if thorns spoil all your roses
E tias notgs suspirs
and nights are full of sighs,

Vonzei sur las vals compars
soon, soon the frozen valleys
In matg etern, pussent:
the might of May will thaw.
Spetga ed hagioz pazienza
Just wait without impatience
Mo aunc in pugn mument!
a little moment more!

(Mo aunc in pign mument,
Sep Mudest Nay)

Mariarta went up the Schachental a few days later and found the stag waiting for her. "A different ride this time," she said, and in the following days took him in a great circle, south of Altdorf and Burglen and into the hills,

crossing the Reuss away from the cities. Up there on one of the peaks behind Attinghausen she explained to Grugni, as she removed the saddle, that she was going to have to be gone for longer periods, but would certainly come back. Those wise eyes understood; the beast nuzzled her and paced away into the woods, the look he gave her saying, *When you're ready, I'll be here.*

Mariarta came back to Altdorf on the twentieth of February. There she was invited to come openly to Walter Fürst's house—as a potential match for his daughter, it was put about. Mariarta had to laugh at that when she met the young woman, a bright-eyed, fair-haired creature who knew Mariarta's secret instantly upon setting eyes on her. Mariarta found young Nida congenial to talk to—a townsman's version of what Mariarta might have been at the same age, her marriage not yet arranged. Nida was in no rush about it: her father's mind was on other matters. So was Nida's.

“And my poor brother-in-law,” she said to Mariarta one afternoon, as they sat in the kitchen together while her mother kneaded bread. “Poor Wilhelm... At least he and his wife and children have a tiny mountain place that Gessler's people don't know about. They'll be there now.” She sighed. “It's a hard life for them, this time of year, it's dark so much, and they can't go out...”

“He had cattle, didn't he?” Mariarta said. “A place in the Schachental, near the end of the valley?”

“Yes,” Nida said. “You've seen it, then. A a good herd, it was doing so well until this trouble started. They're scattered over three valleys now....” Mariarta nodded. It was

only now she had realized that Willem, or Wilhelm, Tel, was also Furst's son-in-law.

"Funny," she said, "everyone around here seems to be related to everyone else, one way or another—"

"Everyone but the bailiffs," Nida said. "We might have less trouble with them if they *were* related to us: they wouldn't behave as they do...." And Nida frowned, leaving Mariarta wondering what she meant...

One afternoon as Mariarta was coming back from hunting in the Schachental, she was met by a most unusual sight: Theo, bustling up the trail toward her, all in a puff. "Oh, heaven," he said, "I'm glad to have caught you. I thought you might come today."

"Why, yes, I told Nida I would," Mariarta said, "but, Theo, what's the ruffle?"

"You'll see soon enough. Just follow my lead."

He led her into town, to the market place—convenient enough, since Mariarta had a pad of skins over her shoulder. She was astonished to see soldiers standing there, looking like they wanted to be trouble for someone. The strange thing was what they stood in front of. Someone had taken a cobble out of the paving in the middle of the marketplace, and had put a great post in the hole. Mariarta stared at it. "Theo, what on earth is that for? A tent?"

"Just look."

The pole had a hat hung on top of it—one of those broad-brimmed northern hats, brown felt with a pheasant's feather in the band. "Bow to it," Theo said, under his breath.

"*What?* It's a hat!"

“Don’t make a scene, just do what I do—” They walked past it. Theo bowed to the hat. Mariarta did the same. They went on: and all the while, she could feel those soldiers staring at her back...

“*What’s this about?*” Mariarta whispered to Theo.

“Hush! Let’s go to the Lion.”

They made their way through the crowded common room, and settled themselves away from the fire. A group of men were sitting there, arguing noisily about the hat.

“Gessler’s idea,” Theo said finally, after the wine arrived. “He’s no fool, that man. Knows where to rub people raw—”

“Pride,” Mariarta said softly, looking around at the room. All around, faces were contorted with anger. “When did this happen?”

“A week ago. He had his people put this post in the market, then announces that since he’s the Emperor’s representative, he must himself be honored as if he were the Emperor. Even his hat must be so honored, as if he were standing there wearing it. And there stand his soldiers to see that the decree’s honored.”

“What are people doing?” Mariarta said.

“Oh, they’re bowing. Some as if it doesn’t matter at all. But a lot of people have taken to going around the long way—doing just about anything they can *not* to go into that marketplace.”

Mariarta shook her head. “Theo, people have to do their marketing sometimes. And what are the sellers supposed to do? Set up in the back alleys?”

“Some have. They’ve been fined.” Theo drank again. “There’s more to it, though. Gessler’s hurrying work on that new castle up the lake. Zwing-Uri, it’s supposed to be called—and he needs more labor for the building. So fail to bow properly—off you go in chains to work on the new castle. Or to rot in the old one. Kussnacht.” His mouth worked as if to spit.

“Nasty,” Mariarta said softly. Kussnacht had a dreadful reputation: dark, dank dungeons, the embrace of night, as the name said. Few people came out of Kussnacht, once in. “Tonight at Walter’s, then?”

“Yes. Late,” Theo said. “People are coming from the north. Don’t be seen.”

“I’ll be there.”

•

Many found it strange how the weather clouded suddenly, around suppertime. By nightfall the streets were blowing with whirling snow that stung the eyes and left one unsure of what was more than three feet away. No one could see anything in such weather, least of all the wretched soldiers in the market square guarding the Governor’s hat.

Inside Walter Furst’s house, chairs were pulled to the fire. Walter himself sat in one, in his shirtsleeves, big and gruff and bearded as always, drinking a great mug of the beer he brewed himself. Chief of the council of Uri he might be, but he was still all farmer at heart, and babied his brewing vats the way some men did their cows. Beside him, in shirtsleeves too, and sweating regardless, sat Werner

Stauffacher: a smaller man, with short bristly hair, beaky nose, and eyes set close together, giving him a thoughtful look like that of a cough sitting on a fence and regarding you. He was drinking Walter's beer in big swallows, looking troubled, as well he might; for as he came in, the wind rushing in past him had brought Mariarta his news, and it was bitter. She kept her peace, while the men got settled. Then Theo introduced her to Stauffacher and the third man who sat quiet near the fire, Arnold von Melchtal.

"He's not here," Theo had said softly to Mariarta when they first came. After their first words exchanged, Mariarta made it a point not to look much at him. But Stauffacher eyed *her*. "Theo," he said, "what can you have been thinking of, bringing a stranger here? Unwise, with—" His eyes flicked to Arnold and away again.

Theo stretched. "Not a stranger. And not so unwise. Who do you think brought on this sudden snow?"

Mariarta raised her eyebrows: she had said nothing to Theo of why she spent the afternoon sitting in a corner in the Lion by herself, whittling and whistling softly, like someone idling the day away.

Walter and Werner stared at her. Mariarta shrugged. "It wanted to snow anyway. It took little convincing."

Stauffacher said, "Nevertheless—"

"The fewer who know what's going on, the better," Mariarta said, quoting him his not-yet-spoken thought. "It's late for that, though. And you have no more reason to mistrust me than you have to mistrust your wives and daughters. These others know me. I'm a Gray Country woman born and bred, with as much reason to hate the

Austriacs as you have. But for them, my father and mother might still be alive. I have my part to play.”

“What part would that be?” said Stauffacher.

“I carry news. Who better than a free hunter who can come and go as she pleases? And I hear news in ways that might surprise you. Like yours, master Werner: shall I tell them, or will you?”

He looked at her, stolid. “Suppose you tell them.”

“You and your lady wife Margrethe,” Mariarta said, “were standing one evening last week out on the porch of your wood-house, when the *landvogt* Gessler came riding by with his retinue. He stopped to admire the place, and said, ‘This house is fair: whose is it?’ You knew he was looking for an excuse to make trouble, so you said to him, ‘Sir, this is the Emperor’s house, and your house and mine, held in fief of him.’ But he didn’t care for the fair words, did he? ‘You speak overboldly of “your” fief from the Emperor!’ says Gessler, all puffed up. ‘I am my lord Albrecht’s regent here, and I don’t want farmers building houses without my approval. Nor will I tolerate this fashion that’s sprung up, of people living as if they were free to do what they liked, as if they were their own lords. And you in particular I’ll watch to know whether you do my bidding or not!’”

Mariarta frowned. “The wretch! —Your lady wife, though—when Gessler and his people had ridden off, she told you that the strong men of the valleys shouldn’t bear such tyranny any more: you should meet with men from the countries around the lake, and all together should determine how the *vogten*’s yoke might be shaken off.”

Werner stared at Mariarta. “The very words,” he said. “His, and hers. This is witchery.”

Mariarta shook her head. “Only words brought me on the wind. Magic it is indeed. But not *striegn*, for this does good, and what *striegn* ever did?”

Werner sighed. “It makes me uneasy,” he said, “but all the same, when they have so much, armies and knights—I’m not sure we can afford to turn away such a gift, when it might let us know what the *vogten* have in mind.”

“We know what they have in mind,” Walter said. “Slavery, for us. Complete lordship for them. We’re meant to be serfs, like the lowest farmhand in the northern countries. We’re sold to the Austriac lords, to do with as they please.”

“And to think we really thought staying quiet would save our families,” Arnold said, and rubbed his face, a gesture Mariarta had seen her father use. It wrung her heart: he had always done it to scrub away tears before they showed. “It’s not working. Look at my poor father! Landenberg put out his eyes to punish *me*.”

Werner nodded. “And that poor girl in Arth, just now; the *landvogt* there shut her in a tower until she would have him—she leapt into the lake, rather. Died of it.”

Arnold let out a long breath. “What freedom we have had, we’ve had too long. Too long to bear *this*. Something must be done.”

“But who decides what to do?” Walter said.

Werner shook his head. “It’s a hard question. We can’t decide for everyone else. Otherwise we become no better than the *vogten*.”

“So ask,” Theo said. “Let the word go out that the free men of the Forest Towns are looking to see what must be done. Let people who think they have answers, come together in secret to say what they might be. Not too many, of course: that would be noticed.”

“Treason,” Arnold said. “Or so the *vogten* will call it.”

“By the time they hear of it,” Walter said, stretching his feet out to the fire, “it may be too late. And they can’t watch every quiet alp or mountainside.... I can think of a couple of spots. A meadow of mine by the lake. Another place, in the shadow of a wood, out of sight of the main road, but accessible. Axenstein, it’s called. Would that suit?”

The others nodded. “Then let’s say six days after Martinmas. A month will give everyone time to make the journey.” He glanced at Mariarta. “Can you make your way right round the Forest Lake within two weeks, mistress?”

“I can.”

“Then go to Yberg, and take our words to Konrad there: and to Konrad Hunn in Schwyz. These also—” He named men’s names, described houses scattered in towns around the lake: Brunnen, Seelisberg, Gersau, Weggis, Stoos. Mariarta committed them all to memory, as she had used to do in the old days when carrying messages for her father, and recited the details back.

The three by the fire nodded. Theo got up, gestured with his head toward the door. Mariarta went after him.

“They’ll have other things to discuss,” Theo said softly. “And Arnold, I think, needs to be with his friends a

while. He loves his father dearly: but he dares not go to him, not while the *vogten* are watching....”

Mariarta shook her head as she put her jacket on. Before the fire, Arnold had been rubbing his face again: he now looked at his hands, the grief showing plain. Walter reached out and took one of those hands, and Werner grasped it as well. The gesture started as one of comfort, but as those three men’s eyes met, it became something more. “Before God I say it,” Walter said, his voice shaking with anger and pain, “we will overthrow this tyranny, and our poor lands will be made free again, whatever it takes: my life on it. My life.”

“Mine too,” Werner said. “And mine,” said Arnold. Mariarta blinked hard and turned away.

•

The next morning there was outrage in the soldiers’ barracks, and an increased presence of them in the market square: for last night, in the dreadful blowing snow, someone had got at the Governor’s hat. The cock-pheasant’s tailfeather that had been stuck in its band was gone, and in its place, shining blue-green in the sun, was a fine long feather from a peacock’s tail. People came from all over town to bow to the hat, smiling, and walked away smiling harder. The soldiers gripped their halberds and glowered.

Mariarta left town without going through the marketplace. Her hide she had disposed of: she had nothing to do but start on her way. She felt blithe, knowing that Grugni would see she completed her errand in good time.

Her path took her along the track under Attinghausen castle, past the door of the church beneath the castle walls. Mariarta paused there, remembering Arnulf telling her of his ancestor's image there on his tomb. Curious, she went in.

The church was small and dark: this time of year, the fortress would shadow it most of the day. "Except for feast days, we mostly use the chapel in the castle," Mariarta remembered Arnulf saying. "At least that way we can see the priest."

Arnulf, Mariarta thought as she moved forward, seeing in her mind the sun through green boughs, hearing a young man's laughter. There were two small side altars, to right and left, even plainer than the main one. The left-hand one had a plain-carved statue of Songt Giusep on it, and nearby, the tomb of the first Knight of Attinghausen, a hundred years dead now. On the stone lid lay the blackened bronze effigy of a stern-faced man in a surcoat and mail, hands folded, head pillowed on a pointed helmet. The resemblance to Arnulf was surprising: except that by no stretch of the imagination could she picture him as looking stern. Mostly she thought of him as wearing that look of concealed amusement as the village council of Tschamut handled his sword....

Mariarta turned away from the tomb and glanced at the other altar. A statue of the Virgin stood there, carved from plain pine-wood like that of Songt Giusep. Mariarta was about to leave when she saw a gleam of something pale above the statue. Curious, she went to the other altar. Behind her the church door opened: a glance backwards

showed her the local priest, bowing to the altar as he came in.

Mariarta stood gazing at the pale thing. It was a white wreath of flowers gone dry with mountain air and age, muddied, bloodied, hanging over the Virgin's statue, trailing stained and yellowed ribbons. She swallowed as the priest came by. "What's that?" she said.

"Why, that's a great relic hereabouts," he said. "It's the bride's wreath of the niece of the Knight of Attinghausen, who saved the people in the south country from a black bull-monster that sprang from a haunted alp, somewhere over by Ried, I think. It ravaged all the country about, and caused many men's deaths. They say the girl had to raise and lead a great white bull to fight the black one. In their battle, all dressed in her bride's array, she died: but without her courage there would have been no victory, so they hung her wreath here to thank God for her sacrifice."

"Indeed," Mariarta said softly. *How strange, she thought; go away for a year or three, and the world rewrites your life story without so much as a nod to you. 'Niece'...* Mariarta stood silently wondering who in Tschamut had sold this 'relic' north: in how many mouths the tale had been, and become confused, before coming to rest here....

"Are you troubled for the maiden?" the priest said gently. "You should not be, for the lords of Attinghausen have masses said every month for the repose of her soul. And surely such a sacrifice has won her a place in heaven."

"Surely," Mariarta said. She reached into her purse, fumbling. "Take this, please. And pray for her."

Mariarta pressed the coin into the priest's hand and went out of the church at a great speed—for she knew she was about to either laugh or weep. Hurriedly Mariarta made her way into the woods. In a while, after she had found Grugni, the laughter won, and the woods rang with it until the snow started, sifting down to hide their tracks under a carpet of silence.

•

Mariarta went swiftly about her errand, hurrying the stag. House after house she visited, always at night, always under cover of snow, when she could cause it. Part of the problem was that she didn't know exactly how she was doing it, and the results were uneven. *I must find my Lady, Mariarta thought, and settle matters somehow or other: for if this power is her gift, like the shooting, it's no good to me as it is, sometimes working, sometimes not. I must become its mistress if it's to do me, or anyone else, any good. I only hope the price isn't more than I can pay...*

She and Grugni worked their way sunwise around the Forest Lake—not a simple task, since the lake is actually four small lakes joined head-and-tail together by narrow straits. Mostly Mariarta and the stag stayed in the mountains, approaching the towns and villages directly from the heights above them.

The stories she was told made Mariarta ever angrier as she delivered her message. Her errand grew as she went, for each of the householders to whom she was sent, influential farmers or townsmen, had more tales of the

insolence and tyranny of the *vogten*. From the Cellarer of Sarnen she heard the rest of the tale of Arnold von Melchtal's father—how the old man, Heinrich, had a beautiful pair of oxen that the *Landvogt* Beringer coveted; when Arnold, enraged, had attacked the servant sent to take the cattle, the *landvogt* seized the old father and demanded he turn his son over to him for punishment. Heinrich, having told his son to flee, had no idea where Arnold was: but the *landvogt* said that on second thought, the father would do as well as the son—and had the old man's eyes put out. All the Unterwald country was seething with rage over the deed: but the *Landvogt* sat invulnerable in his castle above Sarnen, and laughed, while his men hunted for Arnold everywhere.

It was the same elsewhere: lands stolen, young brides carried off and old women slaughtered as a joke, houses burned, crops stolen. Always the excuse was that the people of the Forest countries were to be “taught a lesson”: the lesson being that they must conduct themselves like other serfs—or die. In each place Mariarta told the other stories she had heard, and watched the faces of her listeners, men and women both, grow grimmer.

Mariarta was two days done with her errand—having delivered the last message, to the senior townsmen of Vitznau on the main part of the Forest Lake—and was making her way back to Altdorf, when she got a fright. She had left Grugni to wander for a day or so under the shadow of the white peak of the Fronaltstock. At its feet, in the village of Morschach, she was sitting quietly in a corner of its inn, drinking spiced wine, when the soldiers came in.

They were loud, which was typical, and they sat down and demanded wine and food, which was understandable. It was astonishing to see how the whole common-room of the inn went tense and quiet. The soldiers noticed this, congratulated themselves on having caused it, and got louder.

Mariarta sat in the corner, busily being a grubby hunter worthy of no one's notice. The door swung open after a while, to admit another of the locals. The usual icy blast came howling in through the ineffective door-curtains. Mariarta, without moving, leaned forward in thought to catch what that wind might bring.

—out of here and north again, to catch the big ones—

There was more, a sort of inner grumbling about the weather and the food and the mud; but what upset Mariarta was a clear image, windborne, of the Axenstein. This was a valley road some miles distant, which ran through land too steep to farm, too poor to graze; the bones of the earth stuck through it in granite ribs and ridges. There was no reason for anyone to be there, which made it a good place to gather. Except when someone knew you were coming—

She held still, praying God and her Lady to have someone open that door again. It hardly mattered which of these soldiers' thoughts she had overheard—she only wanted to hear more. *Who talked? Who betrayed us? What should I do?!* Down the chimney, she could hear the wind beginning to howl. *Yes, she begged it, for pity's sake, bring me the word I want to hear!*

Something howled outside: not the wind. Mournful, thoughtful-sounding, it wound down the chimney with the

wind-moan and matched it, a third higher, in harmony as sure as any mountain-singers' who sang the alp-blessing to call the cows home. Not a person in the common-room did or said a thing until that howling stopped. Even the soldiers looked unnerved. Mariarta sat remembering something about her lady from Songt Luzi's book: "—when She stands at the meeting of three roads, hark! hear Her children baying—"

Talk resumed eventually. Shortly the innkeeper went out to see that the beasts in the stable were all right—for knockings and bangings could be heard out there, a response to the howls—and as he opened the door, the blessed draft came screaming in again. Mariarta closed her eyes and leaned back, tasting the wind.

Quite clear, this time, the image of many men at arms, coming from all over, to lie in wait for those meeting at the Axenstein in a week. The captain's own men knew nothing of it: only the various troop captains knew, so that the men wouldn't have a chance to blab to the locals.

I've got to get out of here, Mariarta thought. When the soldiers' attention was turned to their arriving food, she staggered to her feet, "drunk", and lurched out the inn's back door, ostensibly to pee, then went around toward the stables. The door was open: the innkeeper was there. "Miki," she said, "I've got to be away early: let me pay you now."

"Two and one, was it?"

"It was two," Mariarta said pointedly, holding out the small copper pieces.

The innkeeper shrugged, took them, smiled. "Sleep well, then."

“I will,” Mariarta said. *But not here!* She climbed the outside stair to the rooms, got her bag, and five minutes later was heading for the woods.

Morschach had a *bannwald* behind it, a forest planted dense to break the fall of avalanches. Mariarta fled into its shadows, to see something white come melting through the dimness. “Oh, am I glad to see you,” she gasped, throwing her arms around his neck. Grugni nuzzled the back of her neck affectionately while she tried to think. “Back to Walter’s,” Mariarta said. “He has to be told; this is his game and Werner’s. Altdorf—” She swung up onto Grugni. “Come on, we have to hurry!”

Mariarta had never hurried Grugni very hard, preferring to let him set the pace. But now he went through the *bannwald* in a rush, and when out into more open ground, he went like the wind. The wind flowed about them both, cold, shifting until it came from the south: and slowly, as the first hour of their travel passed, snow began to fall. Mariarta rejoiced. It came in big flakes, a wet snow, difficult to move through while newfallen—the kind of snow that would make a treacherous crust if it froze.

They came to the hills above Altdorf about an hour before dawn. Mariarta slid off Grugni, stiff and sore and weary to the bone. She hugged him again. “Bold one, fine one,” she said, “oh well done—but stay here, don’t go far, we’ll be away shortly—”

He nuzzled her, snorting: a good-natured, cheerful sound. *Go on, then, don’t stand around; I’ll be here.*

Shortly Mariarta was sitting at Walter Furst’s kitchen fire, drinking *vinars* and shivering with reaction to the ride.

Walter and his daughter were there too, listening in wonder, and in Walter's case some skepticism, as she told them what she had discovered.

Walter was shaking his head. "It's all strange," he said. "How can you be sure—"

"Walter, a man may lie to others, but not to himself, not inside his head," Mariarta said, starting to feel annoyed. "I'm telling you, there are going to be about a hundred soldiers waiting for your people at the Axenstein. You swore to bring down these tyrants?—well, you'd better listen to me, because otherwise all of you are going to be dead, and the valley people are going to be in as bad a state as they are now. Worse, for Gessler and Beringer and the rest of them around the Lake are going to take *your* treachery out on the survivors."

Walter sighed. "All right. I'm sorry, young Mariarta; it comes hard to me, this magic. So long the priests have said it's all bad—"

"Only the ones who can't do it," Walter's daughter said. "Look at the Capuchins."

Walter nodded slowly. "I suppose. But this still leaves us in danger. Those coming to the meeting must be warned—"

Mariarta squirmed; her backside was protesting bitterly. "I can do that. I know the way. My mount—" She told him about Grugni. "He's swift, but so far the only test of his endurance has been what we did tonight, and I won't risk pushing him too hard. We can warn everyone in three days—I *think*."

“Very well.” Walter frowned and leaned back in the chair. “But the meeting must still take place—just not where it’s expected to. On the other side of the lake is the meadow I told you about, underneath the Seelisberg peak. Rutli, it’s called. It should be safe enough, especially with all Gessler’s people expecting us somewhere else. Tell the confederates we’ll meet there, the same time as was scheduled.”

Mariarta finished her wine. “I’ll go right away.”

“You’ll go tonight,” Lida said, filling Mariarta’s cup and putting a plate of sausage in front of her. “People will say we’ve quarreled....”

Mariarta grinned and started to eat.

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The next three days were a blur of haste through wilderness land, the occasional warm hour spent in a kitchen or offered bedroom, then the cold again. From the evening of the second day to the morning of the fourth, Mariarta did not sleep. Many a householder was startled by the sudden appearance of a messenger they had seen before as a calm young man, now pale as a wraith, tottering with weariness, delivering a message of dreadful urgency in a voice flat as a ghost’s.

It ended at last with Mariarta standing beside the stag, holding onto it with the last of her strength, while it stood under cover of trees and stared mistrustfully at a low wooden building not far away. It was the inn under the Oberbauenstock peak, not far from Rutli. Mariarta went in and slept a day and a night, to the surprise of the innkeeper,

whose food she had always told him was too good to sleep through. The next day she had three dinners, by way of apology.

The night after that, Mariarta was away again, riding Grugni through the woods that paralleled the road along the west side of the lake. Dusk was coming on; a faint golden light behind the mountains on the east side of the lake spoke of the moon coming up, full, in a clear sky.

Mariarta stayed east of the north-running road, Grugni picking his way among the great stones fallen from the Seelisberg. Ahead of her, a wide clear space showed through the trees. Together Mariarta and Grugni came out from under the eaves of the forest. She slipped off his back, patting him, and leaned against a tree, looking the place over.

The Rutli meadow was a rough half-ellipse of green, the "cut" half of the ellipse bordering the lake, dropping quickly to it in a string of little cliffs two or three ells high. From the lakeside the meadow sloped upward to the edges of the forest, and the forest in turn sloped up sharply, flattened out into meadowland, and then sloped more steeply yet to the peak of the Brandegg mountain. Only one *sennen*'s hut stood in the meadow. The snow lay lightly, this low; there were a few patches where it had melted entirely.

Mariarta found a stone near the forest-eaves, brushed it off, sat down to wait. The moon finally showed itself in the dusk over the mountains of the east side of the lake, its light reflecting golden from the uprearing peaks of Fronalpstock and Rotstock. Mariarta looked from them to the dim ground off to northward, where the Axenstein lay.

She began to whistle to herself. The darkness deepened. After a while, as her eyes rested on the shoreline of the east side of the lake, she saw something: a tiny point of light, showing only for a few moments—someone’s lantern, in a boat.

Mariarta waited. Grugni made himself scarce under the trees. Shortly Mariarta saw the first men coming from the northern side of the meadow, and heard Theo’s laughter.

She went to meet him. Ten others were with him, one or two of whom Mariarta knew, having carried messages to them—Winkelried the councillor of Stans, and the Cellarer of Sarnen. Among them, looking less subdued than by Walter Furst’s fireside, was Arnold von Melchtal. Greetings and introductions were made. Theo said, “You want to be somewhere early, stay with Unterwald men: they can’t bear waiting. First in, as always.”

“It’s cold as a witch’s kiss here,” the Cellarer said, “let’s make a fire.”

“Keep it small,” Winkelried said, cautious as always. The fire was made, and everyone stood close about it, as much to hide it as for the warmth. The Cellarer had a skin of *vinars*—“Depend on you to push your wares even at a time like this,” Theo said—and this was passed around. Shortly, looking out across the lake at the moon’s golden track, Arnold said, “It’s the Schwyzers.” A black shape cut the moon’s track, ruffling it: a largish boat, broad in the beam, big oars stroking gently.

The Cellarer produced another skin as the men from Schwyz came through the meadow from the rough landing-spot on the lake. Werner Stauffacher was with them, and

Konrad of Yberg and Konrad Hunn; six others came as well, farmers from the northern valleys around Schwyz.

They stood around the fire and were given drink. Mariarta heard a lot of good-natured jesting and gossip. People inquired about each other's cows, how that new piece of tillage was working out, had Hendri got that screaming ghost in the ravine to shut up yet?—and other such everyday matters. It all had a nervous sound to it, though.

“Look,” said Konrad Hunn. The tiny light of a torch shone by the boat-landing. The dark shapes of the Uri men came into the meadow, one by one; Walter Furst, after him the Miller of Silenen, and five more men of Uri. These joined the others at the fire, but they were tense and quiet. One last figure was still behind them, cloaked as they were. He cast the cloak back as he came to the fire, and the hilt of the sword slung beneath it glinted red-golden. It was Werner, the Knight of Attinghausen.

The Schwyzers and Unterwaldners kept a thoughtful silence. Werner said, “Sirs, I am with you in what you are planning. I dared not miss this chance to tell you so.”

“Here,” the Cellarer said, and handed the Knight the second skin of *vinars*. The others began talking again. More introductions were made, and Theo pointed out two of the Uri men to Mariarta. They were both carrying big black-stained horns, from bulls of the upland breed. “Won't blow this tonight,” said the man, a fellow Mariarta had seen several times in Altdorf before. “But we will yet.”

“The Bulls of Uri,” the other man said, patting his horn and grinning. “They'll roar soon.”

Mariarta swallowed, and smiled.

The casual talk went on, as if men were shy of what they had come to say and hear. Mariarta stood whistling softly under her breath, and slowly, quietly, the warm wind began to pour northward, rippling the lake, fluttering the fire. The men went on giving one another the news. It was all of the *vogten*, their growing arrogance and cruelty. Some talked of the force now waiting in the Axenstein for them—amused talk, but frightened and angry. All these men had realized it would only be a matter of time until they were hunted down in their own villages, instead of some out-of-the-way meeting place.

Across the lake, Mariarta saw, black against the mountain, the shadow that was the Axenstein: and faintly, the tiny pinpoint lights of torches.

There. She breathed out, and the rising *föhn* breathed with her. Others saw how fixedly Mariarta stared, and saw also, faint, slight, the creep of motion, like a moving cloud, near the top of the mountain. That warm *föhn* had been stroking the peak above the Axenstein for a while. Now, seemingly slowly, the avalanche came down, casually as a shrugged-off coat. Since no one lived on the Axenstein land, there had never been any reason to plant a *bannwald*; nothing could stop the snow. After a few breaths, the sound came drifting across the water—a faint hiss, ten or twelve breaths long, then silence. The men who knew Mariarta well all crossed themselves. But no one looked particularly sorry for the people on the other side of the lake.

The Knight of Attinghausen gazed at Mariarta with an expression she could not fathom. “I would not rejoice over the dead,” he said; “but the death of their masters’

rule, at *that* I would rejoice. That's what we're here to talk about, isn't it?"

A murmur of agreement went around. "Let me be clear," the Knight said. "There is no question that the Emperor is my right master, as he was my fathers'. Does anyone here feel differently?"

"No," Walter said. "We are all agreed on that."

The Knight nodded. "I know I speak for my own people round about Altdorf when I say we want no more of this rule by foreigners. We will obey the laws the Emperor makes, pay the taxes he levies: but it will be our people who administer those laws and collect those taxes. When our people must be judged, it will be by their countrymen and peers—not by foreigners who care nothing about our ways."

"It's going to come to fighting," Konrad Hunn said. "Do we really have enough people to resist them? It's mounted knights they'll send against us."

"Footmen we have in plenty," said the Cellarer of Sarnen. "Our country's full of men who have an ax they can sharpen to a bill, or a pruning-hook that can double as a pole-weapon; and trees make pikes without much trouble. Mounted knights—" His expression was troubled.

The Knight of Attinghausen smiled. "It takes time to get a mounted force of any size together. By the time they're ready to come, we will have plenty of warning—and if we can meet them somewhere of our choosing, rather than theirs, our chances are not so bad. Fighters on foot are what we'll need first. Are you sure the Schwyzer and Unterwaldner farmers will rise if called? Otherwise it's

their own families who'll pay the price, if they fail, or if we fail without their help."

"They know it," Winkelried of Stans growled. "The valleys are stirred like a hive...but keeping quiet, for the moment."

"Schwyz is ready," said Konrad of Yberg. "Even the children are saying it's better to die than live always afraid like this."

Werner Stauffacher lifted his head. "The *vogten* will seek to divide us. We must not let them succeed. If one land is attacked, the others must come swiftly to its aid—otherwise none of us will survive."

Men muttered agreement. "Then let us swear it before God," Werner said. "If He wills, a time will come when we make these oaths known to everyone, and stand by them openly. But for now, let us swear loyalty to our companions in the oath, and to the Emperor. Swear that our three lands will help one another, while they remain: and we will never break this oath, but it will last forever. We will be free men again, as our fathers were: or die. And that is our oath."

Every man there, and one woman, lifted their hands and swore it by God. Mariarta's eyes were full of tears as she swore; nor was she alone. The wind had fallen away to nothing. After the last words were spoken, a great silence befell, as if the night listened.

"It's enough for now," the Knight of Attinghausen said. "It may be that to get the Austriacs to take notice, we'll have to attack something they hold dear—some castle, or lord's house. Thought must be taken as to what to do."

For the rest of it—carry word back to your countries of what we've sworn here. Tell people to be ready.”

Everyone agreed. The Knight exchanged a word or so with Theo, then crossed to Mariarta.

He reached out and took her hand. “I had thought you were dead,” the Knight said, “and we sorrowed for you, my younger son and I. But now I see you've walked a stranger road than just dying: and I don't know what to tell him.”

“Tell him the truth. But sir—that bridal wreath in Attinghausen church—”

“It was sold me by a bailiff down south for favors,” the Knight said. “I bought it of him for favors—he thinks. Odd stories have grown up about it: I advise you not to believe everything you hear...” The Knight's smile was amused. “Meantime, our case is too hard to make me look at gifts askance, no matter how strange. You I know well enough to trust how they'll be used.” He pulled his cloak about him. “Theo, my 'boatmen' are ready, I think: their wives will be cross if I keep them out in the cold too long.”

“Just a moment more, Werner,” Theo said, his voice suddenly excited. “Here, Rogear, tell Mati what you told me. Mati, where was the place mentioned in the rede that young girl gave you?”

Mariarta blinked at Theo and the two young Uri men with him. “Not so much 'where'. I was to seek a maiden between two lakes. But mountains are in the rede too....”

One of the men nodded. “My brother used to hunt in the eastern Bernese country—he knows such a place. Two big lakes, the Thunersee and the Brienersee, run together

at a narrow strip of land; right south of that, three big mountains rise up. The Ogre is northernmost. South of it comes the Monk; south of that the Maiden, the biggest one.” The man frowned. “It’s haunted country. The glacier behind it is the longest in the world, they say, and all the dead for miles around are in it. There’s a monastery and a nunnery in the valley town between the lakes, built to pray against that mountain. If you’re going there, it had better be a mighty treasure....”

Mariarta swallowed. “I can only go and find out....”

“Rogear, come on,” someone called: “it’s your turn to row!”

The young Uri man and his friend lifted a hand in salute to Mariarta, Theo and the Knight, then left. “Theo,” the Knight said, “I must go too. Altdorf?”

“In a few weeks, Werner. Take care.”

The Knight saluted him and Mariarta, then went after the others. Shortly the meadow was empty in the moonlight. Not even the lake showed any track of the departing boats from this side, for the Moon had moved.

“Theo,” Mariarta said softly, “it’s mad for you to be helping me, especially when you don’t want me to do this.”

“But you have to go.”

“I do. That avalanche—it almost didn’t work. I walk the knife-edge every time I try this mastery of wind and snow. I must find my Lady and finish my business with her; otherwise I’m no good to these men.”

Theo shook his head. “I think if you survive finding her—you won’t be the same again.”

“I think you’re right,” Mariarta said, “but find her I must. At any rate, I’ll go home with you, and come at the mountains the back way: too many eyes are watching by Kussnacht and the lowlands.”

Theo nodded. “You’re wise. I’ll only be in Realp long enough to get my town ready for the call when it comes. Then I go back to Altdorf, to Walter’s, where Werner and the others can find me quickly. You’ll come to me there when you’re done.”

Grugni was waiting for her at the edge of the meadow. Mariarta called him; he came at a trot across the grass, looking uncertainly at Theo, but when Mariarta told him it was all right, he reached his head out, tentatively, to sniff at Theo’s hand. “Come on,” Theo said, mounting. “We won’t stop in Altdorf. Straight on home.”

The journey took them several days. Realp was a village of wooden houses blackened by age, much like Tschamut. Theo came to his house there, and had Mariarta stay for a night. He would have kept her longer, but she was eager to be gone. In the early November morning, he bade her farewell at his door. “In a month,” he said, “I’ll be in Altdorf. I’ll be looking for you then. Mariarta—” He took her by the shoulders. “Your father would say it, so I say it: the good God and His Son keep you, where you’re going—for you’ll need it.”

Mariarta took him by the shoulders too, manwise, the mountain greeting and farewell—then gave up and simply hugged him. “*Stai cun Diu*,” she muttered into his shoulder: swallowed, straightened, and pushed him away.

She headed down the street, making for the woods above
Realp, where Grugni waited.

TWO

<i>Il mund ei trits</i>	The world is worn
<i>sut tschiel stgir grisch</i>	beneath grey skies
<i>ils cors ein vits...</i>	Hearts empty mourn...
<i>Denton aucn arda</i>	But hope undying,
<i>speranza tarda</i>	Still all defying,
<i>per ina glisch...</i>	a light espies.

(*Advent*, Gion Deplazes)

It was a long road and lonely, that time of year, the climb westward from Realp up the Furka Pass. The snow lay deep, and few tracks or remainders of tracks ran through it; for one who had not been that way before, much of the road was guesswork, and the going always slow. The pass itself was dangerous going, the path narrow, switching back and forth across the northern face of the Tallistock. Grugni

had an eye for roads like this, though, and made the going easier than it might have been.

They went down the other side of the Furka into the long, straight valley of the Rodan river. It pointed like an arrow south-west to north-east; tiny towns were scattered down it, one side or another of the Rodan. Every alp was buried in white. Nothing else was to be seen but the tiny black splotches of houses and treetrunks, roofs and boughs alike being covered thick with snow. Most days now there was not even the blue of the sky to give relief or variety; only thin grey cloud, rolling among the peaks of the mountain-wall on their right.

Mariarta stayed in the tiny villages, each early evening bidding Grugni farewell outside, then walking in to find an inn, or some town-farmer's barn. Múnster was the first one she came to—another like Realp, its dark houses scattered along a slope of old glacial rubble on either side of a stream running to the Rodan. As she walked along the town's one street, wondering where to ask for shelter, Mariarta was greeted like an old friend by a fine big black cat, all spangled with silver hairs, that came trotting to her, shouting a string of meows, and rubbed about her legs. Mariarta stooped to pet it; the cat surprised her by jumping to her shoulder and balancing there, purring. A woman came laughing out of a nearby house and said, "You're looking for lodging? Mutzi always knows. Come in, come in and get warm...."

They fed her and asked her for the news, as people had in a hundred other places: and Mariarta told them all she knew of the doings in the south, and the lake country.

The word quickly got around the village that there was a stranger at Nani's house, and the group that sat around her now, while Mutzi purred in her lap, all frowned as Mariarta told them of the troubles. When she told them about the meeting in the Rutli meadow, fierce glances and eager looks were exchanged among her listeners.

About her own story, the Múnster people were more voluble, especially when they discovered where she was going. "That's a terrible place," everyone said. They told her the stories they knew, one man telling how the mountain was hollow, and had the gates of Heaven in it; another saying the gates of hell were there, burst when Christ went down to rescue the damned, and still open under the mountain. "*Lai da Almas*, it's called, the lake near there," another younger man said; "the Lake of Souls, and you know souls in torment lie in it, because it never freezes though it's right by the great glacier. It bubbles, that's the water from way underneath, boiling—"

The cat purred on, and Mariarta listened to everything, for there was no telling what might be of use.

"There was a road of the Old people there," another man said, a small bent creature with a beard that fell almost to his knees; "buried now, the glacier ate it, and all the towns by the road. You can hear the bells in the buried church towers ringing, sometimes. Once that was a fine alp, the best for miles around, the cows on it were the best milkers, the milk and cream flowed like rivers: and the young man who owned it got proud—" He told how the alp's rich and wasteful owner paved the roads with cheese, showered his spoiled mistress with costly gifts, and even

pampered his favorite cow with the kind of food that only people should have eaten. Yet he paid his workers ill, and he treated his old parents cruelly, gave them manure to spread on their bread and gravel for porridge, and finally turned them out. They cursed him, and Heaven heard. It blasted the alp with eternal winter, and condemned the man and girl to die into the glacier until world's end, and the cow to be a demon cow and run the crags and snowfields above the glacier forever.

“It wasn't the *cow's* fault,” said one little girl, greatly aggrieved. People laughed at that; the child's mother hustled her off to bed; and the stories went on....

Mariarta left Múnster in the morning, met Grugni west of the village, and went on. From what the people had told her, she had about another day's journey before she came to the foot of the glacier. That day they went gently down the valley, passing by the smallest villages, and finally reached Fiesch, where Mariarta turned Grugni loose to feed and sleep, making her way among the black wooden houses to the village's inn. There was no friendly cat this time, but one of the big shaggy white dogs of the mountain country, which snuffled and licked Mariarta's hand when she sat by the fire. It dozed at her feet that evening as the village people gathered to hear her news, and to warn Mariarta about where she was going. “There are '*nanín*' there,” one man said, and crossed himself: “the mountain is full of caves and tunnels, gold and jewels, but it's death to go there: there's something terrible in the caves, hiding there since the Fall, hating, waiting....”

Mariarta nodded, and drank the hot wine they gave her. The innkeeper's mother, a toothless smiling woman huddled in a chair, patted Mariarta on the knee with a clawlike hand, and said, "A woman lived there by the glacier in a hut and spun linen that people brought for her—she used to pray for the ghosts in the glacier, and when she went to bed she would open her window a crack and leave a stump of candle burning for them, so the poor suffering spirits could come into her house and get warm. Years and years, she did that. And when she died, and her cousins came to take her body home, that night they saw lights, lights, thousands of candleflames, going into the glacier. That was all the souls, with all the lights she burned for them, come to fetch her soul; they went into the crevasses all together." She rocked back and forth in her chair, saying, in her tiny, thin, breathy voice, "All the spirits, all the souls...."

Mariarta rose at dawn, for this would be the day that would see her onto the great glacier. "The big mountain right behind us," said the innkeeper's husband, "that's the Eggishorn: you bear right around its root, and follow the Fieschertal northeastward, until you come to a little glacier. Turn left there, and climb steep. The path will bring you to Lai da Almas. Westward from there is the great glacier—" He shivered. "Aletsch, it's called. You'll be halfway up it...God help you."

People waved mournfully from their doorways as she climbed the single track leading toward the Eggishorn. It was a boulder-strewn way, the rocks all etched with long shiny scratches from the glacier, now retreated, which had

dropped them there. As Mariarta came around the bottom of the Eggishorn, Grugni came picking his way down a snowy corrie, munching the last of some dried grass he had found under the snow.

“A hard day today,” she said, patting him, and fed him grain from her pack in her cupped hands until he had enough: then mounted.

They climbed the narrow valley between the Eggishorn and the Risihorn to its right. Fiesch fell away behind, lost in the fog lying in blurry strips along the valley. In a short time they came to the end of the Fiesch glacier: a vast tumble of strangely-shaped boulders, great tables and blocks of smoothed, scored stone, and rising behind them, some fifty feet high, a wall of dirty, scored snow and packed, layered ice.

Mariarta nudged Grugni up the steep slope which confined the glacier’s end and divided the Eggishorn peak from the Strahlhorn to the north. Between the two stretched a narrow saddle of stone. Grugni made for this, picking his steps with care, for blown snow lay deep. Twenty minutes or so it took them to reach the saddle between the peaks, and there Grugni stopped and stood puffing, while Mariarta looked down in silent wonder.

The drop on the far side of the saddle was slight, no more than ten yards in a long slope. At the bottom of the slope lay a flat oval snow-covered space that Mariarta knew was the first lake, the frozen one. Beyond lay Lai da Almas. Even under this dull sky, it lay blue as a sapphire in a story, pear-shaped. The cold wind ruffled its surface, in which cakes and lumps and one great hill of ice floated silently.

The far side of the lake ran against the side of the great glacier, which was still mostly hidden by the remaining upward slope to be climbed. But over the lake, the glacier's side hung out in a massive slanting half-roof of milky and crystalline ice in stripes, sixty feet high or more, the water lapping at the bottom of it.

They made their way downslope, skirting the frozen lake on the right, and were passing the shore of Lai da Almas when they heard a sudden sound like a waterfall. Grugni shied, backing away from the lakeside; Mariarta swallowed, not knowing what terrible thing might be about to happen—and then saw. The biggest iceberg floating in that lake was leaning toward them, bowing in their direction. Mariarta groped for her bow, spanned it, brought it up. The pointed berg bowed like the head of some huge beast—then upended itself in the water, showing, instead of the white “head” crusted with sun-pitted ice and new snow, its bottom side, smaller, rounded, and perfectly crystalline blue, like a floating gem. Water rushed down, streaming; waves spread from the berg as it settled, all the smaller cakes of ice bouncing and dancing as the waves passed. From the ice cakes at the edges of the lake came a soft, musical clunking sound; a sound that, if you heard it at a distance, might have been made by the bells of drowned churches...

Mariarta breathed out, patted Grugni. Off to the left, where the Eggishorn peak fell off steeply, there was a sort of rough stairway of blocks of ice and table-stones, ground together crookedly against the mountainside. Fifteen minutes' climbing and they were on top.

A mighty road of torn and tumbled ice, three-quarters of a mile wide, climbed in great curves for miles steadily north-eastward, sloping between lesser peaks until it flattened out in a great round basin a mile across. Down to this basin flowed five more glaciers from the shoulders of the three great peaks ahead. Furthest, a black mountain, hunched, its top bare of snow, crouched the Ogre: nearer, the Monk brooded, hooded in white above the great forked spur it sent southward. Then, nearest, joined to the Monk by a snow-piled saddle that fed the middle glacier, rose the Maiden herself; two lesser spurs and an uprearing central peak, a lifted head, proud, cool, the kind of mountain that left you certain it was watching you. From the three peaks to where Mariarta and Grugni stood, the ice flowed down in a tremendous motionless river, scored with long deep lines following the curves of its path; a great white many-laned road, full of death for the unwary.

Mariarta swallowed in the cold wind and nudged the stag. He shook his head and stamped; but he went forward.

The morning went by, and afternoon passed, while they made their way up the glacier. It was, Mariarta thought, about eight miles from Lai da Almas to the foot of the Maiden, where the five lesser glaciers met. But this was nothing like traveling eight miles on a road. Any glacier's surface was a wrack of ice and torn-up stones, new snow and old, piles and cones of old dirt, crevasses of all depths. But as this glacier was larger than any Mariarta had seen, so its boulders and ice-chunks and towers were huger, some the size of houses; and the width and depth of the biggest crevasses horrified her. There was no question that whole

churches could be dropped into them. Lesser crevasses Grugni leapt with little trouble. There was nothing to do with the greatest ones but follow them sideways to find a narrow spot where they could be crossed by jumping or by some old snowbridge—then try to go further northward before having to start working east or west again. Going more than six feet in a straight line without having to go sideways was an event.

They stopped in mid-afternoon, four miles along. Mariarta fed Grugni, looking with concern toward where the five glaciers met at the Maiden's foot. The weather was clearing, the grey cloud tattering away to show the luminous blue behind: from the Maiden's head the wind, blowing northward, streamed out a long veil of vapor that thickened into opacity, thinned away to nothing. It was not a good sign.

Grugni nuzzled her. "Are we great idiots?" Mariarta said to it, rubbing its flank. "Me for hunting and hunting—you for following me—" She sighed. "But you at least can take care of yourself if something happens to me...." Mariarta looked at the dreadful height of the Maiden, robed all in white except, here and there, for the bare stone of some jutting precipice too sharp and terrible to hold even the wettest snow. The sun came out, and the whiteness became blinding; glorious, but unbearably so, a pain to the eyes.

Mariarta put her blindfold on, and spent a few minutes trying to make something similar for the stag; but the cloth irked it, and it shook it off, blinking and tearing. "All right," Mariarta said. "I just hope you don't miss your step...."

They went on, Grugni picking his way, sometimes leaping, sometimes standing at the edge of a crevasse, blinking and tearing in the light as he judged his chances. More than once Mariarta reined him back instead and urged him along the edge of the crevasse, the long way. It was a relief when the sun finally slipped behind the Aletschhorn peak to the west.

An hour later Mariarta dismounted, weary with the tension of the ride, and stretched. They stood in the middle of that great meeting-place of glaciers, and all around them the mountains reared up, so tall they seemed to be leaning inward. The afternoon blue of the sky was shading toward evening, and the shadow of the westward mountains lay blue and cool over the glacier.

Mariarta stood still and listened. All day the glacier had been talking to itself, especially when the sun was on it—the chuckle of water, far below their feet, the creak of ice loosening in the warmth when the sun came out; and other less-understood sounds—hisses, moans, bubbling noises. Now the noises were louder, and stranger. The blue mountain-shadow crept across to the mountains on the far side, and the moaning was no more an occasional thing, but constant. Many voices, high and low, could be heard; some crying regularly, as if in the grip of an old, unrelenting pain, others silent a while, then crying out loud and terrible, sobs mixed with moans and strangled cries. Words were muttered or shouted, but in no language Mariarta understood. *All the souls....* Mariarta shuddered. This was no place to spend the night.

The sunlight was dwindling, slipping toward the last crest of the Maiden, the mountain's shadow slipping up the walls of the Monk and Ogre, drowning the long serrated wall of stone and snow to Mariarta's right in a flood of blue. Nothing moved anywhere but that shadow; nothing spoke but those voices. Ahead of Mariarta, where the glacier gave way to the frozen *firn*-snow that fed it, was a great expanse of unbroken whiteness, leading up the mountain peaks to the few barren ridges or thorns of stone. Here and there were a few holes in the *firn*, pits where some crevasse's old snow-bridge had suddenly fallen in, opening a wound in the smooth whiteness. Holes and snow together were drowned in that deepening blue, a reflection of the twilight settling chill over everything—

—everything but one snow-rimmed crevasse some ways under the saddle between the Monk and the Ogre. That was a paler blue than the rest. Mariarta got some more grain out of her pack and fed it to Grugni in her hands, watching that crevasse. While the shadows deepened, while the color of the sky became the color of the shadows filling this great mountain-rimmed bowl of ice, and the last outline of fire slipped away from the Maiden and the other mountains further westward, that crevasse kept the paler-blue color of a depth seen during the day. As the dark grew, that brightness remained, becoming stronger by contrast.

“That has to be it,” she said to the stag. He turned to follow her gaze as she wiped her hands clean. “Has to be.”

Grugni looked at the sky, then looked pointedly at his saddle, and at Mariarta.

Mariarta laughed through her shivering. She mounted up, and they made for the slope of the Monk.

The snow was frozen hard, and once the slope became acute, there was no simply walking it, any more than you might walk up a wall. Mariarta had to repeatedly use her hunter's walking stick to break that crust, opening a small hole which she would then stamp deeper. All this in deepening dark—putting one foot in the new-punched step, bringing the second to rest in the last one made, while behind her Grugni performed the same operation, nervously, with four feet rather than two. Mariarta's heart was thumping with fear of what they might be about to find, fear of not finding it, fear of slipping. Her muscles twitched with fatigue. Mariarta tried to swallow, couldn't for the dryness of her mouth, kept going; one step, the next, the next—

—and she pitched forward as the stick went its whole length through the crust she had slammed it on. Mariarta gasped and wavered forward. Something grabbed her by the neck of her jacket, hard, so that the front of her throat rammed into the collar-fastening and she choked. Mariarta punched another hole closer to her feet, found firm surface, used it to push herself upright again, gasping. Grugni let her go, looking over her shoulder to where the stick had gone in. From just ahead of the hole, in darkness, came a faint tinkling sound that Mariarta knew: icicles, dislodged, falling. Then surprisingly, soft, sounding distant, several small splashes.

Cautiously, Mariarta used her stick to chip away at the snow overhanging the edge of the crevasse. It fell away with more chiming of dislodged icicles, raining into that

dark open space beneath them: after a pause came more splashes.

The opening stretched for many feet to either side, concealed by one of those wind-carved snow cornices which sometimes piled against such an opening. The actual edge was barely a forearm's length in front of Mariarta's feet, and the crevasse itself fell away straight down in a wall of frozen snow and faint blue ice, as if someone had split the mountainside with a giant's axe. The crevasse's far side was a hundred feet away; beyond it the snow lay untroubled, straight to the Monk's summit, a thousand feet higher.

The ice inside the crevasse shone with that faint blueness, like a thick-glassed lamp lit from far within. The bottom of the crevasse could not be seen: only the great smooth ice-wall, vanishing into the darkness...

Mariarta reached sideways with her stick, dislodged another couple of icicles. Chiming, they fell. One breath...two...then, softly, came the splash.

"Well?" she said softly.

Grugni moaned.

"I don't see what else we can do," Mariarta said.

"What *I* can do. Look, brother, go free: you needn't—"

Grugni snorted at her, and glared.

She laughed, and hugged him. "To the right, then," she said, "and I'll go left, so we won't foul each other going." She turned and spent a moment seeing to the saddle's rigging and the fastenings of her pack with her bow and so forth. When everything was as tight as she could make it, she faced the crevasse, trembling. *What if the water's not deep enough*, her mind started screaming, *what if—*

She jumped.

The air tore at her clothes, her body flailed in terror. Then came the splash, and the shock, greater than the impact or losing the air, of finding the water was warm. The thunder of another splash came from right beside her as Mariarta broke surface, gasping and choking more on fear than water. She whipped her hair out of her eyes—her scarf had come off—and started to dogpaddle, staring around her desperately in the dimness. All around her the walls of ice came down, and dimly, through them, that blue light gleamed. Behind Mariarta, Grugni's head broke surface. He blew water out of his nostrils and made past Mariarta for something she couldn't see.

She followed. Grugni heaved his shoulders out of the water in a rush, finding bottom. Mariarta stubbed one foot on a submerged ledge, staggered onto it, and lurched after Grugni. They came onto a shingle of scored stones, gravel, and the powdery "flour" of stone one sees at the bottom of glacier-fed rivers.

Mariarta stood gasping, and started to shiver in the cold air flowing from the mouth of the crevasse above them. Grugni shook himself all over, like a dog, spraying her.

Mariarta fumbled with her pack, hoping that the leather bag inside it with her spare shirt and overshirt and breeches might not be wet right through. She found to her immense relief that the clothes in it, wrapping around the statue, were only wet in places. Hurriedly Mariarta stripped off her clothes and got into the dryish ones.

Warm air was coming into this hole from somewhere, certainly the cause of this pool of meltwater. Down the

length of the strand where she and Grugni stood, Mariarta saw a low opening through the ice-wall off to the left, a place where the quality of the blue light in the ice changed, becoming both brighter and deeper.

She made for it. Grugni followed her, bending as she did to pass through the narrow opening. Past it lay a curving tunnel. Mariarta followed it, brushing her fingers against the wall as she went. The ice was not wet, though the air around them was still warm, and getting warmer.

The tunnel twisted, alternately climbing and slanting downward; sometimes widening, sometimes narrowing until there was barely room for Grugni's body. Every now and then Mariarta thought she saw something buried in the ice of the walls—figures carved of ice themselves, then frozen in more; figures of men and women, animals, glowering many-toothed monsters, odd objects she didn't recognize. Mariarta would squint into depth upon depth of blue ice until her eyes teared, trying to see one clearly, but to no avail. Turn away, though, and something would be looking at her, ice entombed within ice, almost invisible, but *there*, and disturbing. After a while Mariarta stopped looking at the walls.

They walked a long time without anything happening. The only changes were in the light coming from the ice—which slowly, slowly got brighter—and in a strange feeling of breathlessness that was coming over Mariarta, as if she couldn't get a deep enough breath to do her good. Behind her, Grugni's breath was coming heavy too. When the tunnel left room, Mariarta walked with one arm around his neck, trying to reassure him.

Mariarta lost her sense of how long they had been walking, though she thought they were heading more or less westward, toward the Maiden. The light kept brightening; the sound of groans and voices speaking in tongues got less, finally fading away altogether, to Mariarta's relief. But breathing got harder, and the distress in Grugni's eyes grew.

The tunnel through which they moved began to widen again, and its ceiling drew away. This unnerved Mariarta, for some reason, almost as much as her difficulty breathing—she was finding it hard to even walk straight. Gasping, she brought the bow out, and spanned it: then went on between the glowing walls of ice, Grugni pacing behind. The light in the walls seemed to shimmer off something directly ahead that moved and gleamed like falling water. As Mariarta walked toward it, she gasped, found no air at all—then tried to gasp again, found her lungs locked—

Behind her Grugni made a strangled noise and bolted past her, into the shimmering curtain; passed through, vanished. Mariarta could not speak or breathe, could think of nothing to do but follow him through the ripple of clear light. As she burst through, it trailed a shock of bitter cold over her. Half-blind with terror and lack of breath, she blundered a few steps further and rammed into Grugni: gasped one more time, but this time got a breath, and then another one, perfectly normally.

For a few moments she leaned on Grugni, trying to recover her composure. The darkness all around was a relief after the uncanny light of the tunnel. Darkness, at least,

was something Mariarta expected to find inside a mountain. She glanced around, then gulped with surprise. The moon, hanging low above the tops of distant trees, was *not* something she had expected to find inside the mountain. And not a young crescent moon. Only last night she had come to Fiesch under the light of a fat bright moon just past its full....

And there was starlight. The Plough hung upside down in a configuration of spring midnight, with the great Triangle standing high. *April, possibly...* The ground here was scattered with pine needles; Grugni was browsing absently on a branch of arolla pine, and the air was thick with its green fragrance. They stood at the head of a long clearing, running downslope.

Quietly she started to walk down the clearing; Grugni followed. That moon above them was brighter, as a crescent, than the gibbous moon had been the night before—so bright it hurt to look at it, and the old moon in the crescent's arms glowed dust-silver, like an ember under ash. It wasn't setting, despite its thinness and how low it hung above the trees.

The land fell away gently, the clearing leading into another, wider, angled toward the left. Everywhere else, the country seemed covered with pine forest. In one place Mariarta saw water gleaming faintly silver: a lake. But the oddest thing was how, in the distance, the forested country sloped up again, giving way to barren slopes of scree and stone, and then to pale jagged peaks that gleamed at the edges, their upper snows backlit by the burning moon.

They followed the clearing over soft turf, and came to its end, pausing at the spot where it joined the second. This too led downslope, but more gently, and the trees about it changed—less pine, more of the silver birch that one saw in the mountains below the snowline. As Mariarta went she saw the buds on the gracefully upheld branches swollen, but not a leaf showing yet. All those trees shone white in the moonlight and threw a tangle of sharp, delicate shadows on the moonlit ground, so that Mariarta and Grugni paced through a webwork of silver and black, surrounded by white half-lit tree-pillars—all in utter stillness, with never a breath of wind.

After a while the second clearing came to an end in a scatter of tall birches. Irresolute, Mariarta paused and gazed into the wood, while Grugni nibbled the tender buds. Mariarta found that she could see some of the birches deeper into the wood much more clearly than she should have been able to; the dark halves of their trunks seemed to hold a soft light in them, like the old moon in the new moon's arms.

“Come on,” she said. The further they went into the birch wood, the taller and greater of girth the trees became. The greater the trees, the more moonlight they seemed to hold about them; it glowed softly in the trunks themselves, or clouded the thin upper branches in a silvery mist. The birches grew straighter and smoother, losing the faint penwork-tracery of black on their bark. After a while it was as if Mariarta and Grugni walked through a forest of delicately-hewn pillars in the guise of trees of stone, all burning white as if lit by lamps from within. Mariarta

reached out to one and found it as smooth and cool to the touch as one of the pillars in the great cathedral in Chur.

Ahead through the bright trees Mariarta saw a rise, ringed by more birches, but seemingly branchless. As they got closer she found these “trees” were now pillars indeed, plain and unadorned, the stone lit with the same cool inward light as the trees. These pillars supported nothing, but there was another ring of pillars within them, halfway up the rise, and then a third, at the flattened top of the hill. Those pillars upheld a plain round domed roof. Within them, under the roof, was a low building, round as well, of the same stone; and set in it a square two-leaved door, shut, gleaming silver. The crescent moon burning in the sky, still unmoving, seemed to rest on the curve of the dome, and the stars burned unchanged.

Mariarta glanced at Grugni. In this relentlessly silver light he had long since paled to white himself. Together they climbed the hill.

The hilltop was paved in a plain white marble. Across that paving, under the cupola supported by the inmost ring of pillars, lay the silvery door. It was carved with plain shining roundels like the moon at full, hanging from tall slim trees, like fruit; and crescents like flowers hanging from a tracery of vines that embraced and supported the trees and roundels—all these designs repeating. Mariarta reached out and touched the rightward door. The metal was faintly warm. Gently and silently the door swung inward from her push.

She and Grugni went in. The same pale light as lived in the trees and the pillars dwelt also in the plain walls of

stone, and to a lesser extent in the smooth marble paving. Furniture, low couches with curved arms, graceful tables, footstools, were scattered about: all were made of the white stone, polished. Soft cushions lay around. The skins of beasts covered the floor—mountain lynx, bear, here and there the soft pelts of chamois or the longer-haired mountain goat. Cups wrought of the wrinkled horn of the ibex, bound in silver, stood on a table, with silver flacons near them. More skins draped the furniture. Near the back wall of the great round room, by a stone statue of a white hind, was a high stone chair on a dais, backless, the arms curved gracefully upward. It was empty. A soft dark skin was cast over it.

Behind the chair, the statue blinked, and took a step forward— Mariarta swallowed, and found her throat dry again. The hind glowed as the walls did, with that soft interior fire; but it was alive. Mariarta let a breath out, then glanced at Grugni, who also gazed at the hind.

“Yes,” said the wind’s soft voice behind her, “the resemblance *is* remarkable...”

Mariarta turned: not surprised—it was the voice she had expected to hear—but filled with a fear oddly edged with delight. Standing in the doorway was a young woman, tall and slender. She was dressed as the young woman in the picture had been; a long flowing robe, kilted above her knees, bound in below the breasts to keep it from catching on things. This robe, though, was dark as the night outside, with a hint of glowing silver at the hems, and a faint radiance caught in its darkness, the dark of the old moon in the new one’s arms. The woman’s bound-up hair was dark too, but

shot with silver. In one hand, as she paused there in the doorway, she held a bow: but the bow was the moon, burning just as silver, with a curve as merciless now that it was unstrung. Its light filled the round room, and shone in the woman's eyes.

Mariarta gazed at her, and began to tremble. She had heard much of how people were supposed to fear God, and love Him, from the priest in town. She had not understood how you managed both at once. Either you loved someone, the way she loved her father, or feared them, the way she had feared, say, Reiskeipf: but never both. Now, though, looking at the young woman's eyes, she began to understand. Much is said about old eyes in young faces, but Mariarta had never thought what the reality of such a contrast might be if carried to its logical conclusion. The face was that of a handsome young woman of perhaps twenty: not strikingly beautiful, not as Duonna Vrene had been. This face was too severe. But it was fair in its own way. And the eyes... Years lived in them. How many years, Mariarta could not begin to guess. What did *not* live in them was weariness, in any degree. Fierce energy, amusement, a calculating wisdom that reminded Mariarta of looks she had seen in Theo's eyes—but nothing of the tiredness that goes with mortal wisdom, ninety-nine times out of a hundred. Here was an ancient strength founded in some power against which age was helpless. Mariarta was afraid of this woman—and loved her nonetheless.

The woman moved, and Mariarta breathed out, relieved. Something about the woman was so suggestive of swift-rushing motion that seeing her be still even for only a

breath or two made Mariarta nervous—the stillness being of the kind usually seen while someone was taking aim. The woman walked toward the stag, paused by him. Fascinated, watching her, he did not move. “I had forgotten the likeness,” she said. Those eyes flashed a look at Mariarta, humorous and conspiratory. “Though perhaps you thought I meant us.”

Mariarta swallowed again. It had never occurred to her for a moment to liken herself to such athletic beauty, such power. But there was something of a resemblance, even if Mariarta was only a smudgy copy of the original. Hair and stance and general build were all much the same.

“I hardly know what to say to you,” Mariarta said, husky-voiced, feeling foolish, but resolved not to stand there mute, like a stump.

“There’s an honest mortal,” the woman said, heading for one of the couches, “and a rarity for that cause, if not others.” She sat and began to unlace the boot-sandals she was wearing; the hind drifted up behind her, silent as the moon, and nuzzled her neck. Absently the woman stroked her. “Stop it, Chairé. Come then, sister-daughter,” she added, looking at Mariarta, “will you stand there all night? They rest on their feet,” and she glanced at Grugni and the hind, which had paced close to one another and were touching noses, “but no need for you to.”

Mariarta sat cautiously on a nearby couch, unable to take her eyes off the woman. “Wine?” said the other.

“I would rather not,” Mariarta said. She had heard enough bad stories about eating food while inside an

enchanted mountain. Then, uncomfortable, she said, “I don’t even know what to call you—”

“Ah, well then,” the young woman said, tossing the second sandal away and leaning back on her couch, “if you’ll ask to be on name-basis with someone whose wine you won’t even drink—” Mockery glittered in her eyes, but no evil intent: and suddenly Mariarta felt boorish. She reached out and took one of the ibex-horn cups as the young woman was pouring for herself.

“You’re sure now?” the young woman said, pausing as she held the wineflask.

Mariarta held out the cup; the other poured out white wine. Mariarta sniffed the cup. There was a smell of pine about it.

“Not what you’re used to, perhaps,” the young woman said, and drank deep. Mariarta drank too. It was odd-tasting, but no worse than some of her father’s less successful vintages.

“What to call me—” The young woman tucked her legs under her on the couch, reaching back to tug at the bindings of her hair and letting it fall in a rush of darkness shot with silver light. “There was a time before names, of course. They just made the moon’s shape, or drew the lightning, or the hunter’s bow. But later, when words started—Tiamat, that was one name. And Sekhet. Then closer times...Selene. Artemis. Diana. The words got confused there—the Romans borrowed a more ancient name from the older people, the ones who came here and left their writing: the scratches and spirals, you’ve seen them

in the mountains. Diun, that people called me: Diun Glinargiun.”

“Silverbow,” Mariarta said.

The goddess glanced at the footstool, where the bow leaned casually, burning, sickle-sharp. Its string, undone, lay like a coil of white-hot wire near one of the footstool’s legs. “That’s right, the words stayed in your language, didn’t they? Not much change up here. One of the reasons I came to stay.” She smiled. “But that was one of the last names, before the Cry. Now...no one speaks such names, lest something get them.” Diun smiled a naughty child’s smile. “My stepchildren, the creatures of wind and storm. Men fear them, and what aims and strikes—the bow, the shafts that don’t miss, the wind that bears the shafts. The sky’s fire, the sky’s wind—those have been mine since the beginning.”

“The *föhn*,” Mariarta said.

“Especially that, for it runs up from where I was latest strong. But all winds are mine. Where would you be without them, and me? Except for the *föhn*, how would you grow the vine, or corn? What wind melts the snow soon enough for you to put the cows out to pasture and keep yourselves alive until the spring crops come in? All those things are in my gift.”

“Yes,” Mariarta said, “but the same wind makes people mad, and rips roofs off, and blows any spark into a wildfire—”

Diun shrugged and smiled. “If you’ll be careless with sparks,” she said, “you’ll pay the price. Even gods have been burned by fire in the past, stolen or not.” She smiled

slightly. “But what god ever did you any good who was *all* good? We all have our ambivalences.”

Mariarta said nothing. “Anyway,” the goddess said, “clearly you’re not one to be overawed by mere talk, and that’s as well....” She smiled, and the smile was odd. “Power, though...that you understand. Have come to understand well, I think...otherwise I doubt you would be here.”

Mariarta shook her head. “You go too fast. What...” She trailed off, not sure what she was asking. “What *are* you?”

“By my names,” Diun said, cool, “a goddess, surely.”

Mariarta’s mouth was dry. “Yes,” she said, “but *why?*”

A long silence. Then Diun leaned back again, and smiled. “You mean, when there is supposed to be a god already. Just *one*.”

Mariarta nodded, said nothing. She was becoming afraid, wondering whether it would have been wiser to keep her questions to herself.

“Not really,” Diun said. “Never mind: you would know eventually. It all depends on what you call a ‘god’.” She sipped her wine again. “The first way you know them is that they start making things. Other beings like themselves first, as a rule. So this One power did. Twelve we were. And the One said to us, ‘Go, make a world to live in and act upon’. So we did—”

She laughed softly at Mariarta’s expression. “No, you won’t have heard this version of the story. It’s not much told: the One sees to that. We built—all this—” Diun’s eyes rested on the open door, the moonlit landscape outside it. “Everything. All our making. And the creatures in it: our

making too, under direction. Each had his or her part to play. I came into it early. The skyfire that struck the sea and stirred it to life—that was mine.” Diun smiled, looking out the door at the distant stir of water under the moon.

“*You* made the world?” Mariarta said. “And human beings? But it says, ‘In the beginning—’”

“Don’t say the words,” Diun said, her voice going soft. Mariarta shut her mouth. “I know them too well. We made as we were told to: and we loved what we did. Then we ruled what we had made, as the One had said we should. What the One did *not* say—” and her voice grew soft—“was that our rule soon would end, and be given to another. That we could have borne...if we had been warned of it. But there was no warning. Just one day, a child born: and we knew it was the One’s get. There was no hiding such an event—heaven and earth shook with it. That child would live and die, we were told, and live again: and with its new life, our ‘wardship’ of the world would end, and the Child’s rule would begin. Just like that.”

“It was to save us,” Mariarta whispered, even though it made her nervous to say it.

“So you were told,” Diun said. “We were told that as well.” She reached out a hand to stroke the curve of the moonbow. Where touched, its light grew too bright to bear looking at, a bitter, raging fire. “Never a word to *us* of what you might have needed saving from. But our rule was to end.” She shook her head, turned away from Mariarta. “Well, some of us did not take it well. There was an argument.” She smiled. “But the One cannot be argued with. Some of us were cast out. The rest...fled back into the world,

and tried to make the most of their last few years. Then the Child had *his* argument, with death, and won it. Everything changed: heaven and earth together cried out with the birth-pang. Poor Pan—” The goddess shook her head. “He was closest to the world itself, the matter of it, the births and dyings. This birth was too much for him: it killed him. The earth itself cried the news to the creatures in it. And the rest of us fled in earnest, and hid away.”

Mariarta sat there wondering how much to believe of what she was hearing. She still remembered Luzi’s warnings. But at the same time, this goddess was nothing like the raddled demoness that Duonna Vrene had become. Lies there might be in Diun’s words—but how much truth...?

“Time went by, as we had built it to,” Diun said, pouring herself more wine. “It seemed such a charming clockwork, while we were not bound by it. But now we were trapped in the world we had made, and had to watch it change around us. The creatures who had worshipped us forgot us: or they made us over as part of the Child’s new theogony, turned us into ‘saints’, mere holy magic-workers dressed in haloes, subjugate creatures of the Child’s.” She looked ironic. “Some of us couldn’t bear it, and fled into places like this, outside time—where by our art we preserved some memory of the things we made and loved. Some of us hadn’t enough power even for that: they wander the world, diminished, or hide, maddened. But without our worshippers, we are not what we were. After the One withdrew our mandate, theirs was all the power we had left to draw on. Now even that is gone. What tiny bit of power comes to us from the apostate or the studious who still speak

our names, must be husbanded like the last measure of grain in a famine.”

Grugni was leaning over Mariarta’s shoulder: she scratched him under the chin. “I thought it was because of a god’s power that he—she—was worshipped.”

“It starts that way,” Diun said. “Favors asked and granted. But gods have needs too. What use is making, if the creation won’t respond?” Her voice grew soft. “You want what you make—to speak on its own, to say the thing you never thought of.” She shook her head. “That’s half of worship, right there. Being spoken back to, with respect—maybe even love. And when it happens, your creation’s soul—enlarges—and some of the power of that enlargement comes back to you. Only a tiny amount, sometimes. But when you have many worshippers, that doesn’t matter, for you have many footholds in many souls. When you need power, for a miracle or whatever, you can call on the power of all of them at once. The more powerful their belief, the more your power as a result of it.”

“But without it...you diminish,” Mariarta said.

“Yes. The only way to stop the dwindling was to slip as far out of this world as might be. That I did, as any of us might. Where the gods are, time bends on itself; backwards and forwards, both. The gods come from beyond it, from the heart of things, where time is tool rather than master: it knows us, and leans to us, as iron leans to the lodestone. Past and future mingle, where we are. How else would the Frisians ride? Their god is with them, and what is and what was make no difference to them any more.”

“In the mountain at Arosa,” Mariarta said softly, “things did feel very—old—”

“My poor sister,” Diun said, and laughed softly. “But that’s love for you: it always sees the past most clearly. Poor Venus....” Diun put the bow aside and folded her hands. “She was not strong enough to survive being sainted, and worshipped under the guise of a virgin mother, all demure smiles and downcast eyes.” Diun smiled wryly. “That of all things would drive *that* wanton mad. No, she lives in a myth now. But I have no patience with such foolery. This place—” She glanced around with lazy satisfaction. “My will made it what it is. Past and future here both bend to me, and to my will. And to a purpose. I have been waiting for you for a long time....”

The look the goddess gave Mariarta was like a spear; she felt her heart shuddering, transfixed, on the point of it. “Since I saw the book—” Mariarta said.

Diun laughed softly. “Longer than that. When I finished this hiding place, and had a while to regain some strength, I tried to discover a way out of this trap, back into the living world I loved. After much thought, it seemed to me I might escape by borrowing the One’s trick. He had conquered mortality, he said, by mingling his immortal essence in that of a human soul, and being born in a mortal. I thought I might do something similar. But since trying and failing with one of my lesser selves would have cost me power, I sent my pet— ” she rubbed the silver hind affectionately behind the ears—“into the real world, where a mate found her, and in due time their fawn was born. It had an immortal’s abilities, or at least some of them, though

not quite an immortal's life. But I saw my judgment had been correct, so after I called Chairé home, I saw to it that my new creature was put out of time's way, until it should be needed again." She looked with surprising fondness at Mariarta's stag. "Even then, a few such places existed besides the habitations of gods, where some mortal soul's conviction about its own condition turned time back locally."

"The Key Maiden."

Diun nodded. "An unusually strong haunting, that: but I knew you would break it. For after your stag was born, I knew I could now have what I needed: a human child, who would be able to become immortal, and to bear me out of this hiding place again, into the world, where I might go about, being and doing again. Soon enough, perhaps, even being worshipped...." She leaned back and smiled, the same fond look she had bestowed on Grugni—but it was Mariarta that Diun looked at now, and Mariarta shuddered.

"So I sent my own blood and power out into the world through one of my lesser selves, one of the daughters of wind and storm. A mortal man 'caught' her, and gave her and her descendants the only thing I could not, the seed of mortality. I knew *you* would eventually be born and come to me, and we would strike a different kind of bargain from the old one. Instead of many souls of which a little is given, one soul which gives...almost everything."

"In return for what?" Mariarta said.

"Oh, power over wind and skyfire," Diun said, "and the power to aim and always strike: the power of life and death, eternal youth...trifles like that."

Mariarta gulped. She had already tasted such “trifles” and learned how hard it was to do without them, once you got used to them. “So you gave me power,” she said, “but incomplete...on purpose.”

“And I saw to it that the need for it grew. A young man came, with a book. He was my tool, though he didn’t know. And then came some shepherds, with a lamb...”

Mariarta blanched. “They were *your* servants—”

“Borrowed, briefly,” Diun said, stretching lazily, “for others of us move in the world through our servants, and one power may well do another a favor. I saw to it that your friend wakened magics he didn’t understand, and you went seeking your own power to put the trouble right.”

Mariarta was trembling with rage. “You—you have been conniving at my life since I was a child!”

“Since before you were born, actually,” Diun said. “But this is what gods do, my sister, my daughter; don’t take it so hard. Are you not a creature, and is not your business to be a creation? One would think you had a right to say how you ought to have been engendered.” Diun smiled.

For a few breaths Mariarta simply sat there, enraged. *Made*, she thought. *Bred to servitude, like an ox or a riding horse!* She shook with her fury, and behind her Grugni moaned softly, backing a step. “You’ll tell me now, I suppose, that I should think myself lucky to be a goddess’s chosen child.”

“That you speak to me so and yet live,” Diun said, very softly, “is more than luck. And as for the rest—see for yourself.”

The goddess did not move: but a great weight of anger and power descended on Mariarta, inescapable as avalanche, so that she was crushed onto her knees, the light crushed away from her eyes, the thought from her mind. Then Mariarta could see again. But not with eyes, and with more than sight. It was the world Mariarta saw, whole and entire.

She saw everything, as a god sees it. The flow of millions of years and lives, the shift of continents and borders, empires rising and falling, peoples becoming great, mastering their lands, passing away; but everything small and distinct, seeming far away. Mariarta stood apart, watching. There were patterns that repeated, great ones and small, and they were fascinating. All the small lives moving among one another, like grains of sand... The tiny sparks of light that were their lives, burning bright with emotion, fading low with weariness or the approach of death, they all stirred, rustled against one another, their brief frictions making them burn brighter, or extinguish one another in an excess of rage. Murders, Mariarta saw, deaths from sickness, lives wearing themselves out in long toil against the uncaring elements; mighty plots that spanned the rise and fall of kingdoms; brief joys, great loves; but they all seemed distant and worthy of little notice. They passed in a moment, like sparks flying upward from fire, millions of them, no one worth more than any other. The view was vast, and lulling...and Mariarta found it horrible.

I will not have my friends be grains of sand, Mariarta thought, struggling. To have a life, to be in a life, working and suffering, and then to have it become, or even seem, nothing more than this—I won't! She pushed herself back

from the vision, was horrified to find that it followed her, seemingly unrefusable. *To lose love and anger, and the little pleasures, every small and simple thing—not even for this, not even this vision of power, of—peace—*

And there *was* a certain peace about it. To be removed from the troubles of humankind: disease, death, anger, the troublings of love, all made distant, of importance to others far away, but not to you.... Mariarta gasped, once more fighting the breathlessness she had felt on the way in: the hallmark of agelessness, the end of decay—but also of normal human life. The goddess was inside her fully now, taking command of that foothold in her soul; and the foothold went both ways. Mariarta could feel in Diun the knowledge of mortals who had been possessed this way, but without success. It was hard for a mortal to know himself a god, and not fall victim to the knowledge. Diun knew how many a mortal before, becoming god-ridden, withdrew in astonishment to contemplate that remote and seamless vision of the world, and spent a thousand years amazed and immobile—leaving the god trapped too. Other mortals had fallen into fits of action meant to distract themselves from their immortality, and died, as the gods can when careless or briefly unconscious of their godhead. It was always a risk—

But Mariarta gasped for breath, and saw Werner Stauffacher's face harsh in the firelight, turned away from Walter's, so as not to see the younger man's tears falling on their clasped hands. She gasped again, and thought of the clods of dirt falling on her father's shroud—and the remote and peaceful vision became less acute. She thought of the

rain sleeting down the bull-shaped bulk of stone on the alp above Tschamut: she thought hard of the light in the eyes of the Knight's son of Attinghausen. The weight of years bowing her back lessened. She struggled to straighten herself, and suddenly found her eyes her own again, and looked straight into the surprised eyes of the goddess sitting on the couch across from her.

"You'll have to do better than that, Diun Glinargiun," Mariarta said, and got off her knees. "For you to be in me the way you desire, I must be willing, must I not? Even the One had to get the consent of the woman He fathered His child on. You might trick me into thinking you could not be resisted...and so make me my own jailer. But I know better. Nor can you have me on your terms only. When will you offer me what *I* want, Diun Glinargiun? Bargain with me in earnest!"

Diun was angry, but smiling. "I did not breed you to be stupid," she said softly. "Perhaps I might have bred for...less acuity. But no matter: I am well pleased with what I have created. So then, my creature, you will make demands of *me*. Your mistress...your lady..." Her voice softened. "Your lover..."

Mariarta's body awakened in the space between one breath and the next. That old breathing sweetness, the touch of soft wind on her neck, stroking, stroking downward, delicious warmth, like sunlight, stroking, *there*; more than the disembodied touch, but something real now, all through the depths of her, so that she arched her back, wanting—

“No,” Mariarta said, and the word jerked out of her, almost a cry: but angry. She opened her eyes and glared at Diun. “Not that either!”

“I can be that to you whenever you please,” the goddess said. “What are the brute lusts of men to *that*? You don’t know in your own flesh yet...but you can guess well enough.”

“I don’t care,” Mariarta said. The heat in her was anger again. “Now, what was it you were offering, Diun? Power over wind and skyfire, power to aim and infallibly strike? The power of life and death? ‘Trifles like that’?”

“Yes,” the goddess said: and lifted her hand.

The power swirled in and filled Mariarta. She collapsed to her knees, but not under weight, this time. Mariarta was pushed there by the force of wind roaring in her ears, blinding her, rushing into her lungs with the next breath she gasped for. Mariarta could smell the stink of lightning. Her skin itched with it, that unbearable dreadfulness that the *föhn* wind brought with it—like breathable rage that built inside you with every breath, leaving nothing of *you* in the end, only the wrath. The powers of wind and lightning raged inside her, threatening to leave Mariarta no room to exist, much less to master them. *And that would suit her too*— Those powers were another of Diun’s old footholds: another link in the chain being forged for Mariarta—unless she could break it, or get a grip on it that would make it *hers*.

Difficult, though. This random, raging power was as seductive in its own way as the cool, remote vision of the world’s life had been. How easy to be an unfocused rage,

like lightning held in a fist, released at another's command: no need for control, only unleashed fury. The lightning seethed and crackled under Mariarta's skin, the wind raged inside her, shouting down her mind. *Surrender, give it all up, be the weapon you were forged to be...*

But above the shriek of the wind Mariarta turned her thoughts to the murmur of talk in the inn at Altdorf, the sound of men angrily telling their grievances, determined to act, but in the proper time and way. The sound of rage, controlled: Theo putting down his winecup, just so, not a slam, but a soft click that was more comment than any amount of broken crockery. Mariarta gasped for breath to speak with, and found it. "It's a useful thing, anger," Mariarta whispered, "but not just for itself. That's not my price. I had reasons why I came. We need *reasons*, goddess. Don't you see that?"

She pushed herself to her feet again, needing the support of the nearby couch to do it. Grugni slipped under her arm for her to lean on. "Stop trying to master me!" Mariarta said. "If you do it now, I promise I'll find a way to kill myself later. All the power you spent will be lost. Maybe you won't even be left enough to survive." Mariarta smiled. "Be sure, I would wait until you had invested enough in me before I acted...and I would see to it you suspected nothing. You would have a good slave—until one day it would be too late."

After a few moments, Diun shook her head. "You are my other side," Diun said. "My other half. My lesser one, perhaps....but what should that matter? Don't you want to be complete, and whole? Your whole life, you have been

becoming me...if only in small. Huntress and archeress, maiden and free, the one who speaks to the wind and lightning, and is answered. What else could be better? What else could you want to be?"

Mariarta blinked, feeling her eyes filling with tears—strange though it was. There was something pitiful in Diun's voice and manner, and she found herself wondering whether having a goddess's power for thousands upon thousands of years might not make one forget what it was good for. "Hasn't it occurred to you that you might not know?" Mariarta said. "Don't you want your creation to, what was it, 'say the thing you never thought of'? Can't you see that's what I'm doing?"

Diun's expression was strange. "It had not occurred to me," she said softly. "What *is* it you want?"

"Help," Mariarta said, "for the people I'm working with. Our rulers have turned cruel. We must be rid of them. We need our freedom: and to help that happen, I need the power to answer me reliably. As it stands, it can't be trusted. That was your idea, of course...."

Diun looked wry. "War was always one of the great reasons we were called upon: hardly 'the word I never thought of'. Oh, God, make us right, and be on our side!—that's the cry. It hasn't changed, I see."

"We don't need to be made right," Mariarta said, getting angry again. "Is it wrong to want to live in peace, as free men, without having to suffer tyrants?"

"You say their words nicely," Diun said, "but there must be more to it than that, to interest me. This talk of freedom, and tyrants: you think I haven't heard it before?"

Mariarta stood still, gazing at a widening vista of memory in the back of her mind: the goddess's memory, partially hers now. Long, dark, beaked ships, drawn up in a small bay, defying a vast armament of ships glittering in purple and gold. "A long time ago now," Diun said, sorrow in her voice. "It lasted a while, that image of freedom. They triumphed briefly: and for that time, there was no people in the world like them. But they forgot what they had fought for, and became the tyrants themselves. The very word comes from their tongue. Can you be sure the same won't happen to you?"

"Can you be sure it will?" Mariarta said. "And because it happened that way once, does it have to happen that way again? I thought you wanted to go out in the world and live, see new things. Why bother, if you're so convinced already that nothing new can be?"

Diun regarded her, silent. "There's more," Mariarta said. "Who have I ever been, until now, but a crippled you?—as you say. Now, knowing these people, making common cause with them, for the first time I'm something else besides the archeress, the huntress, the strange one. What they do matters! For the first time, I'm becoming something besides what you made me. How should I not want that? How should *you* not, if what you're saying is true?"

Diun was gazing past her, out the door; that sorrowful look again. "The world matters," Mariarta said. "You've forgotten how much it matters! You've been away too long."

Mariarta went to stand beside Diun. "Look," Mariarta said. "Meet me halfway, lady. You want to come out into

the world? I'll carry you there, let you taste it through my life. Let you see again how much it matters."

"There is the business of my worship—" the goddess said slowly.

"For the time being," Mariarta said, "leave that to me. What's worship, as you say, but being spoken to with respect? I think I can manage that. As for the rest—" It was her turn to shrug. "Perhaps you'll earn it."

The power that lives behind the lightning flared briefly in Diun's eyes. Mariarta caught her breath. But Diun, after a moment, averted her glance. "I will do what you wish...sometimes," Mariarta said. "In return—I want your wisdom, your counsel. Your aim. And the lightning and the wind."

"Sometimes," Diun said.

"They are not to be withheld without good reason," Mariarta said. "Betray me, and you'll swiftly find yourself without a hostess. Back here—trapped in this lovely timelessness—no chance ever to get out until the world's over with, and everything becomes moot." Mariarta swallowed, trying to keep her own composure in the face of the goddess's own images of such an eternity.

"And immortality," Diun said, watching Mariarta closely. "I cannot make you invulnerable: but ever youthful, and proof against death by disease and age, that you must be."

Mariarta frowned. "I don't know—"

"Sister-daughter, trust me in this at least," the goddess said. "Those who have gods inside them burn out swiftly without the limited immortality that keeps their bodies safe."

You've borne the power that's been in you only because it was much diluted: no *tschalarera* has the strength that I their original have. Refuse my gift, and you may save your friends, but you'll live to do little else."

Mariarta frowned at that. "Trust you..." she said. "Well...I suppose we must start somewhere. So be it."

Diun shook her head, smiling. Mariarta was perplexed. "Oh, the bargain will suit," Diun said, and laughed. "But what a world I come into, where mortals will dictate terms to gods, and get away with it! I look forward to teaching them how matters ran in older days..."

"Come, then," Mariarta said. "How will we seal this bargain? If we swear, what do gods swear by?"

Diun sat upright, reached off to one side for the bow that was the moon, upended it and undid the bowstring. The length of it, like a wire of light, sizzled with small lightnings as Diun pulled it free and wrapped one end of it around her left wrist.

"Our old oath is void," Diun said. "The One's child bridged that river. Now there is only my power to swear by: and that passes to you." She held out the other end of the bright bowstring to Mariarta.

Mariarta took it. It stung like nettles, and made her hand shake, but made little feeling of heat—though the lightning-smell clung close as she wrapped the bowstring around her left wrist as well.

"Now we become one, as it was done in the ancient day," said Diun: "I am in you, and my power is yours, until death frees you or your own will gives you to me utterly. And you are in me, mortal in immortal, as it was also done

anciently—” Mariarta’s senses began to swim. She blinked and staggered, and Diun, standing, reached out and steadied her. Mariarta cried out at the touch, for she felt it from both sides, as if it were she who touched and steadied. And there was a burning about it, like the bowstring’s, but more intimate, more terrible— “—together in Me,” Diun whispered, her voice trembling as she drew Mariarta close, “one until time’s end—”

Their lips met. The roar of wind was there, the crash of the lightning: a flush like fire passed through Mariarta and left her shaking as if with terrible cold. She ached and burned, but the burning was ecstatic, as if her blood ran fire, and her skin and eyes blazed from within. Mariarta staggered, wavered to one side, blundering into Grugni; he braced himself and held her against his side with his head until she could see.

Mariarta pushed herself away from him, stared around her. Diun was gone.

Hardly, said that voice from inside her, like her own thought. *Come! Let us go see this world you promised me.*

“In a moment,” Mariarta said. She glanced toward the couch: the bow was gone.

Not quite, said Diun inside her. The goddess turned Mariarta and walked her to Grugni and his pack. It was an odd feeling, frightening at first, and Mariarta was determined that she would feel it no more than she had to.

But her hands worked at the fastenings, and brought out the crossbow. *I have been wanting to see one of these*, Diun said, much interested. *It’s as I thought—* Mariarta blinked at the wood of the bowstock. It had a silvery sheen

about it; not plain moonlight, but a hint that it was there when needed.

I would hardly leave without that, Diun said, amused. *It will be needed later. But, quickly, come! There are other ways out of here than the one you came.*

“I should hope so,” Mariarta said. She patted Grugni, which was looking at her thoughtfully. “Well, old friend?” she said.

Grugni grunted, nosed Mariarta in the old affectionate manner, and made for the door.

Inside her, Diun laughed, the laugh of a young girl set free of her chores and about to go on holiday. Mariarta, who had never had a holiday, smiled wryly and went after Grugni, out into the moonlight: alone, and in company...possibly forever.

THREE

L'aura ei il meglia luvrer.

The weather is the best worker.
(old folk saying)

They came out into warm wind, the noise of melting water running hard to the rivers, the sky that paler blue of gentling weather: spring. Standing at the mouth of the valley above Fiesch, hearing the merry crash of the melt-water racing toward the town's mill-wheels, Mariarta was horrified.

"How long did you keep me in there!" she whispered. "I knew I shouldn't have drunk that wine!"

Inside her, she felt eyebrows raised in great unconcern. *You were outside time, as I told you,* Diun Glinargiun said. *The wine had nothing to do with it.*

“But what year is it? Are the people who need me even alive any more?!”

Better find out, said Diun, and laughed.

“Come on,” Mariarta said to Grugni. They rode down the Fieschertal as far as the crags above the town, where Mariarta left Grugni. He went off to browse, and with some trepidation Mariarta took her pack and walked into the village.

People stared at her as she came, and there was recognition in the stares; that at least was a relief. Her worry kept being broken, though, by Diun’s wondering exclamations at everything she saw: the town’s wooden mill, the way house-eaves were carved, the stone fountain in the street where women were doing the washing. *One would think you’d never seen a village before,* Mariarta thought.

Diun didn’t answer, but there was the sound of laughter again, delighted laughter like a child’s. Mariarta smiled, resigned, and made her way to the town’s inn. At its door the innkeeper met her, half in tears, but laughing too, and took her by the hands. “Why, where have you been all the winter?” the woman cried. “We thought you would come back to tell us you were alive, at least!”

Only one winter, Mariarta thought, *thank God!*

Indeed! Glinargiun said, indignant.

“Alive, yes,” Mariarta said, “and thankful for it. No, I can’t stay: I’m in haste eastward. Ah, no—!”

The innkeeper pulled Mariarta inside, and gave her morning porridge, and scolded her for even thinking of going on. By the time the porridge-bowl was clean, Mariarta

was surrounded by half the village, all waiting to hear her tale.

What am I going to tell them? Mariarta thought desperately.

The truth, for all I care, Diun said, lazy-sounding. *But they clearly expect a tale of some kind, and I for one will be interested to hear what you invent....*

Mariarta was no tale-spinner, so she told them the truth—as far as the marble house on the hill, and the opening of its door. Then, for all the expectant faces, she reached into her pack and brought out the old statue. The townspeople were awed. “I keep it with me,” Mariarta said, “and it guides me....” It was falsely true, and the townspeople stared at the statue, and looked relieved when Mariarta put it away.

“And after you came out of the mountain?” the innkeeper’s husband said.

“The weather was bad on the other side,” Mariarta said. “I had to stay a long time until I could cross back....”

“It’s true,” the innkeeper’s husband said, “there was terrible weather all winter. Great blizzards came, one after another, with lightnings in them. There haven’t been such storms of snow and thunder together in a long while....”

Your doing? Mariarta thought, rather severely, to Diun.

Not on purpose. But my surroundings echo my emotions. I was...annoyed, once or twice.

“I missed the worst of the weather,” Mariarta said. “But I must make my way quickly to the lake countries. Have you heard any news from there?”

“We only heard that their weather was as bad as ours.”

Mariarta nodded. It took an hour’s worth of thanking to get free and out onto the eastward-leading road. Grugni was waiting for her there.

When they were on their way, Diun said, *They speak an uncouth tongue.*

“Northern,” Mariarta said. “Our people call it *tudestg*, but the its own name for itself is *deutsche*. I know it well enough...”

But you don’t like it.

“It’s the oppressors’ tongue,” Mariarta said. “Anyone who doesn’t speak it is suspect, to them. Either a rebel, or a backward peasant.”

Diun laughed. *When the tongue you speak is the child of the one spoken by the mightiest empire in the world as yet,* she said, *and their upstart language is just another offshoot of the one Thor’s scattered children speak. How odd the world becomes....*

“You don’t know the half of it,” Mariarta said. “But you’ll find out soon enough.” She nudged the stag; he trotted into the woodland, making north and east for the Furka pass, and Realp, and after that, Altdorf.

•

It was a two days’ ride this time, for the weather in the Furka pass lay calm before them. *Even swaddled in flesh like this, I can manage that much,* Diun said scornfully. *Though most of the power has passed to you now. You had*

best start practicing: you may find the wind more amenable to your requests than it has been....

Mariarta took this advice, finding that the goddess was right. All by herself Mariarta cleared the sky, leaving them in warm sunlight as they climbed, even though the weather had had other plans, and had been thinking of snow. “The doing is easier,” Mariarta said to Diun, gasping as Grugni carried her up the pass road. “But my body seems to be complaining more afterwards...”

Because the power is fully seated within you, Diun said. Don't be misled by the complaints. I am you now, and you are the weather's mistress, if you'll just know yourself so: all the winds are in your hand...if you'll only believe. Not that the weather doesn't hold firm opinions of its own! It was made to do so. Who wants to have to manage it all the time? But know who gave it the power to have those opinions in the first place. The smile inside her was smug. And then change the opinions as you like.

“It's just hard to believe....” Mariarta said. “After so long...”

It's hard to believe anyone would jump into a crevasse in a glacier on a whim, either, but you seem to have managed. Diun was wry. Keep at it. Or give up now, and let me manage it—

Mariarta had her own ideas about *that*. Let the goddess become better than Mariarta at managing her power from within Mariarta's body, and who knew what might follow?

Soft laughter echoed inside her. Mariarta set her teeth, and rode.

They came to Realp. The innkeeper told her that Theo had set out for the forest countries some weeks after Mariarta left. No word had come from him since, and no one expected any with the weather they'd had.... Mariarta thanked him, staying only the night, and rode on.

The next afternoon Mariarta rode down into the Ursera valley, within sight of Andermatt. She thought longingly of the Treis Retgs, of warmth and roast chicken and a bed with straw recently changed. But at the same time she felt uneasy, and wanted, irrationally, to hurry south.

Not my doing, Diun said from inside her. *That is god-knowing you feel. Ignore it at your peril: it's seldom wrong.*

"What does it mean?" Mariarta said, looking at the town.

The goddess laughed. *In all the gods' time of owning it, even we never knew. It never gives reasons, only warnings. At any rate, I would listen, if I were you...*

Mariarta laughed. "You *are* me!" She nudged Grugni northward, along the far side of the Reuss, and over the Devil's Bridge.

After the Bridge, Grugni took to the heights. They passed Göschenen around nightfall, but once again, Mariarta felt reluctant to stop. They went northward still, in the brief light of a moon growing toward first quarter. The sight of the narrow valleys on the west side of the river, and of the tiny towns, made Mariarta smile, for the memory of the Knight's son of Attinghausen was wound up with them—that smile of his, the way he mispronounced the villages' names. All the memories of that journey with a knight and

a bullcalf came back to be considered, and Glinargiun, at the back of Mariarta's mind, might look cool and scornful as she pleased: Mariarta didn't care.

Two hours before midnight, Diun said, *If you drive your body like this all the time, it won't last you long, immortality or not—*

"Something's going to happen," Mariarta said. They were looking toward Ried village from the slope of the Rainen hill across the river.

What? said the goddess.

Mariarta thought about that, and found she hadn't the slightest idea. "Something. We mustn't be late for it...that's all I can tell."

Diun shrugged. *We should stop, nonetheless,* she said. *If something's going to happen, we—you—must be fit for it.*

Mariarta consulted that niggling feeling and won from it a grudging agreement that it would be all right to stop here for the night. She dismounted and undid her pack and Grugni's saddle, stowing it as usual in the lower branches of a handy tree. Grugni nudged her, then strolled off into the woods to browse and sleep. Mariarta shouldered her pack and walked down to Ried.

At the inn she found everything so quiet that she began to distrust the niggling feeling, no matter what Diun might say. No one had come north from the pass for some weeks, the innkeeper told her: the bad weather was just now breaking, and the first *föhn* was melting the snows in the high country. Mariarta steered the conversation to how sales were in the markets, in Altdorf for example?—and

got what she had been hoping for: news that the bad weather had kept even the bailiffs and *vogten* quiet that winter. “Especially,” the innkeeper said, lowering his voice, “after that night they had at the Axenstein last year. Did you hear about that? Seems Gessler and some of the *vogten* made a plan to take some of the chief men hereabouts and stuff them into Kussnacht, or Hell maybe. Thought they’d be there by the mountain together one night. Well, no one knows where they were, but the *vogten*’s soldiers were in the Axenstein right enough, and an avalanche came off the mountain and killed the lot. People say it’s God’s punishment on them for these stealings and house-burnings and people’s eyes being put out. Wickedness it is, a good thing they’re punished for it—”

Mariarta could feel Diun, inside her, smiling with grim approval. “If they’ve been quiet,” Mariarta said to the innkeeper, “it could mean they’re planning....”

The innkeeper put his finger by his nose. “There may be others who’re planning too,” he said, taking the empty pitcher away.

Mariarta grew thoughtful. This time last year, it would have been an incautious man who spoke out loud to a stranger of the wickedness of governors and bailiffs. If this man was typical, then things had changed. Something might be about to happen....

Something is, Diun said, *or so you tell me.*

Mariarta was out of the inn early, and met Grugni in the woods on the Rainen hill. He danced about uneasily as Mariarta got the saddle back on. “What ails you?” she said,

after his shifting from foot to foot made her fumble the girth-fastening for the third time.

The stag lowered his head to look into her eyes, and moaned, that uncertain sound that Mariarta had learned meant trouble. Inside her, Diun took note. *They have senses neither gods nor mortals have: that's the One's gift to them. Something else it's wise to pay mind to.*

“That I knew already.” Mariarta mounted and made sure her bow was well stowed in her bag. Things might have changed in Altdorf...but it would be unwise to assume so without making sure.

An hour past dawn they forded the Bristenlobel stream and passed through the woods above Amsteg. By mid-morning, across the wide green fields on either side of the Reuss, Mariarta could see the rock of Schweinberg mountain, and Attinghausen castle cut sharp against a fair blue sky. “Now then,” she said to Grugni, “you go where where you went the last time, and have a good feed. I’ll be in town tonight.”

Grugni put his head against Mariarta’s, nuzzling her. He trotted up the meadow toward the Stockberg, looking back several times as he went.

Mariarta walked northward, pausing as she crossed the Schachen bridge. The town seemed peaceful—smoke rising from its chimneys as the noonmeal was got ready, a normal-looking traffic of people and carts and animals on the road’s far side.

Slowly Mariarta went into Altdorf. Within her, Diun Glinargiun gazed at everything, turning Mariarta’s head every now and then to look more carefully at a roof-cornice,

a carving on a street-fountain, a woman's face staring out a window. *You'll make me look like a hick just in from the country*, Mariarta thought reprovingly, *when everyone here knows I've been here plenty of times...*

Uncaring, Diun smiled at Mariarta from the bottom of her soul. *I shall look while I have a chance.*

What's that supposed to mean?

An unconcerned shrug. *God-knowing. Mine, now.*

Mariarta went to the marketplace. There was the pole, there was the hat and the bored soldiers. Even the peacock feather remained in the hat, which surprised Mariarta. She bowed to the damned thing, no more than she had to, and walked on by to a stall she knew, pausing to talk to old Andri the bell-saddler. His eyes got wide at the sight of her. "Mati! We thought you were dead—"

"Not yet: hush! Who's 'we?'"

"Why, Walter, and Theo and all—" Andri shook his head. "We thought *they'd* got you. Or something else had."

"It did," Mariarta said, smiling, "but I lived through it. How have things been?"

"Quiet enough. Everyone ignores that now, except to bow to it. Look, you wait—" He vanished behind another stall.

Mariarta leaned there, looking around. She let her eyes wander over the crowd, the people standing to one side or another, talking, gesticulating. Odd, and amusing in its way, how nearly every back in the place was turned on that pole. Mariarta glanced up the street past it, saw a bearded man with a child, looked away: and then back at the man, for here was a familiar face, though she couldn't

place it. *Where have I seen him before?* she wondered. *Different clothes? Maybe without the beard—*

She swallowed, then. That face had been clean-shaven, much younger. Instead of hunter's tunic and leggings of brown linen and leather, he had worn leggings and tunic and cloak all in student's black. Though later still she had seen him in herdsman's dress, leaning on the stall door, looking at the silver bullcalf—

Tel. Wilhelm Tel, striding into the market, looking around with the interested expression of a man who hasn't been to town for a while: a chamois skin on his shoulder, his crossbow slung over his shoulder on a leather belt, and holding a small boy by the hand. *His son*, Mariarta thought. The child's resemblance to the young man his father had been was striking. Behind Tel, a tall brown-haired woman, his wife almost certainly, came along carrying a basket with cloth-wrapped cheeses inside it, looking about her warily. Mariarta saw Tel look at the pole with an expression much like her own that first time: incomprehension, unconcern. He walked by it, heading for the tanner's stall.

The soldiers' eyes fixed on him, and came alive with happy malice.

Mariarta went hot and cold as she had when Diun had first entered her: froze with terror, blazed with helpless rage at something about to happen, something she couldn't see— *My rush to get here*, Mariarta thought in anguish. *All folly. This wouldn't have happened if I had been slower, met him on the road—*

Hush! Diun said forcefully. *This is god-knowing, as I said. Learn now how it works! Whatever it is, this is*

meant to happen. Ride the moment, guide it, don't stand there moaning!

A hand clamped on her arm. She shook it off angrily and turned—only to see it was Theo. Mariarta gripped his arm too, whispered his name. She had no time for more, for Theo was staring past her, seeing what Mariarta had seen, what everyone else in the place was watching, horrified. “Oh, no,” Theo whispered, “what’s he doing here, didn’t he get the message not to—”

The soldiers made for Tel. His son, swinging happily from his father’s hand, was oblivious. His wife, behind him, saw the soldiers coming, blanched, opened her mouth. Before she could speak, Tel turned, saw the soldiers coming toward him, their spears leveled. He pushed his son away, dropped the chamois skin, and reached out to the nearest spear, with which the leading, incautious soldier was almost prodding him. Tel slapped the spearblade aside open-handed, caught the spear by the socket and pulled it out of the soldier’s grip. The man went sprawling. The second one lunged: Tel sidestepped, kicked the spear out of his hands. Other hands had it instantly—for the people in the marketplace had started to gather around Tel within a breath of the trouble starting.

The man who picked up the second spear was leveling it at the soldier who had dropped it. “No,” Tel said loudly; and that man lowered the spear, passing it back through the sudden crowd, where it vanished. Tel handed someone the first spear: it vanished the same way. The soldiers were on their knees, frozen in the act of getting to their feet, as they realized they were in the middle of an unfriendly crowd

getting bigger every minute, with their weapons gone. And Tel still had his bow.

“No,” Tel said to the crowd, and gazed at the two men. “Now what makes you attack a man going peacably about his business?”

“That is the Governor’s hat,” one soldier said, sounding both sullen and frightened at the same time. “It’s his order that all men must bow to it, as symbol of his authority under the Emperor.”

Tel laughed, picked that soldier up by the collar, and set him on his feet. “Now listen,” he said. “I am a free man. I will kneel to God, and I’ll bow my head right enough to my liege lord the Emperor, or his legal representative, if I should see one of them go by. But I’m not bowing to an empty hat. You just tell your Governor that.”

The soldier, his head lowered, was about to turn away, when from northward, by the road that led to the lake, came an unusual sound: a merry call from a hunter’s horn. The soldier’s head came up, and a nasty grin spread across his face as he grabbed Tel by the arm. “Tell him yourself,” the soldier said.

His mate came and took Tel’s other arm. The crowd moved in. “No,” Tel said. People stared, shocked. Tel said, “If I wanted to get away from this, I would. Let be!”

Mariarta, standing to one side with Theo, let out a held breath, found she was shaking. “Theo—” she whispered.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’ve got to go get Walter. It can’t happen now—! But listen, Mati—did you—?”

“Yes,” she said. “Go on!”

He went. The horn-call came closer, and from the street leading north to the lake, horses' hoofbeats could faintly be heard. Mariarta glanced at Tel's wife, who stood to one side, the basket dropped at her feet, looking up the street in plain terror. Mariarta thought of Walter's daughter telling her how they had been hiding out in some cabin in the mountains, where Gessler couldn't find them, after Wilhelm had saved the man who was being chased by the bailiff's people. The wind breathed through the marketplace, though, and Mariarta, looking at Tel's wife, caught something else: a terror that had nothing to do with her husband, but was for herself, and which shamed her. A memory of someone looking at her under veiled eyes, desiring her, so that she fled—

Into the marketplace came the tramp of booted feet, sixteen men in mail and surcoats, on foot, carrying spears. Following them were five men on horseback, armed with swords and bows: and last, on a big chestnut destrier, armed in metal from throat to feet, a man who had to be the *landvogt* Gessler. He needed that huge horse to carry him, for he was tall and broad-shouldered, a big man. Had Mariarta known nothing about him, she would have liked him on first sight. Gessler was handsome in a broken-nosed sort of way, blond-haired, a man whose face had an easy-going look. He was riding along with insouciant ease, eating an apple from a bag that hung at his horse's withers. Not a winter-stored apple, either, but a new season's one, impossible except for a man rich enough to have early fruit shipped from Talia. On his head, Gessler wore a hat with a green peacock's feather in it.

That made Mariarta wonder. *He doesn't mind acting il Giavel's part, or seeming to, if it serves his purpose—*

Gessler took a last bite of his apple, pitched the core away. "Summer is here," he said in a cheerful voice. "How good to come down the lake in this fine weather to see my town looking so prosperous. The marketplace full, people going about their business...."

He glanced around him, smiling. The townspeople turned their faces away, or simply stared at the effrontery of the man. Gessler was plainly enjoying their discomfiture. "And here are two of my trusty men," he said, seeming to turn his attention to the soldiers, and the man they held, for the first time. The soldiers blanched. "He wouldn't bow—!" one of them cried, panicked.

"Unarmed," Gessler said. "Where are your spears?" The two men looked helplessly around. "Where are they?" Gessler demanded of the crowd. People looked blankly at one another, as if struck idiot.

Gessler smiled more broadly. "Take them away and have them whipped," he said to one of the retainers riding with him. "Loss of expensive weapons, can't countenance a thing like that. Have the town searched: I want them back."

Armed men started fanning out through the crowd: the two soldiers were hustled off. "But now," Gessler said, looking at Tel with interest: and ten spears were leveled at Tel for the two that were gone. "It's Master Tel, indeed. A while now since we've seen or heard of you. It seems a winter on the mountainside hasn't taught you any more respect for law."

“It’s a law I never heard of until today. I was surprised—”

“Ignorance is no excuse,” Gessler said cheerfully. “The law is the law, and you have trespassed it. I can put you to death if I like—*that’s* the law too.”

Mariarta became aware of Theo behind her. Walter Furst came up beside her, staring in anguish at the scene in the middle of the marketplace. He started to push forward, but Theo caught him, muttering, “Don’t, Walter. He wants an excuse. For pity’s sake, master yourself—”

“Theo, he’s my *son*—!”

“Shut up, Walter. You know why. Keep still!”

The wind whipped the banners and awnings in the marketplace, and Mariarta knew ‘why’. The oath-confederates’ plans were ready. Soon they would move. But if revolt broke out prematurely, and the Austriacs moved against them before everything was in place—

Ride the moment, Diun whispered. *See what can be done*.

Tel stood before the *landvogt*, and slowly hung his head. Mariarta saw how deliberately it was done: she wondered whether Gessler did. “Sir,” Tel said, “forgive me. But you cannot wish us to do reverence to an empty hat. We are free men.”

Gessler’s smile did not waver, but his eyes changed, and the character of that smile changed entirely as well, at the word *free*. “So you would seem to think,” he said. “For look at you, standing there armed. You Uri people have thought that privilege a right for too long...ignoring the fact that *I* have not confirmed you in it. Never mind what your

fathers did or had. You have *me* to deal with now. I enforce the law, and the law says subjects do not go armed without their governor's express permission. Hunters may hunt...but not in town. You've no excuse for carrying that except to make yourself look big in the townsmen's eyes. Well, we'll have no more of that." He glanced at another of his armed retainers. "Go get that bow he's so fond of," Gessler said. "Put him—" He glanced around. "Oh, under that linden tree there. Then take his bow and shoot him with it."

The crowd moaned. "It's only justice," Gessler said reasonably. "He who lives by the bow will die by the bow."

Hard hands pulled Tel to the linden tree, pushed him against it. "No!" cried a woman's voice, and all heads turned as Tel's wife rushed to Gessler and knelt on the cobbles in front of his horse. "Please, Lord, I beg you—he won't do it again—"

"Frau Hedwig," Gessler said, his voice suddenly soft: and the smile softened too—but again, the eyes did not change, and the effect was horrible. "Or Duonna Edugia, as the old barbarous tongue would have it. Well, it has been awhile since I rode away from your father's door with your words ringing in my ears." He shot a sideways glance at Walter Furst. "You were going to marry someone better, nobler, than a bailiff, you said. But the world changed, and positions shifted. And now look at what you could have had, and look what you married instead." Gessler shook his head in feigned sorrow. "A ragged beast-hunter, and a lawbreaker as well. Still...for the sake of old friendship, I should have mercy, I suppose. What will you offer me for mercy, Hedwig?"

Hedwig's face was white: she opened her mouth, but no words came out. "But no," Gessler said, still feigning sorrow: "the law must be enforced. That bow must be used to punish your husband one way or another." Gessler considered. Tel, under the tree, stood with his face turned away.

"I know," Gessler said. "Justice shall still be served. Take Tel out from under that tree. Put his faithful wife there instead."

"No!" Tel cried as the soldiers pulled him away, as others laid hands on Hedwig and pushed her to stand where her husband had. The crowd stirred and muttered. Beside Mariarta, Walter Furst went white.

"What," Gessler cried, "will you defy the Emperor's representative to his face? I thought you were all *loyal* folk, the Emperor's liege people." Mariarta saw how his eyes fixed on Walter Furst, and Werner Stauffacher, and Theo. *He knows*, she thought, horrified. *But how much—?*

The crowd quieted, stunned: they *were* loyal—but it had never occurred to them that their loyalty would bring them to this. "Now then," Gessler said, "give Tel there back his prize bow." He rummaged in the bag at his saddlebow, picked out a handsome rosy apple of the South, shiny and perfectly ripe. "There," he said, tossing it to a soldier. "Put that on her head."

Everyone stared in amazement. "We've heard about Tel's marksmanship, even right up the lake," Gessler said, sounding good-humored again. "That competition in Ursera, what was it, two years ago now? No, three. Won every prize. Let's see if a winter hiding on the mountainside makes

any difference. What's a good distance? Eighty paces? Meinhard, pace it out."

One of Gessler's retainers dismounted, went to stand under the linden tree beside Tel's wife, and began pacing the distance across the marketplace. "I saw you strike the gold at eighty paces, oh, ten or fifteen times at least," Gessler said to Tel. "Today you only have to do it once. Shoot me that apple off your wife's head, and you go free. If you miss—" He shrugged. "It would be cruel to leave you living. And anyway, the law would require that you be put to death. Murder with a forbidden weapon...."

Tel looked at Gessler with no expression at all. The wind blew Mariarta's way from him, and the rage inside Tel struck her with such violence that she actually staggered, bumping into Theo: he braced her, staring past her, as stricken as the rest.

Tel took back the bow from the soldier who offered it to him, looked at it as if he had never seen it before. Gessler was not watching him, but Hedwig, under the tree: and though his face stayed set in that jovial, expectant look, Mariarta could feel, on the gusting wind, his growing discontent. Hedwig had given her husband only one long glance: silent, he returned it. Now Hedwig stood there tall and still, balancing the apple perfectly, meeting Gessler's eyes with an expression of utter disdain. Mariarta scented down the wind that this was not what the *landvogt* wanted. *Not enough fear*, something said inside him, cool and reasonable: *the victim must show more fear. Terror, and the fear of more terror, is the only way to control this rabble.*

The retainer pacing the distance off had come to a stand almost underneath the pole with the hat on it. Soldiers pushed Tel to the spot. He stood there, not aiming, looking at his wife.

“Now then,” Gessler said abruptly, “truly I cannot bring myself to this solution, either, even in the name of justice. How should any man force another to aim a weapon at his wife of many years, his own dear love? It is too cruel. I have changed my mind.” He beckoned to another retainer. “Take Frau Hedwig out from under that tree,” he said. “Put *him* there instead.”

He pointed at Tel’s six-year-old son, who was holding his grandfather Walter’s hand.

Even the soldiers stood momentarily taken aback. Horrified, the crowd stirred and muttered again. “Oh, come now,” Gessler said. “This is Tel, your prize archer. He will not miss. And if he does—well, wives may be few, but you can always make more children.”

The crowd was shocked into silence. Tel’s face did not change. “The same conditions,” Gessler said. “Get on with it. I burn to see your archery.”

Tel stood still. Then he knelt on the stones. “Sir,” he cried, so as to be heard down the distance, “I am a simple man. I did not trespass against your law from ill will. I beg you, forgive me, and let me go. I will not offend again.”

His voice was under harshest control: there was no edge of pride left in it. To Mariarta, though, the man’s anguish and terror for his son came down the wind, unbearable, like knives.

Walter Furst came forward, slowly, limping: his arthritic knee was troubling him again. Right on that knee he knelt before Gessler's horse, and said, "Lord, I beg you also, if an old man's pleas have any strength: spare this man. You will have all our gratitude."

"Will I indeed," Gessler said, eyeing Furst. Walter raised his eyes to meet Gessler's. The gazes held.

"Carry out my orders," Gessler said softly to the soldiers. They hurried to take the child from where he still stood near Mariarta, though they did not drag him: one of them, a man whose face suggested he would rather do anything else, hoisted the child up piggyback and carried him to the linden tree. Tel's son stared around, his expression confused, but excited. Down the wind Mariarta could taste his mind's mood, fresh and young and largely unconcerned. He was worried that his father was in some kind of trouble, but had no fear for himself.

The soldier set the boy down under the linden. The child looked up into the branches, then at Gessler in his shining armor, as the apple was put on his head.

Gessler, to Mariarta's surprise, looked away. "We must be fair about this," he said. "The child's fear must not be the cause of an accident. Find something to cover his eyes with."

The soldier who had brought Tel's son came up with a soiled linen headband such as a longer-haired man might use to keep his hair in place under the helm. He knelt and started to fasten it on the child, but the boy pushed his hands away. "No," he said, clear-voiced and interested. "I want to watch my *bab*."

The *landvogt* nodded, looking suddenly bored. “Let’s get on with it: I have other places to be today. Tel—make your shot.”

Silence fell over the marketplace: only the wind flapped the banners and the awnings. Tel stood and spanned his bow. He raised the bow to take experimental aim—then let his arms fall again, and knelt. “Lord,” he cried, “it is my son. *I cannot do it!*”

“You can’t?” Gessler said, cheerful again. “But you can do all kinds of other things. You can refuse to give that hat the honor my law requires. You can row murderers away across the lake from the law officers seeking them, and hide rebels from their punishment! You’re quick enough to ‘help’ other people—now let’s see you help yourself. Otherwise you both die, here and now.” He signed to one of his other armed retainers, who rode forward, crossbow at the ready.

Tel swallowed, raised the bow again, and reached into his belt-quiver for a bolt.

We have to help him! Mariarta cried inwardly to Diun Glinargiun. *Can’t I, can’t we give him something—the aim that doesn’t miss—*

Me give my gifts to a man? Diun’s voice was cool. Never. And anyway, impossible. Those gifts are yours: they cannot be loaned away. You have what I promised you: the wind, the storm and the lightning. Use them as you may.

Mariarta looked around her at the flapping awnings and banners. Tel pushed one bolt into the crossbow’s nock, another through the buttonhole at the neckband of his shirt, the hunter’s old habit: then glanced at the ground. On the

bare cobbles there was not so much as a fistful of dust for him to throw in the air to judge the speed and direction of the wind.

Enough, Mariarta cried inside her. *Down!*

The wind whined once like a disciplined hound, and went still.

People blinked at the abrupt flat calm, while Mariarta stood surprised at how quickly she had been obeyed. She winced at the sudden pain between her eyes.

Nothing without price, Diun said silently, *even when a goddess rides you. The power was not free for us, either.*

Tel blinked at the sudden calm as well—then, wisely unwilling to waste the moment, swiftly brought the bow up and aimed.

The sound of the string snapping home was as loud and final-sounding as the smashing of a jar. Everyone stared at the boy.

He moved abruptly, slumping sideways—then turned his head up to look at the bolt stuck flight-deep in the linden. The apple was impaled on it. Only the pheasant-feather fletchings had kept it from falling off entirely. The child, interested, pulled the apple off, twisted it apart along the bolt-seam, and bit into one half.

The crowd's roar of triumph would have drowned out an avalanche. People hugged each other for joy, and turned to shout taunts at Gessler and his people. Some of the soldiers had the sense to look worried. They gave way left and right to the many people who broke through their lines to Tel and carried him into the middle of the marketplace and the main body of the crowd. Beside

Mariarta, Theo grinned, a feral expression. Walter Furst ran to the tree, seized his apple-munching grandson, and carried him off in his arms, weeping with relief.

Mariarta could hear a faint moan of complaint from the wind she had stilled. She turned it loose, and it blew about the awnings with vigor a moment later, gusting in all directions, so it was hard to catch anyone's thought, including Gessler's. He simply sat his horse, smiling.

The *landvogt* gestured to his men to push the townspeople back from him. A little later, when the crowd had quieted, and a clear space hedged with spears lay around him, Gessler said, "Tel, that was a master-shot. Your fame is earned, and you and your son are free." He smiled a conspiratorial smile. "But tell me something: what was that second bolt for?"

Tel, among his friends, with his wife by his side, smiled back as conspiratorially. "Lord, it's only a habit...any mountain archer does that. You wouldn't want the chamois to get away after the first shot, while you were fumbling around in your quiver."

"Tel," Gessler said. "You've won your life for today. Or are you afraid to say what's on your mind?"

Tel stood there, and saw as well as everyone else the malicious glint in Gessler's eye. The sane thing to do with such a man, Mariarta thought in disgust, the rational thing, was to make some excuse, turn and go away....

"Lord," Tel said—and though his voice was quiet, the marketplace suddenly went dead still at the tone of it: rarely had the word "lord" been such an insult. "That second bolt was for you. If I had missed that apple and killed my

son, your heart would have been my next target. And, small and withered though it be, that I would *not* have missed.”

Gessler went pale, though the smile stayed. He laughed heartily: the sound of it fell dreadfully into the silence. Then he took off one mailed gauntlet to wipe his eyes.

“Take him,” he said to his soldiers. “Siegmund, do we have some chains? Of course we do. Here, put some on this man and let’s take him north while we have the free time. We can easily come back this way tomorrow and finish our other business.”

The soldiers stormed the crowd, pushing them back with their spears, and grabbed Tel. Fetters were quickly fastened on him. Tel stood quietly, looking toward his wife and son, and Walter Furst, who stood with his arms around them.

“You’ll be my guest in Kussnacht,” Gessler said, putting his gauntlet back on. “For so long as it takes to make sure I’m safe from your second bolt, or any other. Your life will be hostage to these people’s behavior.” He glanced around at Walter Furst, and Werner Stauffacher, and Theo.

“And you might last a while,” Gessler added, smiling at Tel. “Though we’ve never been able to do anything about the damp in Kussnacht, especially in the cells. It’s those walls dug in under the lakeshore: the water always leaks through. But a man can last a long time down there, if he’s strong enough.”

Gessler reined his horse about. “Come on,” he said to his men, “bring him along. If we leave now, we can be up the lake in time for dinner.”

“Wili!” Tel’s wife cried.

“It’s all right, Edi,” Tel said, loudly, as the soldiers marched him off toward the lakeshore. “The boy’s safe. Now God will help me.”

That one, or maybe another, Mariarta thought fiercely.

Gessler and his people marched away toward the lake, the soldiers in the rearguard looking most nervous. The marketplace did not clear: it seemed to be getting fuller of people by the moment, gathering around Walter Furst and Hedwig and Tel’s child, the sounds of leftover triumph being supplanted by a growing growl of rage. Theo, next to Mariarta, was looking as distressed as she had seen him in a long time.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Mariarta said. “Theo, something’s got to be done.” She was getting an idea....

“Damn right it does,” Theo muttered. “If these people don’t quiet down before tomorrow, everything’s going to go off prematurely, we’ll be lost—”

“You take care of that. Theo, I have to lie down and be left alone for a while. Where can I go?”

“Walter’s would be best. Mati, what are you thinking of?”

“What I went for,” Mariarta said, angry, and delighted. “What I came back with. The power to do something. Come on!”

Together they made their way hurriedly to Walter Furst's house. Mariarta put her head into the kitchen as they passed and said, "Lida, how are things?"

"What? Oh, hello, Mati," said the daughter of the house, serene and unsurprised as always. "Did you find what you went for?"

"Yes, and I'm going to use it. I'll be in the back bedroom—don't let anyone up there, will you?"

Lida glanced, smiling, at the crossbow that stood by the kitchen table, and nodded Mariarta and Theo up the stairs.

Mariarta told Theo the bare bones of what had happened to her in the mountains. Then, "Theo," she said, sitting on the edge of the goosefeather bed in the tiny upstairs bedroom, "what was it Walter said? 'He's quite a rower?'"

"Gugliem? Yes indeed. You saw the arms on the man— What are you thinking of?"

"Tell Lida," Mariarta said, "if she's got any wash on the line, she'd better bring it in. Go on, Theo, go help Walter calm people."

Theo nodded, went out and shut the door.

Mariarta lay back on the bed. She had been trembling with anger and anticipation for a while; now, as she shut her eyes, it got worse. *Now, Glinargiun*, she thought. *I see the sting in the tail of this bargain. The little things— goading weather that already wants to do something into doing it, killing a wind that's blowing already, or nudging it here and there—they're easier than they were. But I know no more about the great workings than I did before. The lightning, the storm out of a clear sky...*

With her eyes closed it was as if they sat in the white marble house in the undermountain country, Diun lounging on the couch across from her, in her black and moon-silver, idly fingering her wine-cup, the moonbow leaned against the arm of the couch. Around her left wrist, a sizzling bracelet, the thin, coiled lightning of the bowstring, still curled. Mariarta saw the like around her own left wrist, the restless burning flicker of it making the muscles of the hand twitch. *So?* Diun said.

“So I must give myself into your hands for this working, if it’s to be done—for I don’t know how to do it. I need the *föhn*.”

The goddess smiled and stretched. *There’s a knack to it*, she said. *The air must be stirred in the right direction, and other details attended to.* She stood, looking sidewise at Mariarta as she did. *Odd, though*, Diun said, *how much politer you are today than a few days ago.*

“Our bargain—” Mariarta said, frowning at her.

Diun Glinargiun laughed, and picked up the bow. She leaned on the bowstock, bent it backwards: so that Mariarta saw what few mortals have seen and lived, that curve bent gracefully double, and the ragged edge, like a nocked silver razor, now terribly on the outside of the curve, looking like something that, if dropped, might slice open the night. Diun undid the string from around her wrist—or some of it: it seemed to stretch in her hands, and leapt to the lower end of the bowstock, coiled about it—then stretched up to do the same with the upper end. Diun lifted it, looking satisfied. *Come, let’s see how things stand.*

She went to the silver door, opened it. Mariarta stood beside her, saw full day outside, and a view she recognized. “Why, that’s the other side of the Lucomagno pass, surely—” The road ran in bright sunshine from their feet, where they stood between the two great gate-peaks of the pass, to the small towns of the Ticino country on the southern side of the mountains, and a veil of golden mist lay over the distant, rough-edged horizon that was the northern foothills of Talia.

It will be easier for you to work with a place you’ve seen, I think, Diun said. But this is going to take some doing: look at this weather, there’s not a cloud in it! When did you want the föhn, and where?

“In the lake north of where we were,” Mariarta said. “And right now.”

Diun laughed, but it wasn’t scornful. *Sister-daughter, I’m a goddess, not the One! Even were I in my ancient power, I couldn’t just tell the wind to ‘blow’ and have it blow. There’s more to it than that.* Diun scowled at the sunshine. *This is going to take a few minutes. And a wind takes time to travel. From here....*

She stood silent, then said, *We could pull it over from the north side, but that will take too long. A storm on this side will be quicker. Fortunately there’s cooler air by the sea; we’ll call it to us and start the movement—*

Abruptly everything changed. Mariarta tried to look around, only to find she had nothing to look around with; and what she was seeing was not something that eyes would have helped her see, for it was the air itself. She seemed to be in it, part of it. Strange it was to perceive the solid earth

as misty and indistinct, and the air around her as a liquid, shading between translucence and opacity, flowing with unnameable color. Mariarta herself was a flow, but tight and self-contained compared to the lazy movement of the air around her, curling through itself in slow domes or bubbles like the shapes of fair-weather clouds.

Yes, said the bright flow near her, self-contained like Mariarta's self in this mode, but with a dangerous-looking edge of light to its swirls and motions. That's what you see when you look at a cloud: the air shapes it, bubbling up as the sun and the ground warm it. But now it's cold we need. Over there—

Lying low off on the eastern horizon, Mariarta saw a mass of darkly luminous color, more like a lake than a flow. *It's not very cold, this far north, but it will serve our purposes. Call it!*

Mariarta scarcely knew how to begin, but she drew herself up, or pulled her flow together, imperiously; she was mistress of winds, they were hers to command; *come!*

There was sluggish movement, a sloshing in that distant, viscous puddle. *I can do better than that,* Mariarta thought, annoyed, drawing herself together again. *COME HERE!*

The sloshing got more emphatic. Slowly she could see it starting to creep toward them. Mariarta was about to call it again, more forcefully, when the other bright flow reached out, laughing, edged with flickers like lightning, and stopped her. *Don't!* Diun said. *That air's heavier than this—push too hard and you won't be able to stop it! It'll*

be here shortly, and you've other business. You must get on top of this warm air and push it down—

Mariarta began to work her way to the top of the lighter-colored flows in which she and Diun seemed to swim. *Not too high—* Diun said. Mariarta began trying to push the warm flows down: but it was like jumping on a feather bed—it went down in one spot, billowed up in another.

No! Diun said, laughing again. *All at once. Define a large flat area and push everywhere at once—*

Mariarta did that. It was more difficult than calling the “heavy” air from by the sea. *Strange to think of air being heavy,* Mariarta thought, as she held it down, held it—

Here it comes, Diun Glinarguin said, sounding pleased. *Don't lose it now! Hold it down—*

Creeping on over them, like a tide of dark honey, the cold air came. *Now,* said Diun, indicating the southern side of the mountains, *tip the edge of the zone you're holding up, just a little, toward them. Not too much—!*

Mariarta did as she was told, straining now, for the warm air wanted to go all in the same direction in a rush. *Be still,* she told it; *do as you're bid!* It did, but barely: as Diun had warned her, the air had its own ideas. All the same, Mariarta held it, held it—

Now! Diun cried. *Let it go!*

Mariarta released her control. The warm bright air shouldered up into the cold air, which was trying to sink through it, like water. Sudden swirls of color, light and dark, broke out all over the masses of air as they mingled; and

something terrible and wonderful started to happen, a tingling and burning all through Mariarta's self, like the prickling of the bowstring on her wrist: a feeling that some great power was about to discharge itself. Mariarta looked at the flow of light and color that was Diun, in this mode, and saw her substance all sparked through with the same anticipatory power, a deadly light, but delightful to see.

Yes, Diun said, sounding dry through her enjoyment: now you know why the gods are so fond of throwing thunderbolts around. Look: it's starting!

The masses of churning color were swirling in a great eddy now, that dangerous light flickering all through, as the eddy spun like a top, wobbling, and its wobbling took it closer and closer to the mountains. *That's what we want,* Diun said, looking at the storm with a practiced eye. *There goes the rain—*

Mariarta looked, but saw nothing. *That curdling at the bottom,* the goddess said. *Only one thing to do now. Push the whole business toward the mountains. Push hard!*

Mariarta drew herself together as she had before and ordered the storm forward. It ignored her. Annoyed, she did as Diun had shown her before, chose a whole wide area to press against, and set herself against it as if she were trying to push one of Walter Furst's beerkegs out the kitchen door. As always, the mass got stuck, resisted her—then abruptly gave, so that Mariarta "fell" forward—

Heaven around us, Diun said, sounding impressed, *that should do it! Quick, before it gets away—put it on, wear it—*

Mariarta saw the Diun-flow veil herself in the flickering, roiling mass of the storm, now lumbering toward the southern side of the mountains as a draft-horse lumbers, slowly at first, but gaining unstoppable speed. Mariarta did the same, pulling the flows of the storm around her like a cloak. Now, for the first time, she could feel the storm as if she had a body: the wind howling, pushing at her back, whipping her loosened hair about her. Not far from her, edged in sizzling blue-white light, she caught sight of a cloud-veiled form, a young woman, and heard Diun's wild laughter as the wind rose and charged up the southern slope of the mountain chain—

Mariarta laughed too with exhilaration as they rode the screaming air up the face of the mountains, pausing for only a breath at the crests. Then she whooped like someone watching a cattle-fight as they and the wind together poured down the far side, rushing down at speeds she had never dreamed of. The wind around them, bizarrely, began to get hotter as they went further north, sliding down the mountains, gaining speed. The air started to prickle and chafe: but this didn't decrease the exhilaration, only added an edge to it, a feeling of righteous wrath—and this was so close to what Mariarta had been feeling a while ago that she fell into the storm's sudden rage wholeheartedly. Not far from her through the roil of cloud and the raging air she could glimpse Diun, roped about with lightning, and hear her laughter, not merely wild now, but malicious—the mother of the *tschalareras* indeed, who would rip off thatch, shatter the forests, fan any spark into a blaze. But in her present mood Mariarta agreed completely. *Death to the cruel*

ones, destruction to the oppressors; let them have the storm they've called down on themselves! Skyfire and the windblast, death and vengeance!

The world was visible again, now. Mariarta could see the mountain snows melt and shift under the breath of the *föhn*-wind, saw the avalanches thunder in their wake; and she laughed recklessly to see them, Diun's laughter mirroring her own—or was it the other way around? They rode the wind low over Andermatt, blasting half its northern *bannwald* flat in their passing and uprooting the oldest trees at the Bazgand ridge-crest; they poured through the Schöllenen gorges until the Reuss rose and thrashed in its steep banks like a bullcalf having the first nose-ring put in, and boulders crashed from the Bruggwald and just missed the Bridge; they plunged past Göschenen, Wassen, Amsteg, Silenen, Erstfeld, a week's journey in twenty minutes' time. And in a mass of black cloud, lightning lashing from it, the rain and the hail hammering everything in their wake, they plunged between Attinghausen peak and the Eggbergen heights above Altdorf, out onto the Lake of Uri.

Mariarta looked down from the storm in absolute satisfaction to see the water actually go concave beneath them with the force of the wind, leaping about in huge shocked waves that shook their white crests and plunged in all directions. Diun was still laughing at the heart of the storm, and Mariarta shouted at her, *How do you stop it?*

Stop the wind once started? You know how. But Diun was laughing on a different note, as if Mariarta might find it more work than she expected.

I don't mean that! I mean, how do we get off the crest of the storm and hold still? There's business I need to watch here.

Silly one, just stop yourself and tell it to go on without you. Diun shot her a look fringed with lightnings. *Myself, I think I will go on ahead. Your concerns here aren't mine.*

But— Too late: that nest of skyfire had shot on ahead of Mariarta like a meteor, and as for her, the idea of stopping had stopped her. She hung in the thunderclouds while the screaming wind poured past, and the water beneath her was only dimly visible through a fog of spray whipped off the wavecrests. The Uri Lake hunched itself up in waves like hills, black and deadly-looking under the lead-black sky. *They couldn't have come far in this short time—* But who knew which way this wind might have blown them? Mariarta paced through the clouds, anxious, peering downward through the wind and spray.

There, under the livid sky, half concealed between one wave and the next, she saw the boat. It must have looked proud at the Altdorf pier—a big sixteen-oar boat, clinker-built, with Gessler's arms let into either side of its prows: tall-masted, with a gaily striped sail. At least, it must have looked so until the wind hit it. Now its mast was snapped, and the sail lay in tatters in the gunwales, a sodden mass. Two men were huddled by the sail, and a man in the stern stared desperately into the murk for any sight of shore, while nine others fought with the oars. What had happened to the other oarsmen, after the first onslaught of wind had hit them, Mariarta could guess. For the rest, a man sat amidships with his cloak huddled about him, clutching onto his head

a hat with a bedraggled peacock's feather in it. The remaining man, halfway between the steersman and the man in the hat, was in chains.

On sight of him, Mariarta stepped lower in the storm, not more than twenty or thirty feet above their heads, and did one thing first. She grabbed a fistful of wind and backhanded the hat with the peacock feather off Gessler's head and into the side of a passing wave, so that he could watch the wave gulp it down, with intent. Then she leaned closer.

Mariarta didn't need the wind to hear thought in this mode: she *was* the wind, and could hear thought for herself. The boat was full of terror, except for one island of alert calm: Tel. Nothing could shake him—he knew some providence was looking after him. Mariarta smiled grimly, bent lower through the cloud.

There, she said to the storm. A wave leapt and smashed two of the oars against the side of the boat. Splinters flew. Gessler ducked, clutching the top of his balding head now instead of a hat. The two poor soldiers who had been rowing collapsed into the gunwales, and another wave, eager, yanked the helm-lever out of the steersman's hands, throwing him right past Tel and practically at Gessler's feet.

Poor landsmen, Mariarta thought, but without any pity—it was like the Austriacs to send people out who were unfit for their work. She watched with approval as the steersman grabbed Gessler by the sleeve and shouted, "Sir, we're too close to the shore, we're going to smash onto the rocks if something isn't done! We can't handle this weather.

But that man can—” He jerked his head at Tel. “We all know how he got away last time. If he saved that man, he can save us—!”

You at least are going to live, Mariarta thought with utmost satisfaction. She bent closer, picked another oar, one lying loose in its locks near Gessler, and threw a wave at it that broke it so close to the handle, Gessler had to jump back so the flying shards would miss him. “For God’s sake, sir,” the steersman yelled, “give order to unfasten him so he can help us! He knows these waters!”

Gessler nodded, his jaws clenched.

The steersman bent over Tel with the keys, unlocked the fetters on his wrists and ankles. “Right,” Mariarta heard Tel shout, “row, all row! If we can get past this spur of rock we’re heading for—”

A couple of the poor boatmen screamed, and one hid his face, seeing through the spray the mountain of black wet rock that loomed before them. “Shut up,” Tel bellowed, “it’ll be quieter on the north side of that, just *row!*”

He grabbed the helm and held it hard: the waves tried to yank it out of his hands, failed. Mariarta saw that Tel should have no trouble avoiding the rocks of the eastern Axenegg shore, for which they had been heading. Past it was another shoreland, rounder and gentler; it would be easy enough to make landfall by the big flat rock. Tel steered for it. The oarsmen and steersman bent desperately to their oars. Gessler clutched his head. Only Mariarta saw Tel glance, and only once, at the shapes of leather and horn and wood lying half under the shattered mast and collapsed

sail: his crossbow, the scattered bolts, his quiver and shoulder-belt.

“Row!” Tel shouted over the wind. Mariarta backhanded another wave into the stern of the boat, so it pitched wildly: but the wave drove it well past the Axenegg point and toward the rounded shoreland, within perhaps fifty feet.

Mariarta saw Tel look at the wide flat rock. They were within ten oarstrokes. He shouted something to the rowers, Mariarta could hardly tell what, for she knew what he was thinking, and was terrified that the wild waves of the lake would wash him away and drown him before she could do anything. Six oarstrokes: three— Tel jammed the helm sideways, so the prow of the boat jerked around as if on a rope, facing the open lake. He leaped away from the helm, grabbed his quiver and bow even as Gessler lifted his head and swung around to see what was happening. For the barest moment their eyes met. Tel grinned. Then he stood in the back of the violently rocking boat, and leapt.

The force of his leap pushed the boat, spinning, out into the water again. Mariarta saw him go, held her breath, the wind dropped in sympathy— Tel came down on the edge of the rock, wavered: it was slippery— *No!* Mariarta cried, and the wind pushed him hard in the back, forward onto the stone. He stumbled, stood, turned to watch.

Gessler, in the boat, had sprung to his feet. Mariarta hauled off and hit the water like a whip with the wind still captive in her fist. A great wave ran under the boat like a whale’s back. Gessler was flung upward, then went sprawling. The men in the boat, too scared to do anything

else, rowed for the lake, where they could at least avoid being smashed on any more rocks.

Mariarta watched Tel jump off the rock into the undergrowth by the side of the lake. *It's all I can do for the moment. Now then: these creatures—* She told the wind what she wanted: this boat to be driven without pause and without landfall all over the lake for the best part of the night, and when the wind ran out, left no nearer than Brunnen, up at the lake's north end. *Let Gessler and his people march back to Altdorf after that—for I'll bet they won't want to have anything to do with the water for some while. That should slow them down for the next day or two.*

Mariarta paused in the tumbling cloud. The force of the storm was beginning to wane, without the pressure of the ebbing *föhn* behind it: clouds rolled over one another, grumbling, and lightning flickered in them, veiled. Mariarta thought of Diun. *Where are you?* she called.

Never far, came the answer. *You did well, for your first time.*

That's as may be, Mariarta said, breathing out, *but I'm going home.*

Laughter followed her. In the clouds, feeling weary of a sudden, Mariarta closed her eyes and let herself drift. Gods and thunderbolts aside, it was hard to be the storm for long, no matter how angry you were.....

Shortly thereafter, she felt goosedown under her instead of thunderstorm air. Mariarta's head ached and pounded as if a thunderstorm were taking place inside it too, but she was too tired to care. Smiling grimly, she turned her face to the pillow and slept.

•

Mariarta did not wake until evening, and when she got up, the headache was still with her. She felt weak and wobbly, and generally thought it would be a good idea to go back to bed fairly soon—though not before she ate something: her stomach was twisting itself into knots.

“There you are,” Lida said calmly when Mariarta put her nose into the kitchen, “just in time for dinner. If we had really been wooing, I would never have known which you were more interested in, me or the cookpot....”

Mariarta smiled and sat at the scrubbed table. Lida got a loaf of bread from beside the kitchen fire and began to slice it, putting the pieces on a plate for Mariarta, then starting to slice a sausage as well. “Thanks for warning me about the laundry.”

“What happened?” Mariarta said.

Lida gave Mariarta some sausage. “I’ve never seen a *föhn* like that before. It blew away everything that wasn’t fastened down. It uprooted the linden tree in the marketplace and threw it in the lake. Father was cross....he liked that tree.”

“I didn’t mean to do that,” Mariarta said, and rubbed her head, wondering what else she had done that she wouldn’t have meant to. Or had Diun done it? Or was there a difference?

“What *did* happen?” Lida said, as her father came in and sat beside Mariarta. Theo came in behind him, and Werner Stauffacher.

“Wilhelm is free,” Mariarta said, and reached out gratefully for the cup of wine Lida brought her. “I last saw him by the Axenegg shore, running off into the trees.”

“You *saw* him—” Werner Stauffacher said.

“I rode the storm,” Mariarta said, rubbing her head again. “I made it free him. Or rather, he freed himself.”

A silence fell at that. Mariarta drank her wine and told Walter and Werner what she had done, though she did not mention Diun. At the end of it, Theo smiled and stretched. “If Gugliem comes back here, he won’t stay long. Walter, I think you’re going to have to hide Hedwig and young Walter again.”

“They’re already on their way up the valley behind Attinghausen,” Walter Furst said, weary-looking. He rubbed his face and leaned back. “This is terrible, Theo. We can’t wait. People are wild to do something. And we have to move before the Austriacs do, whatever happens now: otherwise they’ll descend on us separately and wipe out the men who would otherwise go to the battlefield.”

“They’ll have to move by land, which will give you some time,” Mariarta said. “Trust me when I tell you...no bailiff’s boat will be safe out there. Our own people’s will.”

Werner Stauffacher said, “We’ll have time to get messages out to folk around the lake, if nothing else. They’ll be warned. But we’re going to have to start getting our people ready to go to battle....”

“Where?” Theo said.

Lida sat next to her father and patted his arm so that he would notice the plate and cup she had put in front of him. Walter Furst took a piece of sausage and chewed on it

before he said, “It must be a place that strikes both at the Austriacs’ trade and at their pride, and be a severe enough blow that they must respond with an army, not a raiding party. There’s one good possibility, though not everyone has liked it much. Einsiedeln—”

Mariarta’s mouth fell open at that. “The holy shrine?! But the monks—”

“Are paid their benefice by the Austriacs,” Werner Stauffacher said. “We won’t do them more harm than we must: it’s their masters we’re quarreling with.”

“Well, burn the place,” Theo said, “but for pity’s sake, loot it first. You can’t afford to waste all that gold. Just don’t hurt the books and the holy things.”

“We’ll get word to the monks when we’re ready,” said Walter

Furst. “They have safe places in the mountains there—always have: after all, armies have sacked that place five, six times since it was built....”

The talk went on, revolving around the number of men who would be able to come to the muster—no more than a couple of thousand. “Nothing we can do for a day or two anyway,” Werner Stauffacher said, “until we get word out to the people around the lake.”

Mariarta glanced up. “If you need a messenger—”

Walter and Werner stared at her. “Look at you,” Walter Furst said, “you’re pale as a ghost, you look like someone who’s seen a batch of them—and you want to go out riding after what you’ve been doing this afternoon? Mad girl, shut up and eat your food.”

Mariarta smiled and bit her bread at Walter with defiance. Lida smiled and gave her another piece.

After a while Werner left for home, and Walter Furst went to bed, complaining that his head hurt too—as much from the *föhn* as from the effort of trying to keep the whole town calm in the face of what had happened. Lida moved about the kitchen, putting away food. Mariarta and Theo sat talking for a good while. She told him everything about her journey to the Maiden and what she had found beneath it, not minding that Lida heard.

Theo was silent for a while after Mariarta finished her story. “Are you satisfied?” he said eventually.

Mariarta listened to her mind. Diun was quiet for the moment: busy, or sleeping. *Though do goddesses sleep, when they’re wrapped in human flesh? Who knows—and who but I can find out—*

“It’s hard to say, Theo,” Mariarta said softly. “I’m not sure who I am at the moment. Most of the time there’s another voice at the back of my head, and it’ll be there always, I think. I’m not even sure I can die any more....” She laughed. “What do I say about that in confession? Can I even go into a church any more without being struck by lightning?” Then Mariarta laughed again, a different tone. “No, never mind that last, lightning’s not a problem....”

“How is your soul?” Theo said.

Mariarta shook her head. “Well, I seem to have one, according to my—guest, I guess we should call her. But what the One—what God thinks of me, I’ve no idea. This might be Hell already. Yet at the same time, I have what I

want. What I always wanted. I should be happy, Theo!”
Mariarta said. “Why aren’t I happy?”

He said nothing.

Mariarta turned her own cup around and around. “I did know who I was once. I didn’t much like my life, but I *had* one, I had a place, people who knew who I was, and that I didn’t have to hide from. People to whom I wasn’t strange. Then the Bull came....” She grimaced. “And I was never just Mariarta any more. I was the odd one, the dangerous one. Now the Bull is gone, but things didn’t go back the way they were before it came. At the time, that was the last thing I wanted. Now... Now I think I would give anything for that lonely village life I so hated the thought of. A house to tend, food to grow, nothing else expected of me....”

Theo leaned back in his seat. “If you don’t know who you are at the moment,” Theo said, “that seems like reason enough to be troubled. But give things a while to settle, Mati. Think how it was when you were a child. How long did it take you *then* to find out who you were?”

“Some years, I suppose....”

“So you go through a great change of some kind and expect to understand it all in a few days? Fool.” He cuffed her gently on the side of the head, and tears came to Mariarta’s eyes, not for any pain: it was the same gesture Mariarta’s father used with her from time to time, as Theo well knew. “But meanwhile, you have business to do. It’s good to have business: it keeps your mind off your troubles.”

Mariarta rubbed her aching head again, and smiled. “You’re right there. Oh, Theo—you should have seen it! The look on Gessler’s face.”

“I don’t look to see anything much more from that one,” Theo said, “God willing. But I think Tel will have something to say about that too...”

•

Mariarta went back to bed shortly, still much fatigued from the afternoon’s exertions. Sleep came swiftly, despite the noise of the wind outside the windows—the last remnants of the *föhn* still rattling shutters and scratching tree-branches against each other.

The sound of wind ran all through her dreams, becoming a color eventually, like the flows through which she and Diun had moved. Then, she could not have named the color: now it was dark and light together, water with moonlight on it, and beyond that, the roughness of woodland under the westering moon. She gazed at the town by the lakeshore. Brunnen, it was, with its waterside warehouses for the goods shipped through the valley between the northern lakes and the Forest Lakes. Many boats lay tethered, bobbing, at the piers jutting into the lake. One of them was a big sixteen-oared boat, clinker-built. All but three of its oars were missing, its mast was a stump, and its ruined sail hung over the side like a soiled washcloth....

Mariarta smiled at the sight as the wind swept her past the town. She was borne over the branches of the trees, toward a long dark mass of upward-jutting land northeast

of the lake. This was the Rigi rise, which lay on the northeast side of the upper reaches of the Forest Lake, separating it from the Lake of Zug further to the north. The westering moon glinted on the white dust of the road which led from Brunnen to the Zugersee, then bore south to where an upreaching finger of the upper Forest Lake came within two miles of the Zugersee's shore. There, where the white road passed the lakeshore, crouched a great dark shape from which the moonlight slid away, only its shadow across the road betraying it: a mass of encircling wall, and square towers jutting up like stumps of broken teeth. Kussnacht it was, the heart of the power of all the *vogten* in these parts, and now Gessler's home, the prison of his enemies, the fortress of his allies.

The moon stood high, paling: dawn was coming. Mariarta saw how the trees bent in toward the road at one point, how the road dipped into a gorge there and ran along it, coming within a half-league of Kussnacht. Down the wind she rode came a sound: marching feet. Back along that road she saw a little troop of men, several of them on horseback. On one of them she could see the glint of armor. The man had borrowed a hat from someone. It was too large for him, and had no feather in it.

Mariarta bent closer, seeing, in the woods, something the men who marched could not see. In the low growth between the trees, in one clear spot above the road as it ran through that gorge, a man crouched. The paleness of his white linen herdsman's shirt gave him away, seen from above. The shirt was not as white as it had been earlier, though: an evening's and night's march without pause from

the Axenegg shore to this forsaken spot had left it torn and muddied from steep hills climbed, shrubbery plunged through, muddy mountainside tracks slid down. Mariarta saw the man cock his ear to the sound of men and horses approaching. He reached into his quiver. Only two bolts were there. Silently he spanned the bow, put the first bolt in the nock: looked at the other. Thoughtfully, and with a terrible smile, he stuck the remaining one in the neckband of his shirt, the hunter's old habit.

It was the worst time for shooting. There was little light, and no shadow. The morning mist that dwelt by all the lakesides hereabouts in spring was beginning to rise. The man's lips moved: in prayer, Mariarta thought.

She prayed too, and heard no laughter, or any other comment.

Leaf-plate, she heard him think. *I've never shot at plate before. I wonder, will this work?....*

The sound of feet and hoofbeats echoed in the gorge. The man lifted the bow, sighted, waited. The armored shirt he was most interested in came toward him on the sauntering horse at the lead of the group. The man pulled the trigger.

The snap of the string was loud. Gessler turned in the saddle, just in time for the bolt to catch him fair in the middle of the chest—not the side-shot that the archer would have been quite contented with. The bolt buried itself in the plate-shirt right to the pheasant-feather fletching. Gessler's mouth worked: he stood in the saddle. Then with a crash like a tinker's load coming off a horse, Gessler fell.

The other horses in the group reared and shied. The soldiers with their spears stared around them, got only the

briefest look at a ghostly figure in white who vanished into the undergrowth. A few tried to chase him, but they didn't know the land, and soon enough it occurred to them that, from behind any stone or tree, that unerring bow might be trained on them too. As quickly as they could without looking completely craven, the soldiers got back on the road, and made off towards Kussnacht.

The wind was passing, the last of yesterday's *föhn* breathing itself gently over the lake as the sky went from colorless grey to the beginning of delicate shades of pink and gold. Mariarta gazed at it with a fierce joy and thought of the old story in Luzi's book, that dreams which come at dawn are true. Weary still, even in the dream, Mariarta told the wind to take her back to Altdorf, to bed.

But she yearned for the morning.

FOUR

Cur ils noss velgs buns Pardavonts
When our good forbears in their wards
vanginen fig d' ils lur Tirauns
grew weary of their tyrant lords,
sin beras furmas mal tractai,
who treated them in shameful wise,
tras chi ean els vangî spindrai?
through whom did their salvation rise?
Tras Tei, o Deus! Halleluja!
Through Thee, O God! Halleluja!

(“Concerning the Goodness of God
Toward Our Country”, anonymous)

Mariarta told Walter and Werner and Theo what she had seen, but they said nothing about it. The next morning, the people gathered in fear and hope along the lakeshore saw one tired, footsore man trudging up the road, with a crossbow over his shoulder and an empty quiver. They

welcomed him like a hero and brought him into the Lion to hear the tale of his escape: but it wasn't until he finished the story that they realized what his return meant.

The town went wild: winekegs were broached, and people came out in the street to drink, pledging God like just one more drinking-companion, thanking Him for the death of the tyrant, who would oppress them no more. Even Walter Furst was able to watch his beerkegs rolled out into the street with tears of joy rolling down his face, instead of the usual complaints that it wasn't ready. Arnold von Melchtal came out of hiding at last and was reunited with his old father, who, blind as he was, danced the *gilgia* in the middle of the marketplace, shouting "Revenge! Revenge!" and alternating the shouts with creaky singing of the old psalm-hymn about the just God who punishes the evildoers in His time.

There were a few who smiled and drank the wine or beer, but were not quite so merry. "They'll appoint another bailiff right away," Werner Stauffacher said to Walter Furst. "But first they'll send the army to punish us..."

"We'd better distract them," Walter said.

"Einsiedeln," Wilhelm Tel said softly.

The others nodded. "I don't think the councilors in the other Lake countries will disagree," Theo said. "We'll send word quickly. But what will you do now, Gugliem? It's your hide they'll be after."

"That's the way things have been for a while," Tel said. "Me...I think I'll go home to the Schachental. I want to be with Edugia and the children, by my own hearthside. It's been too damned long."

“They’ve gone up behind Attinghausen,” Walter said, “but we’ll send a messenger to bring them home.”

Tel nodded, grasped each man by the hand. Mariarta smiled at him as he took hers, and said, “That was a mighty shot, sir.”

“The wind helped,” he said, looking at Mariarta thoughtfully.

“Duon Gugliem,” she said, “I don’t think the wind made any difference at all.”

He nodded wearily, and went off toward the Schachen bridge. People cheered him, followed him, shouted praise: but Mariarta noticed that they also left a slight space around him, a distance of respect, almost awe.

Messengers left for the lakeside towns by boat that afternoon. Each messenger bore with him two things. One was a call for a meeting of the councillors of the Lake Countries, at Altdorf, in two days’ time. The other was a spear. It was of a new sort that one of the smiths of Schwyz had heard about from a German traveller, a mustered-out foot soldier of the Austriacs, and had reconstructed with slight improvements. The spear was not merely a spike with a socket, to be clamped onto a scythe-shaft or other pole. This one had a narrow spearhead, but halfway down its length the spearhead sprouted outward gracefully, toward one side, into a straight, flat, razor-sharp edge, a sort of elongated hatchet, while the rest continued into a spike. The weapon was called a “halberd”. It was quick to make, and good at punching through armor, the German traveller had told the Schwyzer smith. It must have been very good at that indeed, since the Austriacs were trying to get it

banned, like the crossbow, as a weapon of mass destruction. The messengers carrying the spears were to take them to smiths, in any village without an Imperial presence of troops or bailiffs, and have as many of them made as swiftly as could be.

Then, until the meeting with the other councillors of the Forest Countries, there was nothing to do but wait.

•

When the news of Gessler's death reached the rest of the towns around the lake, the response was instantaneous, and shocking, even to those who had greatly hoped for something of the kind. Everywhere the Lake people rose and rejoiced at the death of the chief tyrant—then started taking care of business closer to home. Bailiffs were dragged from their houses, flogged, driven out of the towns where they lived, often killed. At Schwanau, an island on the Lauerzer lake west of Schwyz where the *landvogt* of Arth and Goldau lived, silent boatmen landed at the island's piers late in the evening of the day that news of Tell's shot reached Schwyz town. The *landvogt's* bodyguard were killed in their beds. The *landvogt* of Schwanau himself was tied back-to-front on a horse and ridden at a hand-gallop to Arth, where he was dragged to the top of the tower in which he had imprisoned and starved the maiden Gemma, and was thrown down to break his bones on the same jagged rocks that had met Gemma when she leaped from her window in despair. Up in Unterwalden, by Kussnacht town, the small towns around—Udligenswil, Haltikon, Greppen,

Weggis—could not do anything about Kussnacht fortress itself, which had promptly shut its doors in panic at Gessler's death. But the Unterwaldners massed near Immensee the night after the news of Tell's shot came, and marched north to the site of the half-built new fortress, Zwing-Uri. They fell on the barracks near the place, freeing the Lake Towns people who were being held there. Then they destroyed the Urners' Prison—burnt the scaffolding, pulled down every stone that didn't fall, and shot or hacked to death the Austrian soldiers who guarded the site.

Elsewhere in the Unterwald, west of the Forest Lakes, in Sarnen, the people there, long oppressed as badly by their *landvogt* Beringer von Landenberg as the Uri and Schwyz people had been by Gessler, gathered together what weapons they had—not many, then: scythes, and a few longbows and crossbows. They killed their bailiff and the Austrian soldiers quartered in the village, and marched on Landenberg castle. Beringer, much incensed by this outrageous behavior, but unwilling (having heard the news from Kussnacht) to put his nose outdoors, caused some catapults to be brought onto the walls, and started bombarding the castle's attackers, and their town, with burning missiles. Many houses burned, and some people from Sarnen were killed. But early on in the evening, it seemed that God had noticed the basic injustice of the situation. Tales are still told of the terrible storm that came out of the south that evening, howling up the Sarner Lake like some huge black beast. Some claimed they saw a four-footed beast's shape striding menacingly through those dark roiling clouds, roaring as it came. Lightning lanced down

and lashed the hill; three great bolts broke as many breaches in the walls of Burg Landenburg. The people, poorly armed as they were, did the rest. Over a matter of some days, this castle too was pulled apart. The streets of Sarnen town were paved with it, and the burned houses were swiftly rebuilt in grey Landesburg granite. Beringer's charred body was pitched into the lake.

From all around the lakes the stories made their way to every town, and the rejoicing at the Forest Countries' liberation went on for days as that liberation spread. Songs began to be sung of Tell's shot and the castles' fall. The other music mostly heard during that time was the ring of hammers on anvils, and the softer music of axes in the coppices around many small villages, where saplings that might have been harvested for firewood or charcoal were felled and smoothed for another use.

The rejoicing was not unalloyed, for everyone knew the Austriacs' rage was growing. Not long after Tell's shot, a group of about a thousand men gathered from Altdorf and Schwyz and Kussnacht town, from Brunnen and Sarnen and Zug, from Luzern and Vitznau and Bauen. They met in the darkness at Brunnen, and then softly marched through the narrow pass at Morgarten, northeastward toward the lake of Sihl. There beside the lake, atop the Amsel hill, they looked for a long time at the shadowy walls and towers of Einsiedeln. It was an ancient holy place, built on the site where old Sankt Meinrad of the Ravens had lived in his tiny cell, and where he had been killed by robbers five hundred years before. The Emperor Otto had made the monastery founded there the first recipient of immediacy.

That promise of direct rule by the throne was the only one in all these parts which had not been revoked...most men said, because the Empire and the Austriacs did not care to risk the Pope's enmity. The monastery had been spared the lifetime of increasing tyranny that its neighbors had suffered. Standing on that hill, the silent thousand who gazed at Einsiedeln crossed themselves, prayed God to forgive them the sacrilege, and started downward to see to it that the monastery kept up with its neighbors. Hours later, a pillar of fire rose from the lakeside, and in the dawn, a pillar of smoke. Eastward, across the Tyrol and into Austria, the smoke was seen.

For weeks all things seemed to hang suspended about the Forest Lake, waiting. Work in the fields went on: there was plowing to do for the autumn vegetables—though some people were borrowing their neighbors' plowshares, their own having been beaten into what seemed more necessary shapes. Cattle-fights had to be held to sort out the leadership of the herds, and the *pugnieras* had to be gotten in shape for them. There was cheese to be made for the winter, butter for the summer. The only thing missing from the usual late summer scene was the bailiffs, and few found it in their hearts to complain. But still, everyone worried: all through the summer, all through the beginning of the fall.

And when it happened at last, it happened so quickly there was almost no time to react.

•

Mariarta was sitting with Theo and Arnold von Melchtal and Arnold's old father by the fireside in the Lion. The fire was welcome, for November had finally rolled around, and they sat there safe from the sleet outside, toasting themselves and discussing cows. Arnold was insisting that the brown ones, the Saanens, gave the best milk: Theo was holding out for some pale-colored kind that came from France, supposedly good for both milk and meat, and better for cream than the Saanens.

For this I gave my power to a mortal? Diun Glinargiun said from the back of Mariarta's mind. *Where is the travel you promised me, the excitement? I did not come back into the world to study its cows.*

You eat their cheese readily enough, Mariarta said silently, sipping wine. *What about that one the other night that you were so fond of? You made me eat nearly the whole thing. Lida was scandalized, said she was never letting me in her kitchen again. I never thought goddesses with the wisdom of the ages in them would lose their manners so. What a pig—!*

Diun laughed, unconcerned. Mariarta stretched and saw Lida come through the open door. *Now here she is to scold me again,* she said, *and serve you right to have to listen to it—*

Then Mariarta broke off, for the breeze was blowing past Lida, and scolding was not in her mind. She was alarmed. She came straight to the four of them, and said, "Quickly, come back to the house. There's a messenger."

They went out, Theo taking Arnold's father's arm. "What is it?" Mariarta said to Lida.

“Someone from the north,” Lida said. “Come on.”

In Walter Furst’s kitchen they found the messenger, eating and drinking—no surprise, Lida had been at him—and talking to Walter. Werner Stauffacher was there, with a mug of the Furst ale—and so, to Mariarta’s surprise, was the Knight of Attinghausen, drinking and looking concerned.

“Here they are,” Walter said. “Start again, Uli.”

“Early yesterday morning,” the young man said, swallowing the piece of bread he was working on, “someone shot an arrow over the Arth city wall, into the window of one of the councillors. The arrow had a piece of parchment wrapped around it, with the words, ‘Beware the morning of Sankt Othmar’s Eve, at Morgarten.’”

“Sankt Othmar’s—” Theo looked at the Knight. “That’s the day after tomorrow!”

Attinghausen nodded. “The rider went northeast. We have at least one knight in the court who is in a position to know when Duke Leopold moves.”

“Your son....” Mariarta said.

Werner of Attinghausen nodded. “Doubtless Arnulf will be riding with them. This is bitter to me, but there’s nothing to be done. Leopold is our immediate liege-lord under the Emperor.”

“They’ll be coming with a large force,” Walter Furst said. “There would be no point in a small one. I wish we knew for sure how many armored knights will be there.”

The Knight of Attinghausen frowned. “As far as I know, rarely more than a thousand or fifteen hundred knights are doing knight-service in all of Austria at any one time.

The Emperor wouldn't dare try to levy more than that at once—he would have a rebellion on his hands.” He frowned harder. “There might be as many as five or six hundred ‘lances’ of knights. Six men to the Austrian lance, counting each knight’s squire, page, armorer and a couple foot.... Maybe twenty-four hundred horse, and of those, two thousand or so will be armed and able to fight.”

“And then the unattached footmen,” Arnold’s father said.

“For what they have to be considering,” the Knight said, “they’d be fools to bring less than six thousand or so. If the Austriacs are wise, they’ll be intending to push through the pass and resecure Schwyz and Kussnacht: garrison them: then divide the forces in two. One side goes for the Kernwald, up to Luzern and across the top of the Lake, securing the access routes. Then the two forces work their way down both sides of the lake at once, converging on Altdorf. Afterwards they could deal at their leisure with the westward countries—Sarnen and so on.”

The messenger nodded. “So they said in Schwyz. The town itself is well protected by palisades and earthworks, but such things won’t last forever. Konrad Hunn says the only way to stop the attacking force is at the pass—and someone else thinks so too, to judge from the warning of when the force will be expected.”

Theo smiled. “Konrad, that old fox, he knows that part of the country better than anyone. What’s his plan?”

“To block the lakeward end of the pass,” the messenger said. “Try to trap the knights in it, then come around the lakeward side and deal with the footmen. But,

sirs, they've small time. They need your men to start marching now if they're to be with us in time to do any good."

"We can send about three hundred now, I'd say," the Knight said. "Is that right, Walter?"

"That's every able-bodied man," Walter Furst said, looking bleak. "Yes."

"How soon can you march, sirs?" the messenger said. "The muster is at Sattel, just south of Morgarten pass."

"Tonight," Werner Stauffacher said. "We'll be there by..." He thought. "Tomorrow afternoon, late. Two hours before sunset."

The messenger nodded, stood up. "Don't fail the meeting, sirs. Schwyz can only send thirteen hundred men, and about a hundred are coming from Obwalden. No more."

He went out. "Well," the Knight said, "there we are. I cannot go with you, obviously. But many of my people will. Let's blow the muster...there's much to do."

•

From where they stood on the hilltop, Mariarta gazed down on the southern end of the Morgarten pass. It was a narrow defile between two wooded ridges: one sloping up to the nearby mountain, the other to the marshy shores of a spit of the Ageri lake. She could see people working on the far slope, though in this dim light, under cloud and just after sunset, it was hard to see what they were doing.

"There are so few of them," she said. "Of us..."

“You’d be surprised what a few men can do when their minds are set,” Theo said.

Mariarta wasn’t so sure. All she could think of was the terrible number of Austriacs heading for them. “What if they’re early?” she said.

Theo, leaning on his halberd, laughed at her. “If you seriously believe that a force of three thousand horsemen and nine thousand foot can be *early* for anything, you’ve never seen an army move before.”

“I *have* never seen an army move before,” Mariarta said, annoyed.

Oh, indeed? said the calm voice from inside her. Mariarta shut her eyes—she had found this worked best during these exchanges—and saw a long slope leading down to a mountain pass. That slope was black with men in strange clothes: they covered it like ants, crawling along slowly, and the sun above them winked balefully on the pale polished gold of bronze-bladed swords and spears.

The Persians, Diun said.

Mariarta looked at the throat of the narrow pass. There were a very, very few men there. *The vanguard?* she said.

No. The enemy.

Mariarta gulped.

A place called Thermopylae, Diun said. Her memory was oddly approving. *One of the places where we were not prayed to. Honor and necessity meant more to those men than gods did.*

How long did they last? Mariarta said.

A long time. Forever, you might say...for they are immortal now.

“If you’re going to fall asleep while I’m talking to you,” Theo said, “I’ll go get something to eat instead. They’re roasting a sheep down there.”

“No, no,” Mariarta said, opening her eyes. “Sorry, Theo. Just herself. She was remembering another battlefield.”

Theo eyed Mariarta oddly. “Does she fight?”

“It has been a while since I went to war,” Diun said aloud, *“but I have not forgotten the art. I don’t miss my aim in the excitement, if that’s your concern: and I am not afraid of death.”*

Mariarta swallowed: it was strange to have her throat used like that. Theo raised an eyebrow. “Not afraid of death, huh. Watch out for her.”

“I have been...”

For a while they watched the work going on beneath them. Mariarta had already spotted the biggest of the rocks which had been levered out of the far hillside and carefully poised on other rocks to be dropped at the chosen moment. Other boulders had been let fall already. They were scattered about the southwestern end of the pass, and piled among them were many trunks of trees.

“Better hope they don’t send the footmen in first,” Mariarta said.

“They won’t,” Theo said, laughing his saw-in-log laugh. “They’ve got armored knights. The knights will come first, because they know they can hack a way through any force of peasants...and their own foot can come in and finish

us off.” Theo grinned like a man looking forward to seeing the trick tried. “Then the knights will go have dinner, they think, and relieve Kussnacht the next day, and start working their way around the lakes. I don’t think so, somehow....”

Mariarta looked down the gorge and tried to see it with Theo’s certainty. A force of horseman would come here, hit those rocks and boulders— “They’ll be trapped,” she said. “Some of us will be here as snipers, others will drop those rocks and trees they’re stockpiling up the slope. Then we attack—” She shook her head. “Theo, they’re still going to outnumber us five or six to one.”

“I guess we’ll each have to kill five or six of them then,” Theo said, and laughed again. “Mati, the *least* that will happen is that the vanguard will get trapped in the pass. What do you think the footsoldiers are likely to do then? When their armored support can’t protect them, and we break out and take them in the sides?”

“I’d leave.”

Theo nodded. “I bet they will too. This isn’t their fight: they’ll run away and save their skins. Their masters *expect* them to do that—that’s why the knights have to go in first and present them with an easy fight. So... Six hundred knights or so, but certainly no more than a thousand. Seventeen hundred of us, with halberds and crossbows. With rocks, with trees, with the marsh and the lake hemming them in on the other side, with the land fighting for us. And with you—” He grinned. “I was thinking of Sarnen.”

Mariarta moaned just at hearing the town’s name. “Theo, forget it. My head still hurts from rushing it so. That lightning was *inside*.”

“It was worth it. If I were you, I’d get ready to do it again...if you’re serious about being here.”

“Of course...”

“Come on,” Theo said, starting downslope. “Our watch is over. Let’s go get some of that sheep.”

“In a few moments.”

Theo went ahead. *Well, Glinargiun, Mariarta said, what are we going to do? We can’t simply blow them away with a big wind: our own people would go too. And lightning’s as bad. Too big a weapon for this small space—*

Your enemies are miles away yet, Diun said promptly. Lightning there will not trouble you here. Blast them now!

No. Killing them before they come to this battle won’t work. The Austriacs must know us willing to fight...and able to beat them...or we’ll never have any peace.

A moment’s silence. *It is strange, Diun said. How you mortals hamper yourselves with ‘ifs’ and ‘ors’ and ‘buts’...when the world offers you none such in return: only its old ‘is’. Such hindrances would hardly matter to a goddess. She sighed too, but it was an unconcerned sound, and Mariarta knew Diun Glinargiun’s thought: that eventually, after enough years in her company, it would not matter to Mariarta either.*

Not just yet for me, Glinargiun, she said. I must find another way.

Well, you have all the winds and storms and lightnings to work with from the beginning of things until now, Diun said, unconcerned. I dare say you will come up with something by morning. Meanwhile, what about that sheep? She looked down the slope with Mariarta’s eyes,

sniffed with her nose. *It has been a while since I had a decent burnt offering....*

Musing, Mariarta went after Theo.

•

That night they kept things quiet in the pass. Others were not doing so. Around the time Mariarta went for a piece of the roasting mutton, the Austriac army had started arriving in Hauptsee, the small town northward at the bottom of the Ageri lake. A scout was dispatched, and came back about an hour later with a grim smile on his face to report to the Forestlake leaders.

“Are they coming here to secure the pass?” Walter Furst asked immediately. It was the fear on everyone’s mind.

The scout, the young man Uli, laughed. “Not tonight. They’re getting ready to have a party. They’ve drunk the inn dry, and some of them have already gone out to ‘requisition’ people’s beer barrels from their houses.”

Werner Stauffacher frowned. “And the Duke is making no move to stop them.”

“Oh, no, on the contrary, he’s been saying how this is only the first part of his ‘correction’ of the Lake people. A long nasty revenge to teach us who our lords are. That’s what the few townies left in the inn are saying, anyway.”

“How many knights?” Walter said.

“I make it four hundred.”

This was better news than anyone had hoped for. “Are they crazy?” Arnold von Melchtal said. “Or do they think we’re worth so little in a fight? It’s insulting.”

“Let the good God send us more insults like this,” Theo said, “and our enemies more of this kind of intelligence. How many foot, Uli?”

“It’s hard to tell, everything’s so stirred up. Nobody in the inn seemed to know for sure. But I counted tents and did some reckoning. Maybe five thousand?”

“Daylight will give us a better count,” Werner said. “As soon as everything’s in place, we’d better set the watch and get what sleep we can.” He smiled. “I hope they find every beer barrel in the village. We may have justice on our side, but I wouldn’t mind having their hangovers there as well.”

•

Nerves got many people up before the time set, an hour before dawn. Many of the Confederates gathered around the one small fire, stamping and blowing on their cold hands, in that grey hour. Mariarta was there with Theo and Walter and the others, silent, nervous, waiting. While they stood around the fire, for the first time the three battle-standards of the Forest Countries were unwrapped and set up—the red square above a white square of Unterwalden: the plain red square standard of Schwyz: and the newest, the standard that the Uri men brought with them. The banner-bearer was one of the horn-bearers that Mariarta had met in the Rutli meadow, the man who had told her the way to the Maiden. Rather shyly he showed her the banner: yellow, with painted on it in black a big bull’s head, a ring through its nose, its eyes red with menace. “Since we have

the horns,” he said to Mariarta, “it seemed like a good idea to have the banner, too. I heard somebody else down south had one, so I made this.”

Mariarta nodded. “By the way, you gave me good advice—about that mountain.”

The young man smiled. “Theo said so, but you can never tell with Theo. Did you see all the dead people?”

“Heard them. A noisy lot.”

“Did you find treasure?”

Mariarta sensed someone listening inside her with odd wistfulness, waiting for the answer. “Nothing I can spend,” she said. “But I found what I went looking for.”

The young banner-bearer smiled again. “*Haarus*,” he said—the war-cry, the luck-cry, of Uri men to one another on the battlefield. Then he went to where the other banner-bearers were standing.

Mariarta saw the great signalling-horns, the *harsthorner*, brought out and softly tested, making smothered hoots. Some of the men of Unterwalden brought out what they used instead of horns—small sharp-voiced drums, and fifes so shrill they would scrape the insides of your ears. “We got them from some people who came from northern parts,” one man said to Mariarta, showing her the big wooden snare drum he was carrying and the huge heavy drumsticks for it, while his mate cleaned out his five-stopped fife. “Basel, I think. They use them at Carnival.” The drummer looked around with a scared, grim smile. “Different kind of carnival today....” Some of the fifes were briefly used for imitating bird calls, and Mariarta heard someone very softly playing a love song on one. Other than

that, there was little noise: no shouts, little talk, just men walking around restlessly, or standing in groups of varying size and looking north.

An hour after dawn, another scout came in. “They’re packing and getting in order. Not battle order, though. Just marching order.”

“The foot in front?” Walter Furst said.

The scout shook his head. “The knights and their lances. The foot are trailing after. About five thousand of them, we make it.”

“Then let’s go,” said Werner Stauffacher. “Call everyone in for the order of battle.”

It took about ten minutes to get everyone assembled. When they were there, and quiet, Walter Furst said, “All right. *Eidgenossen*, remember the oath you swore! Schwyz must be defended from these invaders—if they once break through, we will never be rid of them. Let us kneel and pray God for His help: and then go about our business.”

Thirteen hundred men and a woman knelt and prayed, though not necessarily in the same directions. *Glinargiun*, Mariarta said, *are you with me in this?*

You’ll live through it, Diun said from her seat in the marble house. It was shadowed there, and Mariarta could not see her expression clearly; but there was the slightest smile in her voice.

That’s not what I asked.

Do you ask for my help, sister-daughter?

Mariarta breathed out. *Goddess and my lady*, she said, *I do. And how the One, as you call Him, will feel about it, I have no idea.*

In my day, the One tended to help those who helped themselves. Have you seen evidence that this has changed? But Diun was definitely smiling. *Let us go forward,* she said. *You will have the help I promised you...if you can think what use to make of it.*

People were standing now. “Everyone to your places,” Walter said. “You, the third group, get behind that ridge and make sure you’re not seen, whatever happens, until the second group has moved.” He walked slowly to stand with the standard-bearers, with the men carrying the *harsthorne* and the fifes and drums.

Mariarta would have liked to be with them, but that was not her job. She barely knew what to do with a halberd—but a crossbow was another matter, so she was with one of four groups of snipers stationed on the southern slope, halfway down the pass. In company with some of the other marksmen, she climbed the slope. Heading upslope east of her, she caught sight of a white linen shirt, and laid over it, matter-of-fact as if the man were strolling in to market in the morning, a crossbow. Mariarta paused a moment, watching him fade into the underbrush: then wished a blessing on his aim, and took her own place among four other archers behind one great cracked stone that had been too big to uproot for their purposes.

And then they waited.

Silence fell over everything, except for the birds, which were singing in earnest now. Mariarta closed her eyes and let her vision slip onto the wind, riding it. It was cooperative, the usual morning onshore wind from the Forestlake behind them, and it bore her swiftly to the

northeastern end of the pass, where the road bent near the shore of the Ageri lake. There they were, a long slow column trundling along as if riding on a holiday: two thousand horse. Not all the riders were wearing metal armor, by any means—only the knights and their squires, and a few favored pages. The other riders were in leather or linen armor, hardly better at stopping a crossbow bolt than a linen shirt would be. After the unarmed riders, the armorers, the butlers, the personal valets and the other servants, came the drummers and trumpeters who would give the signals during a fight—playing desultorily, and with restraint, the way men play noisy instruments when they have headaches. After the drums and trumpets came the footmen, straggling along in an untidy column as wide as the road, winding away out of sight around the edge of the Ageri lake.

Up at the front of the column, two standards stirred in the breeze: the two-headed, two-haloed black eagle on gold of the Empire, and smaller, the horizontal white stripe between two red ones of Austria—once the mark, some said, left where a belt kept clean a white surcoat elsewhere stained completely with blood. Armor glittered in the early sun on the first fifty or sixty men, knights of high stature, counts and such following Duke Leopold. Mariarta tried to pick him out, but too many banners and bannerets were scattered among the knights immediately following the Austrian standards. It didn't matter. As they approached the mouth of the Morgarten pass, Mariarta watched the head of the column slow to a stop, saw knights and their retainers pointing, arms waved, heads turned to ask questions. A scent of disagreement and annoyance came to her on the wind.

The main pass-road was blocked in front of them. Massive tree-trunks and boulders were sown across it from side to side. At first it looked like a landslide, but landslides are rarely so thorough.

The knights muttered, laughed. Plainly this was somebody's desperate and abortive attempt to keep them from going where they intended. Pretty bad, really: untidy, not a proper sort of palisade. Though there was no way the horses were going to get through it.... But it didn't matter. *What about this side road that goes leftwards and up the slope? It parallels the main pass road and misses this blockage entirely. Stupid peasants, really thought a few rocks and tree trunks would slow us down. We'll go this other way....*

Mariarta watched them turn up the smaller road. It was rocky, and could take no more than two or three riders abreast. With apparently no further thought given to the matter, the knights went along it, three by three, and all their people followed them.

Mariarta opened her eyes, said to her companions, "They're coming." They gazed down at where the track wound into sight on the slope on their side. A tiny village stood there, five houses and a smithy: Schafstetten, it was called. The people who lived in the houses were not there. The houses had other occupants this morning.

The snipers made sure of their bows and their view toward those houses. Mariarta swallowed, thinking, *It might be that nothing else will be needed, here. This plan was well made. The Austriacs are doing just what we thought they would. Maybe....*

She checked her bow, crouched there with the others, and waited. Waited....

A flash of color could be seen through the trees where the upslope track bent around the side of the hill toward them. Gold and black: then red and white: then many others. The first forty or fifty knights started to come in sight now, below them, on the road where the five houses of Schafstetten lay.

In an arolla pine near where Mariarta crouched, a *puppentschiertschen*, one of those small pert red-breasted birds that lives on worms and bugs, sat on a branch and sang his morning song with piercing volume and great sweetness. Mariarta glanced at him sidelong, for she knew that bird from her childhood, and it was not his mate to whom he sang. There was another cock *puppen* somewhere around here, and the meaning of those lovely lilting notes was *Mine, this is where I eat, this is where I live, this is my patch of ground, get off it or I'll kill you!*

From up the pass, echoing back and forth between the slopes, came the sound of drums, and the trumpets of the Austriacs, faint and unconcerned. The last of the knights were now in the pass. Suddenly, in answer to the trumpets and much closer, came the drumbeats of the men around the Oath-confederates' standards, and the pure, clear, piercing notes of about twenty fifes, all singing the same tune in a major key, slow, measured and defiant. It was the beat to which a man might march to his wedding, or another's funeral. *Not much to choose between us and the birds this morning*, Mariarta thought, and spanned her bow. Around her, the others did the same.

Her priorities, and the others', were simple. First shoot anything wearing armor: in the head, if possible—no use holing good harness. Second, shoot the horses. After that, any useful target. Mariarta's thoughts suddenly went back to the *buttatsch*, and she found herself wondering disjointedly, as she took aim at her first knight, held her breath, and waited for the sign, whether it would have been considered "useful"....

Below them the Schwyzers, who had insisted on being the first to attack, leapt out from among the now-empty houses of Schafstetten with crossbows and halberds. Knights' horses reared, and some knights managed to draw their swords, not that it helped them. The first thirty or so were pulled out of their saddles by halberd-hooks, and they and their horses slaughtered within moments. More knights rode up, some with crossbows. A few Schwyz men fell, but not many, and their comrades came roaring behind them, the *harsthorn* blaring the attack. Mariarta took aim at a shirt of overlapping plates, let the wind roar past her, showing her the life at the other end of the wind, waiting to be set free. She let the shaft go, bore the dreadful influx of power from the knight's death, and then chose another target.

More knights were riding up, but they were unprepared, their weapons not even drawn. In the pass, something rumbled like thunder. Up rode more knights, and they had no choice about the riding up now: they were being forced forward by their mates behind them, and their mates in turn were forced forward by the impetus of the riders behind *them*. It was going exactly as Werner and Walter had hoped it would, and it was terrible to behold the

confusion, and the slaughter. Mariarta knew that behind the knights, the Oath-confederates toward the mouth of the pass were rolling downslope the stones and tree trunks they had spent all night preparing. The knights were now cut off from their footsoldiers by a barrier that none of their horses could pass. The Oath-confederates hidden in the mouth of the pass would be falling on those foot-soldiers now. There would be no help for them from the cavalry. And as for the cavalry—

From behind trees and stones on the slope east of Mariarta, and west of her, the shout, “*Haarus, haarus!*” went up, and the trees and the stones came down. Many of the trapped knights had half ridden, half slid from the track to the main pass road to find time to breathe and room to fight. They did not find it. The boulders crashed among them, crushing heads, terrifying horses. Shortly there was barely room for a horse to turn around, and the horses began to fall, shot by the crossbowmen, or killed or maimed by their own terror that made them throw their riders, trample fallen ones, break their legs crashing into one another. Some knights managed to dismount and get their swords or bows out, but “*Haarus!*” came the shout from the hill again, and the third group of Oath-confederates came with their halberds and went to work among the dismounted enemy. Mariarta thought she had been watching a slaughter until now, but soon saw otherwise. This was mere butchery, armored men lopped like trees, cut to pieces. She turned her mind to her shooting, and tried to see only armor, not the faces—

Down the pass road some few Austriac knights were gathering, not thrashing about like most of the others. They seemed to be about to charge eastward at a large group of the Oath-confederates who were concentrating on another group of knights. Mariarta wondered how the supply of stones was, upslope, and stared upward hopefully, but saw none coming down. *It may have to be the lightning after all,* she thought bitterly. She picked a spot on the road, among the lesser knights' banners. *Now then,* she said to the sky and the wind, uncertain how well this would work. —*Not too much: keep it confined—*

—and suddenly saw a banner that she knew, sow and piglets, the canting arms of the family who lived on the Schweinberg, the Knights of Attinghausen. It was small, a banneret, charged with the crescent, the difference-mark for the younger son.

Arnulf—!

Mariarta went cold with fear. Above her, in the clear sky, the lightning was building, hunting a path to the ground, with her permission or without it. She had called, and now it would come—

Diun!

You called it! the goddess said. *It can't just be sent away like a dish of meat you don't like the look of!*

Frantically, Mariarta cast around for somewhere to divert it. Down beneath her, the knights were charging, and falling: her comrades' bows were busy. If she didn't think of something, Attinghausen's son would shortly be one more bleeding lump. Tears burst from Mariarta's eyes as she closed them in bitter irony, hunting a solution, any solution.

Get rid of the lightning, have it hit anything, the mountaintop. Then find some other way to be of use. *But what use is having all the storms of a world when you can't—*

Her eyes flew open again, shocked, as Mariarta heard Glinargiun's words again. *You have all the winds and storms and lightnings to work with from the beginning of things until now...*

All the storms. Not only new storms, but the old ones. Every storm of Diun's making. Every storm...

—including that one?

Mariarta trembled. More than anything else she did not want to look at *that—*

—but if she waited—!

Mariarta swallowed. *God, she thought, if we're still talking, be with me now—and you too, Glinargiun!* She closed her eyes. *I am the mistress of the storm. It is in me. And I am in it—as it was anciently—*

Darkness, and a frightened white blot in it. Herself. The rain coming down, soaking. The alp above Tschamut. That old terror filled her. Someone was here to say the words, he mustn't say them, if he did—*my fault, all my fault, don't let him—* Lightning struck through the night and showed her the tiny white form, the boy's shape crouched over it. And then—

All my fault, Mariarta cried into the night, not his fault, don't hurt him for it—! Her uncertainty and fear, her anger at the way he tried to manipulate her, the anger which drove Urs deeper into his own spite: *my fault! I didn't know how to stop it! Let him go free!* Mariarta cried to the lightning lashing about the alp. *He's done his penance—*

Lightning crashed nearby. *And I've done mine!* she cried. *Finish it! Come fight your battle in the daylight—come fight it now, at last: come!* She cried the word into the night in her mind with a goddess's certainty at last, seeing the moment before her—the lightningstrike on the sodden alp, the black shape that killed a boy and ate half his soul. And that other lightningstrike as the black shape sank down, bleeding clear water, redeemed, one-souled again for that brief moment before it crouched into silence and stone. No more need for the silence, no more time for the stone. Mariarta flung her arms high, calling, and struck the dark mass with one last bolt from the sky's bow, not from the past, but the present. Slowly the shape began moving, straining to get free of the earth, shouldering upward, rearing black against the black sky. Its head came up, met her gaze. Bellowed like the thunder—

They saw it begin to come real, on the battlefield, and did not believe. Even the Uri men, even the ones with the great *harsthorner*, the ones following the Bull banner, stared in shock and dread at the black shape now bulking into reality on the pass road, its shoulders reaching from the southern slope almost to the lake, its black horns flickering with lightning. It roared, gazing at what remained of the flower of Austrian chivalry out of eyes with skyfire in them—and it lowered its head, and took a pace forward, scraping the stocks and boulders and fallen bodies back with one hoof as if they were no more than gravel, preparing for the charge.

“The Bull,” the Uri men began to shout, “the Bull, the Bull of Uri, *haarus!*” They were as terrified of the

apparition as everyone else on the field, but they knew it would not hurt them. Everyone else took up the cry, the Schwyzers, the hundred men of Unterwald: *the Bull, the Bull!* The Bull scraped the bloody ground with its other forefoot, lowering: then reared up, bellowing, and charged.

The Austrian knights fled northward, in wild terror, those that still could. Others would have tried to stand their ground, but their horses panicked and fled. The Oath-confederates pursued them, trapped them, cut them to pieces. Any of the remaining foot who saw the Bull ran away, though most of them had the sense to go back the way they had come, rather than breaking toward the Agerisee. Some of the horse did not. The horsemen, undefended, were driven into the swampy ground, or carried there by horses mad with fear, and were drowned with the terrified beasts, thrown off and trampled under foot, or sucked into the sedgy depths by the weight of their armor. For the rest, the cries of the fleeing were almost as loud as the roar of the Bull, the crash of the thunder.

Mariarta stood there watching, blinking in the sunlight now striking the hill-slope on the other side of the pass, her crossbow hanging in her hands, forgotten, and the tears ran down her face as they had that afternoon so long ago. *It is all over at last*, she thought. *Only this was wanting, to knit all together. I bless the God and the fate that brought me here!*

You're welcome, Diun said.

Mariarta laughed out loud. Northward in the pass, the huge dark shape of the Bull was ramping and stamping its way to the far end, over the trapped bodies, the huge

stones. Boulders shattered under its feet, armor was crushed, the tree-trunks snapped like twigs. The Bull paused at the curve of the pass and glanced southwestward, to where the Confederates stood: there was murder in its eyes, and laughter too, terrible to see. The Bull bellowed again, then turned its back on them, lumbering around the curve of the pass and out of sight. Thunder rumbled one more time behind it; slowly the air began to clear.

Gradually the sound of the battlefield started to die away; the cries of the dying and the screams of the horses began to be stilled. *How many thousands of horses dead, Mariarta thought, looking at the shambles, how many of these knights, how many of the footmen—*

They would have killed you, Diun said calmly, and never cared at all. You it was who said your people must be seen to fight and win—

“There is still a place for pity,” Mariarta said softly, “and if goddesses have none, they are poor sorts of goddesses...that’s all I can say.”

The battle did not go on much longer. Indeed it had been nearly over when the Bull appeared, for of the five hundred knights who had entered the pass, nearly all were dead. Their support riders, squires and pages and so forth, numbering another fifteen hundred as well, had done as badly. Some four or five hundred other horsemen, knights and retainers, had tried to escape the way they came, thinking to regroup and join the footmen. But the footmen who had survived contact with the Oath-confederates, though outnumbering them five to one, had panicked and run away—some up the road that led by the Ageri lake,

some into the lake itself. That was a fatal mistake, for the marshes by the road were as treacherous as those by the pass, and those driven into them did not come out.

It took a while for the Oath-confederates to regroup. A careful roll-call was taken. Forty men were dead out of thirteen hundred. Counting the Austriac dead would take much, much longer; but of the nine thousand men who came to Morgarten pass, seven thousand did not leave it. Most, especially the knights, were dead. Some, surviving, were taken prisoner to be ransomed in the usual way. And there was one knight who did not try to flee his captors, and held his ground—though he had wisely dropped his weapons on the ground, and dismounted to stand by his horse. He only kept his spear to lean upon, with the poor stained sow-banner of Attinghausen, torn, still hanging from it. The Oath-confederates gathered around him and pounded his armored back, glad to a man that he had been spared: and they wondered that he had survived the passing of the Bull.

“Now, how should it hurt me?” he said to the people around him. “After all, I am an Uri man....”

They cheered him, and he smiled. But suddenly he looked up the slope of the pass road, seeing there a young man with his hair tied in a scarf, and the wind coming at his back. Some there were surprised at the tears on the face of Mattiu dil Ursera, a hunter of renown, whose face was said by some to be made of stone for all the reaction you might normally get out of it. And there was more surprise when Arnulf von Attinghausen and the hunter took hands and smiled, saying nothing. Some of the Uri men later got into a fight over this with some men of Unterwalden, who

claimed that Uri people were strange. But it was forgotten in the division of the spoil, and the celebrations.

The spoil was considerable: enough armor and weapons to arm every able-bodied fighter of the Forest Lake countries. All this booty was divided in exactly the same way that Forest Lake people divided cheeses, or land, when in dispute. The town councillors put forth an opinion on who should have what, and everybody voted on it, as their fathers had done under the Old Emperor, and, God willing, would eventually do under the new one, when he saw reason....

The celebration went on much longer than the division of spoil, which was as it should have been. Bonfires were lit on every hill around, even the one above Einsiedeln, where the monks were already rebuilding. Those who climbed the hills to light the fires that night saw the chain of sparks of light spread from mountain to mountain: Scheidegg above Brunnen, the Zugerberg, Pilatus above Luzern; the Burgenstock, Seelisberg, Brandegg above Rutli; Uri-Rotstock, Schweinburg, Fluelen above Altdorf; Morschach, Illgau, Great Mythen above Schwyz. The wind rose and fanned the fires so that they burned like stars fallen on the mountains, and the people of the Forestlake countries sang that night for the downfall of the enemy and the goodness of God.

At least one god noticed this, and was heard, by her hostess, to laugh like someone who knows a secret.

•

“What now?” said Arnulf.

They were making their way toward the Lion, through the marketplace of Altdorf: Mariarta, Theo, the Knight of Attinghausen, and his second son.

“I think I shall be moving on,” Mariarta said.

“This is a terrible time to travel,” Theo said. “It might snow any minute now.” He eyed Mariarta hopefully.

She laughed. “No, I have a promise to keep, Theo. Some traveling to do. But I’ll come back when you need me. Not immediately, though.”

The Knight of Attinghausen shook his head. “There’s turmoil at court at the moment. Some people screaming that this whole part of the world has been mishandled, and that what happened was deserved. Others screaming that another punitive expedition is needed—as long as it’s not *they* who have to go. And of course the plain truth is that no such expedition can be started after the loss of troops in the last one. Nor would such be started anyway, this deep into winter, especially after the lesson we’ve taught them about trying such things in November. No, I think we’ll have a respite. A year, maybe two.”

Mariarta glanced over, as they passed it, at the spot where there a hat once sat on a pole. The pole was still there, but a banner with a black Bull’s head hung there now, and the cold December breeze stirred it. “That’s what I think too,” Mariarta said. “So Grugni and I will go north for a while. I want to see Zurich, and the countries around the northern lakes. Someplace,” and for a moment she got an odd glint in her eyes, “that’s *not* mountains. But, Arnulf, what about you?”

“Oh, I’ll go back to court,” he said. “There are so many other knights who ran home, if they managed to get away, that no one’s going to look askance at *my* having done it.”

“That’s good,” Mariarta said. She looked at the Knight, and Theo. “But we’re a bad example to all the other countries under their dominion. In the long run, nothing will satisfy the Austriacs but our fall.”

“Theirs may come first,” Theo said. “In the meantime...make sure we can find you if something comes up.”

“Just say my name to the wind,” Mariarta said, glancing at Arnulf and smiling as they made their way through the Lion’s courtyard. “So. Who’s for dinner?”

Together, they went in through the doors of the Lion; and the breeze swirled about and followed them.

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**Mariarta's story continues
in the second volume of the "Raetian Tales",
The Wind and the Eagle,
telling of her journey north to Basel and beyond,
and the mortal intrigues
and deadly magics she finds there:**

**and *The Fifth Wind*,
in which her path brings her into conflict
both with the Empire in its death-throes
and with the only other half-immortal
who also harbors a god;
and in which her own final fate is determined.**

Afterword:

I have taken liberties with some matters of timing and location in this book. People who may find themselves looking further into the events described herein will probably be wondering why: and my Swiss readers will already know what liberties have been taken, and will almost certainly want an explanation.

The tale of the Bull of Uri begins to appear in written form no sooner than the 1500's, though the battle of Morgarten, where we first hear of the Bull standard being carried to war, took place in 1315. (A standard almost identical to the Morgarten one, made slightly later, can be seen in the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum in Zurich.) Readers curious enough to look for Tschamut on a modern map will find it's not actually in Uri, but just over its eastern boundary, in the canton variously known as Grisons and Grischun—the Grey Country, heart of the alliance which later became the Grey League (which gives the canton its present German name, *Graubünden*). In its original form, the story of the Bull takes place some miles to the northwest, near the Englerbergtal. But since one of the things I wanted to do was tell a story from inside the Romansch languages and cultures, and since the Englerbergtal was by that time mostly if not wholly German-speaking, I moved the story east. This is probably not *entirely* cheating, since Swiss

pre-cantonal borders fluctuated for a long time. There was almost certainly a time when Tschamut was part of Uri, especially considering the nearness of Ursera (now Andermatt) to the Oberalppass, a vital link to Cuera in a time when the mighty Bishops of Chur were the major political force in the region.

Most of the other stories I have tried to leave where they were supposed to have happened. One of the delights of Swiss folklore is its sense (however specious) of really having happened, strengthened by the matter-of-fact naming of places and people. The rock the Devil dropped after building the bridge over the Schöllenen gorges of the Reuss can still be seen just north of Göschenen (Romansch *Caschinutta*); the ruined castle haunted by the Key Maiden can still be visited (though it's actually in Tegerfelden, not Walenstadt. The height above Berschis is the site of an old Roman fortification, and later a fortified medieval Church of St. George). And there are still white chamois in the Alps, though reduced populations and constricting ranges have made the albinistic form even rarer than it used to be.

Time has also been tampered with, toward the end of the book, for purposes of dramatic presentation. The meeting in the Rutli meadow happened sometime between 1290 and 1291: the Battle of Morgarten, as mentioned above, happened on 21 November 1315. I hope my readers will forgive me the elision. What I have *not* tampered with are the details of the battle itself. Readers astonished by the apparent imbecility of the Austrians in their management of the situation should be advised that the author is as bemused by it as they are. The pre-cantonal Swiss, at any

rate, were pioneers in demonstrating to mounted chivalry that it was no longer to consider itself invulnerable. What remains astonishing is that it took the chivalry nearly another hundred years to get the message.

Some readers will recognize Duonna Vrene as an early version of the Venus of the Venusberg myth, her name somewhat changed by time and shifting dialects. Her tradition in the Romansch-speaking part of the world is less Bacchanalian and more deadly, alternately vampiric and destructive. She is yet another of the large group of Roman and Etrurian goddesses now demoted, in Swiss legend, to *diala* or “faery” status. I have run her enchanted valley together with the Churer tale of the *Wunschhohle*, the Wish-Hole near Arosa, where a bold man might venture to get his wishes granted.

Other matters of legend and history are more problematical. Certainly a family called either Tel or Tell are recorded as having settled at Bürglen in the Schachental around 1050. Wilhelm—or, as he would be in Romansch, “Gugliem”—remains a matter for violent disagreement among scholars and historians, some claiming him (like Robin Hood) to be a concatenation of several men or hero-figures, some claiming he never existed at all.

His story, though, has become involved in the general clouding of the issues surrounding the beginning of Swiss independence. The birthday of Switzerland is 1 August 1291, the date of the signing of the document now known as the *Bundesbrief*. (At least, we *think* that was the date of its signing. There is some speculation that the *Brief* was “back-dated”. What is certain is that it was *not* signed, as

some have claimed, at the secret midnight meeting in the Rutli meadow: the Oath-Confederates at that point would not have been so foolish as to leave written evidence of what they were up to.) The participants—Walter Furst, Werner Stauffacher, Arnold von Melchtal, and Werner II, the Knight of Attinghausen—are all verifiable historical personages whose signatures appear on the *Bundesbrief*. The first three men are sometimes known as “the three Tells”: one legend maintains that Furst, Stauffacher and von Melchtal sleep in a cave under the mountain near the Rutli meadow, waiting for their nations’ great need to awaken them.

The events following the swearing of the Oath of Confederacy—Tell’s feats, and the destruction of the castles of Zwing-Uri and Sarnen, etc.—are all first recorded in the “Federal Chronicle” of Obwalden: a document felt to have sound historical sources, though the only version of it we now have is much revised and dated 1470. Schiller’s romanticized version of the Tell story (based on the error-ridden account of Ägidius Schudi, circa 1570) has reduced the signing of the *Bundesbrief* to a poor secondary position in popular culture. The myth being more dramatic than the reality, the two main versions of the story now only share one common image, the shape of a hunter striding down from the valleys into history at Aultvitg/Altdorf. Whether Tell ever even saw Gessler, much less met him, is hard to say. And the story of the hat on the pole sounds like an anti-Austrian propaganda. Not that it couldn’t have happened: but did it happen there, then?

Even if it didn't, Schiller's retelling of the story has become indelible—and in his defense it has to be said that it was a wonderful evocation of the archetypal Swiss traits: stubborn desire for freedom, action only reluctantly taken...but taken swiftly and with carefully premeditated violence when no other choice was possible. The Swiss themselves fell in love with the story, and for that reason more than any other, it seems wise not to meddle with it too much. Tell himself has been invoked again and again as a revolutionary figure since the 1500's, being denounced as “subversive” by various Imperial-descended governments of later times—all of which fell within years of the denunciation. Perhaps there really *are* some ghosts more powerful than the living... At any rate, I have followed the version of the Tell story found in the “Federal Chronicle”, which agrees closely enough with the Schiller for my purposes. (As a side issue, those interested in Tell's musical connections—most famously, the Overture to Rossini's opera *William Tell*—will find an excellent [and dreadfully accurate] musical description of the *föhn* sweeping down in storm and lightning on the Urnersee in the second part of the Overture.)

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On other matters: The statue of Diun/Diana found by Mariarta can be seen in the Rätische Museum in Chur. It was a household votive statue, found during excavations of Curia Raetia, the Roman settlement built about 20 BC and now buried beneath the neighborhood of modern Chur

called Welschdörfli, near the banks of the Plessur. Other such statues have been found in the area, though few so well preserved. At least one “roadside” shrine left by a passing Roman legionary has been found near the spot in the neighborhood of Vaz where Mariarta was distracted from the skinning of her chamois.

Romansch, the language spoken in Tschamut in this story, is with its cousin-tongue Romanian, the most direct lineal descendant of Latin still being colloquially spoken on earth, and (by enactment of law) is the fourth official language of Switzerland. Those interested in Romansch should try to find a copy of the excellent *Bien Di, Bien Onn* by the poet and scholar S. M. Nay: this book is one of those used to teach the language in Switzerland. Romansch (in its five variant forms—Sursilvan, Sutsilvan, Surmiran, Engadinisch/Ladin, and Vallader) is now under threat, being spoken by only about 50,000 people: but this small number is a result of the steady departure of Romansch-speaking populations from the alpine areas to the large cities, and not some politically-motivated or sectarian “linguicide” such as was attempted with other European “minority” languages like Basque and Irish. Of all the Romansch dialects, Sursilvan is the form spoken by the largest group, and is most influential in terms of prose and poetic output. It is the form of Romansch used in this book, though, not for these reasons, but because it’s the form predominant between Tschamut, Disentis/Mustér (still home to the great abbey which gave it its name, a notable center of Romansch learning and scholarship), and Chur.

Readers interested in hearing the music of the language for themselves can do so either on shortwave radio or satellite audio. Swiss Radio International broadcasts a news and current affairs program in (Sursilvan) Romansch twice a week on Tuesdays and Fridays, on 6.165 or 9.535 mHz. Additionally, SRI broadcasts on the Web in live streaming audio from its website at <http://www.sri.ch>, as well as via digital satellite audio on various transponders of the European Astra satellite “constellation”, Eutelsat/HotBird, and others. For more information, write to SRI, CH-3000 Bern 15, Switzerland.

A last note: The word *föhn* has become the official “family” name for all winds of its kind—hot, dry winds, caused by low barometric pressure on one side or the other of a mountain chain. (The Chinook wind of the Rocky Mountains is a *föhn*: so, to a lesser degree, is the Santa Ana wind of southern California.) The *föhn* proper is caused by low barometric pressure on the north side of the Alps, and the presence of storm or other unsettled weather on the south side. The clouds dump their rain on the southern side, and the airmass associated with the southern occluded front is either sucked up and over by the low pressure system north of the mountains, or pushed over the peaks by the storm system to the south. In either case, the air moves so quickly that it is able to discharge very little energy, and because of the increase in kinetic energy caused by its plunge down the northern slope, it rapidly becomes a hot, dry, positively ionized wind of devastating speed and power. The *föhn* melts the snow on the upper pastures early in the year, and extends or creates a growing season for plants that could

otherwise not be grown on the near north side of the Alps (grapes, most fruit, most grains). Its massive positive ionization, though, makes it an uncomfortable wind for human beings to live with...conducive to avalanches, forest fires, short tempers, migraines, and murders. In the upper Reuss valley, from about Tschamut to Disentis/Mustér, smoking is often completely forbidden when the *föhn* is blowing, for the same reasons it's forbidden in forest country in southern California in the summer. With all this taken into account, the relationship of Alpine people with the *föhn* is, at best, ambivalent. One Swiss writer claims the *föhn* has (at least in the southern parts of the country) become the national excuse not to do something you don't want to.

Some drugstores in Switzerland now stock an anti-*föhn* preparation. It is uncertain how well it sells, or works.... Meanwhile, in most German-speaking countries, the word *föhn* is used most often as a slang term for a portable hair dryer.

