

RAMPION

by

Meredith Ann Pierce

I: Sif

The place I remember best about Castle Van is the women's garden. It was set in a little niche off the main courtyard, an open square of earth in the pavement, and it was planted with rampion. That was what we called it, anyway, after a similar herb that grew on the mainland. This herb that grew here in the garden was not native to our little island, or even to our world. It had been brought to the castle five years before my birth by Zara, the witch. The stranger. The mad-woman. The woman who had come through the Gate.

Our little isle was called Ulys, and we lay off the coast between Jorby and Quayth. On a clear, very fine day, you could sometimes just see the hills of High Hallack beyond the haze. Most days were not fair. We were a stormy place of rough tides and submerged rocks, a magnet for every squall. Few ships docked at our tiny port. We kept aloof.

My father, Halss, was the lord of Ulys. Originally he had been a man of the Dales, the second son of a second son, who had left

his clan and gone adventuring. He found his fortune here quite by accident, when the Sulcar merchantman he was passenger on began taking on water and had to put in to the nearest land they could—even if it was a nothing-place like Ulys.

What a stir he must have caused among the fisherfolk: they had seen Sulcarmen before, but never a highborn man of Hallack. He must have been gorgeous to look at then. Even in later years, when I was old enough to take note of such things, I could see how glorious he must have been, with his fair, flushed skin and sandy-coppery hair—though by then age and wenching, drink and despair had thickened and coarsened him.

He had been taken in by the lord of Ulys at once and housed in the finest guest chamber, while the captain of the Sulcar vessel and his men were left to find what lodging they could in town. The lord of the keep had only one child, my namesake, Alia, and she of marriageable age. When the Sulcar ship moved on, my father stayed to court the lord of Ulys's daughter.

Such a prize her dowry must have seemed! I have been told the weather was unusually fine that year, with hardly a storm. The winter, for once, was truly cold and dry, producing a fine crop of seafoxes, those small, thick-furred water dogs that visit our rocks. In winter, the keep men all go out with clubs and kill as many as they can. We sell the pelts to the Dalesmen merchants of the mainland.

My father married the lord of Ulys's daughter in spring, and when the old lord died a year later, became regent for the lady Alia. But she died childless, of the coughing sickness, barely three years after. That left him in a fine mess.

He could have left us then, gone back to High Hallack, but he did not. Shame or pride, I don't know which motivated him. Perhaps it was only inertia. Or greed. The seafoxes brought in a good income. His family had cut him off peniless when they had heard of his marriage outside the Dales.

The dowager Lord Halss spent four years improving the island then. He formed a small militia of castle guards and took

charge of the fishing fleet. He repaired the boats of the fisher-folk and rebuilt the castle's crumbling outer walls. He even had a sea-chain stretched across the narrow harbor as a defense against pirates. Poor as our island was, raiders had been known to land—but only at the harbor. Reefs protected the rest of our shore.

These were the prosperous years for Ulys. It was during this time that the outland woman Zara came. I remember her a little, dimly. She was very tall, with dark red hair and dusky skin. She was not Sulcar, and she was not of the Dales. She would not say where she was from. Some called her mad or witchbrede. My father, it seems, was fascinated with her.

But he married Benis in the end, she who had been the lady Alia's cousin. Once more he could rightly be called the lord of Ulys. It was not a love match. I was born a year later and named Alia, though called Alys. But it was sons my father had been hoping for. Lady Benis managed the castle contentedly enough, stitched tapestry in the evenings, and ordered the servants about by day.

My father, with only the one daughter and no heirs, was not a seafaring man either by birth or inclination, so there was no escape for him from this little prison he had entered into by marriage. How he hated the rampion! I remember it growing in squat clumps of jagged, fleshy leaves. In spring, clusters of cone-shape flowers appeared on top, smelling pungent, like leeks. My father complained that they reeked, but to me the scent was rich and wonderful.

My lord wanted to dig up the garden, throw out the rampion, and plant something useful. He had no need of women's herbs. But my mother said no, to his face, quite definitely. It was the only time I remember her standing up to him openly and winning.

"I won't have you undoing the garden. I don't care where it came from—it is the only herb on this island that helps me. Once a month I send the girl to pull the leaves and make a salad for me."

RAMPION

She didn't mean me. She meant her maidservant, Imma. I hadn't known that, about the rampion. All I had known was that sometimes when my mother was ill, she shut her door and would not see me. Her women moved quickly and quietly then, and told me to go away.

I tried eating the rampion once, when toothache was making me flushed and feverish. The taste was sharp and peppery, almost bitter. It made my eyes weep, but it didn't do any good. I learned later that that was not the sort of illness it relieved. I was not old enough to have that sickness yet.

My earliest clear memory is of confronting my sister in the women's garden. It was summer, but the sky was cloudy, the air hot and damp. My mother was ill and had sent Imma for the herbs. I had followed secretly and stayed behind, and now stood among the miserable little clumps of rampion in violet and bluish bloom, each stalk blossoming like a mace among the glossy, dark green leaves. I was glaring at my sister—of course, I hadn't known then that she was my sister. I must have been about four years old.

To me, she was only Sif, mad Zara's child. My eyes were not good, and I recognized people more by shape and coloring than by details of feature. Sif was a lanky girl, with straight hair, long and yellowish, never combed. Her face was always smudged with grime, as were her patched, ill-mended clothes. I could see just well enough to note she had a long, strong jaw with a definite cleft to the chin and eyes that might have been any shade between blue-gray and sea-green. The day was dark, with storms coming. The light was bad. I had never been this close to her.

"What are you doing?" I cried, stamping my slippered foot and bunching the gores of my gown at the hips. "Stop that at once."

Not a moment before I had seen her empty a bag of kitchen scraps over the garden plants.

"Throwing rubbish on my mother's rampion," I shrilled. "Stop! Pick it up."

Sif looked up with a start, then squared her shoulders, obviously caught by surprise but unwilling to run. She was wearing trousers like a peasant or a boy. She didn't say anything. I was a cheeky brat, much spoiled, and seeing my advantage, came forward.

"Pick it up," I said, in the tone my mother used with wash-maids, but Sif only looked at me. I flew at her in a fury of fists, shrieking, "I'll tell! I'll tell! My mother will send for the boatman, and he'll box your ears!"

Sif didn't fight me as I kicked and buffeted her, but she did catch hold of my wrist and whispered fiercely, "Very well, then, *do*, you little slut. See if I care. He can't do worse than he already does."

I stopped hitting and looked up. I was close enough to see her face almost clearly now, and I realized that what I had thought was a smudge on her one cheek was a bruise. She had another on the same side, just at the jawline near the chin. Her fingers twisting my wrist hurt. I jerked away and fell back a step. We stared at each other for a few moments, panting.

"It's not your mother's garden anyway," Sif said after a moment, still angry, but not so fierce. "It's *my* mother's. She started it."

I squinted, trying to see her better. "Your mother's dead," I said, doing my best to sound contemptuous. The truth was, the bruise on Sif's face had shaken me.

She answered without nodding. "Yes."

"She died on the rocks," I added in a moment.

"Yes."

Six months before, mad Zara had stolen a boat and tried for Arvon. It had been a foolish thing to do. Women were no use in boats. She had broken up on the reef and washed back, drowned. Her body and some of the wreckage had been found on the beach two days later.

RAMPION

I had heard my mother talking to her maids about it, little edges of disdain and horror and triumph in her voice. When Zara's body was found, my father had bolted himself in his chamber for two days and refused to come out. I was too young to understand these things. Old Sul, the boatman, kept Sif now.

I stared at her across the rampion. I could not see her well enough in the murky light to tell if her face had any expression. It seemed expressionless to me, a chalky blur.

"And it isn't rubbish," she said, toeing at something among the fleshy plants. Her voice was low for a girl's, like a sounding horn. "See for yourself. It's fish bones."

I knelt down and peered at the little white skeletons. They stank. "Why did you dump them here?" I demanded, looking up, still feeling righteous. I wrinkled my nose. "Can't you throw them on the midden like everyone else?"

Sif was kneeling across from me. "I didn't dump them," she answered, calmer now. "I put them there on purpose. For the rampion. They're good for it. Can't you see the plants are dying?"

I squinted at the fleshy, flowering clumps. They looked well enough to me.

"They need bones," Sif was saying. "Something in the bones nourishes them. And oyster shells. I put down crushed oyster shells when I can get them."

I rubbed my wrist and looked at her. My gown was already muddied. There was nothing I could do about it now—perhaps my mother was so sick the maids would not notice, or if they did, would not make a fuss. I knew I should be getting back, but strangely, I wanted to stay with Sif.

"Why?" I asked her. "Who told you this?"

"I *told* you," she answered. "My mother started the garden when she came to Ulys, ten years ago. She told me."

I had been born in the Year of the Salamander; Sif, some three years before. That would make her about eight at this

time of our first meeting. If she spoke true, her mother had come to Ulys three years before Sif's birth. Before the lady Alia died—I had not known that.

And Zara had lived at the castle once. I knew that somehow, had heard it somewhere, whispered. My mother could hardly abide hearing her name mentioned. Sif's mother had been brought here by Sulcars, who had found her in the sea, and since she had no money, only a watertight bag of healer's herbs and cuttings, they had put her ashore at their first landfall. She could not get off the island then. My father would not let her go.

But she had left the castle when he married Benis, gone down to the beach and built a little hut. She had lived by scavenging, beachcombing, and as a sort of healer woman, practicing the herb craft. Some called her a witch, but the fisherfolk and even sometimes the keepfolk went to her. My mother would not have allowed her to set foot in the keep—if ever she had presented herself at our gate. But she never did. And she went mad in the end. Ulys drives many of us mad. Sif's mother never wed.

I wanted to ask Sif about her mother then, where she had come from and why she had stolen the boat. Why she had wanted to go to High Hallack, or Arvon, or wherever she had been headed, and had she truly been a witch, like those nameless women with their jewels across the sea?

I had no inkling then that she had not been of our world at all, but from another place, beyond our world and time, beyond the Gate—but I heard my nurse calling me, and since I did not want her to come looking and find me with dirty Sif, I ran away.

After that, we were not such enemies. I slipped away from my nurse as often as I could to meet with her. I had never had a friend before. Sif took me down to the wide, deserted ribbon of sand below Castle Van. All the sea wrack washed up

there—nothing valuable, only bits of driftwood and shell. Once we found the blade of a Sulcar oar, broken off from the handle and partially burned, and once a harpoon head made of bone. Sif liked that. She put a string through it and wore it around her neck.

Sif showed me how to find shellfish under the sand, and how to skip a flat stone over the waves—I could never see well enough to watch it go, but my wrist soon gained the feel of the flick. I showed her my secret place at the top of the tower. It had been built long ago as a lookout for warships and pirate raiders, but High Hallack had long been at peace with us, and since my father had devised the harbor chain, pirates no longer troubled us. No one used the tower anymore.

Save Sif and me. We stayed in the tower often, crouched on the highest landing, three flights up, whenever Sif could get away from the boatman, Sul. He gave her all the hard work to do, she said, scraping the hulls for barnacles and hauling the catch from the hold to the gutting tables. My mother and her maids taught me mending and needlework.

Sif told me tales, tales her mother had told her of the land beyond the Gate. Impossible tales, mad tales that grew more marvelous with each telling, of a land where people lived ageless till the day they died. Everyone there was a witch with a house the size of Castle Van. Hundreds of castles built side by side made up vast cities of shimmering stone. People rode ships that sailed the air. Carts pulled themselves. Sometimes, I think, she was making it up.

“If your mother lived in such a wonderful place,” I said once, scoffing—I must have been seven or eight by then, and Sif eleven or so. “Why ever did she come here?”

We stood on the rocky slope above the beach under a dark autumn sky. Arms spread like sea gulls for balance, we picked our way forward, hopping from stone to stone, looking for hegitts' eggs. Sif took my arm and heaved me over a wide

gap. I was still much smaller than she, and wearing a keep-woman's voluminous gown that beat about me like wings in the wind.

"She said her world was very old, very crowded," answered Sif, bending to pluck a blue egg twice the size of my thumb from a crevice. She put it in a little bag with the others. "The witches had all had too many children. And some people were tired of the witchcraft, the palaces, and the carts. They wanted to come to a new place, and try to live without them."

She straightened. I stared at her, astonished. "They wanted to come here, to Ulys?"

Sif laughed and shook her head. "Not *here*. In the north somewhere. Where the Gate is. Her people have been coming through, she said, in little groups, for years."

Still staring, I lost my balance and caught Sif's arm to steady myself. We had legends of the Gate, even here, even in Ulys—brought in snippets and fragments from the mainland. It was a place in Arvon, a terrible place, where monsters came from and men disappeared. It was guarded by unspeakable horrors. It did not exist. It existed, but there were more than one. It moved about. It was impossible to find except by accident.

"Why did your mother come to Ulys, then?" I persisted.

Sif gave an exasperated sigh. "She didn't mean to. She'd been on her way to High Hallack when a storm caught her. She'd been in the sea three days when the Sulcarmen found her."

"Why?" I asked. We were picking our way carefully now.

"Just to see it!" cried Sif. "She said her people had stayed in one place four generations without exploring. My mother decided to see what the world was like. She was a great traveler. She told me she had already been across the sea to the Witch Land when her boat went down."

I scoffed again, clutching Sif's arm once more against the wind. Sif was strong. "Women don't travel," I said. "Except

to marry." Sometimes girls on Ulys contracted to marry on the mainland. It was a rare and wonderful thing. Then their mothers gave them semroot to make them sleepy and bundled them onto brideboats to be ferried across. "Women don't travel," I said again.

"My mother did," said Sif. There were no bruises on her face today. Old Sul had not been in his cups the night before.

"They're useless on boats," I said, coming after.

"My mother wasn't," answered Sif, leaping the gap.

Your mother died on the rocks, I thought, but didn't say. I jumped, and the tall girl caught me.

"And neither am I!"

I looked up. "What do you mean?"

Sif just grinned, looking more like a boy than ever, thrusting out her long jaw with its cleft chin—not ducking shyly as a woman should. Her teeth were long and even, and her brows, which were darker than her yellow hair, met above the bridge of her long, straight nose. I poked her.

"What do you mean?"

She helped me down off the rocks. We had come to the strand. "Old Sul is teaching me the handling of boats," she whispered, and then squeezed my hand.

"He isn't!" I cried. "He can't. Women can't. It's . . . *bad*." Women in boats brought sickness and storm. Everybody knew that.

Sif set off down the beach with her long legs striding and pulled me after. "He is. He has to!" Her voice was rushed with excitement. "He gashed his hand with a bait hook a half year gone, and it's been numb in three fingers since. He needs someone to help, and all he has is me. He treats me like a boy, anyway. It doesn't matter."

I stopped then, simply staring at her. The hegitts and the robber gulls wheeled overhead. Sif reached out for one. It veered away. She watched it, and laughed.

II: Woman's Plight

Sif and I spent what time we could tending the rampion. She still brought fish bones and oyster shells. I saved bones and brought the shells of eggs when I could get them away from table. The rampion struggled on in our loose, sandy soil. It was stubborn—but Ulys kills all things in time.

One day Sif brought a rampion leaf up to our landing at the top of the tower. We were still young, too young to know the true use of it yet. We had the vague feeling that it would make us women. Sif drew the long, jagged leaf from her sleeve and brushed the dirt from it. We stared at the dark green thing, and then Sif, very carefully, folded it along the vein and broke it in half. The juice was clear and colorless.

Silently, we ate—as I had eaten once before, before I knew Sif—grinding the leathery skin between our teeth to reach the wet within. The taste was strong and green, the smell like onions. Our eyes watered. We waited for a month after that: proud, expectant, secretly terrified. But nothing happened. We were too young.

Once, in the tower, Sif told me more of her mother, red-haired Zara, who had worn her hair cropped short and trousers like a man.

“Was she really a witch?” I asked.

Sif chafed her arms and shrugged. It was full night, the window in the wall above where she sat full of darkness. I crouched on the stairs. The candles guttered in the cool evening wind. Sif tore at the heel of bread I'd brought her. It was summer. She would not freeze in the tower that night. Old Sul had been in his cups again and had left a red weal across her shoulder that would last for days. She had shown it to me. She would spend a night or two in the tower, then go back to Sul, and things would go quietly for a while.

"I don't know," she said at last, and it took me a moment to realize she was replying to my question. She was silent a few moments. She was always silent after Sul had raised his hand to her. Then she said, quietly, "But I know the place my mother came from. It's north of here—I know that much. If I had a boat, I could find it."

She glanced at me.

"I made my mother tell me the way we were to go."

"Go?" I said. The tongue of flame on the candlewick made the stone walls jump and dance. "She left you behind when she tried for Arvon."

Sif shook her head and gnawed at the bread, moving her shoulder as she did so and wincing. "It wasn't Arvon she was heading for. And she took me with her."

The candle guttered.

"Down to the shore to say good-bye," I said, not believing what she was telling me.

Sif shook her head. "Into the boat. She put me in and shoved us off from shore. The water splashed about her legs, then up to her hips. It was early morn, the clouds obscuring High Hallack gray as dragons' breath."

She spoke calmly, as was her way. Sif rarely let passion overrule her—as I did invariably. I came up the last two steps and stood by the window, gazing out at the far, black, moonless sea. The starlight shone on it, a moving white blur to my eyes. But I could hear the sound of it, the crash and wash of distant waves, and I could smell it.

"It was a light boat, no draft at all," Sif went on, "the shallowest she could find. She hoped it would ride high enough to pass over the reefs. I didn't know anything about boats then. I must have been about six. She waded out, shoving the boat, with me in it, before her until the water was up to her waist; then she hauled herself aboard. I wanted to help, but she bade me stay where I was or we'd overbalance. Then she took the oars and rowed."

Sif nibbled at the bread.

"I'd never seen a woman row: long, even strokes. I thought it was wonderful. I thought my mother must be the strongest woman in the world. We drew near the reef. The sun was coming up, a white glare behind the shadow of Ulys in a gray-streaked sky. The tide was high, but going out. There was a gap in the reef she was making for, a little gap."

I saw Sif's hand tighten where it gripped her knees.

"But she had misjudged the depth, or our draft, or the time and tide. She could have made it, I think, in a smaller skiff, built only for one, or even in that boat if I had not been there weighing it down."

Her voice was very quiet now, bitter and deep.

"Our hull caught on a jagged rock. My mother tried to use the oar to lever us free. I started to stand, but she told me to sit and cling tight to the gunwale. The bottom scraped and grated. Mother leaned against the oar. A swell lifted us. We seemed to float free for a moment. Then a cross-wave struck the boat, spinning it, and we broke against the reef."

Sif stared into the candleflame. I could not think of anything to say.

"My mother was thrown beyond the rocks, I think, or onto them. I did not see her again. I was pitched shoreward. The currents are strange around the reef, with a fierce undertow going out with the tide. But I was so light, and rode so high in the water, that the waves carried me along parallel to the land for a while, then closer to shore. Old Sul was coming along the beach. He fished me out."

Even in the bad light, I could see Sif had grown pale. I touched her arm, which was cold. "I didn't know that," I said softly, able to speak now. "That she took you in the boat with her."

Sif shrugged into the sailor's blanket we kept in the tower against the wind. "No one does," she answered, "except maybe Sul. He guesses, I think."

She had finished the bread and now sat looking about as if there might, somehow, be more. There wasn't. Cook had been in a foul mood that evening, and half a loaf had been all I could beg.

"Your mother washed up on the beach two days later," I added, not asking.

Sif nodded, tucking the blanket more closely about her. "Yes."

Some years passed. Sif grew taller, while I gained barely an inch. She told me tales she heard the fishermen tell, of people and kingdoms under the sea. Sif was better at talespinning than I. I told her what the fishwives in the market said, and the gossip from the kitchen and my mother's maids. My father's hair got silver in it. My mother bore my father another short-lived son.

Then I found Sif doubled over in the tower one afternoon, not up on the landing, but below, near the bottom, on the steps. She was on her knees, bent forward, her forehead pressed to the wood.

"Sif, Sif," I cried, dropping the napkin of bannock I had brought for our supper. I ran to her and knelt.

When she lifted her face I could see she was very pale. Dark circles lay under her eyes, which had a wild and hopeless look. She was panting and shaking, and I could see where she had been biting her lip. She was twelve now. I was nine.

"What is it—has Sul hit you?" I asked. I could see no bruises.

She looked at me blankly, then turned and put her head down. "No. No, it isn't that."

I bent closer. "Are you ill? Is it fever?" I touched her arm, but the flesh felt cold, not hot and damp. Sif twitched.

"I . . . no—don't touch me," she panted. "I can't stand to be touched." Her teeth were clenched. I felt baffled, helpless.

"Something you ate?" I tried. We were seafaring folk, and

every one of us knew to eat fish fresh or not at all. But Sul was a lazy sloven these days, Sif said, and who knew what he might have given her?

She shook her head. "No, no." Her hands resting on the wood of the steps were fists. Silence a moment, then, softly, "Go away."

I sat back, startled, staring at her. She had never said such a thing to me before. I frowned hard, tracing the grain of the wood on the step, thinking. I had no intention of going. That was out of the question. Sif needed help, and I must think what to do. I gazed at her doubled figure, listening to her shallow breath, and then, suddenly, I knew.

"It's woman's plight, isn't it?" I asked her. Sif panted and said nothing. "Has old Sul told you what to do?"

Sif made a strangled sound. I couldn't tell if she was weeping or not. "He doesn't know anything—old fool, and wouldn't tell me if he did."

I chewed on that for a moment, feeling strange. For the first time, I knew more about something—something important—than Sif. A pale spider ran across the step beside my hand, jumped, and floated down on a thread of silk.

"Do you have any things?"

"No!" gasped Sif. Her teeth were clenched. "I hate this," she whispered. She was weeping. "I wish I were a boy."

I rose. "Stay here," I said, idiotically. Sif was not going anywhere. I unpinned my cloak and put it over her. She didn't move or turn to look at me. I put the napkin of food on the step near her hand before I left.

I went back to my mother's apartments and stole some of her bloodlinens. No one was about. She and her maids must have been down in the kitchen or the spinning room, or out of keep altogether at the market in the village. It didn't matter. I went down to the women's garden and tore up a handful of fat, dark green leaves. Clutching them and the bag of linens to my breast, I went back to the tower and Sif.

She hadn't moved or touched the food. My cape was slipping from her shoulders, and she hadn't bothered to pull it back up.

"Sif," I said, kneeling. "It's me, Alys. Eat this."

She looked up, her face pasty. "I can't eat," she whispered. "I feel boatsick."

"It's rampion," I said. "My mother uses it. Eat. I promise, it helps."

She stared at the leaf I held out, dully, as though she had never seen such a thing before, as though she had no idea what it was. Slowly, she moved her hand toward it, then stopped. "My fingers are numb."

Her voice was a ghost. I fed the leaf to her, bit by bit. Her lips were cracked and dry. I made her eat two more. Then we waited. The tower smelled of dust and seashells. The summer air was warm. I played with the ants that were carrying bits of chaff down the tower wall. The wind murmured. An hour later, Sif slowly straightened. She still looked pinched and weak, but her breathing had quieted, and some of the color had come back into her cheeks.

"I feel better now," she said quietly. "It still hurts, but it's bearable."

I gave her the last of the rampion, which she ate without complaint. Then I handed her the bloodlinens. She stared at them.

"They're my mother's," I told her. "Put one on."

Sif kept staring, and then looked at me. "How?" she said finally, so blankly I laughed. I showed her. We fumbled, but managed. I was too young yet to be wearing bloodlinens, but I had seen my mother's maids putting on theirs.

"How long. . . ?" I started.

Sif blushed to the bone. "It began last night. I felt ill this morning and couldn't haul the nets. Sul tried to box my ears, so I ran." She shrugged. Now that the pain was past, she seemed more her old self. "But running made it worse."

Meredith Ann Pierce

I sighed and mouthed a phrase I had heard my mother use. "We're born to suffering."

Sif gave a snort and picked at the crumbs of bannock in the napkin I'd brought. "My mother never said that." She shrugged again and gave me back my cloak. "I'll wager it isn't like that, beyond the Gate."

The winter I turned ten, my mother put a woman's gown on me, one that dragged the ground, though I was young yet to be called a woman. The garb was so heavy it slowed my steps, like a gown of lead. She kept me inside with the women then, saying I must learn to spin and weave and wait on my lord at table if I was to marry well. I found it all absurd. Who would marry the ten-year-old daughter of a tiny island lord? I wanted to know.

"Whoever'd have the fur trade hereabouts," my father laughed, stamping the snow from his boots and holding his hands out over the great hall's fire. My mother cleaned the blood from his fingers with a warm, wet cloth.

It had been a good clubbing that year, the foxpelts thick and soft. We would do well in spring when the fur traders came from the mainland. My father laughed again.

"Goddess knows, that's why I wed. And truth, no one'd have you for your looks."

I could not tell if he was joking or not. He boxed me across the backside as I passed, hard enough so I nearly dropped the pitcher I was carrying. He smelled of ale and the blood of seafoxes. My mother said nothing. She never crossed my father in public—or in private, either, for that matter.

I missed the outdoors and my freedom, the wind and wave smell, and the running on the beach with Sif. I hardly saw her anymore. Old Sul kept her working breakback at the nets and boats. He hardly lifted a hand himself anymore, and Sif had to do it all.

On rare occasions we met in the tower. She looked brown

RAMPION

as a boy, her shoulders straining the seams of the narrow shirt she wore. I made her a new shirt. She had never had much breast—unlike me, who my mother wrapped tight lest I look older than my years. Sif didn't show beneath the baggy front of her blouse. When she rolled back the sleeves, her arms were corded and hard. She spoke like the fisherfolk. I scarcely recognized her anymore. More often than our meeting, she left me presents in the rampion: a bright shell, a seastar, the speckled claw of something crablike and huge.

Then came the night when I was nearly eleven; Sif must have been about fourteen. It was the very end of winter, near fullmoon feast, but already warm enough for spring. I had seen the strand of kelp draped over the seaward gate: our signal to meet in the tower. It was nearly dusk, and I would be due in the supper hall soon. My mother always scolded when I was late; sometimes she pinched. But Sif had hung the seaweed, so I went.

I found her on the landing, pacing—not sitting at her ease as was her wont. Her shirt was torn at one shoulder, and she held it up, striding, striding the narrow space. She was two palm widths taller than I was—I realized that with a start. For the last year, when we had met, it was always crouching in secret, not running and walking the beach as we had used to do.

The look in her eye stopped me short on the last step: it was fierce and burning, half wild. I had never seen her so. Her face was flushed and bruised.

“Sif,” I started.

She cut me off. “I'm going. I've got a boat.”

I just stood, speechless. The candle in my hand, flaring and guttering, made the tower walls jump and dance. I shook my head, not understanding. My heart was pounding from climbing the steps.

“I got it out of the castle shed last autumn,” Sif was saying.

"Sul let me take it. He said it was hopeless. But I've patched it. It'll hold—long enough to get me to Jorby, anyway."

"What are you talking about—what do you mean?" I started to say that, but she wouldn't let me speak. Her free hand clenched, the knuckles white.

"Sul was in his cups again—had been since noon. This morning he found a keg of the red washed up on the sand unbreached, unspoiled. Never a word to my lord, mind you. Kept it all to himself, and not a drop to me, either."

Her words fizzed, popping like the candleflame.

"And then a couple of hours back, he says what a pretty thing I am and how he's always liked them tall and fair. He told me I reminded him of a lass he once knew—save for being so skinny—and didn't I like his hand on me? I'd come under his roof so long ago, he could hardly remember if I were a lass or a boy, and he'd see for himself if I wouldn't show him."

She fingered the rip where her shirt's shoulder seam had parted. She was shaking with fury.

"I hit him with the gaffing hook. It drew blood. He fell—maybe I killed him. I didn't stay to find out." She chafed her arm a moment. A trickle of ice bled through me.

"He can't be dead, Sif," I whispered. "You wouldn't hit him that hard."

"Could and would," she muttered, then pierced me suddenly with her eyes: sea-green, green-gray. "Even if he's not dead, I can't stay here. I must get off Ulys, or I'll go mad."

The trickle of ice in me had become a torrent. I started to shake. "No, don't go," I said. "I'll tell my father. He'll punish Sul—make him leave you alone. I'll get Cook to give you a place in the kitchen . . ."

The words trailed off. Sif had stopped pacing. She leaned back against the stone wall beside the window, looking at me. Then she laughed once, a short, incredulous sound. "Do you think your father cares one tat what happens to me?" she

asked. "If he'd any honor, he'd have taken me in himself when Zara died."

"I don't know what you mean," I stammered. "My father is a just and noble . . ."

"Oh, don't talk to me of your 'just and noble' lord," spat Sif, suddenly furious again. She straightened and stood away from the wall. "It's his noble justice left me in Sul's care all these years." She was close to shouting now. "Your fine lord father would have *married* my mother if I'd been born a boy!"

I found the wall behind me with a hand and leaned against it. I needed that support. I stared at Sif. She did not approach.

"I don't know what you mean," I whispered at last.

"By Gunnora," choked Sif. "Who did you think my father was?"

I did not answer, could not. I felt myself growing very pale. I had never, not once, ever imagined such a thing. I suppose if I had bothered to think of it at all, I would have guessed Sul.

"He promised to see she got safe to High Hallack," Sif was saying, "with money enough to buy her passage north—he promised to take her north himself, but later, once his position as lord of the island was more secure," Sif leaned her head back. "She grew to love him. He was kind to her. She told me that. But she didn't bear him an heir—only me. So he wed *your* mother and left mine to find her own way home."

"That isn't true," I whispered. My voice was shaking. I was close to tears. "My father would never . . ."

"Be so dishonorable?" she finished for me, then gave a sigh like one very weary. She spoke softly now, but the words were fierce. "Be glad he was, chit—for your sake. Else it'd have been me trussed up in those fine mucky skirts of yours, and you'd *never have been born.*"

We were silent for a while, looking at each other. The spring night air was cold. Her eyes implored me at last.

"I'll need food, Alys. I've already got the boat."

I did weep then. I couldn't help myself. She couldn't mean it. Not Sif. She couldn't truly mean to be leaving me.

"Where will you go?" I managed at last.

Sif turned away, started pacing again. "I don't know. To High Hallack, first. I'll sign as a seaman. They'll think I'm a boy."

"They won't," I said. "They'll find you out."

"I'll move on before they do," growled Sif, "I'll go north. I'll find my mother's Gate."

It was all absurd, as if she could really go.

"They'll never let you out," I said. "Even if Sul isn't dead, they'll never raise the harbor chain to let you pass . . ."

"I'm not going by the harbor," my sister snapped.

Panic seized me. "You'll drown like your mother—you'll die on the rocks!"

She stopped pacing and came back to me, stood above me on the landing. I stood on the steps. She reached out and touched my shoulder.

"It's midmonth, Alys," she whispered, and eyed me, wondering. "The full moon's in two days' time: spring tide. The water's deep. Don't you know that?"

I shook my head. I had lived on this little island all my life and never once sat in a boat. I knew nothing of tides. Sif's hand tightened.

"You have to help me," she said. "Sul kept no stores, and I've had no time to lay any in. I'd wanted to wait a year. But it must be now, tonight. I can't get into the kitchen, but you can."

I could indeed, but I didn't want to. I didn't want to help her leave me. Yet at the same time, I knew that Sif would do what Sif would do, as she had always done, with or without my help. Then I realized she needn't have told me at all. She didn't really need me; she wouldn't starve between here and High Hallack. She had come to say good-bye.

For a wild moment I wanted to go with her, wanted to beg her to take me along—anything to keep her from leaving me. But I remembered her tale of her mother's boat catching the reef because of too much weight. I would only burden her. I was just a girl. Women in boats were bad fortune. Everyone knew that. I was just a girl, and Sif . . . was Sif.

That was part of it, part of the reason I did not beg her, simply stood there with her hand on my shoulder and held my tongue. The other part of it was that suddenly I knew, with a certainty beyond all doubts and shadows, that full moon or no, high tide or no, spring tide or no, she would never succeed. Sif would die on the rocks.

I brought her everything she asked of me and more—though I had to wait till after supper. All through the meal I waited on my father's table. I stared at him as he ate his fill, laughed with his men, and played games of chance, till my mother pinched me and asked what made me so walleied. Both of them looked like strangers to me. I didn't know them.

When I was dismissed, I lingered in the kitchen until Cook and her maids were at their own fare in the adjoining room, before seizing everything I could lay hold of and wrapping it up in an oiled cloth for Sif: roast fowl and hardcake, seagrates, and two pouches of wine.

I brought them to her in the tower, along with a little bag of sewing floss. I mended her shirt by candlelight and helped her carry her journey fare down to the seaward gate. No one saw us. My father's guards were slack and full of their own importance and never kept good watch. The reef and the harbor chain were all the watch our island needed.

I gave her my good green cloak, which was closewoven of seahair to keep out the damp, and the gold brooch my mother had given me the year before, when she had first put a

woman's gown on me. The month after Sif left, when I told her I had lost it, she gave me a slap that bloodied my nose.

Standing there by the seagate in the darkness under the high, near-full moon, Sif bent down and kissed my cheek, a thing she had never done before, and passed the bone harpoon head that she wore on a string around her neck into my hand. I got my last good look at her face. She was smiling.

"You're not afraid, are you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I know the way as far as Jorby—I've made sailors at the inn tell me as much. It should not be too hard from there."

I hugged her very tight, holding the bone harpoon head till it cut my hand. I never wanted to let her go. But I did at last, when I heard her sighing and impatient to be gone. She really wasn't afraid. I released her and stepped back.

She bent and gathered the things I'd given her and was off—striding down the steep, narrow, moonlit path toward the sea below. She had eyes like a cat in the dark, and I had the eyes of a mole. I didn't stay to watch her go. I would not have been able to see her long anyway. I shut the seagate and turned away, back to Castle Van. I knew that I would never see her again.

III: Seasinger

It's strange sometimes how the scent of someone lingers, like smoke in a still room after the candle's out. Sif's presence lingered with me for months. I kept expecting to see her, striding along the beach below Castle Van, or ducking into the tower, or to see a strand of kelp draped over the seagate—but I never did.

They never found her body. Sometimes the sea does not give up her dead. Old Sul turned out not to be dead after all,

and I could not help feeling bitter that he was not. It meant my sister had died for nothing. She could have stayed.

That spring when Sif disappeared was the start of Ulys's long misfortune. All the luck seemed to wash away. The weather turned bad—a constant, dismal, murky, damp wind so cold that it cut the bone, but no snow drying the air. Fishing fell off, and the red dead-men's-hands got into the shell-fish beds. Shore fever took many of the fisherfolk—but not old Sul. He lived another three years before expiring of an apoplexy. Inwardly, I rejoiced.

But worst of all, the seafoxes dwindled. Perhaps they found another place to winter. I hoped so. Every year my father's men came back from the clubbing with fewer pelts; almost no white or speckled or silver anymore—only the black and the brown, and those thin and small. Second-rate fur—the Dalesmen paid little for it.

Castle Van went into debt to the Hallack merchants from whom we bought many of our goods. Certain valuable heirlooms about the palace quietly disappeared, sold on the mainland, I think. My father made the crossing more than once to secure us loans, always smaller than he had hoped and at exorbitant rates. He lost a good deal of that money gambling and, probably, wenching.

My mother, in a white rage, whispered—but not to him—that he ought to ask his Dalesmen kin for help. He was too proud for that. They had disinherited him years ago. At last, there were no more loans to be had. My father, resourceless, prowled the confines of our small, gray keep and our small, gray isle, and began to go mad.

My mother, with a kind of desperate determination, refused to despair. All would be put right, she vowed, when I married. She and her maids got me by the hair then and took charge of my rearing—a task she said they had grossly neglected before.

Got me by the hair quite literally. I was no longer allowed

to trim it off just below the level of my shoulders, but must let it grow and grow, a waterfall of reddish gold that was heavy and, in the summer, hot. Why couldn't I cut it? I wanted to know. Why must it be so long?

Because that was what a woman's hair was for, my mother said, parting the strands along the center of my scalp with a comb—to be a beauty to a husband's eye. But I didn't have a husband, I protested. *Yet*, she countered, brushing, brushing. It would be sooner than I thought—didn't I want one? No, I didn't want one, I answered, but only to myself, silently. I wanted my childhood back. I wanted Sif.

When I was thirteen years old, my father betrothed me to a minor lord of a minor clan of High Hallack, one Olsan. A brilliant stroke, he called it. Not for sixty years had the daughter of the lord of Ulys actually lived upon the mainland as a lady of a Dale.

I was to remain on Ulys until I was fifteen, then go to join my lord. He wrote me letters I could not read. My mother read them (or pretended to) and summarized. I had the impression he must be older than my father. No one would say, but he already had children, sons. His first wife was dead.

When I was told that the arrangements for my betrothal were being made, the envoys with the marriage axe already on their way, I went down to the beach and looked out at the rocks. I wondered what it would be like to drown, to be torn apart by the gray and heaving sea, to die on jagged stone. I wondered whether I was brave enough to follow Sif, to wade out to my death rather than marry an old man whose household would probably laugh at me.

I was not brave enough. I was a coward at heart—or perhaps I was only practical. I knew that freedom was impossible for me. It was only a question of death or life. And I wanted life, even as the plain, untutored, provincial young wife of a stranger. I turned away from the rocks, from the storm-gray sea, and went back to the castle to face the axe.

RAMPION

* * *

After my betrothal, I was taught how to pin my hair, how to walk, how to speak, how to wear my clothes. My mother sent to the mainland to learn how Daleswomen's gowns were cut. I was made to recite poetry. (They gave up on singing—I had no voice.) I could dance a little. My mother was passionate to impress on me all the arts and graces she fancied a matron of High Hallack would know.

My husband even sent a dame, one of the religious women of the Dales who live without men in sacred houses and worship the Flame. This woman was to instruct me in my husband's religion. (My father's clan had followed other gods.) I could make little of what she told me, but was able to rattle off the phrases quickly enough by rote.

I think Dame Elit sensed my reluctance. She did not stay long: two months. The unrelenting gray of our weather grated on her. She gave me a pat on the cheek and told my mother she would instruct me further when my lord sent for me. Then she went down to the harbor and took passage on the next boat to the mainland. My mother was furious, saying I had driven her off with my stupidity.

The rampion died. Without Sif, I had not the heart to tend it. I came to womanhood not long after my betrothal and suffered the woman's plight my mother had always complained of without relief. Nothing grew in the garden anymore. At regular intervals thereafter, whenever the moon turned dark, it was the same. I thought of Sif, and dreamed of the dark leaves' green and bitter taste.

My betrothed, Lord Olsan of High Hallack, died when I was fourteen years old; some border dispute among the Dalesmen, and he was killed. We had mourning. For three months my mother tied black ribbons in my hair. I was told to look sad. Secretly, though, I did not mourn.

Then I learned that my father had not even waited for the days of mourning to elapse before offering me to any of

Olsan's sons who would have me. He was soundly rebuffed. They were all but one married themselves, to good Daleswomen. I had been but a toy for their father in his age, but they had heirs to get and needed no beggars from Ulys to do it on.

So my father demanded that the part of my dowry that had been sent ahead be returned—and was laughed at. The sons of Olsan knew we of Ulys had no friends or armies to insist on justice. My mother raged. My father suffered fierce headaches and fits of temper. I crept about dejectedly, like a whipped dog, until it occurred to me that what passed between the Dalesmen and my father really had nothing to do with me.

When the castle's debts fell due, he offered me at large in High Hallack. Few lords even bothered to reply. Some of their scorn was for me, I think, as a pauper's daughter—but mostly for him: the madman who would sell his kith so openly. There were delicacies to be observed in the barter of daughters, and he had not observed them. Ulys became a laughingstock, and some of the fisherfolk began to say it was a curse that had driven the lord of the castle mad and chased the seafoxes away.

My father began to be too much in his winecup then, and to gamble in the evenings with his men. When castle stores ran low, he sent men-at-arms to seize the fisherfolk's catch. He ordered the people to gather oysters and search for pearls, though our shellfish are not the kind that bear many pearls. His headaches grew worse. The gates of the castle began to be barred in the evenings, a thing that had never been done in the history of Ulys.

Eventually he began to revile my mother. I remember once we sat in the hearthroom just off the kitchen after supper; my father, my mother, me, and a few of their men and maids, there together for the warmth. It was winter, and we were short of fuel. My lord and lady had been arguing about something, some little thing, over supper, but had been silent

since, when suddenly my father looked up from his cup and growled,

“What is wrong with you, woman, that you never gave me sons? Sons to bring commerce to this little spit of rock, sons to sail and find where the cursed seafoxes have gone?” He looked at the wine dark in the bowl of his cup and muttered, “All you could give me was a chit.”

My mother, tight-lipped and hemming a handkerchief beside the hearth, could take much from my father and had done so over the years, but his saying that she had not done what women were made to do—that is, give their lords an heir—was too much. Before I could even blink, my mother was on her feet, crying.

“I gave you four sons, live out of the womb.” All this from the time I was two till I was nine. “They were your seed, my lord, but they died.” She had pricked herself with her needle, and the cloth held a bright red stain. “Do not complain to me that you have no sons.”

At which, my father cast his cup away with a shout and gave her such a blow it put her on the ground. He was seized with one of his headaches then and was not fit company for days. He was clearly mad. We were all afraid of him.

My mother grew to loathe the sight of me, my father as well. I came to move between the pair of them furtively, like a shadow. My weak eyes did not help. I could not always tell what expression sat their faces. I stayed out of reach. I thought of Sif dodging old Sul, and looked back on her plight with new understanding.

There was no one on Ulys high enough or rich enough to marry me, and no one in High Hallack would have me. My mother spoke once—only once—of sending me to dwell with the dames in Norstead, but my father shouted that by the Horned Man, he'd not send even a worthless girl to serve the superstitions of the thrice-cursed Dalesmen and their Flame.

It was not, I think, that he had forgotten he had been a

Dalesman once himself, but rather that he remembered and at the same time knew beyond all shadows, to his bitter rue, that he could never be one again. Ulys had got him by the hair, too. He could never go back.

I was seventeen, unmarried and unspoken for, when the seasinger came. The girls on Ulys wed at thirteen and fourteen. I was an anomaly, a quirk. A jinx, some said. No man would have me. I had learned not to go down to the market anymore, even with my mother's maids. The looks some of the fishwives gave me made my blood cold.

Perhaps they thought I was the reason the catch and the seafoxes were all so scarce. Or perhaps it was just that I was my father's daughter. He took their labor and their goods, calling it his due, and shared none of the castle stores with them, even when they were starving. They had begun to hate us, I think.

But the seasinger changed all that. He came on a ship of Hallack merchantmen come to look at our meager crop of furs. It was spring. He was not a merchant himself, that much seemed plain. He spoke more like a Dalesman than not, but the cut of his hair was different: bangs across the brow in front and long down the neck behind. It was fair hair, dark gold, though his beard was reddish. A fine, thick beard—no boy's—so he must have been late in his twenties, surely. His face, they said, was neither lined nor weathered, though well-browned by the sun.

Not a common seafarer at all, perhaps? Higher born than that, perhaps? That was what some of the maids speculated. I got all my information from them. They invented excuses to go to the market to see him, to gather news of him.

He played in taverns down by the wharves, songs of High Hallack, and other songs such as none of us had ever heard—though he knew the Ulish fishing songs as well. His accent was good. He picked up the way of our speech very quickly.

All my mother's maids were wild for him. He paid them polite attention and nothing more. They mooned and sighed over him shamelessly, I am sure, while he—never cold, never aloof—yet never seemed to favor one over another, or return a sidelong longing glance, or answer an urgently whispered plea to meet behind the tavern, or in the cow shed, or on the strand.

When the furriers went back to High Hallack at week's end, he stayed. That sparked great interest among the fisherfolk—among my mother's maids as well. Another four days passed, but none seemed to know what the stranger's business in Ulys might be. He would not say.

One of my mother's maidservants came to me when the seasinger had been on our island a week. It was Danna, a saucy girl with dark brown curls. She was younger than I by a year, unmarried, but spoken for. That did not stop her flirting. I sat making tapestry by the open window, bending close and peering so I could count the threads. Danna was a good enough sort. I did not dislike her.

"He asked about you today," she said, her voice pitched low, conspiratorially.

I sighed. "Did he send you to fetch me?" I asked, grown used to my father's whims, but unwilling to go before him without some accompaniment to help insure my safety. "Where's my mother?"

Danna laughed and slapped her hip. "Your mother's below, with Madam Cook, else I would not be telling you this. And it's not your father I mean who asked of you. I mean the stranger, down by the tavern. The singer—he asked."

I frowned and looked up. "What do you mean?"

Danna was not close enough for me to see her face well. I could not tell if she was teasing me. As it turned out, she was, but by telling the truth, not otherwise.

"I was at the market," she said, "buying the fleckfish your lady and Madam Cook are now discussing. And I saw him,

leaning against the inn wall and looking out over the square, eating a fat carnelian fruit in slices with his dagger. So I called out to him, bold as hegitts. I said, 'Ho, singer, why are you not singing in tavern, as that's what you do?'"

She gave a nervous titter at the thought of having been so brash.

"And he said, tossing me a slice of fruit, 'Not all the time, my lass. A man must eat.'"

I sat looking at her. She had covered her mouth with her hands and was blushing—I could see that well—but her tone told me she was more delighted than ashamed.

"And then he said," whispered Danna, "then he said, 'You're Danna, aren't you—Uldinna's daughter?' Truly, hearing him say that, I nearly jumped out of my hair, and I didn't eat his fruit. I came to myself. I said, 'And how do you know that?' And he said, shoving away from where he was leaning. He was smiling—oh, he does have a foxy smile: all his teeth straight, and none missing. But truth, I was a little ware of him by then.

"But he said, soft and courtly as a lord, 'Oh, I've learned many things, Danna, in the little time I've been here—about you and about this place. For example, I know you work in the lord of Ulys's keep.'

"I do,' I said. 'I am maid-waiting on the lady Benis.'

"Ah,' he says, 'and I hear the lady Benis has a daughter, a famous daughter, one all Hallack speaks of . . .'

"And I said, forgetting myself, I said, 'Hold right there, you. It wasn't the lady Alia's fault, her Dalesman lord dying and my lord all in debt. She's a fine, *good* girl, and all this talk of a curse is nothing . . .'

"But he laughed! 'No, no. You mistake me. That is not what I have heard at all,' he said. 'Word is, where I am from, that she is a handsome lass, fair as morning light, with all the virtues a highborn maid should have. But she is proud as her father is rich, and spurned the lord she was betrothed to, till

he died of grief. Then she spurned all the other desperate suitors that clamored for her hand.' He smiled at me. 'At least, so they sing the tale where I am from.'

"Where are you from, sir?" I asked him, but he only laughed.

"Ah, that I cannot tell you just yet, my lass.' He sounded so like a Dalesman then. But not like a merchant—more like your father speaks, like a lord. I'm sure he cannot but be some highborn noble of High Hallack, and the way he speaks to sing us songs in tavern all pretense."

Danna was gazing at me earnestly now. I did not know what to make of her words, nor whether she might be gaming with me. Flustered, I tried to turn back to my tapestry, but the threads kept tangling. My mother's maidservant went on.

"But how is it,' the seasinger now says, 'in all the days I've been here, and all the ladies of Lord Halss's keep'—imagine him calling maids such as I *ladies*—'all those that have come down from the keep to hear my singing, that I have never so much as glimpsed this celebrated girl?'

"Well, she never comes out of the keep,' I said.

"What, never?' the young man asked. He seemed truly surprised. 'Does she not walk along the beach of a morning, or come down to the village on market day?'

"No, sir, she does not—my lord and lady keeping such a close watch on her as they do, not wanting her to fall in with mere common sorts.'

"I said that, looking hard at him, for suddenly I couldn't tell anymore whether he seemed a common seasinger or a highborn Dalesman lord—and the moment before I'd been so sure. But he never so much as blinked."

I gazed out the window then, at the blur of nothingness beyond that was the sky. Danna's words ran against my ears like water for a little space, meaning nothing. "Close watch" indeed! I was a prisoner of my father's keep and my mother's

isle; withering and dying by inches, like the rampion. I felt frozen, and old.

"He seemed to think on that a while," Danna was saying as I began listening again. "And then he said, 'Might this young lady be in need of music lessons? Every fair daughter of a high lord surely must . . .'"

"'Oh, sir, she's hopeless,' I cried. 'The lady Benis tried and tried . . .'"

I glanced at Danna, and the dark-haired girl had the grace to stumble to a halt and blush. I sighed again and turned back to my weaving, satisfied that I knew this seasinger now for what he was, a fortune-seeker, and one who clearly thought my father richer than he was. We had no gold to spare on fripperies like music. But even my glare had not silenced Danna.

"Well, then, all he said was, 'Commend me to the young lady Alia and tell her I stand ready at her service,' and I said I wouldn't, he had a fair tongue, and that I had it in mind to tell the lord Halss himself that an impertinent talesinger had been asking after his daughter.

"But—and here's the odd part, my lady—he only just smiled at me. He didn't seem angry or frightened at all; any common man would have been. And his voice grew all High Hallack and noble again suddenly. He just smiled and said I'd do no such thing—didn't I want to eat my slice of fruit that was dripping all over my hand?"

"And then, truth, I just didn't want to tell my lord, or anyone, save you, and I was ravenous for that bit of fruit. So I ate it quick, and when I did, it was the sweetest thing."

A strange sensation ran through me, hearing that last which Danna said. I began to wonder if there might be more to this mysterious seasinger than just fortune-seeking. My mother's maids continued their silly speculations that he must be some prince of the mainland traveling disguised, adventuring, or—here they sighed—even bride-seeking.

But the more I pondered Danna's tale—of his causing her, with no more than a word and a smile, to forget her intention to report to my lord and savor a fruit she did not want—the more the strange fear grew in me that he must be some conjurer, about what game I could not tell. I resolved to stay wide of him; not that there was any need, with him safely barred from keep and me safely prisoned within.

To my surprise, I did have need of my resolve, and soon. The very next afternoon, the seasinger presented himself at the castle gate. My father was ill with headache and could receive no one, and so my mother was sent for. She was suitably indignant at this mere entertainer's cheek and kept him waiting an hour before donning a fine, fox-trimmed robe and going down to the audience hall, a crowd of maids and ladies revolving around her like satellites.

I was instructed to remain out of the way and on no account to show my face in the audience hall. This I gladly did, having no desire to don a formal gown too tight in the bodice to breathe in and too voluminous to walk in with ease. I dawdled in the kitchen, helping Cook make tarts. I had no wish to see the seasinger. I hoped my mother would send him away.

But she did not. She entertained him for two hours in the hall, listening rapt to his songs and stories. Twice she sent to the kitchen for refreshments, first for cakes and candied eels, and shortly after for the good yellow wine—not the common cellar stock, either, but my lord's private store.

Cook was astonished. I went back to my mother's chambers to await her return with a sharp sense of misgivings. She returned at last, she and her maids all in a flutter, their faces flushed from the strong yellow wine.

"Oh," my mother said, clinging to Imma for balance while another of her maids helped her off with her slippers. "Oh, he is an impressive young man."

A third assisted her with her outer robe. They were all a little unsteady on their feet.

"Such wit, such courtesy. Surely Ulys has never seen the like—saving only my lord husband, of course." She hiccuped and sat down suddenly. Her maids, some of them hiccuping themselves, giggled. My mother joined them.

"And wasn't it clever," she added, "wasn't it clever of me to call for the wine? It put him in a garrulous mood, did it not?"

"A fine mood, m'lady," Imma echoed her. I could see Danna just beyond them on a footstool, dozing where she sat.

"The thing or two he let slip after the second cup!" my mother laughed, worrying with the pins holding her hair. Imma stumbled to help her.

"The way he talked, m'lady, I wouldn't be surprised if he was a prince disguised, a prince of High Hallack come adventuring."

My skin prickled and drew up; he had them all believing it now, and even saying so in front of my mother. I glanced quickly at Danna, but she never so much as stirred in her sleep. My mother nodded.

"I am sure he is of the Haryl clan," she answered. "He mentioned their Dale."

I blushed. The scent of yellow wine was strong in the room, like spilled cider. Imma and her fellows buzzed around like bees. Clearly they had all had several more after the second cup—and probably done no better than make fools of themselves before this common conjurer. My mother laughed again.

"Surely he is rich."

I looked up sharply. What could she mean—a seasinger, rich? My mother seemed to catch sight of me then for the first time.

"Look, Alia; look," she exclaimed. "See what the young man presented to me."

She beckoned her other maid, Rolla, forward. The girl held an oblong something covered with coarse brown sacking. She laid it on the bed. My mother awkwardly pulled the sacking off, and I saw a bolt of cloth—but such cloth as I had never seen.

The threads were very fine and slick, the weave tight, not the least bit sheer. I ran my hand over it; it was soft, yet strangely crisp. It made many tiny wrinkles but did not keep them, springing back from the touch. I sensed water would bead on this stuff. It rustled. It whispered. But the oddest thing about it was its color, appearing from some angles pearly blue-gray or silver, and from others pink.

I stared at it. The cloth had left a witch feel in my hand. All the fine hairs along my arm were standing up. My mother held a length of it up to her, fingering it.

“Oh, we must make him welcome, that we must,” she crowed. “One who knows where they make this cloth—he could make us rich! Alia, have you ever seen the like? How much would even a yard of this bring in High Hallack? Wealth!”

The hairs on my head felt charged and alive, the way they did before a storm. I felt strange, troubled. I could not think of anything to say. My mother dropped the cloth suddenly and frowned a trace. “What a pity he declined my invitation to stay at keep.”

She glanced at me.

“Well, no matter,” she said. “Alia, my dear”—she spoke very distinctly now, against the slurring of the wine—“we must make you ready. I have invited this young man to fullmoon feast two days from now. Your father will be over his headache by then, and we must be certain you are looking your best.”

I drew back, my heart dropping like a stone. My throat was suddenly tight. The cloth on the bed snapped and sparkled where my mother stroked it. I began to fear more than wine and flattery had had a hand in my mother’s change of heart:

inviting strangers to table and calling them lords. Conjuror—warlock, more like! I wanted nothing to do with him.

“Must—must I, mother?” I stammered. “The time of the moon is wrong. I shall be ill that night, I know it.” It was a lie. My time was always at moondark, not fullmoon feast—but it was all I could think of. My mother’s lips compressed.

“Well or ill,” she snapped, “you’ll make yourself ready and be glad on it. The young gentleman—who is calling himself Gyrec at present—has expressed a particular wish to see you.” She glanced away, her eyes a little unfocused. “Imma, my patterns. We must see my daughter has a new gown.”

I shuddered then and could have wept. So they were offering me up to seasingers now. Who would it be next—Sulcars? Seacaptains? I had begun to think myself safe from this bargaining at last; my father too ill and indebted, my mother too resourceless to try again. I had been a fool to hope. I thought of Sif, tossed and dying on the rocks, and envied her.

IV: Fullmoon Feast

I was made ready for fullmoon feast: bathed and scented and bundled into a many-gored, fur-trimmed gown of russet and olive. I had never had a fox-trimmed gown before. My mother had meant to make me a gown of the seasinger’s silk, but my father had seized the stuff as soon as he learned of it and, above my mother’s protests, sent the bolt to the mainland to be sold.

It brought a staggering sum, enough to pay half a year’s debt and more. He was in a fine expansive mood by the time of the feast, chucking my mother’s cheeks and telling her what a clever thing she was, arranging for this excellent young Dalesman to come sit at our table—they’d have me married yet.

What a banquet it was that they laid. We must have gone through stores to last a month in that one meal: sweetgrain

and date sugar, honey and nutmeal for cakes and cozies. Broiled fish and baked bird, eels fried and spitted and dressed seven ways. Shellfish in bloodsauce and succulent pincushion fish, sea currants and ocean plums, apples stuck with spice pricks and steamed in cider. New butter brought over from the mainland in tubs. Cook was a madwoman and beat the kitchen boys for pilfering.

At last the board was laid and the guests in place. My father sat in a high-backed chair at the center of the table, bedecked in all the finery of High Hallack he had left. The garb was old, a little shabby, and tight across the belly even where the seams had been let out.

But he wore it with such an air of unfeigned pride that for a moment, approaching him, I caught a glimpse of what he must have been like when he was young. My mother sat on his left. She had never been a beautiful lady—her hair was graying, her eyes surrounded by tiny lines—but that night she was a regal one.

The stranger sat on my father's right—of middle height for a man, so far as I could tell, well proportioned, with long legs. He was dressed in a tabard and breeks of blue and dark red, gold-chased, finer far than anything anyone else in the hall had on, thereby reinforcing the rumor that he was some disguised lord of High Hallack, as I was sure was his intent.

His hair was indeed dark gold, as I had heard tell, with bangs across the brow and the ends curling under at the shoulder, much longer than the hair of a man of Ulys. And, unlike a man of Ulys, he was bearded. A thick fringe of curly reddish hair ran along his jaw and upper lip and chin, but left the cheeks for the most part bare. The effect was strange to my eye, both enticing and oddly menacing at once.

I dropped my eyes as I approached—as my mother had instructed me to do—curious as I was. I did not have a seat at the table, of course, being only an unmarried girl. My task was to serve the wine and other victuals. I was not to speak unless

directly addressed, and then to answer softly with a bob—any other response being a breach of maidenly modesty.

I filled my father's cup, and then my mother's, but as I bent near to fill the stranger's I became uncomfortably aware that he was watching me. I knew that I must not look up, but his gaze on me was so fixed, so intent, it made my skin prick.

I did look up then, and found him staring. His eyes were gray, dark-looking by candlelight. The hall was ablaze with torches and candles that night—another store we were using recklessly in ostentatious display. The seasinger's eyes, like a steady-burning flame, never wavered. He said nothing.

I backed away from him and dropped my gaze, and, my first serving duty done, retreated in confusion to the kitchen. He had been looking at me as though wishing to see into my very soul, or impart some urgent message. Surely it had been those eyes, conjurer's eyes, that had made Danna eat the fruit.

I began to be afraid then, and cowered in the kitchen until the guestcup was drunk and the next course ready to be served. Every time I went into the serving hall, I felt those eyes on me. My lord and lady did nothing to discourage it. I sat trembling in the kitchen between times and could not eat.

Soon enough my parents began openly to encourage him by discussing the merits of their lovely daughter, a mere child, trained for the life of a lady of High Hallack—until the unfortunate demise of her intended lord. They spoke as though it had been only months, not years ago; as though I must be heartbroken. The young man Gyrec spoke to them wittily, absently, and stared at me.

He had a fine voice, a bit light, but he used it well. He did not quite have the accent of the isles, but his way of speech was close, very close. There was about it, too, a hint of something I had heard before—Sulcar speech? I could not say. It troubled me, making me at once want to listen more closely and run away.

My father and mother began to praise my virtues one by one. Lord Halss went on about my youth, beauty, modesty,

obedience, and sweet nature. He might have been describing a stranger. Then my mother held forth about my skill in all the womanly arts: how well I sewed and cooked and could mend a legging. She told him I recited the pious offices of the Flame and sang like an idylbird in spring.

At that the stranger suddenly laughed, a surprisingly deep-throated, likable sound. He covered this breach with some pleasantries to my mother that if her daughter's voice was half so sweet as her own, I must be a jewel indeed. My parents nearly killed themselves for smiling then, but I knew with certainty that the singer was well aware I had no voice. Danna had told him so in the market square. And he did not care.

When I brought in the next course, the candied fruit between the soup and the meat, the singer's fingers brushed my hand. I shied away and made myself gone as quick as I could, but when I brought in the meat and was taking the soup plates away, he actually caught hold of my wrist, quite unobtrusively and not hard, but I was so startled I jerked away and nearly dropped the dish.

He did not seem angry, only perturbed, and when I next entered the room, he ignored me. My parents were not amused, however, and my mother caught me aside to hiss, "Do not be so standoffish, you silly chit. Smile and be receptive to the young man's attentions. Speak to him if he should speak to you."

Fear bit into me to hear her say that. Desperation made me bold. "I won't!" I whispered. He was no Hallack lord, I *knew* it. "He's some conjurer—"

"He's none, and you will," my mother snapped, pinching me hard enough to make my eyes sting.

"I can't," I gasped, half weeping now. A sidelong glance showed me my father and the long-haired warlock deep in some convivial talk. "I don't like him!"

"That's nothing," my mother said fiercely under her breath. She gave me a shake. "Do as you're told."

A strange, sudden calm that was nearer numbness de-

scended on me, and I stopped weeping. I realized then that I would not marry, ever, any man at my parents' behest. I would live in Castle Van all my life a withering maid if I must, but I would not anymore do as I was told. I would fling myself from the tower first. I'd die on the rocks.

But how to survive this evening was my first concern. Once more I retreated to the kitchen. Once more I emerged to serve a dish. This time when I approached the table, I found my father and his guest at a game of chancesticks. My mother sat watching, seemingly rapt.

She did not know how to play, chancesticks not being considered a suitable game for ladies, but I did. Sif had taught me. My father was a fair enough player, but the seasinger was better. Nevertheless, twice during the next few rounds, I glimpsed our guest surreptitiously discarding a counter to give himself a losing score.

"So," my father said, rubbing the pieces between his palms for luck, "tell me where you found this marvelous cloth you gifted my lady with. Somewhere north of here—Arvon, perhaps?"

He cast the sticks. The stranger laughed.

"Ah, my lord, were a man to divulge such a thing, he'd not long keep his monopoly." He shook the counters between cupped hands. "No, my lord, I am not looking for a confidant. I am looking for a port—preferably an island off the coast of High Hallack. I've already surveyed your neighbors to north and south."

He threw, but the score was low. My father won the round.

"What good's an island port to you?" my father asked, marking the tally and gathering up the sticks.

"As a place to display my wares to the lords of the Dales," the seasinger replied.

My father threw. "Why not take your goods directly to their ports?"

The seasinger smiled and collected his sticks. "Because they would tax me, my lord."

He breathed upon the sticks. My father took a cup of wine, eyeing the other meditatively. Most men were uneasy in my father's presence, if he chose to make them so. But the seasinger showed not a trace of unease. His hand was steady, his air relaxed. My father fingered the stem of his cup.

"And would I not?"

The singer threw. "Think, my lord," he murmured, watching the counters fall. "Think of all the fat Hallack ships coming into your port—Sulcarmen, too. Tax *them*, my lord, when they come to buy my cloth."

My father roared with laughter, and set down his empty cup. The round was his again. My mother ran her linen napkin through her fingers, watching, watching. The gold the bearded man counted out to my father was new minted in High Hallack. *Ting, teng*, it rang. My father's eyes glittered.

But I caught a glimpse the seasinger stole at him while handing over the gold: unsmiling, narrow-eyed, calculating. Suddenly I had the uncanny feeling that he disliked my father—no, more than disliked: *hated* my father for some reason I could not even guess. My parents, I was certain, sensed nothing of this, and the seasinger's look was gone in a moment, as if it had never been.

I had been lingering, watching and listening to what the two players said. I had drawn closer to the seasinger without realizing it. This time he caught not my wrist but my sleeve. My lord and lady conveniently studied the board.

"Ho, gentle maid," the stranger murmured—and again his eyes were on mine with an alarming urgency. "Stand beside me and bring me luck."

Surreptitiously he pressed something small and crumpled into my hand and made to draw me nearer, but I passed on quickly, alarmed, blushing to the bone, determined not to stand long enough to let him get hold of me again.

"Leave me alone," I muttered, just low enough that my parents might not hear.

Safe in the kitchen, I looked at what he had pressed on me:

a little slip of brown parchment covered with tiny scratchings and signs. They meant nothing to me—surely some witchery. I threw it in the kitchen fire and scrubbed my hand with salt.

I didn't want to go back into the banquet hall then, but Cook made me. It was the last course. After that, I could flee. The full moon shone down through the open windows of the hall. The evening was wearing late.

Even as I entered the dining hall, I dropped my eyes. I would not look at him. Conjuror, warlock—doubtless eager to see if his scribbled spell had made me pliable. I squared my shoulders defiantly. I was bearing a basket of spotless gold-enfruit, so sweet and ripe that it bruised if so much as breathed upon. Eyes still downcast, I began serving my father. He caught me about the waist with seeming affection.

"Not so fast, not so fast," he laughed—there was an edge to it, though. I had grown deft at hearing such undertones. "Bide a while, my duck. Do not hurry off. From your haste, one would think you eager for this night to end."

A smile, another laugh, a less-than-gentle squeeze. He was very angry with me and would seize an opportunity within the next few days to box my ears, I could be sure. I didn't care. I served my mother then, and she looked daggers at me. She did not speak, but I could fairly hear what she was thinking: *Chin up, now, girl. You've got his eye. Toss your hair and swirl your skirts a bit. Show your meager gifts off to the buyer at their best.*

I tucked my chin and held my neck perfectly rigid, glowering fiercely, but the stranger would not stop looking at me. My father rose, cup in hand, and began offering a toast, going on about it so as to give the singer some cover to talk to me. I fairly hated my father then. I think I had hated him all my life, for not once had he ever consulted me about my fate as he went about arranging it. At that moment, I could gladly have put a dagger in his heart if I could have done so and lived.

The stranger took my father's cue and bent near me as I passed, taking hold not of me or of my sleeve this time, but of

the basket's edge, as if to examine its contents. He pretended to, and I stood trembling in fury. Warlock or no, I was tired of being afraid.

"You read the note?" he said, very softly, lifting a fruit from the basket and turning it in the light.

"I threw your ensorcelled scrap in the fire," I hissed.

He looked up, startled, nearly dropping the fruit. I saw the bright red bruises his fingers made in the smooth golden flesh.

"What—why?" he gasped, astonished. I felt a little surge of triumph.

"I wouldn't have read your spell even if I could," I said in a low voice. "I can't read."

"Can't. . . ?" he started. "But your mother—"

"She lied," I murmured, with relish. "I can't sing, either. You know that much from Danna in the market."

"Sweet Gunnora . . ." He swallowed the rest of the curse. "There's no time. Meet me on the strand tonight, before midnight, after the feast. I must—"

But I cut him off, wrestling him for the basket. "I won't. I'll not go anywhere with you, warlock."

"Alys," he said then, and I gasped that he could have discovered my secret name. Both my parents had been naming me Alia all night. Surely he was a warlock if he could know such things.

I got the basket from him then and stumbled back, hard into my father as he stood making his toast. The wine sipped from his cup as I jostled him, sopping his sleeve, and the gold-enfruit spilled, to roll bruised and ruined among the platters on the white tablecloth.

"Stupid. . . !" my father burst out, and raised his arm as if he meant to backhand me there before all the hall—it would not have been the first time. But the stranger leaped up suddenly and got between us under the pretext of steadying my lord's cup. He was as tall as my father, nearly, though lighter built.

"My lord," he cried, his voice hearty, not a trace of alarm

or anger to it. He never so much as glanced at me. "My lord, you have offered me a worthy welcome this night, and for that, my thanks. My resources are, at the moment, meager, but allow me to repay your hospitality as best I can."

He kept my lord's eyes square on himself, and I seized the opportunity to retreat a few paces, out of my father's reach. I dared go no farther. My father's stance, as he eyed the young man, was angry still. If I had not known better, I might have thought the seasinger was protecting me. *No*. I resisted the thought. This was all part of his game somehow.

"The time has come to breach that keg, my lord, with which I presented you earlier this even, when first I arrived."

His voice had a fine ring to it. It carried well, commanding the attention of everyone in the hall. My father began to look a little mollified. Already the seasinger had him under his spell. Already he had begun to forget about me. Slowly, my father smiled.

"Indeed," he cried at last, and motioned to two of his men standing across the hall. "Bring it up."

My father's soldiers knelt and lifted something that had rested between them, and came forward with it. As they set it down before the table, I realized it was a wine cask. One of the guardsmen knocked a bung into it. The stranger spoke.

"My lord, lady, good company of the hall, I am a seasinger. I have been far over the ocean wide, seen many places, and drunk many fair wines—but none is finer than the stuff they call seamilk, which is made in a place far north of here, where I have lately done some trading."

He motioned to my father's men. They hefted the cask and came forward again. The singer held out his own cup, which was empty, and let the liquid splash into it. It was amber gold, with a strong, aromatic scent. I was standing close enough to note all this—but under the gold there seemed to be a darkness to it, a blueness like smoke or a shadow in the depths, for all that the surface sparkled and shone like fire.

"A sup, now; a single sup for every person in the hall—for

luck," the stranger continued, and I noted a quickening in his tone, not fear, but an eagerness that had not been there before. Holding out my father's cup, he let the soldiers splash in a measure to mingle with the wine already in the bowl.

My father stood, seemingly a little perplexed, as though not sure how he liked the singer's presumption now that he thought upon it. The guardsmen moved down the table and poured a little in my mother's cup. She stood holding it, looking at my father uncertainly. He ignored her, but when the men-at-arms paused, he gave them a nod to go on around the hall.

"Drink, drink up, my lady, lord," the seasinger urged, his tone commanding yet convivial. Smiling, he raised his cup as in salute. My father brought his own cup to his lips and sipped. I saw his eyebrows lift in surprise, and then his whole face eased.

"By the Horned Man, that is good," he exclaimed, and downed the strange wine in a draught. "Give me another. Let the whole hall have it!"

The stranger gave my lord his own cup, untouched. I saw my mother sipping now, and the same reaction of surprise and pleasure on her face.

"What d'you call that stuff again?" my father asked, taking the full chalice from the seasinger eagerly. My mother eyed the bottom of her cup in disappointment.

"Seamilk, my lord."

"From the north—where in the north?"

"The same spot the silkcloth comes from—but you'd have to offer me a fine bargain indeed to make me tell you that," the stranger laughed. This time I saw him glance at me, and my father, following his gaze, laughed, uproariously, with him.

"Got any more with you?"

"Not this trip. Drink! Drink up, the hall!" cried the seasinger. The soldiers had made their way a quarter of the way around now, and I could hear the sighs and soft exclamations as people tasted each their splash. I saw servers and kitchen boys scrambling—for cups, I guessed. No one was to be denied a sip, not even servants.

And the hall was full, packed to overflowing. I realized that in some astonishment. I had taken no note of it before. All come to see the seasinger, I guessed, or to steal a bite of that magnificent feast. Probably there was not a stablelad or chambermaid in keep who had not come. Now they all held out their cups as the men-at-arms made their round with the smoky seamilk, and still the singer talked. "But my lord, my lord—your health and the lady's. The seamilk is only the first part of my gift. Here is the second."

V: Werefox

Reaching down, the seasinger caught up a little harp hardly bigger than my hand—I could not see where he had been keeping it. It almost seemed he plucked it from the air. Then in one swift striding sweep, the singer was around the table's end and standing in the middle of the hall, in the open space between the other tables. He faced about.

"Let me tell you a tale of the seafoxes, my lord—a song that they sing in the spring in that lonely northern place whence I have lately come. You will find this tale of interest, my lord, for I gather you know something of seafoxes here."

Again my father laughed, and half the hall with him, though I thought the stranger's jest—if jest it were—a feeble one. The soldiers had made half the circuit now, and it seemed to me that that half of the hall was very merry. The singer put his hand to the strings, and the little harp, for all its tiny size and shortness of string, had a surprisingly full, rich sound. The soldiers continued their task, and the aroma of seamilk pervaded the room.

"Once was there a prince of the seafoxes, good people, on a tiny isle far north of here. A man he was upon the land, a silver fox upon the sea . . ."

He told the tale of that seafox prince, and his beautiful sister who swam south one year and disappeared. She had been

captured by a cruel lord who kept her prisoner in his keep until she lost the power to become a seafox. When she tried to swim away from him, she drowned.

It was a haunting tale, skillfully sung. The singer had a fine, full-throated tenor voice that soared to the high notes with no trouble at all. The men-at-arms completed their circuit with still a little seamilk in the keg. No one offered me a cup, and I was strangely glad.

I glimpsed a kitchen maid bearing a full chalice through the kitchen door—for Cook and her minions, I supposed. I wished that I, too, might slip from the hall, but I could not have done so without attracting my father's eye. He was sitting now beside my mother, intent upon the singer, seemingly in a fine mood once again, but I could not be sure. The two men-at-arms stole quietly from the hall with the last of the keg—to share it with their fellows on watch, no doubt.

“That prince, he waited long years for his kinswoman to return,” the seasinger sang. “But at last he said, ‘I fear the worst. Some evil has befallen her. I will trade my human shape for a fox's skin and search for her.’”

The hall should have been very still by then, out of respect for the singer, but it was not. A constant ripple of low laughter ran through the crowd of banqueters; there was much grinning, a chuckle, even a guffaw now and again—though I could find nothing mirthful in the strange, sad tale. The seasinger, however, did not seem to mind. I could not make out his face well at this distance, but he seemed to be smiling.

“It was years; it was a very long time that that prince of the foxes searched, but at last he found the isle where his kinswoman had come. He put on the shape of a man once again and entered the town as a seasinger. Thus he learned her fate.”

It seemed half the hall was laughing now, a little madly, like men drunk at the sight of land after a long voyage or a storm. There was an odd sound to the hilarity, an eerie wildness—as though the listeners laughed less at what they heard

than because they could not help themselves. Unease danced a feather down my spine.

"Then, after a week's time, the lord of the keep called him up to his hall," the seasinger sang. "'Come sing to my people; come sit at my board.' And the prince of the seafoxes sang them a song, and gave the lord of the castle two gifts: a cask of seamilk sweeter than honey on a lying tongue, and a bolt of silkcloth that glimmered like fishskin, or pearlstuff, or oil."

My hands and feet had grown very cold. I stood staring at the seasinger, unable to move. He had turned, gazing intently at my father now, no longer facing the hall, no longer making any pretense at a smile. That edge I had heard before in his voice returned.

"The lord offered him his daughter's hand, saying, 'Take her, good sir. You seem an enterprising young man. And I need an heir.'"

The hall had quieted a little now, but no one seemed in the least alarmed. The half of the hall that had drunk the seamilk last were laughing the loudest now. The first half were nodding and yawning, even the guards. I saw my mother bowed over her cup and my father resting his jaw on one hand and rubbing his eyes with the other.

"'I will take your daughter,' the seasinger replied, 'and your wealth, lord, and the good fortune of all these people here—for I have learned that not only my kinswoman perished here. Scores of my people have lost their lives upon this rock. In winter, you and your men go out hunting—but the seafoxes' heads in and steal their skins . . .'"

His voice had changed utterly now. He was not singing anymore. Abruptly, he stopped speaking, turned and surveyed the hall.

"But enough of songs," the stranger barked, returning his attention once more to my father.

He came forward and tossed his harp upon the table with a carelessness that frightened me. I shrank back against the wall. Once again those piercing eyes looked at me and pinned

me where I stood. My father took no note of any of this, still rubbing his eyes.

"My lord, the seamilk and the song were but the first parts of my business here. There is a third part. Do you know what that might be?"

My father looked up, bleary-eyed. He licked his lips. "Eh?"

I wanted to cry out some warning—or run—but the warlock's eyes had paralyzed me.

"Do you know the third part of my business here this night, my lord?" the singer repeated, sharply. My mother snored over her cup. At the other's words, my father's head snapped up, but quickly sagged.

"Oh . . . my daughter," he muttered. "Benis says . . . must lose no time, contract you to marry her. Before you leave the isle."

I could not swallow. The seasinger laughed.

"Your daughter will be coming with me, never fear," he answered lightly, his tone all darkness underneath. "After this night, you will never see her more. But she will not depart here as a bride, my lord."

My heart twitched in my breast. I leaned back against the wall. The stone was hard and cold. I hardly felt it.

"What?" my father cried, half rising, but his torso seemed somehow too heavy for his legs, and he had to rest one arm upon the tabletop. With the other hand, he clutched his chair. "The girl . . . the chit goes nowhere . . . till she's wed and bred me an heir." He squinted, peering at the bearded young man before him. "You're no Hallack lord . . ."

"I never said I was," the other snapped. "Nor am I a common seasinger. Did you think it was only some singer's tale I told? It was a true account. *I* am that prince of the seafoxes I sang of. This is the isle where my kinswoman perished. You are the cruel lord that held her here."

Once more he turned and seemed to appraise the hall. It had grown far quieter at last. I saw people, some slumped where they sat, others still upon their feet, but like sleepwalkers,

gazing vacantly. I saw a serving boy very calmly give a great yawn and lie down upon the floor. A soldier staggered and leaned against the wall. My father had slumped back into his seat and sat looking stupidly at the stranger as though he were speaking a foreign tongue.

"Kinswoman?" my father muttered. "Kinswoman?"

Again the stranger's cutting laugh. "Can you not recall her name, my lord—has it been so long? *Zara*."

My father choked and shook his head, as if to clear it. He whispered. "*Zara*."

I saw two of my father's men try to rise from their seats, and fall. The seasinger's hand went momentarily to his sleeve as if to draw something concealed there. A weapon? A dagger? But he left the motion uncompleted as both my father's would-be defenders fell. He turned back to my lord.

"Yes, *Zara*." His voice was low, furious. "You kept her prisoner on this crag—ten years."

My father shook his head again, his speech thick and difficult. "No," he muttered. "No." Then: "*Zara*."

"You promised to take her to the mainland and buy her passage north," the seasinger answered, advancing on my father.

"How did you know that?" my father whispered. "Warlock."

The seasinger smiled, leaning nearer. My father's eyes rolled. I had never seen him afraid.

"You broke your word," he said, very softly.

"I told her . . . told her that I had to . . ."

"Had to?"

"To keep her. To keep her with me!" My father's words were a moan. That frightened me still further. I had rarely known him to express any strong emotion but rage.

"She wanted nothing more to do with you," the seasinger half shouted.

For a moment, the grimace on my father's face vanished. His head fell back. He smiled, clumsily, remembering. "No, not after. But those first years—those first years, she loved me."

"Why didn't you marry her?" the seasinger demanded. He had regained his composure, spoke quietly now.

My father's teeth clenched. Again the look of pain. "Wanted to. If she'd given me a son. . . !"

"But she didn't. So you married Benis."

"Had to! They'd never have kept me lord here without an heir—my claim was by marriage. Oh, it was all Benis. Old lord's niece; she wanted it. She forced it—if she'd married someone else, *he'd* have been lord."

He seemed unable to stop talking—part of the seasinger's spell, I knew. My father rested his forehead on his hands. They curled into fists. His voice shook.

"If I'd had a son, a son by Zara, I might have resisted. With an heir, perhaps no one would have cared if I married Benis or not. I held out, hoping . . ." His tone darkened, no longer shaking. His jaw tightened. "But all I got was that brat, a girlchild: Siva."

"Sif." The bearded man's voice dropped, low and dangerous. "Also my kith. Why didn't you let my kinswoman go?"

A moan. "I wanted . . . I thought she'd come back to me."

"With you wed to another?"

My father's head snapped up, his voice a wail. "I didn't think the cow'd live forever! Her cousin, Alia, the first one, died young." A moment's silence, then, softer, "I thought I could get a son on Benis, and Zara would take me back."

"Ten years," the seasinger hissed. "And what became of the brat, the girlchild Sif?"

My father shook his head and swatted the air as if to slap away a relentless fly. "Dead. Dead."

"You left her in the care of the old boatman, Sul. He'd have worked her to death if she'd let him—or worse. Nearly did."

My father gazed ahead of him, at nothing. "Trapped," he murmured, not making sense. "Prisoner."

"You could have raised her in the keep," the seasinger persisted. "She was your daughter—would that have been so hard?"

My father shrugged, petulant. He was growing more sluggish. "Benis'd have killed her. Shoved her down steps or poisoned her in kitchen." He sighed, frowning, scratching his arm and looking about as though he had lost something. "If Benis could have had a son," he murmured, "she'd not have cared a whit about the girl. Or Zara."

"You didn't care what happened to her."

"I needed a *son*."

My father's last spark, gone in a moment. The seasinger was very quiet then, for a long breath, fingering something in his sleeve. "Did you. . . ?" he started, then stopped a moment, as his voice caught. "Did you ever love her, lord?"

My father blinked, slowly, confused. "Alia? Married her for the keep."

"Not Alia," the seasinger said.

"Benis. Had to. To keep my hold on Ulys—all I'd got. And for sons."

"Sif?"

"Brat."

"Zara," the singer said finally, and my father murmured, "Zara."

I thought at first that was all he would say. But he drew breath in a moment, with difficulty. "Only one I ever did. Love. Only one . . . never did a thing I wanted, unless it suited her. And I loved her . . . moment I saw her. And those first years . . . she loved me."

The words trailed off. My father's eyes were vacant, his head tilted slightly askew. The seasinger seemed to consider a moment more whatever he was meditating on, but then he straightened and his expression, though fierce and determined still, eased ever so slightly. He left off fingering whatever it was in his sleeve.

"I'll not kill you, then, old man."

He looked away, raising one hand to his cheek, but his face was turned, and I could not tell what he was doing. All at

once, he broke off, turning completely from my father's table and going to inspect the other guests.

I gazed, frozen where I stood, while he took their measure—mostly just by looking at them, but one or two by shaking and tapping lightly upon the cheek with the back of his hand. All stayed as they were, staring vacantly, except one girl, a kitchen maid, who moaned. The seasinger raised her cup to her lips and guided her to drink the rest. She did not resist or move again.

The guards he was especially wary of, shaking them roughly. One he slapped hard—but they did not stir. They must have drunk deep of the seasinger's draught. That would be like them. Only the stranger himself and I had drunk nothing of it. Like everyone else in the hall, the guards stood or leaned or slumped or lay—motionless. The seasinger took their swords and threw them in the fire.

I found myself thinking stupidly then that I was just standing there, waiting for whatever the warlock might do. And I realized I must not, must not simply stand—as I had stood waiting all of my life, waiting for others to do what they would with me. I wanted to scream, shout for help, but I dared not draw the warlock's eye. Perhaps I had stood so still he had not realized I was not under the influence of his dram—it was a slender hope, but I seized at it. Perhaps he had forgotten me.

I tried to think. What could I do? I had heard somewhere that a warlock's spell is like a circle or a chain. If one link could be broken, one person roused, then the magic might weaken, the others become easier to free. I realized I must try to wake someone, rouse them from this witch sleep. Dropping to a crouch, I crept forward, trusting the table to hide me from view. Still crouching, I caught hold of my father's sleeve and tugged at it.

"Father," I whispered, terrified of speaking too loud. "Father, wake."

He sat like a man stunned, his body holding its position and balance, but his eyes were empty, his jaw slack. I shook harder.

"Father," I hissed. "Throw off this spell. The seasinger has cast some witchery on you. Wake!"

He never stirred. I let go his sleeve, and his hand slid from the chair's arm to dangle limply. I seized him again, by the shoulders this time, and shook him roughly, my breath short. I could see the seasinger across the room, his back to me. He was holding an empty plate onto which he was throwing food snatched from the banquet table. I stared at this, astonished. My father did not move.

"Rouse, my lord!"

The seasinger turned and cast about the hall. I ducked behind my father's chair, my heart in my throat, afraid that he had heard me, was looking for me. But he was not. He spotted a wine pitcher on another table and went to fetch it. Once more his back was to me; stealthily, I crept to my mother's chair.

"Mother," I whispered, desperation edging my voice. "Mother!" She remained as she was, head bowed over onto her arm resting crooked on the table before her. The breath snored and guttered in her throat. "Wake and help me rouse the others—help me!" I entreated, my voice turning to a squeak. I bit back the sound, shaking her vigorously till her head slid from her arm onto the table, and there it stayed. I was close to panic.

"Alys!"

The cry brought me sharp around and into a crouch again. I saw the seasinger, pitcher in one hand, his platter of food now full in the other, casting about the room. His call had not been loud.

"Alys, where are you?" His use of my name made my skin prickle. I stayed motionless. "Alys, I know you're here," he cried—softly. "Don't hide from me."

He saw me then. I tried to duck, to get out of his line of sight, but it was useless. His tense stance eased. He seemed relieved—I did not stop to wonder why. As he started toward me, I sprang up, shaking my father furiously, no longer bothering to whisper.

"Father, help! Hear me—please!"

The seasinger halted in seeming surprise. "Let him alone," he said. "Do you want him to wake? He sold you to me for a bolt of foxsilk and a cask."

I stared at him, terrified, and fell back as he approached. He was not really looking at me, though. His eyes were all for my father now. His expression clouded as once more he came before my lord.

"Know this, lord," he said quietly, but very clearly, as one who speaks to penetrate a dream. "I have much reason to hate you, but I will spare your life, and all the people of this isle—upon a condition. There is indeed a curse upon this place, because you are killing the seafoxes. You must kill them no more, never again."

He set the pitcher down.

"The seafoxes must be allowed to regain their former numbers, for it is they that eat the red dead-men's-hands that are ruining your shellfish beds. When your shellfish come back, they will seine out the little toxins and bitternesses in the waters about this isle that drive the fish away."

He spoke calmly, but full of urgency. Then his tone eased. His face quieted. He leaned back a little, sure of his triumph, a man well satisfied.

"I will take only one thing from you, my lord, in payment of my kinswoman's life." He nodded toward me with hardly a glance. "Your daughter. One kinswoman for another. That is a fair exchange. You will have no heirs, and there will be an end to the lords of Ulys."

He tossed the plate of food down onto the table in front of me then, still not really looking at me. He spoke to me, but his eyes were on my father yet.

"Here, eat this. We've a long journey ahead of us, and you haven't touched a bite." He nodded over one shoulder. "That kitchen boy there looks about your size. Trade clothes with him. Then I'll cut your hair."

I couldn't move. The seasinger glanced at me with a snort of disgust.

"Alys," he said. "We haven't much time."

He reached across the table, for my hand, I think. Suddenly, my father's table dagger was in my grasp. I didn't remember snatching it up, only of shrieking as I lunged with it. I had no intention of going anywhere. I felt the point just graze the seasinger's arm.

He fell back with a startled cry and brought the pitcher down on my hand with force enough to knock the knife from it. It skittered away across the floor. But I felt a momentary triumph. Warlock or werefox he might be, but he was afraid of sharp metal like any other man and bled red blood. And I had gotten him away from me and off balance for a moment. I ran for the kitchen door.

VI: The Rocks

He was after me in less than a moment, vaulting the table instead of going around. I had not anticipated that. I scarcely ducked through the stone doorway and shoved the heavy wooden door shut before I felt his weight collide with it. I fumbled with the bar, swung it down just as his hand found the latch. It rattled furiously.

"Alys," he cried, striking the door once, twice. His voice was muffled. "Alys, let me in! I must tell you, I'm not—perish and misbegotten!" A rain of blows: "There's no time for this. The dram doesn't last long. And we must be away while the moon's high. Within the hour!"

He said other things, but I clamped my hands over my ears, afraid he might be able to cast some spell on me by voice alone. I had heard of that. The door held. I felt another rush of triumph. Danna had told me once that warlocks could pass through doors

like mist. Well, this one couldn't. I leaned against the wood a moment, catching my breath, then turned around.

A strangled cry escaped my lips. I had not expected what I saw: Cook slumped against the great hearth and two kitchen maids beside her. Another stood across the room, the half-full chalice still cupped in her hand. I fled the kitchen, down the long back hall. There was no one about. I wanted to shout, but the sight behind me had stolen my voice.

I found the stairs and climbed them, breathless, to my chambers. I entered, starting and turning, expecting to find the warlock awaiting me in every corner. My chambers were empty—were all the maids down at the feast? Of course they were. Everybody was. And anyone who could not get a place in the hall had more than likely gone down to the taverns in town.

Everything was very still. The little square room looked strange to me, frozen, a stranger's room. I had the overwhelming desire simply to stand and do nothing. A spider danced across the floor. I started, jarring a table, and my hairbrush fell to the tiles with a crack. A moment later, I found myself outside, descending the long, narrow steps, then hurrying down another hall.

All around me was only darkness and empty rooms. I found a door leading out into the open courtyard and tried it. Outside, the night was mild and still. The sky, for once, was clear. I could see the stars and the round moon, swollen and full of light, nearly overhead. I ran for the front gate. One of my father's guards stood sentry there.

I cried out, coming toward him, but he didn't move, didn't answer, gave no sign of having heard me. I drew near and halted dead, seeing the cup still held in his hand. I shook him, knowing it would do no good. The cup fell to the flagstones with a loud clang. I glanced back over my shoulder. Light was spilling into the far side of the courtyard from the open window of the feast.

I glimpsed no movement within, no sign of the seasinger. That only frightened me further. I wanted to know where he was. I ducked around the dreaming sentry and tried the gate.

It was barred, of course. It was always barred at sunset now. My father feared the townsfolk would steal castle stores. The bar was far too high and heavy for me to lift.

I thought of the seaward gate suddenly; it had only a bolt and no bar. Surely I could open that. Nothing lay beyond but open beach, and it was a long way around to the village along that strand, but it was better than no escape at all. I started across the courtyard toward it—then reflex froze me.

The seasinger had emerged from a doorway not far from me. He had a torch. He must have got into the kitchen by another way and been searching for me there. He did not see me, but I could not reach the seagate now. I shrank back into the shadows, stood motionless. The seasinger gazed out across the courtyard, away from me.

"Where are you?" he cried. His call was urgent, but not loud.

I remembered what he had said about departing within the hour. If his spell only lasted a little while, perhaps I need only elude him for so long. I began to hope. He shifted his torch to the other hand with a sound of desperate frustration and started across the yard toward the seagate.

A torch throws light, but also blinds the bearer to all that lies beyond him in the shadows. I skulked along the bare, moonlit wall of the courtyard, well behind his sidelong vision. If he had turned, he would have seen me. The torch's flame hid the side of his face from me. In a moment, I reached my new goal and ducked through the open doorway into the tower.

I had not been inside it in years, not since Sif had gone. No one else ever went there either. It was in ramshackle disrepair, but I needed no light. I knew the way up the winding wooden steps. A rotten board cracked under my weight, and I fell, hard forward, barking my knee. I gathered my gown and scrambled up, hurrying on, panting up the steps.

I reached the landing. Moonlight streamed in the window and fell silver on the floor. Something lay there, small and

drab—I could not tell what it was. I knelt and lifted it. It was my sewing sack. I had marked it missing the day after Sif went, six years ago, and had never thought to look for it here.

The fabric was weathered thin as cobwebs. It shredded in my hand. A little mat of faded floss fell out, and then my needles—a shower of splinters, blazing in the moon's light. They bounded on the floorboards with a brief sound like rain, then rolled, some of them falling through the cracks.

I was overwhelmed with a remembrance and a longing for Sif. She, at least, had lived her life at no one's behest. She had never done what Sul told her unless she had felt like it, which was why he had so often beaten her. She had not been happy, nor had she been loved by anyone but me—but she had been free. Freer than I. And she was dead for it. But I realized now that I would rather have had that than this, to be trapped in a stone place at the mercy of lords and warlocks.

I heard a rattle and a curse. With a start, I realized I had closed my eyes. Carefully, I peered out the window. In the yard below, the singer had found the seagate bolted—obviously I had not gone that way. I saw him glance up, but not at where I stood. His gaze was toward my chamber's window. The accuracy of his guess unnerved me—or did his witchery somehow tell him where my apartments lay?

He looked at the moon, as if gauging the time, and ran across the courtyard toward the entrance that would take him to my room. I turned from the window and leaned back against the wall. My legs trembled. I sank down, hoping—hoping that his time would run out, that he would give up. Give up and go away! My breath was still coming hard, then I realized I was sobbing, dryly and without tears.

I must try for the seagate—I realized that suddenly—*now*, while he searched for me elsewhere. He had already checked that avenue of escape. With luck, he would not check again, or not immediately. My chamber overlooked the yard, but it

was a risk I had to take. I had no idea how long I had sat there trembling.

I scrambled up, my breathing calmer now—and halted suddenly. There was someone below me in the tower. I heard footsteps on the hard-packed earth below. Trembling, peering over the handrail, I saw torchlight. The seasinger stood below, torch in hand. He looked up, up the well between the turns of stair, and saw me. I ducked back into the darkness—too late.

“There you are,” he cried.

I heard him taking the steps two at a time. The torchlight bobbed nearer. I stood, heart pounding, then whirled and stared out the window at the courtyard far, far below. It took only a moment to make my decision. I caught hold of the gray, weathered shutter, which groaned horribly beneath my weight, and pulled myself up onto the stone sill. I crouched there, one hand upon the shutter, half turned and looking over my shoulder. The seasinger rounded the turn of the steps, and seeing me so, gave a cry of astonishment.

“Alys! Don’t—” He lunged up the steps.

I didn’t wait. I was completely calm. He was quicker than I expected, but I still had plenty of time. I had thought he would halt, possibly bargain or cajole, even threaten or command. And of course, he could have used witchery if I had given him time. But he tried none of these, just came charging up the steps, calling my name.

I turned away, looking out over the stones below, the light of the silent banquet hall shining into the yard, the barred front gate and the motionless guard, and beyond the wall on the seaward side, the far waves running and foaming, high on the beach. I thought of Sif, dying on the rocks, and let myself fall.

The sky spun. The rush of air against my cheek was cool. I heard a shout that was almost a scream from the seasinger. It seemed to come from just behind me, far too close—and then I felt a tremendous jerk. My gown went tight across the bodice and under the arms. I couldn’t breathe.

The seasinger had caught me by the gown. I cursed my women's clothing then. My feet had not even left the sill. I tried to struggle, to let my feet slip, but I half leaned, half dangled at such an awkward angle that I was virtually helpless. With a sickening swing, the seasinger hauled me back into the tower.

He had dropped his torch. It lay on the step below the landing, the burning end swung out over empty space. The light around us was eerie, yellow and amber by turns. I struggled toward the window again, but he had me still by the back of the dress and was much stronger than I. It was no use.

He was panting, struggling to hold me and cursing under his breath. I saw him reaching for the torch with his other hand. He had to go down on one knee to get it, and he pulled me down with him. Catching hold of the burning brand, he straightened, leaning across me to set it into the wall niche by the window.

I scratched at his face, as hard as I could. He ducked, biting off a cry and letting go of the torch, but not of me. The brand wobbled in its niche but did not fall. I got hold of something and pulled, then pulled again. His beard was coming off in my hands. I stared at the dark red curls I clutched. The ends were bloodless. They had no roots. They were sticky.

I shook my head, unable to make it out. Men's beards could not be so fragile. Startled, staring, I reached to yank another clump from his jaw. The seasinger hissed in pain and got his free hand on my wrist. He forced it down, twisting till it hurt.

"By Gunnora, you little idiot." His voice was an angry, grating hiss. "Alys, stop. Stop—don't you know me even yet? It's me. *Me. Sif.*"

I did stop then, stopped flailing and struggling, stopped kicking—I hadn't realized I had been till I ceased. I nearly stopped breathing. My heart seemed to stop. The seasinger let go of me. I slumped back against the wall, staring, my hands making fists in the clumps of loose hair. The one before me reached to his face, yanked and scrubbed the red curls

from it—and *was* Sif suddenly, even to my bad eyes; Sif with her forward-thrusting chin with the cleft in it. Her jaw and upper lip looked red and sore where the false beard had been.

“Horned Man, how that itches,” she gasped, clawing vigorously. “I had to put it on with fish glue.”

I tried to swallow and could not. “Sif,” I said, my voice a chirrup. “Sif.”

She nodded, leaning back now and looking at me, her arms crossed. “It’s me,” she said. “No shapeshifter and no ghost.” She had grown two inches since I’d last seen her. She must have been twenty by now. “Why’d you go out the window, little fool? That’s a long drop. You could have broken your leg.”

Or died. She didn’t say that. I swallowed again, succeeding this time, and tried to get my breath to come back. Gingerly, she fingered the cheek where I’d scratched her.

“Did you not know me—truly? I thought if any on this isle would guess, it would be you.”

I scrambled up, feeling relieved and angry now. “How could I?” I stammered, “with your face under all that hair? Why didn’t you tell me. . . ?”

Sif rose, too. She looked at me a moment more, then put her head back and laughed. “Gunnora! How I tried. I thought I might meet you in the market, or on the strand—but then I learned they were keeping you close guarded here at keep, and there was no one I could trust to get a message to you. I thought I might see you if I could get into the keep, but they’d let you see no man alone, so I learned. The banquet hall—it was the only way, and I was out of time . . .”

I shrank against the wall, my blood grown cold again suddenly. “Are you a witch?”

Again Sif laughed. “No!”

“But what you said in the banquet hall, that tale you told . . .”

She snorted. “It was just a tale. I made it up. I really am a seasinger.”

I shuddered, unwilling to believe her. "That dram you gave my father and mother, and all the others in the hall—"

Sif shook her head. "It's only seamilk. I swear it."

I thought of Cook and Imma standing staring in the kitchen—about the others I didn't really care. "Will it hurt them?" I cried, coming toward Sif. My hands were fists still. "If you've hurt them—!"

Sif took me by the shoulders—gently. She towered over me. I'd barely grown at all since she had gone. "Not a bit," she answered quietly, and I let myself believe at last. "They'll stand dreaming an hour or two and then awake, I promise you."

Something dangled in her sleeve. I reached to touch it through the fabric. Not a dagger, more of a tube. I couldn't make out what it was. "You meant to kill my father, didn't you? There in the banquet hall."

Sif dropped her hands from me and looked away. Her color heightened. "Not at first. At first all I wanted was to get you away. But then . . . there I was. And there he was—I don't know," she ended shortly. "I don't know what I meant to do."

I was sure then. "Would you have done it," I asked, "if I hadn't been there?"

Sif blushed outright. "I wanted to," she whispered, "but I couldn't."

I stood still, feeling cold and stiff, remembering my own thoughts in the banquet hall. Who was I to admonish Sif? I shivered. "It doesn't matter. He'll be dead soon. There's a pain in his head."

Sif looked at me, her eyes wide. She hadn't known that, of course. Her face was uncertain. "Do you love him?"

I shook my head.

Sif looked off again. "I used to envy you," she murmured, "living here, in this keep, safe and warm, always enough to eat, no rags for clothes. And then I heard the songs they were singing about you in High Hallack."

Surprising myself, I laughed. My limbs felt suddenly less

knotted. "I used to envy you." Carefully, I reached out my hand to hers. I knew beyond all shadows then that she was real. "You're not dead," I whispered. "You didn't die on the rocks."

"I got safe to High Hallack," she replied, tossing the hair back out of her eyes. I could see her brows then, how they met. "Patched boat leaked all the way. I sold your brooch for food and clothes, then signed on as a cabin boy on a Sulcar ship. I've been across the waves, Alys, and seen the eastern lands: Estcarp and Karsten and Alizon."

My breath caught. "You haven't."

I had heard such names only in stories and song. They could not be real. Sif sat down again. We both sat down.

"Estcarp is ruled by a tribe of witches. In the hills south of Estcarp live a race of hawking men who leave women alone except to visit them once a year. Karsten and Alizon"—she shrugged—"are much as here."

She drew breath, not looking at me, frowning a little now.

"The Sulcars are good people. They never treated me ill—but there is something stirring about the isle of Gorm near Sulcar Keep, some witchery. Some evil thing. I did not like the way the wind smelled in Estcarp, so after two years with the Sulcars, I came back to High Hallack."

I watched her. Still looking down, she found one of my needles and lifted it, turning it over in her fingers. It gleamed. The torchlight played smoky-dusky across the side of her face.

"I had enough then to buy my own boat, a small thing, two-masted. I coasted along the Hallack shore, trading, and when I couldn't keep myself with trade, I sang and told stories in taverns. My voice is good enough."

She glanced at me.

"That's where I heard those songs the Dalesmen sing of you." She scratched the needle across the bone dry floorboards, raising dust. "I sang a few songs of my own about you then. If they did aught to change anybody's mind, I'm glad." She smiled, a brief smile. It quickly vanished. "Then I went north."

Setting aside my needle, she worked her shoulders to get the tightness out, chafed her arms.

"Did you find your mother's Gate?" I ventured, when she did not speak.

Sif gave a laugh that had no smile in it. "I found *a* Gate, in Arvon, long deserted and unused. Burned out—it leads nowhere. Not my mother's Gate."

She sighed bitterly.

"I almost came home then. It's a strange place, Arvon, and I was very tired. I spent some months high off the coast, pondering. And then a storm plucked me far away from land—farther to the north than even my charts show. I nearly wrecked.

"But at last I made landfall, among a tiny group of islands the inhabitants call Vellas. They speak something near my mother's tongue, and they know nothing of any Gate—but oh, Alys, such a place! In the great bay between the islands, the seafoxes summer. On the inner shores they bear their young."

She leaned forward now, very intent, gazing down at the gray, wave-grained floor as though it were the bay of those islands that lay between us.

"The people of Vellas, they do not kill the seafoxes, Alys, but gather the wool of their shedding coats. It washes in to the shore like silver upon the waves. And on spring nights, they go down to the strand and sing: *Ilililé ilé ilé. Ulululé ulé ulé.* A long, strange, melodious piping that brings the seafoxes in to shore.

"Black and dappled and silver, they come, marl and burned umber and frosty white. They come to the singers as tame as children, for they know those people will offer them no harm—only comb out the mats of dense winter hair and gather the shed up in long, trailing bags. It's that they spin into the foxsilk, Alys. They showed me how—the singing and the combing and the weaving, all of it. That bolt of cloth I gave your mother—I made that."

I sat quietly amazed. I had never before heard Sif speak with pride of any of the womanly arts.

"They do not divide the work there as they do here," she was saying. "The women go out in boats and fish. The men may mind the little ones, or sing to the seafoxes and spin their hair. The children learn what skills they like—it was a boy taught me the weaving of foxsilk. It is very strange there. It is so strange." She shivered, half shaking her head. "They know little of our southern ways and have no wish to know, I like it well."

"If it is such a place," I said softly, "why did you come away?"

She smiled just a little then, and glanced at me. "I came for you," she said. "I was there, happy, and I thought of you, here. And I knew that I must come back and tell you of it. And take you there."

She spoke, her eyes shining as they had always used to do whenever she spoke of her mother's tales, of the fabulous country beyond the Gate. But this was no such land she spoke of now. It was here, in our world, a tiny clutch of isles far to the north. I sat, not quite certain what I should say or think; I had never thought of leaving Ulys, except to marry and go to a new prison in High Hallack. Escape had never seemed possible before, so it would have done me no good to think on it. Now I must.

I said slowly, "How do you mean to get me away? You've no ship of your own here, and even if you did, the harbor is chained."

Sif smiled at me. "I don't mean to go out by the harbor, Alys." She must have seen my eyes go wide, for she took my hands. "I've a little boat hidden down on the beach. But we must go while the moon's high. Now, at once."

She rose, pulling on my hand, but I held back. "We'll never clear the rocks," I exclaimed.

"I did once."

"But not with two in the boat! Your mother tried that."

"It's a different sort of boat I have this time," she said, voice growing urgent. She leaned near me. "You *must* come, Alys. Come now. He'll marry you off to anyone he can to get heirs for this place."

"But . . . what will the people do?" I stammered, clutching at straws. It was all too fast. "When my father dies, they'll have no lord."

"And what good did the lords of Ulys ever do them?" snapped Sif. "Save take half their catch and one workday out of three. It's the lord of Ulys that's ruined their fishing—by clubbing the seafoxes. It's they that eat the red dead-men's-hands. That part of what I said in the banquet hall is true."

She fixed me with her eyes.

"When the seafoxes come back, they will eat the dead-men's-hands, and then the shellfish will come back. When the shellfish return, they will strain the waters so the fish will breed again. It will take years, but it will come."

I hardly knew whether to believe her or not. It sounded so fantastical, fabulous as the shimmering cities and the self-drawn carts in her mother's tales. Sif snorted.

"The people of Vellas have no lord, and they are glad of it."

She had pulled me to my feet and was trying to get me down the steps. I resisted still.

"But Sif," I cried. "What if you can't find this Vellas again? You said it is beyond your charts . . ."

"We'll find it," she said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

"And if we don't?" I demanded. "What becomes of me? You are tall and sturdy-made, with a full voice and a fearless heart. You can pass for a man if you want. But what of me? No one would ever take me for anything but what I am. I could never be a seaman, or a seasinger, either."

My voice grew more impassioned. It was my life she wanted me to risk, everything I had.

"I won't pretend to be a man," I cried. "I can't. I'm not like you, Sif. I can never be like you. I won't don men's breeches, and I won't cut my hair!"

Sif stopped, really looking at me for the first time in some while. She studied me, and I realized I had never been so

frank, with her or anyone—not even Sif could tell me what to do. If I were to leave Ulys, I must do so not because Sif wanted it, but because *I* wanted it. Sif touched my cheek, and let go my wrist. She smiled, a wry smile that was also rueful.

“Then you’ll just have to come as you are.”

I looked at her, and felt the fear that had been holding me back dissolve. I could go. I needn’t change me, becoming something other than myself, a task my parents had been hard at all my life. And I had let them. My freedom, I realized, was not to be a hegitt’s egg, falling easily into my grasp, but the hegitt itself, a flying bird that must be chased and reached after, a long time, desperately, and even then might not be caught. But I had held such a hegitt once, and let her go. Now, years later, she had come back to me. If I let her go this time, she would never return.

“I’ll come then,” I told Sif.

She nodded, letting out her breath. Then she fetched something out of her sleeve and gripped it. My eyes widened; I stared. I had never seen such a thing before. It looked like a hollow tube.

“What is that?” I whispered.

“Dart gun,” she answered. “I got it in Estcarp. In case any of the guards missed their dram.”

She took my hand. I gripped it tight. She had said she was not a witch, but she had learned such things since she left as to seem very near one to me. I shivered, and then shoved all doubt away. None of that mattered. She was Sif. We hurried down the rotten steps and out of the tower, leaving the torch still burning in the window above.

We crossed the moonlit courtyard to the seagate. Sif slipped the bolt. There were no guards, or none that showed themselves. The stone steps down the steep, rocky slope were slippery with sand, the beach beyond flat and open and infinitely more light. We ran across the dry, silvery grit to the high-water mark. The tide was going out. I could hear the surf booming on the reef.

Sif put the dart gun back into her sleeve and knelt beside a great heap of seaweed. She pulled it away, and underneath I saw a boat, but such a boat as I scarcely recognized. It was not made of planks, but of skins (or perhaps some fabric—I could not tell which) stretched tight over a wooden frame. I stared at it.

It looked far too light, too delicate, to be a real boat—more like a child's toy. Sif carried it under one arm out to the waves. It rode so high I was astonished; it had barely four fingers of draft. She held out her hand to put me aboard. I took it, but held back, looking over my shoulder at Castle Van, standing still and silent, a ghostkeep under the moon.

"The people," I said, "my father's guests in the banquet hall, and Cook, and the guards—truly, you have not hurt them?" I glanced at Sif. "They'll wake?"

She squeezed my hand. "Truly. They'll be waking very soon."

I turned away from the keep. "Will they remember?"

She smiled. "Only some muddled something—how a prince of the seafoxes came to claim the lord of Ulys's daughter. Come."

She took my arm. The waves lapped at my feet, soaking the hem of my gown. I lifted it.

"And you never found your mother's Gate."

Sif laughed. "Never—perhaps we'll find it yet."

I let her hand me into the boat. It pitched beneath me, and I clutched the sides. Sif waded out, knee deep, then waist deep in the waves. They were sucking away from shore. I could feel that in their motion. Sif pulled herself aboard, and the shallow craft bucked and yawed. Sif sat in the bow and unshipped the paddles—much shorter-handled and broader-bladed than the oars our people used. The little skiff leaped forward to her strong, even strokes.

I crouched and clung to the gunwale poles. The waves swelled and jostled beneath us hugely. I did not know how to swim. In my heavy gown, if we overturned or if I fell in, I'd drown. I tried

not to think of that. I had heard others say that the motion of the sea made them sick, but I did not feel sick. I had eaten nothing at all that even. I felt very light. Ulys was slowly growing smaller, pulling away from me with every dip of my sister's oars.

I thought of Sif's mother, Zara, and her marvelous land beyond the Gate that I would never see, and of the islands called Vellas, which I might—if we cleared the reef. I heard Sif straining at the oars, biting her lip, her breathing hoarse. She sat half looking over one shoulder, her legs braced as she struggled to maneuver us—toward some gap, I supposed. I could not see it, but I sat still, trusting her. All around us, the heaving waves rose, fell, darkly brilliant under the moon, as wild and green as rampion.