

VOICE OF MEMORY

by

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“. . . And on this day, did Logrin, brother to Lady Alyss, die, having completed his fifty-third year, and some three months and also two days.” Sibley tilted the quill upward so that the ink would not blot and tried to think of a way to end the entry. When Lady Alyss’s elder brother died six years ago, Master Logrin had filled half a page of the commonplace book recording Geran’s bravery on the battlefield. But what could she say about a scholar who even as a young man had never been a warrior. Sibley admired him for his learning, but there were few others in the keep who felt that Logrin’s attempt to understand the nature of language had been more than a complicated game, a jest even, played at the expense of harried fighters.

Sibley lay the quill in its rest and began to leaf through the pages of the book. Every bushel of wheat, every pound of dry flesh brought into the keep, was recorded in Logrin’s economical hand. Each birth, wedding, and death; all building and repair; every increase in the herd of sheep, was listed. Logrin had noted every raid by the Alizon, every shipwreck off the keep’s coast. There were the records Logrin kept of the stubby dairy cattle he had tried to breed for his sister before deciding that if

Gunnora had wanted cattle to live by the sea edge, she would have made some grass other than a few wiry tufts grow on the cliffs.

Sibley paused at one entry written nearly eighteen years earlier: "For fostering, Sibley from Ithrypt. The girl is some two years of age and seems completely without hearing; she makes no cry. No one can tell if she was born thus or lost her hearing through some cause as she has been kept apart from the family and her nurse is now dead." Those few words told how she had come to the keep.

Sibley had gleaned a little more information from Lady Alyss. Her mother, the youngest daughter of the lord of Ithrypt, died bearing a bastard daughter. She never named the father of her infant. Lady Alyss chose to believe that Sibley's father had been a knight, but Sibley thought this unlikely. Sibley was given to a woodcutter's widow to nurse until she was old enough to be sent to the Dames and the family did their best to forget the scandal.

When Sibley was less than two, robbers killed her nurse, hacking off the woman's head. Sibley and her three-year-old milk brother were found under the bed. The killers had slashed the mattress and run pikes through the board: the little boy was dead of stab wounds, but Sibley was unharmed. Word of this event spread through the Dales, and Logrin, who had long been interested in trying to create a sophisticated silent language, offered a home for the child. Her grandparents, who were thankful for the chance to be rid of her, quickly accepted.

She took up the pen again and turned back the pages to end her own entry, "Always the first to plan for battle, the design of war machines was among his skills, also the use of herbs and much other learning." She left the book open, ready for the next day's entry. The book was nearly half used: neat columns, marching week after week, month after month across the large pages. It had taken Logrin a lifetime to fill that much. Sibley suddenly realized that she would spend her life filling the rest, transcribing the steward's tally sticks, recording the sergeant-at-arms's report. And she would fill her days as she had with Logrin, reading his books, borrowing and lending manuscripts between the other keeps and the Abbeys, silently sewing with

Lady Alyss's maidens, and then, when the lady died, with those of Blodnath, Lady Alyss's mealy-mouthed daughter-in-law. The maidens would become wives, and she, Sibley, would stay a maiden.

"You're not beautiful, but still you look well enough, more's the pity," Blodnath had said when Sibley was twelve. A year later Sibley had understood what she meant when a neighbor's young son had asked permission to court her. Lady Alyss had explained that any child Sibley bore might also be "afflicted." Sibley must reconcile herself to spinsterhood. "Perhaps we should send you to the Dames, you would be safe there . . ." But Sibley had no wish to leave the only home she knew, and so braided her yellow hair under her cap, kept her brown eyes lowered, wore simple clothes, and told herself what Logrin taught her was more important than babies.

"And I am reconciled," she told herself as she looked out the window, watching the surf break on the cliffs, "and I am content." Sibley thought of Jenneth, who had befriended her ten years ago, when she had stopped sleeping in the closet where Logrin kept his books and been moved into the maidens' room. Jenneth was twelve then, the youngest girl fostered with Lady Alyss, and the only person beside Logrin to master the finger speech Logrin had devised. At times it was a game among the maidens to learn Sibley's language, but no one, save Jenneth, had ever bothered to learn enough to let Sibley have a proper gossip with her.

But Jenneth had left three years ago to marry a widowed lord and Sibley would probably never see her again. Sibley touched the arm band Jenneth had sent her shortly after arriving at her husband's keep. It was made of green stone and large enough that Sibley could push it above her elbow and wear it hidden under her sleeve. Now she slid it off her arm. It was smooth, warm from her own warmth. Jenneth had seen it hanging outside a house, part of a wreath of dried Angelica-Vervain and Moly, put there to keep off the evil eye. The villager said that his uncle had dug it up years ago, and had been happy enough to sell it to his lord as a gift for his pretty young bride. Sibley remembered the letter Jenneth sent with it, telling her about the journey and her new life, how exciting everything was. But

lately Jenneth's letters had been short. Between her husband's half-grown children and her own two babies, Jenneth seemed to have little time for herself. Yes, thought Sibley, *it's better this way.*

The chamber felt confining, and everywhere Sibley looked she saw reminders of Logrin. It was a chilly spring evening, but the evenings were long now. She had time to take a walk before the evening meal. The air would clear her head. She put on the heavy boots she had worn to go herb gathering with Logrin and went outside.

At the gate she signed, "Good evening," hand turned up at chest level, then raised above her head, fingers bent over palm. She pointed to the headland, and down, indicating that she would walk on the beach, and then pointed to the sun and lowered her fingers a few degrees to tell him that she would return when the sun had moved that much. It would still be a little before dark.

"All right, Sibley." She and the gatekeeper had worked out this crude method years ago. Now it rankled Sibley, why did she have to use gestures when she had words? She had only gone a few steps when she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was the gatekeeper. "Mind you're back for dinner, now."

Sibley nodded and tapped once on her shoulder. Of course she'd be back in time. Why did everyone treat her as a child?

The beach was only a narrow strip, high tide would crest very soon. Sibley wandered along, letting her mind drift. *It's natural that I should be sad now, all winter, even, with Logrin so ill, but the grief will pass. That's why I feel so unsettled now. Soon all will be well again.* The movement of a seagull caught her eye and she watched it as it dived.

By the time Sibley reached the cliff base at the foot of the headland the tide was at its fullest. Even so, there was enough beach uncovered that if she wanted to scramble across the rocks she could reach the next cove. For a moment she hesitated, she hadn't told the gatekeeper that she might go there: that would have involved drawing a map in the muddy earth. Then she drew an arrow in the sand and wrote her name next to it. If anyone came looking for her, the way she'd gone would be clear enough. But what if someone just glanced along the beach

and did not see anyone? They might raise the alarm without even looking for the arrow. But why would anyone even come looking for her? There was time enough before the gatekeeper expected her back.

Sibley gathered up her skirts and started around the cliff base. The wind was strong here, tugging at the brown fabric. Her green cloak billowed behind her and she grabbed the loose end to tuck under one arm before it could trail into one of the tidal ponds. She had to keep her eyes down, looking for gaps in the slippery seaweed where she could step, but once on sand again she let loose her hold on her skirts and cloak and looked up.

Halfway down the beach men in helmets and leather jerkins were pushing a rowing boat into the sea. She did not recognize any of them. Raiders! Sibley turned to run, to raise the alarm. Halfway across the rocks she slipped into a pool and fell. She struggled on, soaking wet with the wind like ice across her face and her dripping clothing twisting around her legs. Had they seen her? She glanced back, she could no longer see the beach, but there was no one on the rock behind her. *Please, Neave, let the noise seem like the sea to them.*

Sibley clawed at the wet tapes of her cloak, trying to untie them and drop the sodden weight. She broke a nail on the knot and pulled it to her mouth to try her teeth on it. Her heart pounded and she could feel the blood rushing in her ears. Then something struck her on the back, knocking her to the ground. She twisted her head around and saw one of the strangers standing over her. He grabbed a wrist and pulled her to her feet, his mouth was moving but Sibley could not make out the words. She struggled to free herself and he cuffed her lightly, then backhanded her sharply when she did not stop fighting. Finally the man stuffed a corner of her wet and sandy cloak into her mouth. He held it there with one hand, put the other around her waist, and carried her across the rocks.

The others had already launched the boat. Sibley's captor dragged her behind him and dumped her into the boat. At once other hands replaced his over her mouth. The man heaved himself into the boat and crouched next to her. Shivering, Sibley inched away from him. Someone else pushed her aside. The

oars were unshipped, and hugging the coast, the boat moved away from the keep.

Twice Sibley tried to raise her head above the gunwale; each time she was pushed back to the bottom of the boat. The man holding her was trying to tell her something, but she couldn't understand the words his lips made. So she lay there, shivering in the bilge. Obviously, these men hoped that no one from the keep would spot them. They had picked a good time to try it, ebbing tide and dusk. Many of the men were dark—were they from Alizon? But what were men of Alizon doing here? There had been no recent storms, so they were not wreck survivors. These were fighting men, although their equipment was shoddy. Perhaps a scouting party?

Eventually her captor loosened his grip. Sibley sat in the bottom of the boat, legs pulled up to her chin. Here, at least, she was out of the wind. No one objected when she spat out the corner of her cloak. One of the men draped it over her and she soon realized that even wet it helped cut the wind. She fell into a half sleep, aware that she was cold and bruised, but almost detached from the discomfort. And she blamed herself: *I should have never left the cove. But if Logrin hadn't died . . .*

Sibley had no idea how long the journey took, but it was still dark when they reached a ship. The men scrambled up a rope ladder, but Sibley's legs were painfully asleep and couldn't bear her weight. She was carried on board like a sack of meal and dumped on the deck. With stiff fingers she rubbed life back into her numb legs. There were no lights on the ship. In the darkness she could see the shapes of men moving about. It wasn't a large ship, but the crew seemed numerous. Like all the keep children, Sibley had been taken on the fishing boats along the estuary, but she had never been on a seafaring vessel. The motion was unsettling and when she finally managed to stand she nearly pitched to the deck again.

Someone took her arm and hurried her down the companion-way into the cabin. It was small and close. A man sat at a table, and a younger man—not yet grown tall enough to have to stoop in the low cabin—stood next to him. Her escort pointed to a bench bolted to the bulkhead, and Sibley lurched over to sit there. The taller of the two men—Sibley assumed he was the

captain as the others deferred to him—turned to her. When he spoke, she could not understand him. With her right hand she mimed holding a pen, making strokes on her left palm.

The captain spoke again, then turned to the other man. Sibley followed the captain's gaze. The young man said something, then, after his captain turned back to Sibley, he winked at her. She quickly looked away and he left the cabin.

The captain gave Sibley a bit of slate and a lead rule. Since the men did not use the tongue of the Dales, she doubted they could read it. Logrin had taught her to read the language of Alizon, but she had never tried to make herself understood in it. She carefully printed, "I do not hear you."

The captain at least could make out what she had written. He read it out to the others, pointing to each word. After some discussion the captain touched his lips with an exaggerated gesture.

"No, I cannot speak," Sibley wrote, trying for an even hand despite the ship's lurching. "Who are you? Why did you take me? What—"

The captain took the slate and rule, and smudged out her words. "I am Estban, captain. My ship." He printed clumsily. "Be good. Go with the boy."

Sibley reached for the slate, but Estban pushed her hand away. When the young man returned, the captain spoke to him. He pulled a blanket off the bed, pocketed the slate and rule, and held out a hand to Sibley.

Sibley stumbled after him. The captain's few remarks had not reassured her at all. She had no idea of what would happen to her. Was this man going to take her back on deck and pitch her overboard? She tried to calm herself. Why did he take the slate if he was just going to kill her? To trick her? Fighting fear, Sibley realized that panic would only make her more helpless.

The young man took her to the galley. He roused the cook from his bed, and the man shuffled off, scowling at Sibley. He had only one eye and was missing a hand. Sibley hoped he'd find somewhere else to sleep that night. She sat gingerly on the side of the dirty bunk while the man poured her a drink of water. It tasted stale, but Sibley's mouth was raw from the salt

and sand and the wool of her cloak, and she drank gratefully before making the sign for thank you.

The man had taken out the slate and drawn on it a picture of a stick figure with long braids, wrapped in a blanket lying on the bunk. He plucked at her sleeve, pointed to the open doorway, then turned his back. Sibley stamped her foot, a good way to get someone's attention. He turned around and looked her straight in the eye.

Sibley noticed then that his eyes were green. That in itself was not too unusual, but they were slitted like a cat's. He was drawing again, a picture of someone plucking a chicken. He pointed to the picture, then to Sibley.

Sibley understood: undress or be stripped. With poor grace she nodded and pointed to the doorway. At least he could wait outside. She removed her dress and stockings and, after much fumbling, the woolen shirt she wore under her chemise. She was going to keep the chemise to sleep in even though it was damp. Then she tossed the wet clothes into the hall and climbed into the bunk. As an afterthought she removed her cap. It was half dry, and she was so tired that she pulled it off over her face rather than trying to untie it. She wondered how she would brush her hair, and fell asleep still wondering.

When she woke, she knew at once she was not in the keep. She remembered everything from the night before. Unlike the poor girl in *The Dalemaid's Litany* who awoke every morning in the Abbey thinking she was still in her parents' home, Sibley knew where she was. She could feel the footsteps of men on the deck above her and smell some sort of strong spirit. Turning her head she saw the fierce cook pouring a dark liquid into a kettle. A sailor took it off the fire and carried it out of the galley. The cook carefully banked down the fire, then rummaged through a sack on the floor. As Sibley watched horrified, he crushed a brick of hard bread, picking out maggots, poured hot water from another kettle over it, and added a little of the spirit. He put the dish next to Sibley, made sure once again the fire in the sandbox was banked, and left the galley. So this was her breakfast.

Her clothes were hanging from the ceiling, dry, but stiff and scratchy. During the night someone had tacked a bit of sail

cloth across the doorway. It didn't hang all the way to the floor. Sibley assumed it was too short to reach the sandbox: fire was an even greater risk at sea than on land. She put her shirt on over her chemise. Her cap was a crumpled rag. She broke off one of the tapes and used it to tie back her hair. After she dressed she choked down her breakfast, the spirit was bitter but warming. While she was still eating the cat-eyed man brought her a bucket and drew a picture of the girl with braids carrying the bucket onto the deck. Then he left her.

Sibley spent the morning on deck, huddled out of the wind. She dared not return to the galley and face the cook. The sailors ignored her. Once the captain came over and absently patted her shoulder. She supposed that was his way of saying that she was being good.

When the sun was high, the cat-eyed man brought her a cup of water and another dish of the watered bread. She took the dish from him and set it on the deck. As the ship rolled, the dish slid, and he stopped it with his foot. Sibley pointed to herself, then to several points on the horizon. Would he understand that she was asking where the keep was?

He smiled at her and pointed to her meal. As he handed her the cup he spoke: "Poor little maid, waiting by the sea."

Sibley recognized the words, they were part of a children's rhyme. She put a figure to her lips, reached to touch his ear, then touched his lips and the corner of her own eye.

He looked straight at her, and his eyes narrowed. "So you can see my words, is that it, lass?"

His lips moved slowly, and he shaped his words oddly, but Sibley could make out his meaning. She pretended to write, and he gave her the slate and rule.

She sketched a picture of High Hallack's coast, then pointed to him and the ship.

"It makes no odds where we are."

Sibley shook her head and drew again. The stick figure with braids stood with both feet on High Hallack. Then on a boat shape with wavy lines underneath, and finally on the outline of a ship. Sibley pointed to him.

"How did I get here? Well, I was born about there near Kalaven Port—however did you learn to draw a chart?"

Sibley shrugged. It was an inelegant gesture, one which Lady Alyss forbade her, but it would be too complicated to explain about Logrin. The cat-eyed man spoke again, repeating words when she shook her head, and before long she had his story.

"My father was off a Sulcar ship, my mother a chandler's daughter. My father wintered with us each year, and when my mother died—I was eight—he took me to sea with him. He—died, he's dead now, and I'm working my passage home."

Sibley wondered what he wasn't telling her.

"But, little maid, you're not to let them know I'm of High Hallack. They think I'm Sulcar, and that suits me. I've no wish for them to send me spying out against my mother's people. You understand?"

Sibley nodded. He took the empty cup and dish. "I'll be back later, rest easy."

Sibley signed, "Good-bye." This man—she would have to learn his name—did not seem altogether trustworthy. But he seemed loyal to his mother's people, and he was kindly disposed toward her. Perhaps he would help her escape. She would have to talk with him more, try to understand him. She remembered Logrin talking about the art of siege warfare, "always have a friend within the gates."

When the sun started to set the cat-eyed man took her back to the galley, where the cook made her the same meal again. Then he cut chunks of dried meat into a bucket—for the crew's dinner, Sibley guessed. The meat smelled foul, and Sibley was thankful that she didn't have to eat it. She was thirsty, but when she held out her cup, hoping the cook would refill it, he shook his head. When he left the galley, the cat-eyed man explained that water was rationed.

He gave Sibley the slate, and she began to make her clumsy drawings again while the man tried to guess her meaning.

"By the Horned Man, lass, I would that you could write."

"And what makes you think I can't?" Sibley wrote.

"However did they teach you?"

"However did they teach you to read?"

"My grandfather Chandler taught me, though I'm out of practice."

"What is your name?"

"Herol. But they call me Woldor, a good Sulcar name, or Boy. What's yours?"

"Mistress Sibley." She didn't really have any right to the title, but Lady Alyss had encouraged people to use it, and Sibley was beginning to suspect Herol was younger than she was. It would do him good to show a little respect.

He looked at her stained, simple clothes, and nodded. "Mistress."

Sibley spelled out his name with her fingers. "Or I could call you this," she wrote. She held out her right hand, palm facing her, thumb holding back the little figure so that the other three pointed to her left, like whiskers. It was the sign for "cat."

He laughed, pointing to himself, then making the sign.

Sibley taught him the verb "to be" and a few pronouns. Cat learned quickly. She told him about Logrin and how she'd come to be captured, then showed him a few more signs, ones useful in emergencies, and told him that if he stamped his foot, she'd feel it. "Or thump on a table if I'm writing on it, anything that makes vibrations."

"Can you feel the waves against the ship?"

"Yes, and when the sailors run across the deck, just like you could if you felt for it," Sibley wrote, then scrubbed the slate clean. The rule was bent and she pinched it back into shape. Now that she and Cat were on friendly footing she'd trust him more. "I do miss home."

Cat grinned. "Can I help you escape, you mean?"

"What will happen to me? Will Estban try to get a ransom for me?"

Cat reached to touch her hand, then stopped.

Sibley understood that he wished to comfort her and smiled.

"Estban isn't going to risk something like that, even if he knew your rank. Suppose your family set a trap for him when he went to collect the gold. No, he'll sell you."

"But who'd want a deaf servant, even one who can read and write? I'd be too much trouble, and no one would trust me to keep accounts or anything like that."

"No, he'll sell you—to a place where your deafness won't matter." He fell silent, a hard look on his face. "I'll think of something."

"But no one's touched me." Sibley knew exactly what he was talking about.

"It wouldn't be good for the men's morale to let them . . . er."

Sibley tapped her shoulder, she understood. "When the ship gets into port, bribe the greediest sailor to let us off."

Cat laughed so much she couldn't understand him. When he could speak clearly he said, "There are enough holes there to sail a fleet through. There is always someone on guard, for a start, and what shall I bribe them with—my shirt?"

Sibley smiled and took Jenneth's arm band off.

Cat took it, turning it over and over. "Where did you get this?"

"A gift. I think it's valuable. Even Logrin had never seen stone like it."

"It was made by the Old Ones."

Sibley made the question sign.

"I can feel it, I've held their relics before. Can you read this writing?" Cat held the bracelet out to her.

"There isn't any writing."

"Here, but very faint, I can just see silver letters; they must have been painted on."

Sibley couldn't see any writing, but perhaps Cat's eyes were sharper. A real cat could see in the dark, after all.

"Can you read it?" she asked.

"No." He copied the writing onto the slate, but the language was foreign to Sibley. "Take it back, lass—mistress, I should be saying."

"Keep it, in case you get a chance."

"Have you thought what you'd do once you got away. You'd be in a strange place—"

Sibley tugged at his sleeve, and he read from the slate. "I would have you to speak for me."

"In Alizon, I'd be killed on sight if I left the ship. You, too, if you're with me."

"Why?"

"Less than a week ago, the horn was sounded thrice against the Old Race. I have the blood of the Old Ones in me." He pointed to his eyes. "These let me see in the dark, but in Alizon

it would be taken as a mark of the Old Race." He paused. "I was in Alizon when it happened, drinking wine with my father and a merchant, a friend of his near the docks. Suddenly there was a hue and cry in the streets. Before I could make out the cause, my father had pushed me out the back door. He was—he died in the street trying to bar the front door. I could hear, I think the merchant did it. Then I ran.

"I hid all day in a warehouse, made my way to the ship at night and saw her watched by the Hounds. I was afraid that if I tried to board, they would attack and my shipmates would be killed trying to aid me. So I crept along the docks, keeping to the shadows. When I saw old Estban's tub I thought I was saved. He's a scoundrel and a slaver—we've had a couple of run-ins with him over the years, but I thought he'd let me buy passage with him. Half his crew is outside the law, I didn't think he'd turn on me. Well, he took every coin I had, and yesterday morning, before we were in sight of High Hallack, he had me tied below. I know what that means. He wants to keep me as a slave—forever. He knows I'm afraid to be seen in Alizon, and he won't let me get near enough to land anywhere else.

"But don't worry, I'm going to find a way off, and I'll take you with me." He took up the lantern and stepped across the tiny galley, then turned, "And, Sibley, I'm sleeping across the door, Estban's orders, though I'll be up and gone when you wake. Don't worry if it gets rough tonight."

Sibley took up her arm band. The air was damp and cold, but the stone felt unusually warm, and in the poor light, its green color seemed paler than it really was. She pulled off her boots and lay down fully dressed. She was awake for hours, trying to make plans, and fell asleep to dream of Cat and herself swimming away in the night. In the dream it didn't matter that she did not know how to swim.

The sea was much rougher the next morning. The cook did not light the fire, and sent up hard biscuits to the men, although he took the time to grind Sibley's into a paste with cold water and gave her a slice of dried apple. Sibley ate and took her slops bucket onto the deck. She had a hard time keeping her footing, but once she had huddled into the same space she had taken the day before, she decided to stay above deck. Here at

least the air was fresh and the ship's movement bothered her less.

The weather did not improve, and Sibley had to eat biscuit paste again at noon. She wondered if the cook thought she had no teeth, but after she saw that the sailors had to suck their biscuit rather than chewing it, she was grateful he bothered. While she was still eating, the sails were reefed, and she was not surprised when Cat came and took her below.

"There is going to be a storm," he told her as soon as they were in the galley. "You'll have to stay here where you'll be safe."

"Will it be bad?" she signed.

Cat understood the question and roughly signed, "No bad."

The storm was very bad. It hit suddenly, and Sibley could feel the ship's timbers pulling apart under strain. She tried to lie in the bunk, but after rolling out of it a couple of times, she wedged herself between the bulkhead and the fire box. Warm ashes spilled over her. Before long she had been sick, and huddled miserably under the cloak. It was very dark. When waves broke over the deck, water rushed between the boards.

Sibley did not notice when morning came with a sick gray light. She was balanced between exhausted sleep and a fear that if she slept the ship might go down and carry her with it. Death might be preferable to seasickness, but drowning, trapped in a small room, was a horror she could not even bear to think about.

Cat passed into her sight, working the bung from the water barrel, and fresh water sloshed everywhere. Even Cat was having trouble keeping his balance. He crawled over to her and pressed a wet rag against her lips. She sucked, but the water made her stomach heave. He wiped her face instead. He said something that she couldn't understand.

"More clearly," she signed. It was an effort to move her hands.

"What?"

She managed to sign, "Go on."

"I'm going to take you on deck."

Cat half dragged, half carried her up the companionway and helped her lie down against the cabin. There was a cold gray

light; the rain was hard and driving. Estban and the men crouched around the wheel. "The cable snapped," Cat explained, "and over there, hidden in the fog, are the Long Sisters. The wind is driving us onto them. There's no point in taking the boat, it would capsize in this sea. But we may get washed over The Hands, the low bit that joins the two big reefs. If so, we'll be driven onto the shore."

Sibley ached with cold and sickness and had not understood every word, but she thought she could manage to drown out here and not disgrace herself by panicking. She wouldn't be trapped. The fresh air cleared her head a little. With stiff fingers she worried her arm band from under her wet sleeve. "Take it, swim, buy passage home." She had never heard of the Long Sisters: they must be off the Alizon coast. Cat would be in danger there. "Close eyes," she added.

"I don't understand?" Cat said.

Sibley tried to explain once more, if only she'd taught him more signs. He kept pushing the bracelet away, but finally took it. He folded his hands about it, fingers threaded through the hole. Sibley closed her eyes. *It was all right now, if he swam, or even if he didn't. He'd wake up on the beach . . . cats had nine lives, after all.*

A short while later the wind dropped. Sibley felt a little warmer. There was a jolt, and she thought the ship had finally struck, but instead she turned to. Sibley opened her eyes.

Sailors were climbing the rigging, hoisting sails. Estban waved his arms. Cat sat beside her, bent over, his arms pulled to his chest. His face was white, eyes rolled back. Sibley stumbled to her feet, the sea was still rough, and as she tried to walk, a wave broke over the ship, and sea water rushed around her knees, knocking her to the deck. Cat now lay on the deck, legs drawn up, his head in water. Sibley pulled him more or less upright. She'd do better to stay with him than trying to get help.

Sibley held him while the wind dropped and the fog lifted. Soon the rain stopped, and the sun shone through a thin haze of clouds. Estban had a rudder jury-rigged, and a minimum of canvas raised.

Cat was still in her arms breathing rapidly. No one took any

notice of them. Suddenly he began to shake. For a moment Sibley was even more frightened, then she realized that his color was coming back and that his eyes were closed. He was limp, like a sleeping child. She turned him on his back and his legs flopped straight. The arm band was grasped loosely in his hands. It was white, the color gone. As Sibley pulled it free she noticed that the palms of his hands were red as if they had been scorched, but the marks were already fading. She pushed the bracelet onto her arm. Cat, it seemed, had worked some sort of magic with it.

Someone was standing next to them; Sibley looked up at Estban. He knelt and began to feel Cat's head. Cat stirred, Estban spoke, and Cat nodded. Estban pulled Cat to his feet. Cat glanced at Sibley and encircled his wrist with the fingers of the other hand. Sibley pointed to her own arm and nodded. Cat winked and went to join the working men. Estban looked at her. Sibley could not read his expression. Then he shook his head and left her.

No one paid any attention to Sibley that day, and she kept out of the way. She worried about Cat and her arm band. When the men were given water, she expected some, but was not brought any. She wondered if she were being punished. At dusk the cook took her back to the galley. She thought she was too worried and thirsty to sleep, but did so as soon as she climbed into the bunk.

Cat was there in the morning, holding a cup of water, the now-cracked slate, and a piece of crumbly chalk. He had a split lip and a bruise on his left cheek.

"Sorry," Sibley signed. She meant, "Oh, poor Cat."

He grinned lopsidedly. "Sleeping on watch. Estban said he wishes he could learn to drop off like that. Thank the Horned One he thinks of me as a boy, otherwise I'd have been keel-hauled."

Sibley hoped he was teasing her.

It was raining again, and Sibley stayed in the galley. She watched the cook with fascination as he set the galley to rights and boiled meat for the crew. When he noticed her interest, he entertained her by mending a shirt. Sibley, who hated people staring when she signed, felt embarrassed by her own interest.

She crushed her own biscuits for something to do, and borrowed the cook's needle and thread to mend a rent in her cloak. Even with the fire lit, it was cold in the galley, and her clothes were damp.

Cat came to see her in the evening, and the cook left. "Changing of the guard," Cat joked. His bruise was just starting to turn purple at the edges, and his lip was very swollen. Sibley had a hard time understanding him. He'd brought a new bit of lead to replace the almost finished chalk. "I have a plan: we were blown off course, almost as far south as Estcarp."

"Witches!" signed Sibley, then wrote it for Cat.

"Yes, but they won't hunt the Old Race, it would be like killing their own people. If we were wrecked there, then we, you and I, we could run inland. Both Estcarp and High Hallack stand against Kolder and Alizon. I'm sure I could find a Sulcar ship and arrange for you to go home."

"But we'd have to wait for a storm, and pray it blew us in the right direction," Sibley wrote, wishing that written words had the nuances signs did: she wanted to draw information out of Cat.

"Sibley, that arm band of yours, you know I wore it before the storm dropped."

She tapped her shoulder.

"Well, I was thinking about the storm, how the wind was blowing from the east, and a little south, and that if it veered to the south, we might pass over The Hands. And I felt the band grow warmer. Then I thought why couldn't the wind just rise higher, high enough to leave us calm, and blow the clouds away. The stone grew even warmer. And I knew it was magic, my thoughts were bringing it to life. It was a terrible knowledge. I was frightened, and I wondered what I'd done to deserve it.

"I thought about the storm, and suddenly it was as if I were above it, looking down. But I didn't really see it. Sibley, I say I can see in the dark, but I can't really. I just know where things are if I'm moving toward them. This was the same sort of thing. I was the wind. I pushed against the ship, it was a something there instead of nothing, and it moved. Then I drove away the clouds. When I stopped pushing, it was as though I was drifting

away. I thought I was dying. Then I was on the deck with you by me and the standing captain over me. My hand burned all day, and my chest, where the stone had pressed against me, although there wasn't a mark on me or my clothes."

Sibley drew off the arm band. She had looked at it the few times the cook left the galley. Each time it was darker. Now it had almost returned to its usual dusky green, and for the first time she could remember it was cold to the touch. She told him how it had been nearly white when she had taken it from him.

"Perhaps I used up its power, or maybe it just goes white when it's being used. I just hope it will work again. We're going south and west now, I'll have to drive us east before a storm."

"How can you use it without anyone noticing."

"I'll have to get sick. I hope you don't mind sharing the galley with a sick man. I'll drink seawater and pretend I feel worse than I do."

Sibley went on deck the next morning. It was only the fifth morning she had woken on the ship, and she was sick of biscuit gruel and not enough water to drink. She felt dirtier than she ever had. Halfway through the morning Cat collapsed on deck, and after he had been pulled to his feet and fallen several times, he was carried into the galley. Sibley followed. Cat was given a drink of water and left alone with her.

"I drank seawater and brought it up four times last night. Everyone heard. Cook won't be here for a bit, and by then I'll be asleep—not really asleep you know."

"Doing magic," Sibley signed. "Slate?"

"Captain took it back. He does his talleys on it."

Sibley handed him the arm band. "Luck," she signed.

"Once I've really got the storm blowing, I'll try to wake up. If I don't, just walk along the coast until you find someone." He closed his eyes and tightened his grasp on the stone.

Sibley found his instructions rather inadequate. Since she couldn't swim, she wondered how she was supposed to get to shore. But she didn't want to disturb him to ask, for she suspected that if he didn't wake she wouldn't be able to manage without his help. There was no point in worrying him.

When the cook came down Cat lay curled up, facing the wall. The cook looked at him, but didn't touch him, and went about

his work. Sibley spent the afternoon sitting by Cat, hoping to feel some difference in the weather. It seemed a little colder, but that might just be wishful thinking.

She spent the night sitting by the bunk. Sometimes she slept, her head resting against the boards. She was awake when Cat began to shiver again. She put her cloak over him and waited until he slept normally, then took the arm band back again. The cook came at first light and made biscuit gruel for both Sibley and Cat. Cat made faces at her while he ate his.

His hands were still red when Estban came to see him, but the captain seemed to believe he was well, because he sent Cat up on deck. Later Cat explained that Estban thought his hands were red with a rash from fever.

"Storm?" signed Sibley.

"I've made a wind; can't you feel it? By tonight it will be driving us back. I'll work a little more on it this evening."

Sibley thought he seemed very sure of himself.

"The captain will be furious," he continued. "He wants to put in somewhere safe for water: several casks were broached during the last storm. When you're outlawed in your own land, it's hard to find a safe bay, and I'll be driving him away from one he likes."

"When will we go?" Sibley asked, trying to use signs he knew.

"In a day or two, if we're driven fast enough."

Sibley wondered how many days of storm she could endure.

"I do not swim."

"I'll tow you. Don't worry."

But Sibley did. Cat was no longer afraid of using the stone, in fact he had lost his awe of it. Sibley found it hard to believe he had mastered its magic so soon. However, as the day went on, the wind grew stronger until it was a gale. The ship was no longer able to tack, and, as Cat had predicted, ran before the wind. There was no rain, but the seas were high, and once the waves began to break over the deck, Sibley was sent below. Cat took the band with him into the passageway when he went to sleep that night.

Sibley awoke as the ship struck something, drew back, and struck again. This time the motion stopped, although she could

feel the timbers strain as the ship was pounded by the waves. It was dark, and she barked her shins against the sandbox. She found the doorway by blundering into the sailcloth curtain. There was a little moonlight in the passage, and she saw Cat, legs and arms drawn up, body curled. She bent to look at his face: it was contorted. She tried to draw his hands away from his chest and saw scorch marks on his shirt: the stone had finally grown too hot. There was a skin of seawater kept over the fire box, and she hurried to get it. It cooled the skin around the stone, but she still could not pull it free.

There was water spilling around her feet. It drew back, and rushed again. The ship must have struck a rock! Sibley grabbed Cat by the legs and dragged. She was smaller than he was and slighter, and she thought she could never lift him. She got him up the ladder by working an arm under one of his and pulling him up rung by rung. Her arm felt as though it would tear loose from its socket. The deck was deserted, the boat gone. The men had left—even the cook—with no thought for them. Sibley felt anger and with it, strength. She dumped Cat on the deck and, no longer caring if she hurt him, forced his fingers from the stone. It burned her slightly, but it soon cooled, and she pushed it back on her arm. One did not discard something of its power easily.

Then she propped him against the hatch and went to the railings. As she walked around the ship she could see no sign of a rock. The ship seemed caught below the water line, and not in danger of sinking at once, but Sibley was sure the vessel was being broken apart. Twice she settled with a lurch. Sibley had to find something to keep her and Cat afloat. She searched his pocket for his clasp knife and cut several lengths of rope. Then she looked for something she could use. The hatch cover bound with iron was too heavy for her to lift, so she cut a spar free. As she worked, she felt the ship drop again.

The spar was twice her height in length, and thicker than her arm could span, but she could roll and push it along the deck. She found seamen's harnesses, hanging from the rigging where they had been abandoned, and manhandled Cat into one. He was less stiff now, but his eyes were still open and rolled back. She pushed the spar through the stern railings, then fastened a

length of cable to the end nearest the sea, passed the cable over the railings, and tied the other end to Cat's harness, thanking Neave she had learned her knots as a child. Then she struggled into a harness and fastened herself to the spar as she had Cat.

It seemed to take forever to heave Cat over the railing. As soon as he dropped, she was pushing the spar into the water, trying not to tangle the rope, and climbing over the railing herself. For an awful moment she thought she was not going to make it, but would jam against the railing, held there by the weight of the dangling spar. Suddenly she felt herself falling, then the cold shock of the sea, colder than she had expected. She pulled herself hand over hand until she felt the spar, then fumbled for the rope attached to Cat. Twice she pulled on her own rope before she drew him up to her. She felt his warm breath on her hand and she knew he lived.

With them both at one end, the spar rode unevenly in the water, the far end poking above their heads, so Sibley dragged them toward the middle. She had planned to lash them firmly to the spar, but had the strength only to cling to the wood with one arm and keep Cat's head above water.

The tide did the rest. At least Cat had been right about that, although it was a morning ebb, not an evening one. Surely Gunnora was watching over them. The wind must have blown much more strongly than Cat had planned, and they could easily have come when the tide was flowing. Sibley just let wave after wave carry them onto the shore. After a long while her feet touched bottom. The beach was very long with a gentle slope. The waves crested and broke far from land. The force of the tide was strong. The tide turned when the water was still up to Sibley's waist, and rushed out quickly. She struggled to drag Cat and the spar behind her: there was no time to cut them free.

She collapsed in the surf and waited while the sea withdrew and the sun rose. Cat lay still in his trance. With an effort Sibley pushed herself to her knees and drew out the clasp knife. She had eaten nothing but biscuit and dried apple for five days and was thirsty as usual. She cut the ropes and harnesses; it was easier than trying to untie the knots. There was wet seaweed

heaped along the beach, and she bound Cat's blistered hands with it. When she looked at the stone it was white and cracked.

There was a high sea wall behind them with stairs shaped into it. There would be a village above them. Sooner or later someone would come onto the beach, and be they Alizon, witches, or moss wives, Sibley would be glad to see them. The tide was far out now. Sibley could barely see water across the sand. She wondered how far she and Cat had drifted. Well, she'd rest a little too and if no one had found them by the time they woke, they'd have to find the village themselves.

The sun shining through her eyelids woke her. She put her arm over her face to block it, then decided to get up and see how Cat was. As she looked at the sea she blanched. The tide had turned—the sea was rushing toward them. The same strong rush that had carried them onto the beach would trap them. Now she noticed high water marks on the sea wall, marks higher than her head. They had to get off the beach.

Cat did not stir when she shook him. She slapped him and his lips moved, but not clearly enough for her to understand. She pulled at his arm, but she was at the end of her strength and could not lift him. She could not even drag him.

They had to move, or they would die. Dimly, words formed in her mind, "Don't move, don't make a sound!" She shook her head to clear it and tugged at Cat again. Her head was whirling with faintness. She collapsed over him.

There was sunlight spilling through the cottage door. Sibbie sat on the floor, watching Islak pile up four wooden blocks for her to knock over. She put out a hand and the blocks flew everywhere. "More, more, Issie put up now," she demanded, laughing as she scattered the stack.

Nana sitting on the doorstep knitting said, "Say 'please,' Sibbie."

"P'ease more, Issie?" she said, and Islak made the tower again. Suddenly Nana pushed her under the bed. Outraged, for she'd done nothing wrong, Sibbie yelled.

"Hold her, Islak, don't let her cry," Nana commanded. It was dark under the bed; the dangling quilt blocked most of the light. She heard the door slam. "Don't cry." Islak held her tightly, his hand over her mouth.

Sibley felt Cat's body jerk under her, convulsed. She moved her hands, making his name sign.

There was thudding against the door. Sibbie heard a groan as it was forced open. A scream from Nana. Islak's hands were over ears now, but she could still hear. Peeking under the quilt, Sibbie saw Nana fall, saw a stick driven into her. Islak screamed.

There were terrible vibrations in Cat's chest.

There was a thud as the mattress landed over Nana. Islak let go of Sibbie, and she drew back against the wall, covering her ears with her own hands. A stick, like the one that had hurt Nana, came through the bed, then another. One stuck Islak, and his screams grew shriller. Sibbie bit her lip to keep from crying for Nana. She was not to make a sound or the stick would get her.

Islak stopped screaming. Sibbie couldn't hear anything.

Sibley looked at Cat's face. He was moving his lips again. She glanced at the sea, it was advancing faster than a man could run.

Islak squirmed and kicked.

Cat kicked; his arms flailed.

Nana lay half covered by the mattress. "Don't cry, don't listen."

Cat lay still.

Sibbie was silent, not hearing.

Sibley screamed, "Cat, Cat." She chafed his hand.

He moaned.

"Cat, what is it, what do you need?" The words sounded strange to her own ears.

"So far, go so far," Cat murmured.

"Come back, come here, to me. Cat."

"Above the clouds . . . the wind."

"It's over, Cat, come back, you don't have the band, you aren't doing magic."

He lay still while Sibley repeated his name, calling him back. His color improved. Then his eyes opened, and he whispered, "Water."

"Stand!" cried Sibley. "Look at the sea!"

Cat looked and scrambled up. A wave broke a hand's width from his feet, drew back to break again, soaking him to his

knees. Clutching each other they stumbled up the stairs, pulling themselves by their hands when they slipped.

They sat on the top step with the sea whirling below them. Sibley rested her head on Cat's shoulder. Suddenly he twisted his head to look directly at her. "You can speak!"

"And hear. As soon as you can walk again we'll go along that path and find someone to help us. But while we rest let me tell you . . ."