

FALCON LAW

by

Judith Tarr

I

The falcons knew.

The one called Shadow lay on the hard narrow shelf that was a bed, face to the wall, and tried not to hear or heed or even remember that there were others in the room. A cold room, all stone, unlit in the night, and seven others whispering and rustling and snoring in it. They were all boys; they had no names but what they gave one another, some for insult, some for admiration, some for both together. Shadow was Shadow for quickness and silence and a talent for effacement. It was better than Grub, or Downychick, or poor Maid, who would never have come this close to a proper name if these had been the old days and this the old Eyrie that the Witches' workings had destroyed. For the land's sake and the world's saving, even the most bitter of the Brothers granted that, but the Witches were cursed here. And Maid would strive for his name and his falcon, who once would have been discarded as a weakling.

They were too few. So many had died in the wars and in the Turning; the remnants had scattered into service in the lowlands, though they hated the heat and the level land and the narrowed sky, or had taken ship over sea with chosen women and a child or two. They had only begun to come back to the Master's call, to this new Eyrie in an old, old stronghold. Perhaps it was of the Old Ones. But their Power, if it had ever lain here, was long gone; it was the falcons' now, and the Falconers', and one day it would be strong.

Shadow shivered under the thin blanket and drew into a knot. Shadow was a seachild, one of those who had sailed and come back. Sometimes, when sleep came slow, the waves' memory brought it flooding.

Not tonight.

"Tomorrow," someone whispered. Snowcat, with his pale eyes and his voice already a man's. Even when he whispered, he made it as deep as he could. "Tomorrow I get my falcon."

"Tomorrow your falcon gets you." That was Eyas, warming Shadow a little, because he was Eyas. Another seachild. A friend. Almost. Shadow did not need eyes to see him lying on his side, brows knit over the nose that in part had given him his name, telling the truth as he always did, even to haughty cruel Snowcat. "The Choosing is for the falcons. Sometimes they choose not to Choose. You have no say in it."

Snowcat growled. If it had been anyone but Eyas, he might have sprung. But in the years of their training, he had learned. He was no match for Eyas in a fight, smaller though Eyas was, and slighter, and younger. Snowcat wanted to be lord of the not-yet-men, the boys who would be Chosen or rejected at this turning of the year. Eyas did not want to be lord, and was.

"Women," Dancer said in the silence. Shadow gasped and shuddered. No one noticed. Others were making sounds of disgust or of derision. Someone hissed for quiet; Dancer laughed. "What are you afraid of? No one's listening. My

tongue's as safe as it ever was. Look. Women, women, women!" He grunted. Someone yelped. "Oi! Get your knee out of my belly, idiot. What's so horrible about a word?"

"It's not the word," muttered Snowcat. "It's the thing."

Voices chimed agreement. "Animals," said Colt. He always said that, choking on it. "Do you think—when we get our names—we'll have to—?"

"Not until we're blooded, and the Master decides we're fit." Dancer sounded not at all dismayed at the prospect. "A long time yet, have no fear. Then it should be endurable enough. Cattle manage; horses do very nicely. Though I've heard that a woman has a shade more wits than a mare."

"Evil wits," Colt hissed. "Witchcraft. They snare souls. We must keep them apart; we must never speak to them, or touch them save when the Master commands, or even think of them. Else they will destroy us."

Dancer snorted. "Nonsense! They're different, that's all. Alien, like Old Ones. The moon rules them, did you know that? Their blood runs in tides like the sea."

"You speak blasphemies!" Colt gasped, appalled.

Dancer laughed. Eyas' voice came through it, soft but very clear. "The tides are true. I know it; I remember. All the rest is nonsense. She's dead, you know that. The one we had to guard against: the witch, the soul-stealer. Jonkara." They all shivered at the name; even he stumbled on it, a little. "Women are people, like men, but weaker. That weakness was Jonkara's weapon. She ruled our women, and through them would have ruled us all. And yet a woman helped destroy her."

"Yes," said Snowcat. "A Sulcar bitch. Remember what she did to Rivery. Snared him and unmanned him, and lured him away from the Brotherhood. Now he roves the world with her, he and his falcon, and whenever he meets a Brother he preaches his mad new doctrine. Set our women free, he says. Live with them. Teach them. Make them like men. And

where will it end? Women riding, hunting, bearing arms. Women with falcons."

Breaths caught. Snowcat had gone beyond the bounds even of defiance. "Powers!" Colt cried. "If the Brothers could hear you—"

"They can certainly hear *you*." Dancer yawned loudly. "Let us not wax preposterous. Falcons will never Choose a woman. I do pity poor Rivery; if he's not careful he'll be out-cast, and I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Even a Falconer with a Sulcarwoman for swordkin."

Shadow struggled to shut ears and mind. They roared, both, but not with the sea. One hand closed on flesh beneath the rough tunic. Little enough yet, but growing, it and its sister. And the moon calling with her tides, and all the spells wavering, child's magic giving way to greater magic. Woman's magic.

The falcons knew. When Shadow came to the test, they would rise all together and tear her limb from limb. Because she was chosen. Because with magic and with treachery, with lies and slyness and silences, with spells and moonweavings and wieldings of the Powers, a female had crept among the fledglings of the Brotherhood.

No. Her lips shaped the word in silence. Voices murmured in her mind. Faces gathered. They flickered. Now dull-eyed, expressionless, as men must see them. Now fierce with life and wit: the secret faces, the faces which they revealed to one another, when men were far away in their arrogance and their cowardice.

One face was clearest, worn with years and pain, scarred with the violence of the Turning: Iverna who was Mistress of the women of the Falcon. "Jonkara is dead," she said. "We have waited, we have suffered, we have hidden all that we are and do, lest the men know, and through the men, Jonkara. Now we are free. She cannot touch us; she cannot bend our

wills to her own, nor lure us with promises of power. Empty promises. She would have it all. We would be her slaves."

"Why?" Shadow asked without sound.

"Power. It is all Power. The Witches had it, they of Est-carp: not only magic but the rule of realms. Lords have it. The Kolder longed for it; our men fancy that it is theirs, if only over us."

"And you would have it. You chose me to win it for you. To live as a boy. To be modest, but with a spell to whisper at need, to trick eyes into seeing what a boy would show. To face the Choosing; to be a falcon's Chosen. But," said Shadow, "the falcons know. They *know*."

"And do they hate?"

Shadow lay on her face. Her breasts did not like it. She let them protest. Iverna was no dream, and no shape of fear. She was there, in Shadow's mind, waiting. "No," Shadow whispered. "No. They don't hate me. Sometimes . . . one will let me touch him, even borrow his eyes as he flies, in secret. When no one can see and punish us. But I can't be Chosen. The falcons know the old fears. They'll never offer a brother to a woman."

"You must ask."

"Have I ever had a choice?" Shadow laughed, bitter. "I was always your obedient weapon. I let you forge me as you would. I let the Brothers hone me. Now I let you wield me. I may not even ask you why."

"Because it is time. Because we have suffered enough. Because you are not the first, but you are the only one who has come so far, and has not failed in testing or in training or in strength of will."

Shadow had little strength left. She could run. She knew ways, and she knew a witchery or two that might blind even a falcon. She knew weapons, and riding, and warfare. She had Power. For that last alone, the Witches would accept her. What a triumph that would be. A Witch of Falcon blood; a

Power out of the Eyrie. That would break the Brothers' pride, even without the Choosing.

Shadow sighed. Woman and witch she might be, and spy, and would-be betrayer, but she was Falcon. Estcarp was no land and no people of hers.

She turned her mind from Iverna's. Once she could not have done it. She did not pause to be proud of it, or even to be afraid. She was saving all her fear for the Choosing.

The night was ages long, and then there was nothing left of it. The bell brought them all to their feet, even Grub who would sleep past sunup if he were let be. Some scrambled blindly for their usual clothes, remembered, joined the rest in putting on the leather and linen of full Brothers. It was the first time for them all, perhaps the only time; they were proud in it, but stiff, part with tension, part with fear. They fell into a wavering line in the room's center. Eyas hissed; the line snapped into straightness.

None too soon. Brothers had come for them. Falconers as outlanders saw them, falcon-helmed, faceless, each with his winged brother riding hooded on his shoulder. But the falcons could see. Shadow felt their eyes like burning needles, thrusting deep into her soul.

She could not do it. She had lived this lie for a full seven years. It was too long. She would fail; she would die. She could not do it.

Someone touched her. She started like a cat. Eyas was shoulder to shoulder with her, flashing her a sidelong smile. "Luck," he said under his breath. He had always been her friend, she had never known precisely why. Perhaps because she had neither toadied to him nor challenged him; and sometimes in practice and often in lessons, she had bested him. He had asked her once to be his swordbrother. She had put him off. He had not asked again, but neither had he changed

toward her. He was comfortable beside her, as a brother should be.

Maid began to snivel. Shadow stiffened her back. *She* was no girl-minded coward, to let everyone know how terrified she was.

The thought made her want to laugh. She answered Eyas' smile with one almost as steady. "Luck," she answered him, and let herself be herded to the testing.

It was threefold. First, of the body, in armed or in unarmed combat. Then, of the mind, before the Master and the eldest Brothers. And last, for those who survived that final winnowing, the Choosing. Its precise nature, no one spoke of. Shadow knew that the initiates went one by one to the Eyrie's heart, and that some came back with falcons, but some never came back at all.

Three tests, three testing grounds. The ground of flesh and steel was blessedly familiar, the same stone court in which they had all had their training, with its carving of the sleeping falcon over the gate. Shadow's eyes rested on it as she waited, standing at attention between Eyas and a pale and rigid Maid, with words of invocation washing over her. The Brothers were still as stones round the rim of the court, each with its falcon shadow. The invocation rose and fell. The voice was familiar, even coming from the masked helmet, harsh and sweet at once, like honey in barley spirit. Blind Verian, who had seen his eight fledglings through their training, would see them to the end of it. His voice rose for the last time: "May the Lord of Wings favor your hands!"

The echoes had no time to die. Weapons lay in the court's center, seven of them. Sword, spear, dart gun, axe, pike, quarterstaff, dagger. The initiates lunged for them. In the same instant, a circle of Brothers closed in. Eight of them, falconless, and seven were armed and one had only his bare hands.

Shadow's mind darted wildly, swifter even than her body.

She had long since chosen. Likewise another. Snowcat's eyes blazed into her own. Her hand flashed past his, snatched the sword, tossed it. Eyas caught it. Snowcat had the spear. For her, nothing. They were scattered, like weapon moving to like. It was the pattern and the custom. This was testing, yet it was also ritual, precise as a dance.

Snowcat was the first to strike. He faced the spearman, shaft rising in a swift smooth movement. He let it fly.

It flew wide. The Brother's did not. Snowcat was quick, else he would have taken it in the body. He stumbled to one knee. The Brother was on him, vicious as any enemy.

They were the enemy. They would kill if they must: they were fighting men. They had no room in their ranks for the weak. Perhaps Snowcat had not truly believed it. He was learning, hard.

Shadow had the Brother's spear and a stinging hand, but she paid no heed to that. If her tactic had bemused her partner in the dance, he was not showing it. Nor was he moving. She could put no name to that leathern jerkin, that faceless helm. She did not try to cast the spear, nor did she move at all, but waited. Weapons rang about her.

The weaponless man moved, a light step, forward, a little to the side. She whipped the spear about. He caught it. She laughed, a breathless bark, and let him vault her over his head. She kicked. Her foot cried pain. She landed, rolled, twisted away from a shadow, came up in a coiled-spring leap. Metal glittered. Knife. Its hilt filled her hand. Her body knew the way of it: crouched, poised, waiting. She faced a man with a face. Her foot had not won its pain for nothing; it had unhelmed him. Dimly she knew him, and she knew that she should be awed, or honored, or terrified. Almery was the best man of his hands in the Eyrie. In the Brotherhood, he had perhaps an equal or two. He waited as she waited, wary as she was wary, poised with the perfection of which she was the

merest shadow. His eyes were level, and they did not condescend. Which was a very mighty honor.

And which very nearly undid her. Boy or budding woman, she was no match for him. She could not hope to try.

She did not have to win. Simply to hold her own.

She could not.

She must.

And she waited, patient, for him to begin. She knew that Eyas' sword was holding, and a staff—Dancer. And the pike. Maid had it; he was outdoing himself. The others she could not see.

She dropped the knife. Let steel contend with steel. Flesh held to another law.

Did Almery's eyes flicker?

Her body did not tarry for an answer. It danced ahead and aside, pivoted. A vise closed about her wrist. Instinct flung her back; will and training loosed her muscles, let his strength battle for her, brought her in close and close. He was a head taller than she, and stone-hard, but never stone-cold. Her knee drove upward. He sprang away. Still grasping her wrist. Snatching the other. She launched herself into his face.

Again he eluded her. He had both her hands. Twice in close—he would expect a third. She gathered her every scrap of strength. If he would wait—if he would not move—

Back. Back, down, into bruising darkness, but not utter, not yet; bring up protesting legs, call in the will and the wit, raise and roll and fling the other up, over, away. And the sky was clean and her hands were free, and a shadow loomed against the light. Now he would fall upon her and end it. She lay and tried to breathe and could not care.

"Come, warrior." The words were warm, amused, but tinged with—respect? "Here, up. Would you sleep the day away?"

It was Almery. She had not known that he could smile at a fledgling. He pulled her unprotesting to her feet, and held her

up, his arm about her shoulders. Dazedly she looked about. Eyas with blood on his face but a grin through it. Maid, Dancer, Downyck, all triumphant. Snowcat snarling but erect. Of Grub and of Colt, nothing, not even a body on the stones.

Two fallen, and two tests yet to come. It was not the worst of omens, but it was far from the best. And time only to wash, cool their throats with water, patch Eyas' cheek. Rest, they must not. The Master was waiting.

The hall was not utterly strange, but it had not the ease of familiarity. They had seen it once or twice at high festivals, when the older fledglings were suffered to serve at table. It was bare like all the rest of the Eyrie, no tables in it now, no fires lit, only the falcon banner black on scarlet behind the Master's chair. The Master and four men sat below it, waiting. They wore no masks, nor any mark of rank save the badge on each shoulder: stooping falcon for the captains, falcon in flight for the Master. But their faces were masks enough, and their bearing was more than regal; it was the bearing of men born and bred and trained to command.

Their attack was of eye and tongue and mind, and it came without warning and without preliminary. Seizing Maid who was weakest, lashing him with swift words: "Each Falconer is bonded to his falcon. What need of the baubles on the jesses?"

Maid paled beneath his mask of bruises. His mouth opened, closed. Dancer made a move, perhaps to help. A word froze him into immobility. "I—" Maid squeaked. "I—I don't—" The silence was terrible. He filled it with a rush of desperation. "The—the baubles are for outsiders. To conceal the bond that is our highest secret. To speak to allies when there is need, to pass commands in battle and to warn of dangers on the march."

He stopped, gasping as if he had run a race. They had

fallen already on another: Dancer, perhaps for his presumption. "Our Eyrie once was known to any who wished. Why is it now hidden?"

Dancer was quicker of tongue, and steadier. "The Old Eyrie fell in the Turning that the Witches wrought. Our new stronghold must be a secret place until all its defenses are secured; for its valley is rich and hidden in the tumbled hills, and those rove there who would gladly destroy us to gain what we hold. Or simply to rid the world of our kind, whether because we are human, or because we live by the Law of the Falcon."

"And what is that?" They asked it of Eyas. Deceptive simplicity; he took his time in answering.

"The Law is the law of brother-in-feathers and brother-in-skin. To live in bond to one another; to look to one's brothers and to one's commanders; to fight fair wherever fighting is, and to kill never save in defense of one's life or one's brothers or one's sworn alliance. To keep the secrets of the Brotherhood, and to keep faith, and to destroy the Darkness wherever it rises. And never to yield one's self to woman or Witch, or to any enemy of the Brotherhood."

"You: How many Masters have held this seat I hold? Name them as they held it. What was the distinction of each?"

And on. Simple questions, questions less simple, questions that must be thought on but there was no time to think, only to answer. Whether there were answer or no. And never a yea or a nay, only the flashing thrust of a new demand against a new victim.

There was a pattern in it. Shadow was trained to see patterns; and this was less subtle than witchery. Where weakness was, they seized on it, and yet they seized also on strength. She was at ease with the lore of the sea, and with the histories of the Brotherhood, and with the strategies of battle; less so with the mastery of horses or with the reckoning of numbers. And when she was all but spent with the effort of answering

and of waiting to answer, the Master demanded of her, "Tell us of women and the Power."

So then. She was found out. She was almost glad that it was almost over.

They waited, silent. She mustered her wits. Falconers were taught the colors of magic, for evading them; they learned somewhat of Witches and their art, for every man must know his enemy. But someone already had spoken of both. Dancer, careful to display the proper hatred of females in general and Witches in particular. "Women," she said slowly, with tautness that might pass for revulsion, "are not to be thought of. Through them were we snared, long ago, when like Estcarp we were ruled by them. Estcarp is paying even yet for that folly. We have paid, and are rewarded. She of the curse is dead, Jonkara whose name is not lightly to be spoken. Her kinswomen remain bound and apart lest she rise again within them. She is the enemy whom we cannot escape, the field of death which we must sow in order to reap the life of the Brotherhood, the shadow through whom we must come to the light. It is said," she said, and she was careful to say it so, "that no man can be strong if he entrusts his strength to a woman; and yet without a woman, he would never have been born. We are not taught to hate them, nor to scorn them, only to hate and scorn what they stand for, and to do eternal battle against it. It is the way, the teachings tell us. It must be so."

She fell silent. Her throat ached with the effort of saying only what she had been taught to say. She lived a lie, but she had no skill in lying, even for her life's sake.

The Master did not speak, nor did the captains. A falcon mantled, hissing, but in a moment it stilled. No one rose; no one leveled his sword, denounced the impostor, thundered the truth. The fledglings, for all their training, had begun to droop with exhaustion. Eyas leaned very lightly against Shadow, seeming only to stand shoulder to shoulder, a trick they had all learned in training. She leaned on him in turn,

easing her aching feet. She did not look to see if he glanced at her, and she would not let herself be troubled for him, although his face on the edge of her vision was alarmingly pale. His cheek would carry a scar. He would not, she thought inconsequentially, be the less good to look on for that.

The Master raised a hand. "You." Maid started and almost fell. But he stumbled forward. Then Dancer, and Snowcat. Then a long silence. Shadow stood with the others, too tired for despair, but strong enough to be angry. Let the old fools reject her; and Downychick had not stood up well to the relentlessness of the testing. But Eyas was the best of them all. How dared they pass him over?

The Master bowed his head slightly. Eyas came, reluctant, glancing back. Shadow managed a smile. It was well enough, now. No woman yet had come even this far.

"You."

She blinked. Downychick looked as he always did, a little wry, a little morose, and completely unsurprised. He had not moved. The eyes impaled her. Her feet yielded, carrying her forward. Her mind bated, wild with relief, with protest, with terror. The one who had failed was being taken away. The Master was speaking. It had had an order, that singling out. Last to first. First and second had been very close, but in the end, the choice was clear enough.

And she was angry all over again. Eyas was the best. She was a lie. A lie and a liar. And there was no help for it. The falcons would unmask her as she had always known they must.

Even the test of the Master had had its hedge of holy words; but the utmost, the true test, the Choosing, was simple to starkness. A Brother took each fledgling apart to a cell with a lamp and a stool and no window, where he must wait, alone with his fear. If any fear was left after the harrowing of body and mind. Shadow had none. She had subsumed the last

of it in patience, in the acceptance which every woman learned from the cradle. A sort of strength, that; a scabbard for the weapon which was her Power. She might go down, but she would go down fighting, for the honor of her sex.

And then she stood alone under the pitiless sky. She seemed to remember a Brother's smile. Almery's. He had given her a Falconer's gauntlet and the scarlet ribbons of jesses. His words lingered: "Be strong, warrior, and fly high. The Lord of Wings favor your hunting."

It was all the rite he gave her, and it was enough. She stood in the high and holy place, the heart of the Eyrie, the summit of its mountain: the Fane of Wings. Its roof was the sky, its walls the limitless air; its floor was living stone, shaped and carved by the wind itself. Where an altar might have been rose a fang of stone, and on it, falcons.

True falcons. Not the tiercels, the black males with their white breasts, the warriors who flew with the warrior Brothers: great birds and beautiful, and wise with the wisdom of their kind. These were the females, the falcons, larger by half than their brothers, and wiser, and immeasurably fiercer. They were as white as clouds, shadowed with silver like clouds, on the wings, on the tails, in a gullwing sweep upon their breasts. Their eyes were burning gold.

Shadow froze like a cony beneath their stare. No one had told her. They had said that falcons would Choose or refuse. Not that she must face the great ones, the queens, the untamed and untamable. They were half a legend even in the Eyrie, though it was they who had found and claimed it; they did not reveal themselves to outlanders, and seldom so condescended to the Brothers. Their nesting places were secret. No one spoke of how they mated, or of how they reared their young. That males and females lived apart, the Falconers knew, and found it unremarkable: the young tiercels new from the nest, and those who had not Chosen a Brother,

hunted in companies like men. It was in companies that, Shadow had been taught, they came to the Choosing.

Laughter rang in Shadow's mind. It was falcon laughter, wild and cold, with words in it. *Ignorance! It is the unchosen who flock like starlings.*

She could not tell who spoke. Perhaps it did not matter. They all watched her unblinking: twice two hands of them, she counted, and one more.

Unchosen, the soundless voice went on, by us. The lesser ones find mates in wingless men. There was no scorn in the words, merely acceptance of what was proper. A falcon chose her tiercel; a tiercel, falconless, Chose his man.

Shadow almost laughed. There was irony. She wondered if the Brothers knew it, and had perforce to live with it: to be less in reckoning than a female, even a female of the falcons. "And before the tiercels Choose," she said, trying to understand it all, "you measure the man to be Chosen."

Again the laughter. Its coldness was shot through with a fire of impatience. *An eyas in the egg has wit enough for that.* One of the falcons mantled: she upon the fang's tip. Her eyes held Shadow's own. Her mind's touch recalled Iverna, strong as it was, and intent on its purpose, with no time to spare for gentleness. *But you, fledgling. You are not like the rest. Come closer, and let us look at you.*

Shadow was cold with more than wind. No falcon ever hatched had any need to sharpen its eyes with closeness. And yet she moved as she was bidden. She sensed no danger yet; only fascination. It was no comfort. Falcons killed without malice, because it was their nature.

Their eyes were jewel-hard, glittering upon her. Shadow knew beneath knowing, that they spoke to one another. They had searched her to the soul, and done it long since, before she even knew. Now the trial was past, the judgment begun. The sentence was clear enough. No tiercel had come to her hand, and none would.

Death, she found herself praying. *Let it be death*. Not the crueller punishment. Life. Maimed, blinded or crippled, sent back among the women, bound again to their life of servitude. Her Power, the falcons would take. They had the strength. It throbbed in her bones, stronger even than the Power of this place.

There was silence deeper than silence. Even the wind had stilled. Shadow stood erect, her mind's shields up and locked. If she must fail, she would fail in her own way, in a blaze of power.

Female, said the falcon, clear through her shields, scattering her gathered power. *The males fear your kind. They fear power that flies unfeathered.*

"But it is dead!" Shadow cried, reckless. "It is gone."

Yours is not. The queen of falcons stretched her wings wide, folded them with fastidious care. Her head cocked. *We knew when you came. Your magic was small then; it flew with others' wings. It has grown since.*

"Then," said Shadow, a little bitterly, "there was never any need for this. You could have closed talons on me long ago."

Another falcon spoke. She was younger, Shadow sensed, and smaller, and yet she was very proud. *So we could! The tiercels urged it. They learn to think like men; and to fear like men.*

"You let me live. As a cat would. To watch me run."

Others of the falcons cried anger; one or two rose from the perch. The queen merely blinked, a flicker of the inner lid. The young one said, *When we hunt, we kill.*

The falcons settled one by one. Shadow remembered to breathe. She gulped air, loosed it in words. "What do you want of me? Why are you taking so long to kill me?"

Do you deserve to die? the queen inquired.

"The Brothers would say I did."

We are no being's brothers.

The young falcon leaped into the air. The wind shrieked as

she pierced it. Shadow stood like stone, steadfast, meeting stare with valiant stare. Talons stretched for her. Of its own accord her arm swung up.

The talons closed. The white wings folded. The falcon smoothed a feather that had settled awry. *My name*, she said, *is Wind-in-the-North*. It was fitting. Her voice in the mind was clear and cold yet faintly sweet, like the sense of her presence: a wind off the snowfields, with the merest hint of spring.

Shadow swallowed dry-throated. The falcon was a firm weight on her wrist, a prick of talons even through the gauntlet. Stronger was the prick of talons in her mind. Awareness swelled there. Presence; power. It was strange, and yet it was not. As if emptiness had lain in the heart of her, all unsuspected, and now it was filled. She had not known that she was not complete, until she stood completed.

But this could not be Choosing. She-falcons did not Choose. They were above it.

Wind-in-the-North flexed claws as strong as steel, and spoke aloud in falcon speech. "Name yourself, fledgling."

It was Choosing. Improbable, impossible, but it *was*.

Falcons had little enough patience. Shadow tasted the beginning of their contempt. Even the least of the males had acquitted himself more creditably than this.

The least of the males had had some small hope of his Choosing. Shadow drew herself up. "Javanne," she said hoarsely, and then more clearly. "Javanne is my name."

Javanne. The falcons made of it a chorus. The queen's voice went on when theirs had faded. *Javanne our sister, our proud one has Chosen you. She does not choose idly. But there is a price.*

That was not the way of Choosing. Shadow, whose true-name was Javanne, knew that much at least. It was a free bond, the meeting of mind and mind, life and life. She opened her mouth to speak.

The queen forestalled her. *It is your own price, of your own*

making. You are Chosen; that is right and proper. But you came veiled in a lie. For that, you must pay.

Javanne set her jaw. There was truth in the queen's words. Falcon truth, swift and merciless and unescapable. "When I was Chosen, I was to give up my deception. I am prepared for that. I will face whatever I must."

No, the queen said. You will not. That is your price. To live your lie until another sets you free.

Javanne's mind struggled with sudden mad joy. No need to face them all as she had known she must. No need to know their hatred, and their bitter revulsion, and the death which they would give her with hand and blade and claw. No need—and yet—

She could not fall. Wind-in-the-North would not let her. She could not move at all. To go on. To live her lie. To take hall-oath and sword-oath. To be a man among men, veiled in her magics, as she became ever more a woman . . .

Until another should free her. Another man? Another woman? Another lie?

She swore a trooper's oath. The falcons did not even blink. They were, if anything, amused. "It was supposed to *end* here!" Javanne raged at them. "I was supposed to die!"

You were not, said Wind-in-the-North with perfect calm. You were to belong to me. I Chose you from my egg.

"But only tiercels—"

A falcon does as she pleases. Wind-in-the-North sprang to Javanne's shoulder, and nipped her ear, not gently. They are Chosen, your nestmates. They wait for you. Would you have them think you a losel?

That brought Javanne's head up. She stiffened her knees, scrambled together what wits she had. If she chose as the falcons had chosen for her, she must be Javan, Brother of the brothers of falcons. And Chosen of a queen. That would stretch eyes wide enough, even without the rest of it.

"At least," Javanne said to Wind-in-the-North, and in part

to the rest who watched, "it will not be dull living that kills me."

While I live, said Wind-in-the-North, *it will be nothing at all.*

Javanne drank deep of cold clean air. The sun was sinking; the Brothers were waiting. Almetry; and Eyas and Snowcat and Dancer and Maid, who now had names and falcons and places among the warriors. As she had, now, whatever came after. She saluted the queen as a swordsman salutes one who is both master and opponent, and raised her fist. Wind-in-the-North took station once more upon it. Her mind enclosed Javanne's, as Javanne's enclosed her own.

Javanne tried on a smile. It fit surprisingly well. With head up and back straight and a grin of triumph flaring through the smile, she went to join her Brothers.

II

The dream was always the same. A falcon in flight, now black, now silver-white: poising at the summit of its ascent, centering itself, plunging down and down and down. The air tore asunder. The prey swerved, desperate. The falcon struck. Bone cracked, a small hideous sound. The body, captive, convulsed once and was still. Furred beast-body blurred into furless long-limbed shape, eyes wide in the slack face. They lived, those eyes. They burned. They were all colors and none, in all faces and none. But always, however they shifted, they settled at last into one alone: a woman of the Falcon, facing her men with dull submission, but raising behind it a white fire of Power. *Iverna*, Javanne named her. At the naming of the name, the vision shriveled. It was only a cony slain in the hunt, and the falcon only a falcon.

And there was the heart of the horror. *Only* a falcon. It was Wind-in-the-North, all white and silver and achingly beau-

tiful, and where the bond had been that ran deeper than life, nothing. No touch of mind, no presence in the soul, only a black and aching void.

Javanne lay and shuddered and muffled her gasping in the rough familiar blanket. Her mind clutched desperately. *Here*, said Wind-in-the-North. *I am here*. With that overtone that was wholly hers and wholly falcon, of impatience with human follies. Where else would she ever be but safe in Javanne's soul, as Javanne was safe in her own?

Javanne clung to that anchor. It brought the world back, whole and solid. The guardroom in Ravenhold keep, the fire banked on the hearth, the Brothers in their beds and the falcons on their perches, deep asleep. And closest to her, Wind-in-the-North, a white glimmer and a strong presence.

Slowly the nightmare faded. Javanne rose, hunter-quiet; pulled on jerkin and breeches and boots; ran her fingers through her cropped hair. Wind-in-the-North came to her fist without even a flicker of temper.

Loric had the dawn watch above the gate. Little as there was to watch for in this sheltered valley, still he was vigilant: a falcon-helmed shadow under a sky wild with stars, Stormrider drowsing lightly on his shoulder. Javanne sat on the parapet in his comfortable silence, and let the starlight bathe her face. Her narrow sharp-chinned Falconer's face, strong for a woman's, yet almost too fine for a man's. Sometimes Kerrec called her Beauty. Kerrec could be cruel when the mood was on him; and he had never forgiven her for being the Chosen of a queen.

She could see it still behind her eyelids. The long climb down from the Fane of Wings, with the sun setting full in her eyes, and the wind striving to pluck her from the mountain-side, and Wind-in-the-North still as a carved falcon on her shoulder. But no stone, she. Warm body sleeked with feathers, wide eyes burning gold, and in Javanne's mind the flame of her consciousness. Where the mountain met the Eyrie,

Brothers waited, each with his tiercel. The falcons had regarded Wind-in-the-North with mighty respect but with no surprise. The men had forgotten for an eternal moment all that they were to say and do. One even loosed an exclamation. It was Alмеры who cut across it, scattering it with ritual: the full salute and the measured words. "I give you greeting, Brother. Was it fair, the hunting?"

Javanne stumbled over the response which she had never expected to give. "It—it was fair, the hunting. Is the fire warm upon the hearth?"

"The fire blazes," said Alмеры, "and the board is laid. Will my Brother take his rest among my Brothers?"

"Gladly would I rest," she said, and that was purest truth.

The hall that had been so grim and cold in the testing, was full of warmth and light, and Brothers. Every Brother in the Eyrie, and every falcon, and among them four who were but newly Chosen. Snowcat, Dancer, Maid, and Eyas; but now they were strangers, straight-backed stern-faced young men in full Falcon gear, with names that she must remember. Kerrec, Hendin, Jory, Loric. Yet in that first moment as she stood alone and small in the gate, she saw only eyes. They were wide and startled, fixed on her other self, who spread great wings and said distinctly in falcon speech, "I who am Wind-in-the-North have Chosen this one called Javan to be my soul's kin."

Here and there, discipline broke. Javanne caught rags of words. "A queen?" "But that has never—" "*Can* never—" And sharp and clear and yet maddeningly sourceless: "Sacrilege!"

"How can holiness defile itself?" That was Loric, managing to be both diffident and impatient. "The queen has Chosen. Who would be fool enough to gainsay her?"

"Queens do not Choose," rapped a scarred and weathered Brother.

"A queen has," Alмеры said, coming to stand beside Jav-

anne. His helmet was in his hand; he was calm, almost smiling. He saluted Wind-in-the-North and addressed her in her own tongue. "Is it permitted to ask why?"

She blinked the falcon's double blink, inner lid flickering in the wake of the outer. Her hiss was falcon laughter; her answer was absolute. "It is not."

Almery bowed, and astonished Javanne with a sudden wicked grin. It vanished as quickly as it had come; he beckoned.

She followed him through all the eyes. Some were beginning to envy, or to admire. A few began to hate. In front of the dais she halted. The Master stood alone upon it, clad like any Brother in leather and in well-worn mail. His eyes were the image of his falcon's, wild and burning cold, no flicker of plain humanity to give Javanne comfort.

She drew herself up. She had Wind-in-the-North. She needed no more.

His head bowed the merest fraction. His eyes did not warm, but they considered her steadily, almost as if he knew what she hid and why, and it mattered, and he would fight when the time came; but now he would play out the game as the falcons wished it. "Will you take sword-oath, O Chosen of a queen?"

"If you will accept it," Javanne answered steadily.

There was a sword for her. Almery's. She knew what that meant. Later she would know that she was the first of the five to be oathed; they had waited for her. She knelt as she must, set her hands in the Master's, said all the words of binding to Eyrie and Brothers and Law. And again, before Almery, she swore herself into service. She did not know what she felt. She was too stunned for joy, or even for fear. Her lie must endure, with the falcons' geas now to bind it, and oaths which she would try to keep. She was sundered from those who had set her in the Eyrie: so she learned after long and baffling silence, when she tried to touch Iverna's mind and met a wall

full of falcon eyes. That too was of the geas, and impassable, and no force of hers sufficed to break it down.

Time had eased her way, a little. The Eyrie's discipline had forestalled her singling out, and Almetry her captain took care to use both falcon and Falconer precisely as he would use any other pair of novices. Wind-in-the-North was larger than her brothers, and swifter, and fiercer, but she was young enough to yield to wisdom where she must. Even if that wisdom belonged to a lowly male. Now, after two years' honing and training in the Eyrie and among the fighting men of Estcarp, the white falcon and her Chosen roused comment only among strangers.

No one knew her secret. No one had even guessed. Men were blinder than she could ever have conceived. She hardly needed the spells with which by care and habit she guarded her womanhood. That young Javan was modest to obsession was reckoned a simple eccentricity, of a piece with his shyness and his reticence. Had he not lived seven years in the novices' barracks where there could be few secrets? Had he not passed the Choosing, where there could be none? Even if it were a she-falcon who Chose: that was a wonder and perhaps a scandal, but it was done; there was no altering it. Javanne was accepted now, a Brother of the brothers of falcons. She lived, rode, fought beside them. Her body by fortune's favor had grown tall and narrow, its curves all gone in thinness. She had trained herself to walk like a man, and to talk like one, although her throat disliked it. The rest was in the eye and the mind of the one who saw her.

She was as safe as she could ever hope to be. And she was breaking slowly. The dreams were the proof of it. Her mind was not content to beset her with simple nightmares of unmasking and outcasting. No; she must know the full hideousness of sundering from her falcon.

Never, said Wind-in-the-North from the edge of sleep. And, stronger: *I guard you. No one can touch you.*

Tell that to my dreams, Javanne said sourly.

I tell them, said Wind-in-the-North.

Javanne sighed and shivered. Her neck was stiff. Had she drowned? The stars were fading; the east had grown pale. Loric was more shape now than shadow.

What drew her eye upward, she did not know. Ravenhold keep boasted far more of strength than of grace; but from one corner of it rose a slender spear of stone. It was a weakness, Javanne reckoned with Falconer logic: thin-walled, ornamented with carven balconies, and weakened to uselessness by a scattering of windows. Lord Imric's women held it and the corner of the keep from which it sprang; appropriately enough, the Brothers muttered, especially those ten condemned to stand guard in Ravenhold while the rest harried the borders with the lord. Guarding was easy enough, if ignominious; and Lord Imric had men to spare for that, even if he must hire Almery's company to clear his lands of the offscourings of the wars and the Turning. But he had insisted that his castle's guards be Falconers. "I cannot rest easy else," he had said in the way he had, light, a little deprecating, but all steel beneath. "I lost my lady to a liegeman's treachery. I will not so lose my sister. From men of the Falcon at least I need fear no betrayal."

Almery had consented with little enough demur. The Lady Gwenlian kept to the tower with her women; the Brothers kept to their guardianship, not happily, but with soldierly resignation. They all knew the tale behind Lord Imric's tale of treachery. A woman alone with her lord gone to war, a captain of guards with a fair face and a white smile, and one thing led to another, and on a fine bright morning they two were gone. Eastward, people said. And Lord Imric entrusted his remaining women to the only men in the world who would not dream of breaking that trust.

Javanne regarded the women's tower in the dawn, and was soul-glad that she need not dwell there. Women in Estcarp

were said to be as free as men. In the towns Javanne had seen, that seemed to be so. It appalled even hardened veterans among her Brothers. Yet in Ravenhold, whether by their own choice or by Lord Imric's doing, the ladies lived almost as prisoners.

She had heard the servants whispering. It was not only the Lady Vianna's infidelity. Some strangeness attached itself to the Lady Gwenlian. She was to have been a Witch, they said. Then had come the Turning, and the breaking of the Witches' power in Estcarp. The lady had come home without oath or jewel, riding alone through the wrack of war. She had told her full tale to no one save, perhaps, her brother. She had shut herself up in her tower, and there she remained, coming forth only to walk in the herb garden or to ride unattended in the far fields or, very rarely, to dine in hall. Since her brother left, she had done none of them.

Yet surely that was she who leaned on the windowframe above Javanne, face turned to the rising dawn. Her hair was loose about her shoulders. She wore something pale, with a shawl thrown over it, all careless where perhaps she thought none could see. She was almost frighteningly beautiful.

"I don't think we're even supposed to look."

Javanne started. Loric stood behind her; his voice was wry, and pitched just above a whisper.

"I wonder," Javanne muttered, eyes fixed on that glimmering face. And more softly still, and yet more swiftly, almost a hiss: "She is no Witch!"

"Of course not. Witches have no beauty."

"She has too much." Javanne rounded on him. "You've been looking."

"I can hardly help it," he said. "Maybe that's why she never won her jewel. Her looks were against her."

"Maybe," said Javanne, not believing it. She was very cold. It was the wind, she told herself, and the dawn chill. It had nothing to do with the lady in the window. Fair as she was,

and strange, and touched with sadness, like a white bird caged. Her troubles were her own. She was nothing to Javanne of the Brotherhood.

Again Javanne looked up. The lady's eyes had lowered to meet Javanne's. They were level, and very dark in the half-light. The lady smiled a very little, tentative, almost shy. *Why*, Javanne thought, *she's young*. As for her people she must be, long as their lives were, and young as the Witches took them. Not so very much older than Javanne herself, and like her, a prisoner with a secret which she dared not tell.

Javanne's face was stiff. She tore her eyes away. It was deadly, that sense of kinship. She must not yield to it.

Steel rang on steel. Hendin, come to relieve Loric. Javanne took shelter in flight.

Wind-in-the-North rode the living air, letting it carry her, with the sun warm on her back and Ravenhold's gray walls forgotten below. In a little while she would be hungry, and then she would kill. Now she was simply free.

Stormrider circled lazily below her. He waited on her pleasure, as was proper. His wings were blacker than any raven's, with a shimmer of midnight splendor. His eyes were the color of heart's blood. The curve of his beak was fiercely beautiful; his talons were strong and sure in the kill. Perhaps, when her season came . . .

Javanne thanked the Powers for the helmet that hid her burning cheeks. Wind-in-the-North was no lady; she was a queen. When she thought of loving, she spared no time for maidenly foolishness. Lately she had often thought of it. Winter was retreating from the mountains; already lesser birds were nesting. Soon Wind-in-the-North must choose her life's mate and begin the raising of her young.

Perhaps Almerly had known what he did, to set Javanne among the guardians of Ravenhold. A nesting falcon had no place among her fighting kin.

I will not nest, said Wind-in-the-North with a flash of temper, until I choose. I am no featherhead of a bird, to be at my body's mercy.

But if your body insists—Javanne began.

My body is my servant. Wind-in-the-North gathered it. Rockdoves fed amid the stubble of a fallow field. She loosed a high fierce cry. They scattered. She laughed, chose the fattest, and struck.

Javanne untangled herself from the exhilaration of the kill. Her body was briefly strange to itself, great awkward wingless thing in leather and mail. Her gelding fretted the bit, tossing his head. He had stood still quite long enough; and there were three doves down at Wind-in-the-North's talons, and one frantic in its darting flight, but she was waiting for it. Stormrider had two on his own account, filling Loric's bag; he brought down a third as Javanne watched, and came to his perch on Loric's saddle with no little reluctance. But he settled quickly enough as Loric gutted the last of the birds and fed him the entrails.

"How fierce your birds are," a stranger said, "and how splendid."

Javanne had known that a horse approached from the castle; because its leather-clad rider was no Brother, she had noticed the fineness of the mount, acknowledged the quality of the horsemanship, and dismissed both. But the low sweet voice brought her about. Even in riding garb there could be no doubt of the newcomer's gender. Or of her name. There could not be two such faces in Ravenhold.

Javanne spoke no word of greeting. Deliberately she dismounted, calling Wind-in-the-North to her fist with a whistle and a word as one always did before strangers, gathering the slain birds into her bag. When she turned, the Lady Gwenlian had come between her and her gelding. Javanne skirted her in silence, set Wind-in-the-North on the forked perch, swung astride.

The lady seemed not at all dismayed. "It is wonderful, the flight of a falcon," she said.

Javanne set her teeth and began to gut a dove. The lady did not, as Javanne had hoped, turn pale and retreat. She watched with interest as Wind-in-the-North accepted the tribute of heart and liver. "Your bird is very beautiful. Is it a new breed? I have never seen one like it."

Javanne had sworn herself to silence. Not so Loric. "She," he said with cool precision, "is a female: a falcon. Those whom you have seen are males. Tiercels." He paused, one beat, two. "Does my lady require escort to her chambers?"

Javanne would have laughed if she had not been so desperately uneasy. As if this woman, being woman and once, almost, a Witch, could know. As if she could see what lay beneath the leather and steel.

She was lonely, that was all. Javanne hardly needed witchery to know it. It was written in her face. And perhaps she found her tower tedious, and here was a challenge to her beauty and her wit and her potent womanhood: a pair of Falconers hunting for the pot.

She smiled at Loric. It was neither simper nor snarl. It was merely beautiful. "My lady welcomes escort in her riding."

"We hunt," Loric said, flat and forbidding.

"Then you may lead, and I will follow. It is a long while," she said, "since I rode a-hawking."

Loric wavered visibly. The lady was very beautiful, and he was very young, and he was not as wholehearted a hater of women as he should have been.

"You hunt," Javanne said to him, quickly, before he could speak. "I shall return the lady to her place."

"And am I a strayed heifer, to be sent back to my byre?" demanded the Lady Gwenlian. Stung, with glittering eyes and sharpened voice, she seemed less like sheer mindless beauty and more like a mortal woman. She was all the more perilous for that.

"You are a woman," said Javanne. It was stark and reasonless terror; it sounded like hate thickened with scorn.

Loric was a little gentler. "The falcons hunt best without

distraction." Stormrider stretched his wings and hissed. He was laughing.

Wind-in-the-North had less patience. She left her perch in an eruption of wings, and sank talons into the rump of the lady's stallion. The beast screamed, lashed, and bolted.

Javanne gathered to bolt after; but a flick of the falcon's mind held her still. The stallion's path led directly to the castle, and the rider was firm upon his back. Already he was slowing under her hand.

Wind-in-the-North settled calmly on her perch and smoothed a ruffled feather. "Now," she said in falcon speech, "may we hunt?"

Falcon helm turned to falcon helm. Javanne wanted desperately to laugh, or else to howl. Loric raised his hand in the warrior's signal: *Onwārd*.

"Onward," Javanne agreed. Time enough later to pay for a falcon's frankness. The day grew no younger, and they had a pot to fill. She touched the gelding to a trot.

If there was a price for her abrupt and humiliating dismissal, the Lady Gwenlian seemed disinclined to demand it. She did not approach Javanne again. Javanne saw her once or twice in the window of her tower, but she did not call, and Javanne did not tarry to tempt her. The edge began to wear off the memory, although Javanne could not, yet, manage to laugh at it. She told no one of it. Nor, she noticed, did Loric. It was too small a matter, or too great, to bandy about the guardroom.

Then Javanne forgot it. She was dreaming nightly, always the same: the falcon, the hunt, the kill; and the terrible blankness of the mind behind the lambent eyes. Once she woke screaming, with Loric holding her down. Her first instinct was to cling. Her second was to fling him away with all her strength. He fell sprawling in Hendin's bed, in a tumult of startled men and startled falcons. They were all short of sleep

that night, and not inclined to let Javanne forget who had begun it. She almost welcomed the three days' stable duty: she could sleep in the loft among the last of the hay, and dream her dreams without fear of shattering anyone's sleep but her own.

On the third day of her penance, Javanne stood atop the dungheap with the sun in her eyes and an emptied barrow tugging against her hands. Because it was insistent, and because she had stopped caring who saw, she let it go. It found its upward track, sprang off its legs, and somersaulted down the slope. A small madness stung her. She vaulted after it, spinning in the air. Her feet struck clean earth and a living shadow. She swayed, startled, and almost fell. A hand caught her.

Loric let go quickly. He was trying to be Falcon-stern, but a grin kept breaking through.

She swallowed her own. "I didn't mean to strike you," she said. "The other night."

And in the same instant he said, "I didn't mean to startle you. The other night."

They stopped. "I—" they both said. Stopped again. Began to laugh.

Javanne mastered herself first. She righted the barrow, set her hands to the shafts. Loric stopped her. He had sobered all at once, which was a gift he had. "Wait. I really do mean—I tried to come before, but Gavin forbade me."

"One should obey one's décurion," Javanne agreed blandly.

"I told him I started it."

"And he said that I brought force into it." Javanne upended the barrow and leaned on it. A yawn escaped before she could catch it. "Let be, Loric. It's past."

"Hardly that." His hand took in the stableyard, the redolent hill, the barrow. "And you still have the dreams."

Javanne straightened very slowly. "It was only one nightmare."

"Yes," he shot back. "Every night for nights out of count. And you running away from sleep until it catches you and ties you, and going about like a black-eyed ghost, and turning into one, too, with the bare mouthful you'll eat when someone forces it into you."

Javanne stared at him. He glared back, his dark eyes sparking gold out of his falcon's face. Anger she could understand, or impatience. But not this passionate eloquence.

His jaw set. His brows met over the swoop of his nose. "Damn you, Javan," he said. "What is there in you that won't let itself trust your own Brothers?"

"A man is strong," she answered him levelly. "He does not go weeping to his mother at every ill dream."

"Neither does he nurse a great trouble till it comes nigh to breaking him."

"What makes you think that you can ease my burden?"

She thought that she had gained his hatred then. But Loric was Loric. "Maybe I can't," he said with perfect calm. "Stormrider thinks I should try."

"Stormrider is a broody hen."

He knocked her down and sat on her. He did it without rancor, and without great effort. "Never," he said gently, "never speak ill of my falcon. Your dreams are troubling his sleep. Your self troubles his waking. He demands that I make you whole. Because, he says, you are falcon-minded, and a queen has Chosen you."

Javanne tossed him onto his back, knelt astride him, scowled down at him. "What makes him think you have any power over me?"

Loric shrugged. "Can I fathom the logic of a falcon? I can't even fathom yours. Something is killing you inch by inch. And you refuse to say a word."

"Surely the falcons know," she said bitterly.

"Only that you dream, and your dreams are dark."

She pushed herself away from him, gathering into a knot. Secrets. So many secrets. And no one—no one—

She tossed her aching head. "My dreams are dark," she said. Her voice was raw, not like her own at all; it rasped in her throat. "My dream. It is only one. My falcon, hunting. She kills. And there is no bond between us. None at all." She looked up. His face was still. Her lips stretched in the parody of a smile. "You see? There's no more to it than that. It's hardly worth a falcon's fretting, or the concern of a—" She paused. For all that she could do, the word escaped. "The concern of a friend."

She shrank within herself. He said nothing for a long while, did not even glance at her. He sat up and clasped his knees. He frowned a little still. When he spoke, at first it seemed to have nothing to do with either dream or friendship. "This morning, Gavin had a sending through the baubles. There's been a battle. Almery and the Brothers had the van. They were ambushed. They were . . . very badly beaten." Javanne sat mute. Loric considered the pattern of dust on his breeches. "Very badly," he repeated, as if to himself. "They were no scattering of bandits that attacked: there were too many, and too crafty. Renegade sellswords out of Karsten, Almery thinks, with an eye on the green lands. We pay high for what they take. Half of our Brothers—half down, killed or wounded. And the falcons . . ." His voice broke as it had not since just after his Choosing. He tossed his head, angry at his own weakness. "The enemy aimed at the falcons. It was sudden—uncanny. Our people had had no warning at all. And the falcons—just as the shooting began, the falcons went wild. Something had broken the bond. Like a knife cutting, abrupt and absolute."

"Witchery." Javanne hardly knew that she spoke aloud until she had spoken.

Loric nodded tightly. "It was witchery. Strong, but not so

strong as to hold past the first moments. It had no need. By the time Lord Imric's men came, the damage was done, and the enemy had melted away. None of them lingered. There were only our dead, winged and wingless."

"Almery?" she whispered.

"Safe. A dart grazed his hand; there was no poison in it. Those falcons who live, stay by their Chosen. But the bond, they say, is not what it was before. Like a broken pot. Mended, it shows still the scars."

Javanne was silent for a long while. At last she dared to ask it. "How many?"

"Thirty falcons. Ten men."

Javanne closed her eyes. Thirty. There had been half a hundred. Ten rested idle in Ravenhold. Only ten left. Of half a hundred falcons, only ten. Twenty men left alive, half their souls gone, torn asunder by a flight of outland arrows.

She had thought herself a veteran, blooded in battle, inured to any horror. Fool that she was. Child. She had never seen a falcon slain while his bondmate lived. Men, yes. But their brothers-in-feathers had always died with them. That was great grief, but it was fitting. She could endure it.

This was unspeakable. She wrapped her arms about the sickness in her belly, holding it there by main force.

"The dead are fortunate," Loric said. "The living are cripples, most of them. Some are mad. Revan killed himself."

He said it quietly, coolly, as if he were what outlanders deemed all his kind to be: cold and heartless, a man of leather and steel. But that was the Falcon way. His eyes were burning dry, his face carved in ice, the scar of his Choosing livid in it. And he had laughed with Javanne, suffered her cruelties, fretted over her little troubles.

He said it even as she thought it. "So you see, Javan. You dreamed true."

She shook her head slowly. Not denying it. Refusing what it meant. However twisted, stunted, bent awry by the lie which

she must live, Power dwelt in her. She knew it. She could have been a Witch, had she been of Estcarp, and had she submitted herself to that stark and ancient discipline: though no less stark or ancient than the Law of the Falcon. But that she was foresighted—that she had seen what would be, and had not heeded it, and had kept it with the rest of her secrets, and by her criminal folly so many had died—

She rocked, still shaking her head, giving no thought to how she must look until Loric seized her and shook her. She looked at him and reckoned him brave; and strange, for a Brother, because he was so willing to touch and to be touched. They had hearts, the Falconers. They could love, and did, often, and freely in their own dour way. Man and falcon, Brother and Brother, soldier and captain, sometimes even man and man, though that was neither as easy nor as common as outlanders seemed to think. But they did not often set flesh to flesh. Like their falcons, they did their touching from a distance.

Loric's fingers were hurting-tight. All at once they were gone, although the pain tarried. "By all the Powers," he cried to her, "don't *look* like that!"

She swallowed. Her throat ached. But her mind was suddenly very clear. She heard her voice coming from very far away. "What will Gavin do?"

"Send five Brothers to do what they can. Not," Loric added, and that was bitter, "the five of us infants. We stay with Gavin and make a show of defending milady's virtue."

"A show," Javanne repeated. She began to laugh.

This time Loric had to strike her. She was frightening him. He had never seen her like this. Herself. Woman and witch; but he could not know that. She thought of telling him, of stripping in front of him. It was a passing madness, and she was geas-bound. She made herself sit up, arrange her face into sanity, and say, "A show indeed. That is what we must put on."

Something was awry. Perhaps she was too calm. "What are you saying?" Loric demanded, swift and fierce.

She had no answer for him. So much was unraveling in this ill-knit world of hers; the woman was part of it, because she was a woman, because she would have been a Witch, because something in her called to Javanne. Nor had it stopped calling for that Javanne would not listen.

"No," she heard Loric say. "Oh, no. You haven't let her sink her claws in you."

It was a prayer. He yearned to believe it; he feared desperately that it was a lie. He waited for her to confess that she had gone to her oathlady's bed.

Beyond hysteria lay a region of utter calm. She spoke from the midst of it. "She could never tempt me to that."

"Of course she could," he said with an edge of roughness. "She is beautiful. She rides like a man; she knows the sword; she—"

"And how do you know that?"

He stopped short. His cheeks reddened beneath the browning of sun and wind. The thin line of his scar burned scarlet. "I'm neither blind nor deaf. And I'm no less a man than you."

Javanne bit her lip until the blood sprang, sudden and iron-sweet. "Loric, I would not desire her. I could not." His eyes were adamant in unbelief. She flung truth in his face. "I *can't*! I do not—I cannot incline toward a woman."

There was a silence. Loric paled. His hand reached, retreated. "I—" He swallowed. His head tossed. His brows were knotted as if in pain. "Is that why you wouldn't be my swordbrother?"

After a moment she nodded. She could not look at him. Her cheeks were hot; her vitals twisted, racked with her treading so close to the bounds of the geas.

He did not say anything ridiculous. For a long while he did not say anything at all. Then he touched her shoulder, lightly,

briefly. "You know what I am," he said. "And what I'm not." He paused. "Will you be my swordbrother?"

Her head came up. This was more than apology. She knew what he was asking, and what he was not. She had refused him once, because she knew that she must fail the Choosing. Now she was Chosen. And more a woman now than she had been then. And he was—very—

Young. Blind. Foolish. And beloved. Yes, she cried in the fortress of her mind. She was quite besotted with this her Brother, and so she always had been, ever since she saw him standing in the fledglings' barracks, awkward and bedraggled and ugly-beautiful as an unfledged falcon. That was her first terror-stark day in the Eyrie, with every moment trumpeting her discovery and her destruction; and he had been fighting: Kerrec crouched in a corner, nursing a bloodied face. But Loric had been gentle with the newcomer, the seachild brought late into the Brotherhood, and he had named himself seachild also, and appointed himself her friend. Her brother. Defender and defended, and sharer in all that she would share.

He was not a man for men. He could not be a man for women. While she . . .

"Yes," she said, defying fate and geas and her own treacherous body. "Yes, I will be your swordbrother."

The light in his face made her want to break and bolt. She unsheathed her dagger as he unsheathed his. They made the cut, held wrist to wrist, mingled blood and blood. He was steady. She struggled not to shake. Something more was passing than blood and friendship. Something potent, that would not let her grasp it.

"Sword and shield," he said, slow and solemn, "blood and bread, and the Lord of Wings over us all: be thou my brother in heart and hand, through life and through death, unto the world's ending."

"Sword and shield," she said, steady because her pride

commanded it, "blood and bread, and the queens of falcons be my witness: be thou my brother in heart and hand, through life and through death, unto the world's ending."

"So mote it be," he said, setting his hilt in her hand.

She laid her blade in his. "By the Powers of Air, so shall it be."

The air thrummed into stillness. The scent of Power faded slowly. Loric seemed not to perceive it. Her blade snicked into his sheath; he smiled at her, a little shy, a little mischievous. Yet his words were all properly dutiful. "The Brothers will be wanting their horses. Are you done here?"

"Quite done," Javanne said. He turned; she followed him into the odorous dark of the stable.

From the highest of Ravenhold's pastures, the land seemed all at peace. No wars and no Turning; no reivers in the hills. No slaughter of falcons. Even here, even after a hand of days, Javanne's mind could not dwell on that memory. It skittered round the edges. It tried to see a pattern. A plot, with the Falconers' destruction in the center.

"But *why*?" she cried aloud.

Why? the mountains echoed her. *Whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy?*

Wind-in-the-North drew her back from the borders of desperation. She flew high even for a Falconer's sight; her white-and-silver body was one with the scud of clouds. *A rider comes*, she said.

Javanne's gelding wandered, cropping the new grass. She did not call him to her. From the stone on which she sat, she could see down the long rolling slope to the narrow neck of the valley. She watched the sun pursue cloud-shadows across it.

A new shadow swelled among the green. Earthbound, this one, moving at horse-pace. Javanne watched as it drew nearer.

The Lady Gwenlian wore woman's garb, the skirt divided for riding, pouring over the gray stallion's flanks. He halted neat-footed on the very edge of Javanne's shadow; his rider looked down, level, taking in the unmasked face.

Javanne let her stare. It could not matter what she saw. Nothing mattered but that some Power wished the falcons dead.

"You," the lady said slowly. "You are not—"

Javanne paid the woman's words no heed. "They are killing falcons," she said. "Do you know what that does to us? Can you even imagine it?"

Gwenlian slid from the saddle. Her eyes were intent, her fine brows knit. "I thought—you were all—" She stopped, shook her head sharply as if to dismiss a thought that had no purpose. "Who would slay your birds? What could he hope to gain from it?"

"If I knew that, I would not be sitting idle here, grieving for my Brothers." Javanne's mind was beginning to clear. There was danger in this colloquy. In coming so close to a woman who might not be blind as men were blind. And yet there was a sort of comfort in it. A sense almost of relief; a loosening of the constraints that bound her body and her mind.

The lady sat on the grass. She had made an art of beauty as did Almerj of swordsmanship; it was as sure as instinct, and as unconscious. "There are ways to learn who threatens your people," she said.

Javanne met her eyes. "You are no Witch, lady."

"Not all the world's Power resides in the sisterhood."

Javanne laughed lightly enough to startle herself. "Indeed not! Though they would have your people believe otherwise. They trained you, did they not? and fell before they could bring you into the fullness of your Power."

"I left them," Gwenlian said. "I could not bind myself as they would see me bound."

"The body's pleasures are sweet, I am told."

The lady flushed faintly; yet she did not take offense. "That was not all of it."

"Surely not." Javanne ran gloved fingers through the grass. "I would be a fool to trust you. You are a woman; you were to be a Witch. What you stand for, and what I stand for, are as the wolf and the snow cat. Implacable enemies."

"Need it be so?"

Javanne glanced at her. There was no falsehood in her. "Suppose that I did trust you. What can you do?"

"More perhaps than you think. What needs to be done?"

"Something is slaying falcons. Something with Power. We must find it; name it, if we can; destroy it."

"Simple enough," said the lady with a flicker of mirth. "I have not the Power of a full Witch, but in seeking and in finding I have a little skill. If I seek and find, surely your brave sword will suffice to destroy."

"Why would you trouble yourself to do it?"

Gwenlian shrugged. She looked very young. "It is dull, this life of mine. In some matters my brother is a little less than sane; I humor him, because I love him, but he is not my master. Whatever he may think." There was steel in that. Javanne acknowledged it with a dip of her head. The lady bowed in return. "And beyond my small preoccupations, there is truth. I was taught to hear what is not said, to see more than my eyes can see. I cannot help it. Your falcons, my heart tells me, are more than trained beasts."

"They are rather more than that," Javanne said. She raised her fist. Wind-in-the-North came to it. The lady held very still: remembering, no doubt, what had come of their last meeting. Javanne smiled thinly. "If you would ally with me, you must ally likewise with this my sister."

Gwenlian regarded the white falcon with more of wonder than of distrust. Wind-in-the-North favored her with a single molten glance, and shifted to Javanne's shoulder. *We need her*, the falcon said, not with any great pleasure. *She can hunt*

where we cannot; her little Power can seek unmarked where our greater strength would flush the quarry. Tell her that I say so.

Javanne did as she was bidden. The lady was not pleased to be so judged, but she mustered a smile. "The white queen is as direct in speech as in her hunting. I will suffer her if she will suffer me." She rose, shook out her skirts with the air of one girding for battle. She held out her hand. "Well, Falconer. Is it a pact?"

Javanne paused. Wind-in-the-North was wise, and more foresighted than any human seer. But it was mad, all of this. What could any of them do against a Power with strength to fell a full company of the Falcon?

They could find it and face it and take what came after. She clasped the lady's hand, and it was soft, uncalloused, yet strong. "A pact," she said. She grinned suddenly, to Gwenlian's patent astonishment. "My Brothers will be appalled."

"Are you?"

Javanne laughed and would not answer.

"There is a place," said Gwenlian, "where our seeking may be the stronger."

Javanne, once begun, refused to regret what she had chosen. She mounted her gelding; Wind-in-the-North took again to the air. Together they followed in Gwenlian's wake, by ways steep even for a mountain pony, away from the setting sun. The fighting was away eastward. The Lady Vianna had fled eastward. In the east were mysteries and memories and old, old fears.

Javanne tensed to gather the slack reins, to turn her mount back. What was she doing? She had orders: a patrol to ride and a land to protect. She had no leave to abandon her duties.

The gelding slid, stumbled, caught himself. Her fingers

loosened on the reins. Ahead of her trod her shadow, and ahead of it her guide. She firmed herself to follow them.

The mountain wearied at last of its ascent, and rested upon a high stony level. There was nothing sorcerous in it, save that magic which dwells in all high places: wind and air magic, wild magic, the magic of earth that meets the sky. Falcon magic. With a high exultant cry, Wind-in-the-North touched the summit of heaven and dropped like a stone. A bare man-length above Javanne's head, she caught herself; she settled demurely to the saddle-perch, ignoring Gwenlian's wide stare. "Begin," she said in falcon speech.

The lady scarcely needed to hear the meaning of the word. She left her saddle, taking with her the saddlebags. She set them on the ground, searching through them until she found what she needed: a peeled wand, a packet of herbs, a string of beads the color of the summer sky. She looked up from them, smiling a little. She was not as steady as she might have been. "It is a simple thing, this. With proper teaching, a child can do it."

Javanne nodded slowly. Falcon magic was more of the inner world than of the outer; it needed few trappings, demanded little ritual. She watched Gwenlian circle the mountaintop with her wand, sealing the circle with herbs and with murmured words. She sensed the raising of wards: an oddness, a cramping of Power into this small space. The stallion snorted, startling her. She gentled him. He pulled away, seeking out the thin grass which grew among the stones.

Gwenlian returned from the circle's edge to kneel in its center. Her steps were a little slower, her brow sheened with sweat. She waved Javanne away. "No, no, it is nothing. Power has its price; this is low enough. Stay by me now; watch over me. If I have not roused by moonrise, compel me. Do not touch me unless you must, and do not fear, whatever you see."

Again and more sharply Javanne nodded. Her lips were set.

Let the woman call it apprehension; that was true enough. Not since she was a little child had Javanne been forced to trust to another's Power. And this was not even a Power of her own kind. Spells, cantrips, beads and powders and charlatanry; and the wielder of them all an enemy of the Falcon, a Witch who had turned coward and fled the testing.

No. No coward. Merely one who had yearned to be free.

Gwenlian settled herself with her back to a tall stone and her face to the eastern sky. She arranged her body with care, and arranged her mind with it. She wound the blue beads about her fingers, stroking them, focusing upon them. Her face stilled. Her eyes closed.

Power gathered. It was slow; it was less feeble than Javanne had feared it would be. There was sweetness in it, but steel too, and a fierce self-centeredness that spoke to Javanne of cats. It was not a flaw in a sorceress, if she had the wit to rule it.

Javanne's shields rose with the other's Power. It was not aware of her own that yearned to call to it. It turned outward, a shadow cat with eyes like moons. A wall of light reared before it. It paced forward. A gate opened; the cat passed through, taking with it a glimmer of the wall's light. It paused beyond, head up, questing. The world had gone all strange. Dreams walked the shadowed earth; memories; ghosts, demons, flickers of alien Power. The cat took no notice of them. It sought a thing more palpable than they. A slayer of falcons. A breaker of the bond; an enemy of the Brotherhood.

Javanne was one with the shadows in the cat's wake. Part of her dwelt still in the outer world, eyes and a sliver of mind on watch against dangers of the body. She saw the sun go down; she knew when the wind rose, keen and cold. And she quested behind the lady, watching only, veiled against any Power that might come hunting.

The cat's tail twitched: a quickening of the sorceress' awareness. Javanne sank deeper into hiding. The mind-beast

advanced with greater purpose now. It had found a scent. Javanne clung to control. She must not reach toward that suggestion of presence. She must trust this alliance and this ally. There had been little enough logic in the pact; in its observance at least she could take thought for prudence.

Even as she thought it, mind and body reeled. Something had risen out of the mists of the inner world. It was huge, and it was ancient, and it was nothing that had ever been at one with human soul. It was bound, but not unfree; like a young falcon on the creance, it flew as far as it might and did what it would within the stretch of its bonds. And it yearned to break them. It was a Power of the air, a winged thing trammeled, constrained to alien will.

Human will.

Great talons stretched. Gwenlian whirled to flee. Too late, too slow. Javanne caught her, mind, body. There were too many of both. She could not grasp them all.

The earth fell away beneath them. Something caught at them: the wards, feeble, toppling under the weight of Power without and Power helpless within. Mind tangled in body, body spun in void. It tore like ancient silk.

Javanne gasped for breath. She was blind, deaf, dead.

Something stirred against her. A pale blur steadied into a face, dim-lit as by a pallid radiance. She stared stupidly at it. Loric. What had Loric to do with any of this?

Her focus stretched sluggishly. Gwenlian stirred within her hand's reach. Stormrider, Wind-in-the-North, she could not see. But the white falcon was in her mind as she clutched in dream-born panic, offering nothing but presence.

It was enough. She sat up dizzily, swallowing bile. This was not the mountaintop near Ravenhold. That had held only the Power which Gwenlian brought to it. This was a place of true Power. Her bones throbbed with it.

In the mortal world it was simple enough: a ring of stones about a single central stone. Those without were newer

though still vastly old, shaped and smoothed by art and hand, touched with a fugitive shimmer. Blue, perhaps. Or green. Or moonwhite. The inner stone was the heartstone, and at the first blurred glance it seemed to have no shape but that which time had given it. But it was shaped, how long ago Javanne could not even begin to guess, and that shape had about it a haunting familiarity. Like—almost like—a winged creature. A bird, beaked and taloned, its wings half spread as if it would take flight from its prison. The light which kindled in it was of no color which a human eye could encompass.

It was not of the Dark. No more was it of the Light. It was beyond either, or perhaps beneath them. And it was appallingly strong.

The others had begun to rouse. Loric was on his feet almost before his eyes opened; only Javanne's grip kept him erect. They held each other up and watched Gwenlian come slowly to herself. She saw the two who stood over her; she opened her mouth as if to speak, closed it again with care.

Javanne's knees gave way. She let them, taking Loric with her. He did not resist. Nor did his eyes leave her face. "I hope," he said, "that you know what you are doing."

Rage or terror, she could have borne. Trust made her want to throw back her head and howl. "What are you doing here?" she demanded of him.

"I followed you," he answered.

"Why?"

"I thought you might need me."

"You fool. You utter fool."

"And what are you?" he countered. "What do you call this? A child's game?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You thought I lied. After all I said, after the oathing itself, you thought I had fallen to a woman."

"I thought you contemplated something less than wise."

Neat, that evasion. Javanne glared at the ground. The truth was less than he thought, but more than she could bear to

confess. It would sound too much like betrayal. Or at the very least, like madness.

The Lady Gwenlian filled her craven silence. "We made alliance," said the woman, "to find the Power that is slaying falcons. It seems that we have found it."

"Or it has found us." Loric's calm acceptance startled Javanne, and shamed her. But it was a woman who had told him, and one of Estcarp at that, from whom any madness could be truth. He stood, paused to steady his feet, approached the heartstone. He circled it slowly. But for the light in it, it seemed like any other stone, lifeless and Powerless. He walked away from it to the edge of the circle.

The outer stones waxed brighter as he drew nearer. His feet slowed. He stretched out a hand.

A hammer of light smote him down.

Javanne was beside him, with no memory of moving. Her brain held no thought at all. Could hold none, until she held him and knew that he lived. Dazed, stunned, but coming to his senses. "Guardians," he said. "Jailers. But what they guard—it grows stronger than they. It struck me. But for the guardians—"

But for the guardians, he would have died. "It wants us here," Javanne said.

"To free it." He sat up, holding his head as if it might break. His breath hissed. "*Powers!* No wonder they teach us to shun sorcery. I feel like the lure after the hawk has struck it."

"It seems to have had little effect on your eloquence."

They turned to face the darkness beyond the guardians. The one who had spoken passed the stones, moving slowly as if against the air's resistance. The stones blazed; he raised a hand to shade his eyes. Yet he smiled. "Well met," he said, "and well come. I trust your journey was not excessively unpleasant."

They were all on their feet, swaying, blinking in the strange

light. "You," Javanne said, eyes slitted to make shape of the stranger's shadow. "It was you behind the Power."

He advanced a step. She knew his face then, and his light cool voice. "Indeed, Falconer," Lord Imric said, "it was I. I have been awaiting your coming."

With all her strength she held herself still. She did not turn upon the lady. What Loric must be thinking, she could well guess. The teachings were only too true. Never, never, might a Brother place his trust in a woman.

Gwenlian's voice came sharp behind her. "Awaiting us? What do you mean by that?"

"Sister," Lord Imric said. His smile showed a gleam of teeth. "You have done well. I can only wish that you had done better. These are but two; and no falcon to be seen. Where are the rest?"

Gwenlian came to Javanne's side. In spite of herself, Javanne spared a glance. The lady's face was white and rigid, her fists clenched at her sides. Her voice was a purr. "Oh, no, brother. I am no counter in this game of yours."

"Are you not? You came when I would have you come. You bring fair tribute to this my ally."

"You are not sane."

He laughed. "Sister, sister! Is it mad to seek the aid of a greater Power for the strengthening of our house? Estcarp of old is no more. The Witches are fallen; the Borders are shifted, the east laid open that was so long forgotten. This land cries aloud for the rule of a strong lord."

"What," Loric asked with perilous softness, "has that to do with the murder of falcons?"

Imric regarded Loric without fear. He was, after all, but a boy; he had no falcon to defend him. "That is the price," the lord answered, "for my ally's aid. He is, I fear, exceedingly fastidious. He will have none but Falcon blood."

"And why is that?"

Imric shrugged. "It is his pleasure. He is a Power of the air;

he exacts tribute of his own kind. It is no small price to pay, you must believe that, Falconer. Half a hundred of your brethren, even though some be green boys, do not come cheaply. There were false reivers to be bought, and true reivers to be fought, and a war that was half truth and half a lie . . . No, the payment has been neither simple nor easy."

Loric lurched forward a step. Javanne caught him. But he had mastered himself. He stood quivering like an arrow in the target, his thin nostrils pinched tight.

Lord Imric spread his hands. "Truly, Falconer, it is necessary. I have done what I can to spare your men. The birds, alas, I cannot spare. They are rare, I know, and their training is much to lose, but my ally insists. It will not aid me without its recompense in blood."

"*It?*" Loric asked. "Surely it is *she?*"

"*It,*" said Imric, certain. His brows went up. "Ah. I see. That mindless fear which rules your kind. And yet I see you in my sister's company."

Despite the lightness of his tone, Javanne's hackles rose. The man was truly indifferent to the deaths of her brothers-in-feathers. But that his sister might have bedded with a Falconer—to that he was not indifferent at all. He was no more sane than the hunting wolf, and no less. What he reckoned to be his, and what he wished to be his, must be his wholly. Aught else, to his mind, was black betrayal.

Javanne folded her arms to keep her hands from trembling, or from locking about Lord Imric's throat. "We have nothing to do with your sister," she said. "We merely made use of her Power to discover what was slaughtering our falcons. She was gracious enough to grant us her aid, and unfortunate enough to be caught in the granting of it. If you will set her free, perhaps we may settle this matter of death which lies between us."

"What!" Lord Imric exclaimed. "Gallantry, in a Falconer? Astonishing. And quite riddled with falsehood. How many of

your kind have had her? All of you? Do you take her all together, or does she summon you one by one?"

Gwenlian was white more with fury than with fear. Javanne dared not touch her. The lord waited for one of them to do it, willed him to venture it; then might he shed Falconer blood with a clear conscience. Javanne met his glittering stare. "My lord, your fears are groundless. We would not dream of dishonoring your sister. We are not capable of dreaming it."

Loric gripped her arm. The pain was strangely calming. She smiled at him in a way which, she prayed, Lord Imric would not mistake.

It seemed that he did not. The madness faded from his eyes. His mouth twisted in disgust. He turned on his heel, rapped a command.

In the gate through which he had come, armed men appeared, leading among them a prisoner. He seemed a youth, a stripling, small and slight and strengthless; but so were all Brothers among outlanders. Their strength was not of axe or mace but of the sword. His guards flung him into the circle and arrayed themselves just within the ring of stones.

He fell awkwardly, twisting as if to guard something at his breast. As he rolled onto his back, Javanne saw the wicked beak thrusting from the neck of his shirt, and the maddened scarlet eyes of his falcon. Had they hoped that his soul's brother would rend him?

Javanne dropped to her knees beside her Brother and captain. Almery was trussed like a fowl for the spit, motionless and barely conscious. Drugged; or beaten half out of his senses. His face, once well-nigh as falcon-keen as Loric's, was a battered ruin.

She snatched at her dagger, to cut those cruel cords. Hard hands seized her, with hard eyes behind them. They were too strong for her, struggle though she would, trained though she was. They stripped her of weapons and of her mail shirt. They

set hands to the leather jerkin beneath. She began to fight in earnest.

She fought like a mad thing. And like a mad thing, she was two: Javanne who battled for her secret, and Javanne who noted with cool interest that the Power in the stone was rising. Loric was down, stripped to treads. His skin was very white where the sun did not touch it, and very smooth. Like a girl's, one might say. Her own was little smoother. He had ceased his battle: he would have seen no purpose in it.

A blow nearly reft her of her senses. She clutched them as they fled. But the hands had returned to mere imprisonment. Lord Imric faced the stone, bowing to it. He spoke words in no tongue she knew, yet somehow it made her think of falcon speech. It was as harsh, and as toneless, with a strange wild music in it: wind, and the roar of the storm, and the headiness of the kill.

And yet it was alien. It bore no love for falcon kind; it hungered for their blood. No clean bringer of death, this: raven, vulture, carrion crow. Falcons hunted its mortal kin. Falcon kin had bound it long ago.

Not her kin, human born, nor the brothers of her brothers-in-feathers. But their cousins, yes, or their like, masters and mistresses of Power before ever man set foot in this country. They had sentenced this their enemy to eternal imprisonment. And well before eternity was past, they vanished into death or something stranger than death. Their guardians grew feeble without them, until the circle would admit a man walking with firm will. Curiosity drove him first, perhaps. Perhaps the thing within had whetted that curiosity, sharpened it into a summons. And once within, he was fair prey to that ancient strength. What he wished for, it could promise to grant. Promises cost nothing, and their price was the Power's freedom. For that, it had taught him the way to loose its bonds. It had let him command it as he pleased and as its weakening prison allowed; it had prevailed upon him to give it that which

served as both sustenance and revenge. Men's blood was useful, but the blood of their falcons was sweeter by far, and more potent for the breaking of its captivity.

Javanne sagged in her captors' grip. It was not blood alone. The bond between man and falcon held great Power. The severing of it poured that Power into the captive's mind. So would it do with Almery: sunder him from his falcon, and drain their souls, and drink their blood. And with Loric and herself, whose falcons had escaped its nets, the sundering would suffice, seasoned with mere human lives. Then at last would it be free.

A knife gleamed in Imric's hand. He knelt by Loric as his men held her swordbrother spread-eagled on the ground. "You," the lord said, "will do for a beginning. Your bird conceals itself; but we need not see it in order to make use of it. See, now. If it cannot be ours, yours also it shall not be."

Loric cried aloud. High above the circle, a falcon's voice echoed him. He twisted, his face drawn in agony. All his body was a scream. Lord Imric raised the knife, choosing his target.

Javanne damned her secret, damned her geas, damned all that she had ever been. Her Power roared as it came. The captive recoiled. The guardians blazed white. She almost laughed. Moon magic. Yes, it would be that. And the moon, though fading from the full, had a little strength left. She drank it like wine.

Outside of Power she was most aware, not of the enemy, but of the ally who had not known all that she was. The Lady Gwenlian was wonderstruck but unsurprised. *Witch*, she said, touching mind to mind as falcons could, *I had not guessed. But woman, yes, oh surely yes. From the moment I saw your face.*

Javanne paused. *How?*

Boys are seldom so beautiful. Gwenlian was laughing. *Yes, you are, you shall not deny it. And a woman knows a sister, even in Falcon mail.*

Sister, said Javanne, trying the taste of it. Plunging before her courage failed her. *Will you help me?*

Gwenlian's response had no need of words. Her Power stretched forth like a firm hand, clasping Javanne's own.

The Power in the stone rose to its fullest height. It shaped itself in Javanne's eyes as a great gore-crow. Its body stretched, straining. A thread glimmered through the darkness, slender as spidersilk and no less strong. The light upon it was the moon's sheen upon the wings of a white falcon.

The thread eluded the crow's snapping lunge. Wind-in-the-North came no closer. Javanne willed her to flee altogether; but that, she would not.

Javanne struck the side which the crow had left undefended. The Power whipped about. Its caw was rage, tempered with iron laughter. *See!* it exulted. *See what you have done!*

She reeled into her body. Bitter cold smote it. Her shirt was torn from her, the breastband flung away, the truth bared to the sky: full truth as hands rent her breeches. Her guards were grinning. Lord Imric's mirth pealed up to heaven. "By all the Powers of the Air! What have we here?" His eyes narrowed. "Or is that the Falconers' secret?"

"Strip them," he snapped to his men.

Nakedness, she could bear. Leers and muttered comments, she had expected. But that her Brothers should see her with all her lies laid bare—that, she could not endure. And there was no mercy in the world. They were both awake and aware and able to see. Almere's stare was coldly level. Loric's . . .

It was Loric whom she could not bear. At whom she could not even look.

"Only one," said Imric, having looked long at each, and tested the reality of their manhood with a seeking hand, as now he tested Javanne's womanhood. His touch was almost gentle. She shuddered away from it. "Ah now," he crooned as if she had been a skittish mare. "It is only you. What have I uncovered then? A wonder? A secret? A conspiracy, perhaps?"

Power was her refuge. She plunged into the heart of it.

Gwenlian was there, holding their gathered strength. *The Power rises*, she said. *Arm yourself.*

The gore-crow rose against the white falcon that was Javanne's Power. Lord Imric laid hands upon her body. They all knew in Estcarp, how to part a woman from her witchery.

The lord fell back staggering. His ally spread wings of Power about her. *Mine*, it warned him. *She is mine*.

"I belong to no one!" Her voice was shrill in her own ears. It had freed itself through none of her willing; it was surely and indisputably a woman's.

Free. Yes. That was the strangeness that uncoiled in her, more even than Power or alliance or peril. The knot that had filled her center, the constraint of the falcons' geas, was gone. Gwenlian had seen it. Lord Imric had laid it bare for all to see.

It could not matter now what she did. Life, soul, sanity, all came to nothing. She was unmasked. She had nothing more to fear, and nothing more to live for.

Except, perhaps, to finish the proving which she had begun. That a woman could be all that a man was; and that a man could be as treacherous as any woman. The Brothers, refusing all Power but that which bound them to their falcons, had no weapon with which to face this enemy. Save only her ill-trained self.

They would never forgive her for that.

She had gone past any hope of forgiveness on the day when she entered the Eyrie. She drew herself up, and heard herself laugh: light, free, almost exultant. Wind-in-the-North had come down at last; and a second, darkness shot with a V of white: Stormrider in the full wrath of his kind. Javanne's captors fled the raking talons. Lord Imric cried out, cursing sudden pain.

Javanne snatched up the gauntlet which they had torn from her. Wind-in-the-North took station upon it. Stormrider circled her head and came to rest beside his soul's brother.

"Now," said Javanne. "Now we end it."

She faced the stone. Its shape was changing. It was visibly a work of hands now. Its wings stretched wider, shifting into strangeness, a sheen of feathers gleaming through the stone. In the pits of its eyes, a pale light grew. It had set aside its lust

for falcon blood. Her Power would serve it far better; then at its leisure it would take its revenge.

Its Power roared upon her. It battered her to her knees. It sank talons into her will. *Come. Come, set me free.*

It did not beg. It commanded. It filled her brain with visions. Memories. Dreams. Freedom, long, long ago. The open sky and the wild wind, and wings spread wide to encompass them. It was lord of a great realm, and its will was the world's law.

But it had enemies: swift, fierce, bitter-taloned. They would not suffer its rule. They dared to fly where they chose, to hunt where they would, to cast defiance in the face of their lawful lord.

Not lawful, said Wind-in-the-North, clear and cold and contemptuous, *by any law of our kin. We had naught to do with your tyranny.*

I ruled, the Old One said, conspicuous in its forbearance, *because I was the strongest. Time has diminished you; it has but made me greater.*

In malice, the falcon conceded, *yes. You were a little lord, of little wit. So you remain.*

Free me, the Old One willed Javanne. *Give me your Power. Set me free.*

There was little enough in it of volition. Javanne's Power bled from the wounds of the Old One's assault. It drank the stream that though slow was manifold. Its will drew harder; the talons of its Power tensed to tear anew.

It twitched, startled. Denial pricked it like the sting of a gnat: infinite and infinitesimal wrath, flying in the face of its vastness. "No!" Lord Imric cried enraged. "You are mine. You belong to me. You are *mine!*"

The great creature turned at its leisure. *I am yours*, it agreed with perfect willingness. *Free me.*

"You are mine," Imric said.

Utterly, said the Old One. *Set me free.*

Imric's jaw set. Life beat in his hands, falcon-wild, bound

and helpless. His knife glittered through all the woven worlds. It flashed down.

Almery's Windhover burst free, rending the hand that gripped him, shrieking his fury. One drop of blood—human, falcon, there was no telling—fell smoking to the Power's prison. The heartstone shattered. Wings of darkness smote the sky. A bill like a lance slashed out and down, and swept up. Its prey struggled, screaming: the man but an insect in that terrible beak, a scarce morsel for its hunger.

Javanne raised all the Power she had. The earth groaned as the Old One strained to be free of it. But within her was silence, manifold. They had all come to her center. Gwenlian's grief quivered at the edge of hearing, her anger bright as blood, overlaid with coolness that must have come of her Witch's training. She was stronger than she knew, and more skilled. About her hovered the white fire of falcons: Windhover, Stormrider, Wind-in-the-North greater than either. The tiercels bore with them shadows of earth with Power buried deep and locked in chains, but there for Javanne's wielding, if so she willed.

Almery knew dimly what had befallen him. Loric was like a stone in Stormrider's claw. Not sundered, no longer. The Old One had forsaken that torment to turn all its Power against Javanne. But the shock had driven Loric deep into himself. Scarcely thinking, knowing only what Power knew, Javanne touched the stone. It hardened against her. She persisted. With infinite slowness it transmuted into shadow, and from shadow into light. Blue light, Power of ward and guard. It was strong enough to dazzle; and it swelled. It touched the circle of guardians. It made itself one of them. Their gladness was faint and sweet upon her tongue, but touched swiftly with bitterness.

Like their prisoner, the guardians had wielded Power in sleep; but now they roused. Slow, so slow. The Old One surged against its failing bonds. The earth trembled. The air caught at Javanne's throat, acrid with lightnings.

Cold horror all but severed her from her Power. The enemy

was growing stronger. She was feeding it, she and the gathered strength of her allies. The very exultation of that union was the Old One's sustenance; and through it, it could drain dry the guardians themselves.

"That is why," she whispered to the air. "That is why they chained it. Because where it was, it made all Power its own."

And to chain it with Power, luring it, trapping it, binding it for all the long ages—how mighty they must have been, those kindred of falcons. How many must have died, or sacrificed their magery, to bind their enemy in the stone.

She steeled herself. Strand by strand she loosed the woven Powers and thrust them away. Gwenlian fell back half stunned. Windhover, with Almery, retreated because they must. The guardians, embracing Loric and his falcon, wrought again their wall of light: great gift and great grace, to set her free and to shield her against the buffeting of her enemy; for without the bonding of her Power with theirs, the Old One could not feed on them.

Only Wind-in-the-North would not go. Javanne struck her fiercely with the knowledge of what she did. She was a hindrance; she was a danger. The Old One would only grow greater with the waxing of her strength. She must be wise. She must leave Javanne alone, with Power too little for allure-ment, but great enough for what must be done.

Perhaps.

Wind-in-the-North was a queen of falcons. She saw the wisdom and the necessity, and hated it, but at last she yielded to it. The heat of her anger fed Javanne's courage. Only the thread of the bond remained between them. Javanne could not, dared not sunder it.

The enemy had no such compunction. It slashed at the thread. The bond buckled, frayed, held. Javanne fell upon the Old One with all her staggering Power. It seized her.

She struggled briefly, madly, in purest and starkest terror. With an effort that racked her to the bone, she stilled. Black wings closed about her. The Old One's will made itself all her

own. One moment, one brief instant, and the last of its bonds would snap. It would be free.

With the last vanishing grain of will that was Javanne, she shaped a thought and held it. The Old One surged triumphant. Far down in the heart of it, her thought broke free. Swelled. Bloomed. Burst in a storm of fire.

III

Javanne was dead.

Her body did not know it. It had come to life again out of the darkness that was Power's aftermath, and seen what it had wrought. The stone of the Old One shattered into dust, its prisoner gone, consumed by her Power that it had made its own. The guardians fallen. Lord Imric cast upon the ground, broken, dead. *His* death was merciful: it granted him oblivion.

For Javanne there was no mercy. Dead, she could not care. She rode among the remnant of the Brothers, her Brothers no longer. She wore the leather of the Falcon companies, because she must wear something, and she had naught else. She did not venture mail or weapon, nor ever the falcon helmet. That Wind-in-the-North rode on the perch before her, was the falcon's choice and the falcon's right; not even the most unforgiving of the Brothers ventured to contest it.

Gwenlian had tried to stop her. "Stay with me," the lady beseeched her. "My brother was never brother to me as you are my sister. Stay and be free with me, and together we will master that Power which we raised together."

"That is dead," Javanne had said.

She meant that she herself had died, and with her any hope of friendship or freedom or mastery of Power. Gwenlian chose not to understand. "I would never ally myself with any Old One. But you—you are like me. My brother has paid for his folly in death; the Honor of the Raven lies now in my hands. With

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another woman, strong both in arms and in Power, I may rule it as it deserves to be ruled. Will you aid me, sister?"

Javanne shook her head, remembering. Her lips shaped in silence the words which she had said then. "I am Falcon. My soul is subject to Falcon law. By that alone may I be judged. By that alone may I be set free."

"To death!" Gwenlian had cried, wild as any falcon.

Javanne turned her face to the sky. It wept slow tears of rain. She had lived longer than she had ever hoped to, and she had lived well. She had slain the slayer of falcons. Not even the Master of the Eyrie could take that from her.

She closed her eyes. *Enough*, she bade the spinning of her thoughts. Let it go no further. Let her remember only what she had gained.

She rode in a circle of silence. No Brother had spoken a word to her since she entered the ring of the guardians. None of them would raise his hand to touch her, or give her to eat or drink. She was worse than a traitor. There was no word for what she was.

She never glanced at Loric. She refused to know whether he ever glanced at her. But she was always aware of him: subtly, constantly, deep under her skin. When she woke and found food and a flask beside her, his presence lay heavy upon both. When she rode, he was most often behind her. When she slept, he spread his blankets just out of reach.

He was making her forget that she was dead. And that was more cruel than any Brother's malice.

They rode slowly, to spare the wounded. Of falconless men there were none. They were all dead or fled. And yet, slowly as they rode, they drew ever and inevitably closer to the Eyrie.

There came a morning of sun that put the rain to flight. The riders passed out of that light into a cleft like a knife-slash in the earth. Its farthest depths had never known the sun; the sky was a blade of darkness, and on the point of it a single star.

They came to the wall that was as tall as the sky, and led their horses one by one into the shadow of the hidden gate.

The Brothers, wise, had drawn their cloaks over their eyes. Javanne had not cared to be prudent. The sudden flame of the sun smote her to the ground.

Hands drew her up, set her in the saddle. By slow degrees her blindness passed. Loric was mounting, last of them all, eyes turned away from her. She looked past him to the Vale of the Falcon: and on the mountain's knees, the Eyrie. She flinched. Her chin set; she straightened. When the Brothers quickened their pace, she rode well forward among them, eyes and mind fixed upon the gray loom of the fortress.

Javanne lay in a cell, thinking nothing, feeling nothing. She was not imprisoned as an outlander would reckon it. The cell was the chamber of an elder Brother, a captain whose rank had freed him from the tumult of the barracks. Its starkness was Falcon comfort: a pallet on a frame of whipcord and leather, sheer luxury after the plain stone shelf of a trooper; a woolen blanket worn to softness; a perch on which Wind-in-the-North dreamed falcon dreams. The door was unbarred and unguarded.

There was no need of a guard. All the Eyrie stood on watch against her.

She had been fed twice. Or perhaps thrice; she was not counting. She had eaten only because Wind-in-the-North would take no sustenance while Javanne fasted. She had bathed, perhaps. She was clean; her riding leathers were gone. Nothing had taken their place. Her modesty, honed to instinct, kept raising a protest. She disdained to heed it.

The door opened. She had not heard the Brothers' coming. She would not have seen them, had not her face been turned toward them.

These two, she did not know well; they were sword-oathed to another commander. One, older and much scarred, pulled her up without a glance and dressed her as one dresses a child or an idiot. The other's eyes kept darting sidewise. He looked young. Perhaps he had never seen a woman naked.

It was he who saw what she lacked the will to notice. "Alarn. The woman. She's wounded herself."

The woman. As if she had never been Javan of the white queen's Choosing.

Alarn's scars twisted. She did not think it was a smile. His eyes, compelled, turned toward his companion's hand. He muttered a curse.

"Alarn—" the boy said.

"Bandages," he rapped. "Fetch."

The boy bolted. Javanne began to laugh softly, helplessly, with no will at all.

Alarn would not touch her. His revulsion was a knotting of her own vitals. Her laughter stilled; she regarded him with the pale beginnings of sympathy.

The boy came back. His name drifted to the surface of her memory. "Riwal," she said as she took the bandages from his hands, "there's nothing to fear. It's only the moon's calling."

He stiffened and turned his back on her. He had brought a basin, and water somewhat less than icy. She thanked his outraged back and washed herself, and finished her dressing. They had given her the garb of a Falconer. Because they had no other? Or because, until she was judged, she remained perforce a Brother?

She paused, straightening as the shock ran through her. She was waking. She was beginning to think; she was remembering how to feel. And she must not. That way was consciousness, and memory, and pain.

Sooner might she stay the tides of the sea. All her struggles only made her wits the keener. And with her wits rose her Power. She had spent it utterly, and it had come back in all its old strength and more.

"Damn you!" she cried, outraged. "I wanted to be *dead*."

The Brothers stared at her. She was no animal that they could comprehend. She shook her head sadly. "Poor man-lings. Do I baffle you?"

Alarn's drawn sword was his answer. "Out," he commanded the air somewhat beside and behind her.

Wind-in-the-North came to her fist. Together they led the Brothers from the cell.

The Brothers of the Falcon ringed the great hall, all the companies that were in the Eyrie, men and falcons both, captains and troopers, even the fledglings trying not to fidget by the wall. This would be a mighty lesson: proof positive of the perfidy of the female.

Between her courses and her fear, it was all she could do not to fall retching to the stones. Pride, and Wind-in-the-North motionless on her fist, kept her erect, led her with some semblance of dignity to the circle of trial. It was a stone set in the floor before the Master's seat, never covered and never trodden on save by some transgressor against the Law of the Falcon.

None had ever transgressed so far or so appallingly. There was a black glory in that.

Her Power twitched, rousing of itself. Someone was regretting that she had been permitted Falcon gear. She looked too much like a Brother, and much too little like a woman.

A thin smile had found its way to her lips. She let it linger. Garments alone were not her trouble; and her face was female enough if one did not persist in seeing it as a boy's. But no man there could deny what gripped her fist with fierce and unrelenting strength.

There were formalities. Javanne took little notice. Her eyes were on the banner behind the Master: the black falcon under which she had lived and learned and fought. It blurred. She willed the tears away. Fool that she was, moon-beset; she had known that this must come. Had prayed for it more than once in the black wake of her dreams. She should be glad that her long lie was done.

"You." The Master did not even favor her with a name. "Do you deny the truth of the charges against you?"

Almost she asked, stupidly, what they were. But she knew. "That I am a woman, no, I do not." Her voice was clear, with a ring in it that no man could match. "That I am traitor to my oath and enemy of the Brotherhood, yes, by all the Powers of the Air, I do deny it."

"Do you deny that you have maintained your deception with the aid of witchcraft?"

"There was little enough need of it," she said, "once men knew what they would see."

"Do you deny it?"

His words were iron. Cold iron, a fugitive thought observed, could be deadly to Power. She lifted her chin. "I cannot deny it."

A whisper ran through the ranks, more of the mind than of the body. Hatred darkened it, and fear, and ingrained revulsion. Eyes had begun to shift. If one female could have crept into the ranks, how many others might have done the same?

Wind-in-the-North stretched her wings. The eyes snapped to her. Minds struggled anew with her existence, here, soul-bound to this woman. One or two groped toward blasphemy. Female and female. How deep could treachery run? Were the queens of falcons no more to be trusted than their wingless sisters?

Javanne's spine crawled with cold. There was poison in the air, foul as a rotting wound, and more deadly. For years beyond count it had festered. Rivery and his Sulcarwoman had slain the one who wrought it. But no simple stroke of sword or Power could drain away the poison.

"Kill her," someone said, or no one, or everyone. "Kill her. *Kill her!*"

The falcons rose in a roar of wings. Javanne watched them with something almost like relief. Yes: that would be a fair ending, to die under those cruel talons. Wind-in-the-North did not even try to do battle against them. She watched as Javanne watched, as the world blurred into a flurry of black bodies, white gullwing slashes, blood-red falcon eyes.

As suddenly as the storm had risen, it settled. Javanne stood

in a ring of falcons. All faced outward, wings half spread, hissing warning. One proud tiercel took station on her shoulder. The white falcon blinked once, giving leave. Stormrider dipped his head in respect. "Touch our sisters," he said, "and we strike."

Javanne found it in herself to pity the Brothers. They stood all naked, some gripping broken jesses, staring blankly at this greatest of betrayals. She had robbed them of their falcons.

Anger gusted through her, driving out compassion. "I did not," she gritted, lest she break and scream at them. "As well you should know, you at least, who knew Lord Imric's treachery." Her eye found Almery, his face returning at last to its old comeliness, although his nose would never be the fine and haughty arch that it had been. He met her stare with one which she had no time to read. "Your brother remains your brother. Not your servant, to do only as you would wish."

"And yet," the Master said, not one whit shaken to see his own brother-in-feathers among the ranks at her feet, "you are no brother of ours. Who set you here, and why?"

"The tale is long," said Javanne, warning only, not refusal.

"Tell it."

"She will not." The voice rang from the open gate. Figures stood in it. The Brothers were slow enough to know them, straight as they stood, and proud, with light in their faces, and no slightest vestige of dumb servility. Falcons came with them. White falcons. Queens. The tiercels rose up in homage.

Javanne could not move. Iverna led the women of the Falcon, and there was triumph in their coming, even if they all must die for daring it. The white falcons came as companions, and as guards; what had become of the Brothers on guard without, Javanne could well guess.

Iverna came forward to face the Master. They were of an age, and of a kind, and of a strength. He acknowledged it. His head inclined the merest fraction; he betrayed no hint of the lesser Brothers' shock, that women should have set foot in the Eyrie. "Headwoman," he said.

"Wingmaster," she responded.

"This was your doing." He was not surprised, although the knowledge was as recent as his speaking of it.

She did not answer him at once. She turned to Javanne, looking her up and down with eyes as bitter-bright as the Master's. But gentler. A very little gentler. "You have grown, daughter," she said.

She was not speaking of the body. Javanne raised her Power like a sword, half salute, half warning. "I am what I was bred to be."

"Indeed," said Iverna, seeing her with more than eyes: woman, witch, sister of falcons; warrior and hunter and swordsworn of the Brotherhood. It was a great burden, to be seen so. Javanne retreated behind her shields, seeking comfort in being simply Javanne.

Iverna turned back to the Master. "This was my doing, mine and my sisters' and our mothers' before us. Did you dream that we submitted meekly to slavery? Did you think that when you bred warriors like cattle, mating the best of your men to the best bred of our women, only the sons would be strong? Or that we would have no stake in such matings? As you bred for strength and will and wit, we bred for the same, and for Power with it." Her eyes swept the hall. The Brothers gaped at her, faces slack with shock. She shook her head as at the witlessness of children. "For many a long year we have left you to your delusions. Now it is time you learned the truth.

"You teach and are taught that all the bonds of your lives are forged by what brought you to this land: Jonkara's rise to power in Salzarat of the Falcon, and her enslavement of all her sex, whereby she bound the men and the nation; the sacrifice of Langward the king, who dying at his own queen's hand sealed the spell that bound Jonkara, and set free a handful of his people; the long fear that Jonkara would rise again in all her old strength, and take her revenge, again through us who were her sisters in the flesh.

"So you teach. So you believe. And that too has been a defense.

"For not only the women fell to Jonkara's Power. The men fell also, and as their wives and sisters turned against them in hatred and in revenge for wrongs whether true or false, so did they abhor those women whom once they had loved. It was that hatred which turned at last against Jonkara.

"A few of those women with Power, albeit no equal to their enemy's, had seen what must be, and had done what they could to arm themselves against her. With Langward, who was himself an adept of no little potency, they conceived and carried out their assault. They could not hope to destroy Jonkara, but they could cage her; prevent her from calling upon her allies of the Dark and of the worlds beyond the Gates; gather those of their kinsmen who could be compelled by Power or by the king's command or, in extremity, by deception; and take flight across the northern seas.

"We accepted subjection as the price of our freedom. It was necessary. If Jonkara freed herself and pursued us, she would strike first through the men, as she had done in Salzarat. She must not know what defense we raised behind the shield of their hatred and contempt: walls and battlements of Power, and strong weapons to defend them, honed through years of waiting and of wariness."

Iverna paused. She had a power beyond Power. The Brothers listened to her. Not willingly, not easily, but they let her speak.

Again she scanned their faces. How much alike they were, Javanne thought, following the woman's eyes. Like all the folk of the Old Race they aged almost invisibly: even the elders did not seem remarkably older than Loric or Hendin or Kerrec. Many bore scars of the battles which were the Falconers' livelihood; but beneath the scars, they all had well-nigh the same face. The face of the Falcon, bred into the line like the Power which no man would acknowledge.

And like the hatred of women which had been their preservation. "Now," said Iverna, "the necessity is gone. Jonkara's end came simply enough, and at the hands of a woman: a

Sulcarwoman at that, and hence doubly to be scorned. But Jonkara's legacy endured. Her death did not set us free. You would not even consider it. What if the ancient enemy was gone? Another might rise in her place."

"Another has!" a man cried, pricked at last beyond endurance.

A snarl rose from among the ranks; weapons glittered, unsheathed in hall against every law of the Eyrie. But there could be no law now. Women had entered the realm of the Brothers. One had gone so far as to pass the Choosing.

Here and there a captain strove to quell the revolt. The Master did not even try. He simply watched, as a falcon watches its prey before it strikes.

The falcons rose, shrilling their war-cry. They struck with wings only, without talons, but they drove back the advance, and held it back with the sheer force of their anger.

Wind-in-the-North spoke for them all. "We are not slaves. I Chose as I wished to Choose. There is no opener of dark Gates here."

More than discipline was crumbling. Men doubted the word of a falcon. Not all the blades had returned to their sheaths.

In one long leap Javanne mounted the dais to the Master's side. The tiercels came with her. From amid the tumult of their wings, she raised her voice and set Power in it. "I am not your enemy. I am of your blood and bone; I have kept the law as well as any one of you. I call the falcons as my witness."

"You have lied," the Master said, almost gently.

"There was no other way." Iverna and her companions stood unharmed, unafraid. "One of your own, Rivery himself, told you the truth. You would not heed him. Thrice we ventured it. Once you, Theron, heard me out. I tell your Brothers what you told me. 'It has been too long. The hatred runs too deep. There can never be alliance between the men and the women of the Falcon.'"

"Nor can there be," the Master said.

"Therefore," said Iverna as if he had not spoken, "we abandoned words. We chose this child to be our proof. We saw to it that she was chosen for the Eyrie. We did no more than give you to think that she was male. But for that sole deception, she was all that you could desire in one of your sons."

"That is so." Verian said it, the blind master of the fledglings. He spoke as one who confronts a bitter truth. "She was not the worst of the young ones in my care."

"Witchcraft," muttered the Brothers nearest him.

"It was not," said Verian. "She passed all the testing. She was Chosen, and by a queen. Now I understand how that could be."

Javanne's breath caught in her throat. That Verian should speak for her—that was a mighty gift. No one could question either Verian's honor or his courage. With his eyes he had bought the lives of his whole company, years ago, in the wars against the Kolder.

"It was witchcraft," the Brothers persisted. They were perhaps a little fewer. Or perhaps not. "Witches have been our downfall."

"And your salvation!" Loric thrust his way to the front of the ranks, and spun on his heel. "Does no one even remember why she was unmasked? But for her we would face as bitter an enemy as ever Jonkara was. She severed us from our women. That Power of the Old Ones would have sundered us from our falcons."

The Brothers looked at him. His hands shook; he fisted them at his sides. "She faced that enemy," he said with great care, as if his voice would not hold steady else. "She faced it alone, knowing what it could do, knowing that she dared death and worse than death. Knowing what recompense we would give her."

"We must," purred Kerrec. "Of course you would speak for her. You are her swordbrother. Or are you more than that?"

A gauntleted fist struck Kerrec down. He leaped up, knife

in hand. Almery faced him weaponless, arms folded, face unreadable. Very slowly Kerrec sheathed his dagger. Even he knew better than to raise steel against his commander.

Almery turned his back on him, advancing to Loric's side. "I will speak for the prisoner. I was part of her testing; I can affirm that she was well worthy of her training. I have been her captain, and have found her to be as strong in battle as any Brother of her age, as skilled in weapons and in tactics, as firm in her observance of our laws. I was witness to her unmasking; it was my life for which she offered her own, mine and that of her swordbrother. It was done in all honor and for the preservation of the Brotherhood."

Voices rose, tangling in the heavy air. "Lies." "She seduced them." "She is a woman!"

There was the heart of it. "Yes," Javanne said. "I am a woman. That is my great sin. I was given all else that makes a Brother, save that alone. What I have done is nothing to what I am." She stepped from her guard of falcons, sending Stormrider from her shoulder, Wind-in-the-North from her fist. She spread her hands. "The law is the law. I submit myself to its judgment."

"To what end?" asked the Master, as if indeed he wished to know.

She addressed her answer to them all. "You wrought me too well, O my people. You gave me honor, and you gave me pride. You made certain that I would pay for what you have done. You have cast defiance in nature's face." She braced her feet, threw up her head: a youth's bravado, and she knew it, but her body and her tongue were running all of their own accord. "Outlanders are twofold, woman and man, bearer and begetter. We were three: woman, man, and falcon. Jonkara shattered us. For one woman mad with power, we have destroyed generations of our own kin. Will she then have the victory? Must we prove beyond all disbelief, that we are no more than her hatred would have made us?" They were silent. Each tiercel had returned to his brother. There was an edge in

the reunion, a tension in men and falcons alike: the beginnings of distrust. Javanne smote her hands together. "By all the lords of the air! Kill me and have done with it."

The Brothers stirred, rumbling, swaying for her, against her, in spite of her. "We have no choice!" one cried above the rest. "She is a woman, a liar, a traitor. She must die. It is the law."

But falcons did not live by Falcon law. Their high queen spoke from the eminence of the Master's seat. Her voice was flat even for a falcon's, and implacable. "We will kill the one who kills her."

"What is she to you?" the Master dared to ask.

"She is our sister," the queen responded. "She binds what was too long unbound. She makes our people whole again."

Iverna's voice was sweet after that harsh tonelessness; but it was no less unyielding. "Yes, O Brothers. That was the way of it in the days which you have forgotten. Man and tiercel, woman and falcon. Queens Chose as did their brothers, and marriages were made that mated four and not the common outland two."

"We—cannot—" The Master regained his composure with swiftness that won Javanne's envy. "Is that what you would have?"

The woman shook her head almost impatiently. "It is far too soon for that. For us as for you. We too hate, Winglord. We too have years of pain to forget. But we are willing to begin. A truce; the opening of the village and the Eyrie; the meeting of our people. We will suffer a few chosen men to dwell with us for a time, as brothers only, to learn that we are as human as they. We ask that you permit our sisters the same." Her hand forestalled an outcry. "Nor do we trust you! You looked on us as cattle, fit only to breed sons. You took those sons when they had been ours long enough to know as well as to love, and slew those whom you judged unfit, and taught the rest to hate us who had given them life. Our daughters—*your* daughters—were as nothing; a man who begot more than three was reck-

oned incapable and removed from the lists of herd-sires. It was a mild disgrace, release from a duty more onerous than honorable. But the mother of three daughters—on her you had no mercy. You condemned her to death.”

“And you slew her,” the Master said.

Iverna smiled with deadly sweetness. “So we permitted you to think.” She paused. He was silent, expressionless. The Brothers were beginning to understand; she said it for them. “We acknowledge your authority only over the males.”

“Which,” said Loric with boldness verging on insanity, “the prisoner is not.”

Javanne wanted to gag him. He was destroying himself for her. For loyalty, ill though she had rewarded it; for gratitude, as if she would not have saved the life of any Brother. “I am the Master’s,” she said coldly, “by my oath. It is his part to judge me.”

“And how can he?” Loric cried.

Almery’s hand silenced him. It did not still his mind. He beat upon her Power, insistent, incredibly strong. She walled him out.

The Master frowned. “I am asked to judge, and yet I am forbidden.”

“We do not forbid,” said the queen of falcons. “We warn.”

Death for death. A Brother would die gladly for his people. But that one of them should die for this, and their numbers so shrunken already from the wars and the Turning and the madness of the Lord of Ravenhold . . .

Javanne’s mind was perfectly clear. It wielded her body with speed and precision. She had the Master’s dagger before he knew she had moved. A pause, to find the place. Just below the breast, yes. Upward, inward. A moment’s pain, no more. So swift. So simple.

The storm took her. Too late, she tried to tell it. Her heart, beating, brushed the dagger’s point. She gathered her waning will to drive it home.

“Hold her down.”

Men's voices. Women's. Falcons'. She smiled in the gathering dark. She had brought them together in spite of themselves.

"Hold her, damn you!"

"Cloths, quickly."

"Never mind the lacings. Cut them."

"Yes, we can heal her. If we are swift. If she allows it. *If*"—acidly—"we are spared your gabble of questions."

She would not allow it. She would *not*.

You shall. There were many in that voice. Falcons were clearest. She refused them. They needed a death. A sacrifice, to seal the spell of their union. So did blood seal all great magics.

Not so! Anger sparked in the denial. *That is Darkness. How have you fallen to it?*

It was truth. She thrust herself away from them. She must die. She could not live as a woman. She had lost her place as a Brother. She was a weapon outworn, too deadly to keep.

Someone was cursing her steadily. He sounded strange. As if—almost as if he wept.

She paused in her descent into night. Who would weep for her? She had never mattered to anyone. She was a thing. A weapon indeed, sheathed in a lie. Wind-in-the-North need not mourn: where Javanne went, there also would she go. And falcons had no fear of death.

The cursing was louder. Light grew about her. Pain sharpened it. Faces. Falcon eyes. Her head rested on something more angular than not. She turned her head a fraction.

Loric's face was framed in falcons: black, white. He addressed his curses to the air. He did not seem to know that he wept; or that he held her in his lap, and stroked her hair over and over.

She hit him as hard as she could. "You disgrace yourself." The blow was but a brush of fingers across his streaming face. The reprimand was less than a whisper. Both earned her the

flash of Iverna's temper, for what they did to the wound. She hardly noticed.

He looked down at her. His face was furious under the tears. "Why did you do it, damn you? *Why?*"

"I had to."

He heard her, if no one else could. His lip curled. "Coward."

"I had to." He must understand. He *must*.

He refused. "You run away. Leaving us to clear the field. Leaving me— Damn you, woman. Damn you."

Her eyes opened a little wider. She saw what he had no words to tell her: the waxing of Power in him, roused in the circle of the guardians, adamant in its refusal to return to sleep. Her doing, through her healing of his bond with his falcon, through her wielding of him after. He had been hiding it; it was beginning to fester in him, to swell and surge and struggle to break free. He needed training, and swiftly. Training which she above all knew how to give.

She? She was nothing beside Iverna.

She was his swordbrother.

"How can I be?" she demanded bitterly. "I am a woman."

"You are my swordbrother."

Obstinate. She hit him again. Again it had no more force than a caress. This time he caught her hand and held it to his scarred cheek. There was little enough thought in it; then there was defiance. Let them think that Kerrec spoke the truth: that he had known to what he swore his faith and his honor.

"I revolt you," she said.

He shook his head. He was a little puzzled: that comforted her. "You haven't changed. It's we who have to learn a new way to see."

Her eyes closed. But for his grip, her hand would have fallen. She was aware, distantly, of Power driving itself into her side, transmuting the pain of steel into the agony of fire. So little a wound, to be of so much moment. She thought of letting go. She could do it. In the end, her life was hers to keep, or hers to cast away.

Loric bent close above her. She needed no eyes to see his face. "We need you," he said. "Only you are the fullness of what may be."

No. Her voice was gone somewhere in the fiery dark. *The Brothers will never allow it.*

"They must," said Wind-in-the-North.

Javanne's eyelids lifted. They were intolerably heavy. She had to search, with mighty effort, to find the Master. He was close. Kneeling. Holding a basin. He looked almost human. "Judge," she whispered with all the strength that was left in her.

He lowered the basin. The mask flickered across his face. "Have you not done so already?"

She could neither move nor speak. Iverna drew back from her, raising bloodied hands in a gesture of surrender. "I can do nothing while she resists me. Judge her, Wingmaster. She will die if you command it."

"And if I do not?"

Iverna shrugged, not with indifference, but as one who knows and accepts the realities of Power.

The Master, who knew only the ways of the palpable world, stiffened in resistance. His eyes rested on Javanne; on Loric; on their two falcons. His brows met. He faced Iverna as if he found her easier to bear: less troubling to his vision of the world. "Women. Always it is women who wreak havoc with our people. Jonkara, the Witches, this youngling—whether she lives or she dies, the Brothers will not be the same. They have learned that a female can match them. They have seen the falcons turn against them for her sake. And they—we—owe her a debt which we can . . . never . . . repay."

No one spoke. Javanne sighed. She was infinitely tired. Would he not condemn her and let her go?

He took her chin in his hand, turning her face more fully toward him. He spoke gently enough to widen more eyes than hers. "If I command you on your oath to the Brotherhood, will you obey?"

Her nod was the merest shadow, but he felt it.

"Even if I bid you live?"

She strove with all her will to pull away. So much he hated her and all her sex. So cruelly. And to invoke her oath—how could he fail? If she broke it and died, she proved the faithlessness of the female. If she kept it and lived, she lived a slave, a woman of the Falcon.

He held her, eyes level. No hatred burned in them. He was too cold for that.

"Too wise," said Iverna.

His gaze did not waver. "You will live. You will remain among us. Your captain has asked it—demanded it. Your sword-brother . . ." He did not like to say it, but he firmed himself. "Your swordbrother has advised me that if you face exile, he will face it with you. He is not alone." His mind was open to hers. Jory. Hendin. Others who amazed her more: older Brothers, not all of them from her own company, who perhaps, against all law and custom, knew or guessed what a woman was.

"It is time," Iverna said. "The world changes. We change with it or fall."

The Master tensed, as if he would cry out against her. But he nodded, a jerk of the head: outrage, anger, utterly unwilling acceptance. "This is no gift I give you. You may yet win your death, and mine with it, and that of all the people of the Falcon. You will be hated; you will be tested, and tested again, and given no quarter. From me you will have no protection but what the law commands."

Javanne could see what he saw. A long hard road, with much pain, and much division among the Brothers, and much that was sown lost to the bitter wind.

She shivered. But it was a clean chill, not the dank cold of death. She met the Master's eyes. He was more than wise; he was foresighted. And he had courage beyond even the measure of his warrior kind. To judge as he judged, when her death would be so much simpler: to face what must come, and not to thrust it far ahead when perhaps he might not survive to suffer it.

He offered her no mercy. She wanted none. She was Falconer, the Chosen of a queen. She was as strong as any man.

Loric had her hands. Her body had begun to be her own again. It knew how tight his grip was, how close to pain. She mustered her voice. She spoke to them all, to Master and Headwoman, Brothers, sisters, falcons with ears to hear beyond mere windy words. But she spoke most specially to a pair of falcons, and to her swordbrother on whom they rested. "I live," she said. His joy leaped high. It made her laugh, with a catch in it, for she hurt. "I live, since you compel me. How can I resist you? You offer me a battle."

"A long one." Loric was far too joyous to be dismayed. "But in the end we'll win it. We can't fail. We have you, and we have Wind-in-the-North."

"And you have me," said Stormrider, his mind touching Javanne's, swift and proud.

"And you," Javanne agreed as the Power rose in her. Iverna was but the spark that rekindled the fire. A little while, and she would rise; and not her body alone would be healed. She had never been whole as she was now. As her people would be, now that she walked in the light: woman and witch and Falconer, untainted by any lie. First of her kind, but not, if the Powers willed, the last.

"One day," she said, "there will be many; and all our griefs shall be forgotten. By the Powers of Air I swear it. By Falcon blood and Falcon law, so mote it be."

So shall it be, said Wind-in-the-North with falcon certainty.

Afterword

When Andre Norton invited me to join her in the Witch World, I was deeply honored and slightly panicked. I had never worked in anyone else's mental universe before; I had no idea how to go about it. "Just do it," Andre advised me.

I did it. I went back to the Witch World; I reread all the books; I became a Witch Worlder, for a little while. And, like many of my comrades there, I discovered a particular fascination with one group of people: the Falconers. The moment of truth was distinct. I read the story "Falcon Blood" in Lore of the Witch World, and, being then deeply into the world, I said, "That can't be all there was to it." I wrote a short story called "Falcon Law," and sent it to Andre, with a note that it seemed like a piece of a longer tale.

Andre called me as soon as she received it. Now, the telephone and I do not get along. It took Andre, who is a lady in the fullest sense of the word, and a flawlessly patient one, some little time to convince me that, no, she wasn't one of those atrocious and ubiquitous computerized salespeople; she wasn't selling anything, she was buying. Could I, she asked, write the whole story? Could I give her 20,000 words, preferably yesterday?

I gave it to her, of course. It was the very least I could do for a writer who has given me so much, so freely, for so long.

Thank you, Andre, for sharing your world with us.

—JUDITH TARR