

FALCON'S CHICK

by

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They call me the Wise Weaver on the Mountain, although I am a killer. Now I must kill again, or risk the murder of all the village, and Gunnora help me, I can do neither. Oh, give me the wisdom to see what must be done and do it!

Falcon Crag looms over our village like a giant's shadow. Once a year the Falconers come down to the huts at the trail-head we keep for their visits, and start our daughters growing in us. Children, the elders, and those with some ailment or difference are kept safely away from the Falconers, for they are all mad.

I remember curling on my mother Eina's lap once, when I was small, and asking, "What is 'mad'?"

She stroked my hair. "Jommy," she said softly, "you have seen babies who have not yet learned how to behave. When they are tired, or cannot make their wishes known, they have a tantrum."

"Like Aunt Lorin's grandbaby," I said knowingly. Aunt Lorin was my mother's sister-friend, but she had daughters with daughters, and my mother had only me.

"When a big person acts like that baby," my mother agreed, "we say she is mad, and stay out of her way until the fit passes. Sometimes it never passes and we cannot live with her, but must send her away as we did Mad Bethia in my great-grandmother's day, who killed three women she said were plotting against her." She made a falcon-away sign and cuddled me to her breast. "But that was long ago, Jommy, very long ago."

On the other side of the hearth, my foster-sister Jorra, Aunt Lorin's youngest daughter, was watching with wide, fascinated eyes. Now she left our watchdog Guardian's side to pull at Mother's sleeve and stare at me. "Lennis Meireith's-daughter says Jommy will be like that," she whispered, "because Jommy is a you-know-what."

"Lennis is mistaken," Mother said fiercely. "Look at Guardian! Her foremothers were wolves, but we brought them up properly, and now she and her pups are part of the family. I am bringing Jommy up properly and he is nothing like a Falconer."

That, to me, was that, and I was more interested in having another honey cake before being sent to bed. But that night I wondered what she meant by "you-know-what." For I had already learned I was not like the others, but which way did she mean?

One of my feet had grown twisted, and hurt when I tried to run. Elthea the weaver was lame like me, from falling into a pit while herding sheep. It was three days before they found her and brought her to the healer, and her bones had set all wrong. I was to be her apprentice and learn her trade when I was older. That was one difference.

The other I learned from watching the tiniest babies in the village. Some made their water gently, as they should. Others made theirs in a spouting stream, and had a little thing like mine they did it with. (Though Mother and Aunt Lorin and my foster-sisters had taught me to do it properly and not wet my robes.) Babies like this were called *boys*, and all were tiny but me, and their mothers all seemed very sad. None of them had names but me, either. "Why is this?" I asked Aunt Lorin once.

"They are not ours to keep, Jommy," she said soberly. "They belong to the Falconers, who will take them away and make Falconers of them if they like them." Then she swallowed

hard. "Eina does not want you told, but there is no greater unkindness than a kindly lie. Jommy, if the Falconers do not like a boy, they kill him. They do not like twisted legs. So your mother hid you from them to rear as her own daughter, for she had none. For this reason you must never let a Falconer see you, ever, but do not think any more of it than that."

When I understood this, I began to have bad dreams in which women with falcon wings (for I had never seen a Falconer) swooped down and carried off bad babies. Mother comforted me, then stormed off to quarrel with Aunt Lorin, who moved out of our house and back in with her blood-kin. I thought it was my fault and cried for a week, until Mother relented and apologized, and we were all happy again.

Sometime after that, the Falconers came.

The sheep herders in the high hills that dot the plains across the river cried out, a falcon's cry, then hid themselves and the sheep. Half of our young women and older maidens scrambled into ugly, shapeless robes and veils, gave their knives and wolf-spears to their kin for safekeeping, and slowly walked to the trailhead huts, heads down.

The rest of us quenched our fires, packed our valuables, and ran to the caves in the base of the mountain, driving our animals before us. It was dark and cold in there, though we had food and water, and a nasty pile by the door where we could relieve our needs. A long time we sat there, while the old women taught us the warning cries and told Falconer tales. We build our houses in the forest, one said, because the Falconers would burn down any house a villager built for herself. As if they expected us to live in the trailhead huts, so rundown and ill-omened! How the Falconers kill any woman they catch with spear or knife. Of boys taken and boys killed; of women murdered for no fault. Truly they are mad!

"Why do we endure it?" Jorra cried out after the seventh such tale.

"How else can we get our daughters started within us?" an old woman answered helplessly.

"Jonkara, Avenger of Women, sees all these deeds," came a bitter whisper from the deep darkness, "and lets no evil go unpunished."

"Oh, hush!" my mother cried out frantically. "Remember the b-o-y."

"Maybe we need not endure the Falconers much longer," Aunt Lorin said thoughtfully.

When the all-clear sounded, the children were kept from the trailhead, but the healers and the priestess went. They brought back the body of Meireith, Lennis's mother.

"They do not like women too old to bear," my mother said with wet eyes at her burial, "and she was my age, but went anyway. But why did they try to start another daughter within her, and then kill her?" she demanded. "Why?"

"Why do we endure it?" Aunt Lorin asked again, and looked at me as if I had the answer, which I did not. I began to cry, from helplessness. Nobody answered either of us except to comfort us, which without an answer was no comfort at all.

The older girls take care of any children who can walk past their mothers' doorsteps, and Lennis Meireith's-daughter was one of them. I soon grew to hate and fear her above anybody in the village, even the blacksmith with her bulging arms and grimy face. I would raise my voice, or scuffle with another child, and Lennis's face would grow pinched and hard. "Falconer blood," she'd say, as if I were a mad wolf; or "what did you expect, seeing what he is?"

Then one day when I was struggling to keep up with the others, my lame foot twisted, I went down, and I used a word the sheep herders used. Lennis quickly herded the little girls away from me, with a loud whisper of "Watch out for him! He'll go mad next."

I struggled to my feet, angry that she made no move to help, and hobbled toward her. She sent the younger girls running, and stood before me in the path, taunting, "Come on, Falcon Boy, touch me, I dare you. Hit me, be like all the others." Her robe was stained and torn, and not too lately washed, which was strange, and the finger she jabbed underneath my nose was dirty, with its nail bitten to the quick. Her brown braids swung back and forth as she shook her head from side to side chanting, "Falcon Boy, killer, touch me, I dare you."

Rage rose in me; then, fear that she was right. I wanted to go mad and hit her; then I'd be sent from the village like a wolf

and never see my mother or Aunt Lorin or Jorra again. "Let me by," I begged, and burst into tears; then I sat on the grass and bawled like any infant.

Suddenly she was silent. I looked up and there was Noriel the Blacksmith, her skirts hitched up and grime on her face. Gently she helped me up and hugged me, then said, "I hope nobody has been unkind to Jommy. It is very hard to be different from the others, without letting unkind people make fun of his differences. You're a big girl, Lennis; you wouldn't let that happen. Would you? Because big girls protect little children, don't they?"

I saw Lennis blush and look at the ground. The blacksmith took me by the hand and walked me home. Once away from Lennis, she said softly, "She mourns her mother, whom the Falconers killed. It's a hard thing to have a mother die for a mad wolf's whim."

"I am not a wolf," I said a little too loudly. "I am not!"

"You are a watchdog pup," the blacksmith agreed, "and you would never be unkind to Lennis for saying things in her grief that she does not mean."

But the next day my mother dressed me in my best robe, braided my hair, and sent me to Elthea's to begin my apprenticeship.

It was a good exchange. I loved to watch the patterns in the wool grow under Elthea's hands, and soon learned all the colors and shapes of the wool in her baskets. When she set me to working a pattern of my own at a tiny upright loom, I treasured it even beyond a new puppy or a kitten. I wove ribbons for my mother and Aunt Lorin, and a very special one for Jorra, who blushed and grinned as if someone had given her a friendship token. Later, she brought me a tiny wooden box she had made at the carpenter shop. I have it still.

So the years went, with the round of festivals, the Falconer visits, the births and naming of babies, the councils and village meetings, storms and fair weather. Once a year the lookouts would hoot like doves and the women, dressed in their finest robes, would bundle their best pots and weavings together and ride out a trail through the forest that could not be seen from the crag. There they would meet with women who said they

served the Good goddess Gunnora in her abbey. We would trade goods, and sometimes people; the priestess who taught us children had been abbey-trained. We would all grow big-eyed on the strangers' tales for another year, and would go home rich in metal, salt, and spices.

And the children of my age were growing tall. Unable as I was to join some play, because of my leg, I could still join their talk and quiet games, a little apart as always. I knew who was whose best friend; saw the handholding and the tokens exchanged; heard the chants of "Lennis and Marra, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" I knew that sister-friends lived together like Mother and Aunt Lorin, and reared their children together as foster-sisters; and as I grew older, I started to think about Jorra in that way. I thought of her even at the loom, and at meals, and soon the chants were "Jommy and Jorra, sitting in a tree . . ." I blushed as hot as anyone, but was secretly pleased.

Lennis left her childhood behind and joined the maidens, and in two years her lot was drawn to visit the Falconers. She came back with her face drawn up as if she'd eaten something nasty. I thought of Jorra undergoing this ordeal when her time came, and was sick inside. But when Lennis grew big with child, and it proved a daughter she could keep, I thought of Jorra holding a baby and felt better. The priestess and the healers had explained to me that I would never be able to bear a child, which hurt, but I swore then to foster all Jorra's babies as if they had been my own, if she would let me.

Then one day Jorra woke up early and went to her mother, then to the healers', and stayed there while the moon waxed and waned. I started to weave her a fine stole of four colors for her Maiden Day gift and worked day and night on it, while her mother and mine sewed her the long gown of a grown-up. Her sisters wove her a pretty crown of flowers on the day she came out. Our mothers held a party for her that everybody came to, even Lennis, who disliked our whole family. We ate of everybody's cooking and grew tipsy on Cousin Annis's fruit wine, and giggled like children.

Jorra opened my gift, blushed, and said, "No maiden has ever had a finer Maiden Day gift, Jommy," and kissed me.

"Jorra, I love you," I said, greatly daring.

She looked at me then, not as a sister, but as a lover, and we sat with our arms around each other, talking all night.

If we had not lived in the same house, we would have spent night after night at each other's houses often. As it was, her room was mine and mine was hers. I wove her a fine bedcover, and she made me a hope chest, though I would never have a baby to make things and save them for. We dressed each others' hair and she told me how Lennis's sister used to taunt her "Firehead! Firehead!" for her red hair.

"They're just an unkind family," I said.

"That's an unkind word, but you're right," Jorra answered, and we giggled and cuddled together. Then she said, "It isn't fair, for a sourpuss like Lennis to have babies when you can't."

"I don't have any place to grow one," I explained, my eyes hot, "but I'd like to play with yours." She lay curled up against me, soft and fair for all her hard work, her hair like fire in my hand. I loved her and she loved me, for all my difference and strangeness.

Then suddenly I jumped up, shocked and ashamed, as the part of me I'd thought tamed in babyhood made a sticky wetness all over the bedclothes. I blushed and stammered, "I—I'm sorry."

Jorra's mind worked faster than mine, and she said, "Maybe it's what boys have instead of moonblood. Let's ask the healer." She went downstairs while I tried to clean up, and came back with both our mothers, talking excitedly as if she'd discovered something great and new, and I think she had.

"This is what Falconers do to start the babies growing in us," Aunt Lorin said while Mother nodded. We went to the healer, then to the priestess, who told me in detail what happened during a Falconer visit. "You can never bear a baby, Jommy," she said with sober joy, "but perhaps you can start one growing in someone."

I thought back on this and that. "I may—I may have already," I blurted out. "In Jorra."

I have never seen such rejoicing on any face, or one so carefully guarded. "Maybe we can do without the Falconers now," she said.

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So it was that I spent a month in seclusion, learning the secrets of Falconer visits and childbirth. I came out and was given a long white robe and a lovely crown of flowers; my mother and Jorra gave a great party to which everyone came, even those who had disapproved of my mother keeping me. We ate and drank and danced, and only Lennis, who had a newborn boy in her arms, looked angry and sad.

For two Falconer visits after that, Jorra stayed out of the lot-drawing, and nobody said a word. Then came the day she showed the signs of a child growing within her, and Lennis led a fierce and bitter outcry. "It is not fair that she should have a child and be spared the Falconers," she raged; and she raged until a village meeting was called. I sat in the back, for my youth and barrenness, and was silent, for many people had never wanted me there at all. But when Lennis raised her cry again, I shook with anger.

Noriel the Blacksmith spoke then. "Many of us go to the trailhead every year, like my sister, and never have a child. Is that fair? Some of us are blind or deaf or lame or simple, while others are whole. Is that fair? Lennis wants the lucky punished to console the unlucky. Is that fair?"

There were shouts from Lennis's side, and more shouting from our side, on into the night, until finally Jorra stood up and cried out, "I will not cause quarreling in this village! I will put my lot in with the rest and go to the trailhead if it is drawn." Then she sat down, crying.

I will never know if the lots were fairly drawn, but she was chosen, and went, veiled and downcast like all the others. I waited in the caves, sick at heart. I knew there was a grim ordeal in store for her, but surely nothing else. She was whole in every part, unblemished, and lovely; laughing and clever and loving. She had friends and family to help soothe her heart when she came back.

She did not come back.

When the all-clear sounded, the first few women coming in turned their faces from our family, and my stomach grew very cold and still in me. Then came two strong women carrying a

body shrouded in the ugly trailhead-visit robes, but flame-red hair spilled out from under the hood. I struggled to my feet. Lennis stood before Jorra's mother, crying.

"I'm sorry!" she wailed. "I didn't know!"

Aunt Lorin held both Lennis's arms and looked in her eyes. Lennis tried to shrink down; Aunt Lorin stayed on a level with her. "What happened?" she demanded.

It was simple, and totally senseless. The Falconer who was trying to start a daughter in Jorra knew by her breasts and belly that one was already growing, and grew angry. Not because he wasn't needed, but because she had been with another man. All the Falconers then put their knives to the women's throats, and many thought they would all die; but Jorra did not betray the village.

"She retold the Tale of Kallile," Lennis whimpered, "that a man had come to her in the fields and did what Falconers do, and because he had a knife, she let him. The other Falconers wanted to question her under torture, but this one said it would spend their time needlessly, and cut her throat."

"What did he look like?" I asked her, forcing my way up front.

There was a babble of voices. He was short; he was tall; Falconers are taller than we are. He was breastless and arm-heavy as they are, with hair on his face. Fair hair like Elthea's; gray eyes like mine. Lennis looked at me exactly as a small child who has secretly gotten even with another, and I shoved myself between her and Aunt Lorin. "You know how to tell him if you see him again," I said, my head beginning to cloud with a distant redness. "Tell me!"

Defiantly she said, "It's not my fault! I told her we shouldn't have let her start babies by herself."

Unthinking, I lashed out and slapped her face, hard. My mother and Aunt Lorin took me by the arms and led me away. It's well they did, or I would have run mad like a Falconer and choked the truth from her smug, defensive face. Jorra always had a word that calmed my rage and made me laugh. Jorra was no longer here. Jorra would have babies and we would rear them together. There would be no babies and there was no Jorra. Mother tried to get me to eat, but I would not; Aunt Lorin expected me to cry, but I could not. Nor did I sleep.

Before the dawn I hobbled down to the kitchen and took a bowl of soup from the great ceramic pot that always sat in the coals. My mother was there, sitting next to Aunt Lorin, who had cried herself to sleep. Both were in heavy night-ropes, now all wrinkled; their hair, all gray, fell uncombed and unbraided around their shoulders. They had lost a daughter and I could not comfort them, only go berserk.

"Mother, I must leave, before I run mad and kill Lennis," I said.

I have never seen her face so old. "Take the back trail to the forest shrine of Gunnora and pray her help, Jommy," she said, "and forget Lennis. You were in grief, and she's had that slap coming since she was old enough to speak."

I could not speak for a few minutes. "I have a Falconer's madness, Mother," I forced out of a tight throat. "Please."

At last, as a feeble gray light began to show around the edge of the shutters, she went upstairs and brought down everything I owned, including all that Jorra had given me. She came back with a fine mule, its saddlebags full of food; a rare and expensive long-knife; and the short robe and trousers of a field worker. I shaved my head in grief and laid the long, dark braids across the bedcover I had woven for us, and took only the ring she had carved for my fifteenth birthday.

I would never see my sixteenth, for I was going to kill a mad, trained killer. I kissed her, and kissed Aunt Lorin who still slept, and patted Guardian's-daughter, and rode off before the sun rose above the mountains. I thought I would never see my home again.

Gunnora's shrine stood in a clearing, with offerings all about it, but I called on another goddess. "Jonkara, Avenger of Women, help me avenge Jorra's death and the baby's. Jonkara, who slays men who harm women, help me now, even though I am a boy."

I heard a falcon's cry and saw before me a falcon-headed woman of the sort that had haunted my childhood nightmares. "Are you sure?" she asked with a mocking, Lennis-like laugh.

"You would not harm my village or my family," I said boldly. "And if you want my life, I am ready to die."

Jonkara screeched like a falcon again. "Avenge a wrong your kinswomen have all consented to?" she demanded.

I stood my ground. "You know why. Let them get daughters without enduring the whims of madmen every year, or every day." I added that last because of a legend that the Falconers had once lived among us, until we could endure their conduct no more and drove them out.

Her eyes filled with hate as Lennis's were, the goddess cried, "You have your wish," and flew off to Falcon Crag with a victory call that haunted me all the way down the trail.

The trail opened onto a wide, smooth road. Every once in a while I saw gardens or buildings, terribly exposed; and from time to time people passed on foot or horseback. I knew none of them and could not speak to them, but at night when I stopped and lit a fire, a woman spoke. "What do you do on this road alone, lad?" she asked me in a strange accent.

"Darthis," her companion warned, exactly as a big girl speaks to a wandering little one. The one who spoke had the breastless, flat, arm-heavy look of a Falconer, but his hair was brown-gray and he did not look mad. All the same, I stood ready to flee.

"It's only a boy, and a shy one," she argued, much like a little girl debating an elder. "And, Corin, I don't imagine he's ever been out of native village in all his life."

"I have not," I agreed, looking between them. "My name is Jommy Eina's-son, and I am looking for a Falconer. He has fair hair and gray eyes."

"It's bad business, seeking out Falconers," Elder Corin said soberly. "But there's a market in the city where they are sometimes seen. We're going partway there; after that you're on your own."

I thanked them, and helped Darthis with food and fire, as was proper. Then I saw my mother had packed my smallest ribbon-loom and some wool in my saddlebags, so after supper I set it up and began to weave. "If we are together long," I told them, "I'll make you a ribbon each, for your kindness." Darthis smiled, but Corin looked at me strangely.

However strange, they were a kindly pair, and I missed them when they left. The road grew more and more crowded as I drew closer to the town, and I was often frightened.

Most of those on the road were men, with hair on their faces, and manners rougher than I have ever seen, even to fighting among themselves like beasts, for pleasure; yet many seemed kind. Some mocked my bad leg and timid manners; others offered to share fire and food.

Of one such I will not speak, except to say that now I know what the women in my village must endure during a Falconer visit, and marvel that any of them ever let their lot be drawn. Oh, I did right to call upon Jonkara the Avenger to help us!

All this while I kept Falcon Crag in view, and watched for the bird-masks everybody said the Falconers wore among men. I ate very sparingly of the food my mother had packed for me, and wove ribbons, and sold them along the road for food and wool to make more, and endlessly searched. I dreamed of home and often woke up crying; I dreamed of Jorra living, and awakening was the nightmare; I dreamed of her dead and cried for vengeance once again. But now I had learned to call it "justice."

At last the Goddess favored me and I saw the falcon helmet of a man who was, as the women said, short for a man. He carried a curved sword—another word I had learned among men—and the hair on the back of his hands was fair. I followed him as quietly as I could, but like a bird, he had eyes in the back of his head. In a deserted place along the road we were on, he turned and snapped, "Well, boy? What do you want?"

"I want to see if you have gray eyes," I said, my hand finding the wolf-spear I had bought along the way. "I seek a Falconer with fair hair and gray eyes."

He stared at me, then laughed and took off his helmet. He was the one. I stared, shocked, then threw the spear. It went into his guts and he came raging at me. "Why, you treacherous little rat?"

Even lame I could sidestep him. "You killed Jorra and the baby," I shouted. How could he not know?

He was losing strength rapidly as his blood ran from him, but his anger remained. "I killed no woman," he snarled. "We never touch women, you little fool. Bad enough to be around them in the world of men!"

I drew the knife my mother had given me and stared him

down in sick rage. "She had red hair and was going to have a child. That angered you and you killed her. Deny it if you can, madman."

He was down on his knees now, doubled up, but he raised his head and snarled, "What do we care what one of your witches does and with whom? The only woman with red hair I know of was one of ours, who had defiled herself with some outlaw. My brother Haakon killed her before she could infect the rest of the stupid herd with her notions. And"—he was snarling in agony now—"if your father had cared enough to beat better manners into you the way mine did me, you wouldn't be butting your nose into things that don't concern you!"

I started to cut his throat, but he fought me with his hands until I found the end of the spear and twisted it. He grunted and fell down. I pulled it out and half his gut came with it. Then I cut his throat, mounted my mule, and rode off as if Jonkara and all the Falconer tribe were after me. His cries and grunts, like those of a pig being butchered, rang in my ears. His odd and hateful words—"one of ours"; "stupid herd"; "*beat* better manners into you"—was *that* how Falconers made boys into Falconers?—followed me. But they could not drown out the only words with any meaning: "*my brother Haakon.*" I had killed the wrong man.

It was good that I fled, for when I reached the marketplace, the streets were abuzz with grim-faced men in bird-masks. They had not seen me yet. I must warn the village of what I had done and learned, and we had friends in the abbey. I stopped and put on the robe my mother had given me for this, made some attempt to comb my shorn hair, and threw away the spearpoint in the nearest midden, keeping the shaft for a walking stick. I rode as far as the abbey gates, dismounted, and slowly started up the steps.

"Here, Mother," a man's voice said suddenly, and he stepped in front of me. "Where would you be going today?"

Did he mean me? "To the abbey, with a message," I croaked, my voice raw from a dry throat.

"Well, be careful," he said gently. "Some mad dog took out a Falconer last night, and he's still loose on the streets. If he can do that—and is mad enough to try—he's dangerous!"

"Thank you," I choked, and hobbled up to the abbey door. Thank Gunnora for my bad leg; it had saved my life twice! Once from the Falconers; and now, by making the man think I was old. I rang the bell and stood panting by the gate. An abbey servant came; I wheezed, "I am Jommy Eina's-daughter and I must see the abbes." "

She gave me a stern look and let me in, but led me to an outbuilding and bid me remain there. I sat down and tried to breathe, but my heart was bursting in my chest and my throat was pounding. Soon a woman in a long, plain gray robe stood before me and said, "This is a refuge for women, and you have lied before the Goddess. Well, sir?"

I looked straight at her, a slender, proud old woman who could have been the Goddess's own self. "I gave the name I am called at home. I have stirred up the Falconers, and they must not be allowed to harm my village for what I did."

She laid a hand against my head and called for hot mulled ale. Then she sat down on a box and heard me out, asking many questions, and paused only to call for food for us both. At last she said, "I was a great lady in the world before retiring here; I have sat in judgment many times. Jommy, the world will think two things." She held up one slender, pale, wrinkled finger.

"First, that you have every right to avenge your wife and unborn child." She paused. "But, second"—another finger—"that the Falconers have every right to do as they please with their women and their children. So you are truly in a trap."

"Theirs, theirs, theirs!" I cried out. "How are we theirs? The wolf who raids the flocks doesn't think of them as his, does he?"

"He probably does," she said dryly. She made me finish the rest of the ale, then said briskly, "The women of Falconer Village have asked our aid in the name of Gunnora, and we will give it to them. Do you mind disguising yourself as a woman? No, I see not. Or riding with a witch of Estcarp?"

"Why should I? Elder mother," I said, exhausted, "what you say, I will do. But you know I have the Falconer madness now."

She laid a hand on my head again. "You were a boy pushed

beyond endurance. But see that killing does not become a habit."

After a safe but uneasy night's sleep and a good breakfast, I was dressed in ash-gray robes, ordered not to speak to anyone, and put in a wagon with two other women. As they drove out of the city, a guard who could have been the twin of the one I had seen yesterday asked with sober concern, "Where are you going, good Dames, with a mad killer on the loose?"

The tall, heavy one put her head down and said a little sadly, "To the Shrine in the Forest, to learn the discipline of silence." The guard shook his head, and with a faint smile waved us on. I all but cried to see the shrine of Gunnora, so calm and peaceful in the leaf-filtered sun.

I must live long enough to tell the village that I had killed. Even now I regretted that I had killed the wrong man more than I regretted the killing. Yet, I must also tell them that I had dared ask the abbess if the Falconers truly made men out of boys by beating them, and very dryly she had said, "That is the usual way men are made."

Or madmen? Yet, I was a killer, and nobody had ever hit me in all my fifteen years. Men said that boys were like mules; you must first hit them to get their attention. An unwelcome thought!

We came to the village after a long ride I remember little of, for my shame at being Falconer-mad. As the wagon entered our clearing, a girl ran off long-legged. She came back dancing ahead of my mother, who moved as slowly and painfully as an old woman. Lennis stood in front of the wagon, glowering at me. My mother cried out and kissed me.

I kissed her back, but then blurted out, "Mother, I killed a Falconer!" and heard the pride in my voice with horror, as Lennis stepped back in loathing and terror. The priestess and our three healers gathered around and the elders slowly came up as I told my tale, uncaring for anything but to get it all said. When I came to the beating of the boys, everyone began talking at once, all but one little girl who handed me a rag and said, "Jommy, don't cry!" I think she was one of Aunt Lorin's granddaughters.

"Mother," I said then in a low voice, "I cannot live among people anymore; but I cannot endure the outside. Let me live and weave apart from the others and watch for enemies I might have brought among you."

"Enough of this foolish talk," Aunt Lorin scolded me. "Your old room is ready for you; your mother and I and your foster-sisters have prepared as much of a party as we could with only a lookout's notice . . ." But her voice trailed off and she looked at me dubiously. My mother was weeping, heartbroken.

The priestess put her hand on my shoulder. "We cannot leave you completely alone, Jommy; that would truly make a madman and a monster of you. But in your wisdom you shall have your wish."

I slept in the back room of the healers' that night, with their old gray tomcat for company. In the morning we drove my mule and the wagon up a steep path in a hillside overlooking the river, the plains, and Falcon Crag, depending on which way you were looking. There was a cave in the hillside, and a little creek ran nearby. The land around the cave was wooded; there was enough room in front of it to set up a loom and even have a little garden.

I had all I needed: an upright loom and wool, some blankets, a water pot and a cooking pot and a firepot full of coals. Noriel the Blacksmith, my driver, took from her skirt pocket a small, long-necked pot with holes in the top, full of sweet grain seeds. She set up the loom, gathered wood for my first fire, and then surprised me with a quick kiss, saying, "Some of us think you did no more than keep a two-legged wolf from the flock. Is there anything more you want?"

I did not say "Jorra." Instead I asked for the blue and violet dayflower vines that follow the sun. She nodded and drove off, and so my second life began.

The wind came in from beyond the river, and the threads on my loom became a welcome windbreak. I huddled deep in my cave, blankets wrapped around me, feeding twigs to the firepot and roasting bread and cheese. It was my third week on the mountain, and the storm was a bad one for the season. I lis-

tened to the wind outside, but my thoughts went round and round like children in a ring-dance.

Laughter and tears flow freely in our village. I have had much sorrow, and have cried much. Men outside despise tears, though they laugh freely; and they fight like beasts. Falconers do none of these where others can see, but they are mad.

Women outside act toward men as children do toward elders; and the men act toward them as the big girls do the little ones they tend, but not so motherly. There were many things we do the women outside do not do, sometimes from pride, and sometimes in fear of a scolding. It was hard to tell which, or why.

My mistress, Elthea. I had not thought of her when I left, or when I came back, which was strange; I had spent most of my life working by her side. She was a silent woman, speaking only of the work at hand. Her days as a sheep herder? The rug I was weaving should be for her. Had she minded having a boy apprentice? She never said.

There were women outside who wore bright colors and talked freely among themselves; to men they talked like horse traders trying to sell a horse. One decided in all kindness to teach me how to start children when you are not lovers, but without Falconer brutality. Now she haunted my dreams, all mixed up with Jorra and Lennis and the dead Falconer and the man on the road.

I had a red cloth to hang outside the cave to cry for help. Would I need to do this when my food ran out? My garden would not be ready for some time. Would they bring me food, when I was doing nothing in return? And why?

They would come on the mule I have never called by name. This is not rudeness. She is stubborn, so I named her for a villager it would be unkind to make known; I think the name and say Mule.

Well, one moon cycle exactly from the day I came to the mountain, the oldest healer came to me, with fruit and vegetables, herbs for tea, and bread, but no meat. This is what you eat when you are seeking wisdom, so I understood. She said nothing to my questions about my mother, Aunt Lorin, and Elthea, but the next moon my mother came instead. It hurt that

she had waited until the healer reported I was not mad, but she was my mother and I was her only child. I hugged her and let her cry and asked her to tell Elthea about the rug. We had little to say to each other but regrets.

In turn all of my family, and many of the women central to our lives, came. I grew my garden and watched the land and the stars, and chewed over my thoughts. I would deliver my weavings to whoever came, for whatever I pleased, and the village seemed to think the trade was fair. I was growing tall despite my twisted foot, but when hairs began to sprout on my face, I hid myself and tried to scrape them off with the edge of my knife. Many men outside had hairy faces, but being different was bad enough for me without adding ugliness to it.

One warm month my visitor was Noriel the Blacksmith, and she seemed shy about something. "There are other Jommys in the village now," she said. "One is blind, one is simple, but the other is whole. He's slender-built like you."

I was glad to hear it, and took her hand, not speaking. Then she looked at me and blushed like a girl with her first best friend.

"I have never been to the trailhead," she blurted out. "I feared the Falconers would dislike my strong arms and kill me. But I've always wanted a child and am still young enough to bear. Jommy, would you do this for me?"

She had been a good friend to me since Lennis tormented me on the trail so long ago. "If I can," I said, then had to admit, "The Falconer part of me does not always obey my will, but only its own."

"How like them," she said, and laughed. I remembered what the woman outside had shown me, and for all we were both awkward, I think we handled it well. It was a long time before I heard what came of this, but later from time to time others made the same request, and from time to time I heard news of other boys—they called them Jommys—and how they were doing.

From my hillside I could see the Falconers come down from the crag, and cry the warning. I could see the Dames coming by the forest trail and hoot the dove call. One year I saw great masses of riders moving across the plains, and, frightened, gave

the vulture's cry. Later, one of the sheep herders, now armed with spear and sword, told me this was an army, which had burned down and looted a village less hidden. We took in those women and children who survived, and made them ours. I wondered how long they would tolerate the need to hide every year as we did.

That year and many more, the armies moved back and forth, the storms grew wilder and longer, and I heard tales of witches in our village. Not just women with some knowledge of herbs and spellcraft, but women of great power. I remembered then that I had returned with one such, and she had made alliance with our elders. Alone as I was, I heard only fragments of news, but kept up my duty to watch and warn, as well as weave.

(My mother told me that my storm blanket, with its streaks or reds and oranges, and its darkening grays, now hangs on the abbey wall as one of their treasures!)

At last came the great storm that shook even Falcon Crag, when lightnings played around the mountaintops, and wolves howled night-long. The land trembled like a woman in childbirth, and when it was over, the very face of the crag had changed beyond recognition. My next caller, Natha Lorin's daughter, spoke of the witches doing great deeds as she sat beside me and braided my hair for me. But what I remember most is that the Falconers came no more. Never, ever again.

A hand and a half of years after the Falconers stopped coming, people were calling me the Wise Weaver of the Mountain. They would come to me with questions, as well as news, as if I were a priestess, and they often brought the Jommys when they came, or the boy-children of the people they had taken in. I was starting to think of going back, excessively tall and hairy though I was, and tainted with killing, when I heard a cry on the hillside.

Wounded men were nothing unusual these days. This one was short and wiry, with fair hair and gray eyes, and the look of a fighter by trade. I am no healer, but from the way he breathed, his lungs were hurt. I helped him up the mountain slowly and laid him on my rug. Cousin Natha had been there a few days before; I had plenty to offer him.

"Bandits," he said when I asked. "They grow bold. My brother was murdered years ago and his killer was never found." Speech came hard to him, but he spoke with a gentleness rare among men who lived by the sword. "I'm glad to see a shepherd lad on this hillside, and thank you."

I was feeding him from my pot of vegetable soup, and now offered him my old pain. "My sister-friend, Jorra, was murdered, too. A Falconer killed her, claiming she belonged to them, but she did not."

"If she had a name, she did not," the man said gently. "We don't give our females names. I'm amazed they can even talk, they hear a human voice so rarely." My mouth fell open; quietly he said, "We only speak to them in dire cases. It happened once in my lifetime, and I hope never to see it again."

"You're a Falconer?" I asked stupidly.

"Was. Falcon Crag has fallen." He lay back and closed his eyes, breathing harshly.

For other men I could call the healer, and send them on their way when they were well. A Falconer might recognize her, or the village. And he'd claim ownership for no other cause than a wolf's cause to own the flock he raided. He seemed a man of reason, but—great Jonkara! If he thought we couldn't even talk, the sound of our songs and stories, debates and decidings, might drive him back into a killing madness! Which was so absurd, and so probable, I strangled a laugh and a sob together.

He opened his eyes and said, still gently, "Our customs may seem strange to you, shepherd lad, but you have seen dogs go mad and turn against their masters. So with our women." He winced in pain. "Some still do. Then we must stamp it out, quickly. I had this to do once, and the creature was with child. I did so as humanely as possible. The gods grant I need never do it again!"

I set down the bowl and left, then, turning my face from him, I fled at a cripple's slow pace to the creek, tears coming from me in great gasps. I plunged my head in the icy running water as I cried. This was the man who had killed Jorra! A decent, kindly, reasonable man with beliefs so cruel they had twisted his actions as my foot was twisted, but left his mind untouched. What could I do now?

I should kill him as he slept, to avenge Jorra's murder. If I did not, all the village risked a cleansing and humane death at his hands. I would become no better than the Falconers, but what was that against my people's lives? But then, those who came after me might murder by my example; I could not risk that, either.

Could he be brought to see the truth? In time; but not before he ran mad and tried to kill us all.

I could do nothing, but tend him and let him go. He had a lung wound and would surely die, but that was in the Goddess's hands. I would have done nothing—like a little girl who puts another up to doing her mischief?

But I could not let our village be ravaged by a wolf whose madness masqueraded as reason and necessity. In fact, the Falconer was partly right! Surely we had driven them out as the old tale said because they had fancied themselves our masters, and they had not forgiven us this.

We and Jonkara, I realized then; and Jonkara met killing with killing. I knelt by the stream and prayed, "Gunnora, show me how to save my people without killing, please." Jonkara then cried, "Make him the village storyteller!"

Storyteller? I limped back to the cave. The Falconer waited for me, his face drawn with pain, but still concerned. "Are you all right, lad?" he asked.

"A griping of the bowels," I brushed it off, and refilled his bowl. "Falconer, I heard once of a village of such women as you speak of, but it vanished years ago. A very long time ago." I bit my lip. "If I raise this cloth, the healer woman will come, with help for your wounds and your lungs."

I have rarely seen such fear on anyone's face before, but he composed himself to obey and said, "Thank you, lad."

I would forestall the healer and together we would make up a tale that would misdirect the Falconer as the quail misdirects the mountain cats from her nest. I raised the cloth. Tears were running down my cheeks unashamed, for at last I could truly mourn Jorra without vengefulness or self-pity or fear for my soul, and I wept as I forgave her killer once and for all.

A falcon cried out overhead. The Falconer's body trembled and convulsed, and then lay still and white. I put my ear to his

chest. His heart had stopped. He had died in fear of our healers! Jonkara cried out again and circled overhead as she left with the Falconer's soul. It seemed then that she smiled, and became Gunnora's dove even as she flew away. Down in the valley, I could hear the village women greet the day in song, and slowly, leaning on a stout stick, I made my way down there to join them.