

JUDITH TARR

Death and the Lady

One of the most popular and respected fantasists of the 1980s, Judith Tarr is also a medieval scholar with a Ph.D. in medieval studies from Yale University, which background has served her well in creating the richly detailed milieus of her critically ac-claimed novels. She has published more than seventeen books, including the World Fantasy Award nominee *Lord of the Two Lands*, *The Lie of Glass*, *The Golden Horn.*, *The Hounds of God*, *The Hall of the Mountain King*, *The Lady of Han-Gilen*, *A Fall of Princes*, *A Wind in Cairo*, *Ars Magica*, *Alamut*, and *The Dagger and the Cross: A Novel of the Crusades*, as well as historical novels such as *Throne of Isis*, *The Eagle's Daughter*, and *Pillar of Fire*. Born in Augusta, Maine, she now lives in Tucson, Arizona.

In the compelling, compassionate, and tough-minded story that follows, she takes us to a time when the Old World of Eu-rope is dying and a New World is being painfully born from its ashes, and shows us how both Old World and New must of ne-cessity deal with a still *older* World, the dark enchanted World that lies Beyond the Wood, and with the creatures who some-times come *out* of it...and who sometimes want to go *back* . . .

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I

The year after the Great Death, the harvest was the best that anyone could remember. The best, and the worst, because there were so few of us to get it in; and the men who had lived through the plague all gone, even to the fledgling boys, in the high ones' endless wars. The few that were left were the old and the lame and the witless, and the women. We made a joke of it that year, how the Angel of Death took his share of our men, and Sire and Comte the rest.

We did what we could, we in Sency-la-Forêt. I had lost a baby that summer, and almost myself, and I was weak a little still; even so I would have been reaping barley with my sisters, if Mère Adele had not caught me coming out with the scythe in my hand. She had a tongue on her, did Mère Adele, and Saint Benedict's black habit did nothing to curb it. She took the scythe and kilted up her habit and went to work down the long rows, and I went where she told me, to mind the children.

There were more maybe than some had, if travelers' tales told the truth. Every house had lost its share to the black sickness, and in the manor by the little river the dark angel had taken everyone but the few who had the wits to run. So we were a lordless demesne as well as a manless one, a city of women, one of the nuns from the priory called us; she read books, and not all of them were scripture.

If I looked from where I sat under the May tree, I could see her in the field, binding sheaves where the reapers passed. There were children with her; my own Celine, just big enough to work, had her own sheaf to gather and bind. I had the littlest ones, the babies in their pen like odd sheep, and the weanlings for the moment in my lap and in a circle round me, while I told them a story. It was a very old story; I hardly needed to pay attention to it, but let my tongue run on and watched the reapers, and decided that I was going to claim my scythe back. Let Mère Adele look after the babies. I was bigger than she, and stronger, too.

I was growing quite angry inside myself, while I smiled at the children and made them laugh. Even Francha, who never made a sound, nor had since her family died around her, had a glint of laughter in her eye, though she looked down quickly. I reached to draw her into my lap. She was stiff, all bones and tremblings like a wild thing, but she did not run away as she would have once. After a while she laid her head on my breast.

That quieted my temper. I finished the story I was telling. As I opened my mouth to begin another, Francha went rigid in my arms. I tried to soothe her with hands and voice. She clawed her way about, not to escape, but to see what came behind me.

Sency is Sency-la-Forêt not for that it was woodland once, though that is true enough; nor for that wood surrounds it, closing in on the road to Sency-les-Champs and away beyond it into Normandy; but because of the trees that are its westward wall. People pass through Sency from north to south and back again. Sometimes, from north or south, they go eastward into Maine or Anjou. West they never go. East and south and north is wood,

in part the Sire de Sency's if the Death had left any to claim that title, in part common ground for hunting and woodcutting and pig-grazing. West is Wood. Cursed, the priest said before he took fright at the Death and fled to Avranches. Bewitched, said the old women by the fire in the evenings. Enchanted, the young men used to say before they went away. Sometimes a young man would swear that he would go hunt-ing in the Wood, or a young woman would say that she meant to scry out a lover in the well by the broken chapel. If any of them ever did it, he never talked of it, nor she; nor did people ask. The Wood was best not spoken of.

I sat with Francha stiff as a stick in my arms, and stared where she was staring, into the green gloom that was the Wood. There was someone on the edge of it. It could almost have been a traveler from south or east, worked round westward by a turning of the road or by the lure of the trees. We were a formidable enough town by then, with the palisade that Messire Arnaud had built before he died, and no gate open but on the northward side.

Francha broke out of my arms. My Perrin, always the first to leap on anything that was new, bolted gleefully in Francha's wake. Half a breath more and they were all gone, the babies in their pen beginning to howl, and the reapers nearest pausing, some straightening to stare.

If I thought anything, I thought it later. That the Death was not so long gone. That the roads were full of wolves, two-legged nearly all of them, and deadly dangerous. That the Wood held things more deadly than any wolf, if even a tithe of the tales were true.

As I ran I thought of Perrin, and of Francha. I could have caught them easily, a season ago. Now the stitch caught me before I had run a furlong, doubled me up and made me curse. I ran in spite of it, but hobbling. I could see well enough. There was only one figure on the Wood's edge, standing very still before the onslaught of children. It was a woman. I did not know how I knew that. It was all in shapeless brown, hooded and faceless. It did not frighten our young at all. They had seen the Death. This was but a curiosity, a traveler on the road that no one traveled, a new thing to run after and shrill at and squabble over.

As the children parted like a flock of sheep and streamed around it, the figure bent. It straightened with one of the children in its arms. Francha, white and silent Francha who never spoke, who fled even from those she knew, clinging to this stranger as if she would never let go.

The reapers were leaving their reaping. Some moved slowly, weary or

wary. Others came as fast as they were able. We trusted nothing in these days, but Sency had been quiet since the spring, when the Comte's man came to take our men away. Our woods protected us, and our prayers, too.

Still I was the first but for the children to come to the stranger. Her hood was deep but the light was on her. I saw a pale face, and big eyes in it, staring at me.

I said the first thing that came into my head. "Greetings to you, stranger, and God's blessing on you."

She made a sound that might have been laughter or a sob. But she said clearly enough, "Greetings and blessing, in God's name." She had a lady's voice, and a lady's accent, too, with a lilt in it that made me think of birds.

"Where are you from? Do you carry the sickness?"

The lady did not move at all. I was the one who started and spun about.

Mère Adele was noble born herself, though she never made much of it; she was as outspoken to the lord bishop as she was to any of us. She stood behind me now, hands on her ample hips, and fixed the stranger with a hard eye. "Well? Are you dumb, then?"

"Not mute," the lady said in her soft voice, "nor enemy either. I have no sickness in me."

"And how may we be sure of that?"

I sucked in a breath.

The lady spoke before I could, as sweetly as ever, and patient, with Francha's head buried in the hollow of her shoulder. I had been thinking that she might be a nun fled from her convent. If she was, I thought I knew why. No bride of the lord Christ would carry a man's child in her belly, swelling it under the coarse brown robe.

"You can never be certain," she said to Mère Adele, "not of a stranger; not in these times. I will take no more from you than a loaf, of your charity, and your blessing if you will give it."

"The loaf you may have," said Mère Adele. "The blessing I'll have to

think on. If you fancy a bed for the night, there's straw in plenty to make one, and a reaper's dinner if you see fit to earn it."

"Even," the lady asked, "unblessed?"

Mère Adele was enjoying herself: I could see the glint in her eye. "Earn your dinner," she said, "and you'll get your blessing with it."

The lady bent her head, as gracious as a queen in a story. She mur-mured in Francha's ear. Francha's grip loosened on her neck. She set the child down in front of me—Francha all eyes and wordless reluctance—and followed Mère Adele through the field. None of the children went after her, even Perrin. They were meeker than I had ever seen them, and qui-eter; though they came to themselves soon enough, once I had them back under the May tree.

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Her name, she said, was Lys. She offered no more than that, that night, sitting by the fire in the mown field, eating bread and cheese and drink-ing the ale that was all we had. In the day's heat she had taken off her hood and her outer robe and worked as the rest did, in a shift of fine linen that was almost new. She was bearing for a fact, two seasons gone, I judged, and looking the bigger for that she was so thin. She had bones like a bird's, and skin so white one could see the tracks of veins beneath, and hair as black as her skin was white, hacked off as short as a nun's.

She was not that, she said. Swore to it and signed herself, lowering the lids over the great grey eyes. Have I said that she was beautiful? Oh, she was, like a white lily, with her sweet low voice and her long fair hands. Francha held her lap against all comers, but Perrin was bewitched, and Celine, and the rest of the children whose mothers had not herded them home.

"No nun," she said, "and a great sinner, who does penance for her sins in this long wandering."

We nodded round the fire. Pilgrimages we understood; and pilgrims, even noble ones, alone and afoot and tonsured, treading out the leagues of their salvation. Guillemette, who was pretty and very silly, sighed and clasped her hands to her breast. "How sad," she said, "and how brave, to leave your lord and your castle—for castle you had, surely, you are much too beautiful to be a plain man's wife—and go out on the long road."

“My lord is dead,” the lady said.

Guillemette blinked. Her eyes were full of easy tears. “Oh, how terri-ble! Was it the war?”

“It was the plague,” said Lys. “And that was six months ago now, by his daughter in my belly, and you may weep as you choose, but I have no tears left.”

She sounded it: dry and quiet. No anger in her, but no softness either. In the silence she stood up. “If there is a bed for me, I will take it. In the morning I will go.”

“Where?” That was Mère Adele, abrupt as always, and cutting to the heart of things.

Lys stood still. She was tall; taller in the firelight. “My vow takes me west,” she said.

“But there is nothing in the west,” said Mère Adele.

“But,” said Lys, “there is a whole kingdom, leagues of it, from these marches to the sea.”

“Ah,” said Mère Adele, sharp and short. “That’s not west, that’s Armorica. West is nothing that a human creature should meddle with. If it’s Armorica that you’re aiming for, you’d best go south first, and then west, on the king’s road.”

“We have another name for that kingdom,” said Lys, “where I was born.” She shook herself; she sighed. “In the morning I will go.”

* * * *

She slept in the house I had come to when I married Claudel, in my bed next to me with the children in a warm nest, Celine and Perrin and Francha, and the cats wherever they found room. That was Francha’s doing, holding to her like grim death when she would have made her bed in the nun’s barn, until my tongue spoke for me and offered her what I had.

I did not sleep overmuch. Nor, I thought, did she. She was still all the night long, coiled on her side with Francha in the hollow of her. The chil-dren made their night noises, the cats purred, Mamère Mondine snored in her bed by the fire. I listened to them, and to the lady’s silence. Claudel’s

absence was an ache still. It was worse tonight, with this stranger in his place. My hand kept trying to creep toward the warmth and the sound of her breathing, as if a touch could change her, make her the one I wanted there. In the end I made a fist of it and pinned it under my head, and squeezed my eyes shut, and willed the dawn to come.

Dawn came and went, and another dawn, and Lys stayed. The sky that had been so clear was turning grey. We needed every hand we had, to get in the crops before the rain came. Even mine—Mère Adele scowled at me as I took my place, but I stared her down. Lys took the row beside me. No one said anything. We were all silent, that day and the next, racing the rain.

The last of the barley went in the barn as the first drops fell. We stood out in it, too tired and too shocked by the stopping of a race we had run for so long, to do more than stare. Then someone grinned. Then some one else. Then the whole lot of us. We had done it, we, the women and the children and the men too old or weak to fight. We had brought in the harvest in Sency-la-Forêt.

That night we had a feast. Mère Adele's cook slaughtered an ox, and the rest of us brought what we had or could gather. There was meat for everyone, and a cake with honey in it, and apples from the orchards, and even a little wine. We sat in the nuns' refectory and listened to the rain on the roof, and ate till we were sated. Lame Bertrand had his pipe and Raymonde her drum, and Guillemette had a voice like a linnet. Some of the younger ones got up to dance. I saw how Pierre Allard was looking at Guillemette, and he just old enough to tend his own sheep: too young and small as he had been in the spring for the Comte's men to take, but grown tall in the summer, and casting eyes at our pretty idiot as if he were a proper man.

I drank maybe more of the wine than was good for me. I danced, and people cheered: I had a neat foot even then, and Pierre Allard was light enough, and quick enough, to keep up with me.

It should have been Claudel dancing there. No great beauty, my Claudel, and not much taller than I, but he could dance like a leaf in the Wood; and sing, too, and laugh with me when I spun dizzy and breath-less out of the dance. There was no one there to catch me and carry me away to a bed under the sky, or more likely on a night like this, in the barn among the cows, away from children and questions and eyes that pried.

I left soon after that, while the dancing was still in full whirl. The rain

was steady, and not too cold. I was wet through soon enough, but it felt more pleasant than not. My feet knew the way in the black dark, along the path that followed the priory's wall, down to the river and then up again to a shadow in shadow and a scent of the midden that was mine and no one else's. There was light through a chink in the door: firelight, banked but not yet covered. Mamère Mondine nodded in front of it. She was blind and nearly deaf, but she smiled when I kissed her forehead. "Jeannette," she said. "Pretty Jeannette." And patted my hand that rested on her shoulder, and went back to her dreaming.

The children were abed, asleep. There was no larger figure with them. Francha's eyes gleamed at me in the light from the lamp. They were swollen and red; her cheeks were tracked with tears.

I started to speak. To say that Lys was coming, that she would be here soon, that she was still in the priory. But I could not find it in me to say it. She had eaten with us. She had been there when the children went out in a crowd, protesting loudly. When the dancing began, I had not seen her. I had thought, if I thought at all, that she had come here before me.

In the dark and the rain, a stranger could only too easily go astray. It was not far to the priory, a mile, maybe, but that was a good count of steps, and more than enough to be lost in.

What made me think of the Wood, I never knew. Her words to Mère Adele. My first sight of her on the Wood's edge. The simple strangeness of her, as I sat on the bed and tried to comfort Francha, and saw in the dimness the memory of her face. We had stories, we in Sency, of what lived in the Wood. Animals both familiar and strange, and shadows cast by no living thing, and paths that wound deep and deep, and yet ended where they began; and far within, behind a wall of mists and fear, a king-dom ruled by a deathless king.

I shook myself hard. What was it to me that a wayward stranger had come, brought in our harvest, and gone away again? To Francha it was too much, and that I would not forgive. Whatever in the world had made our poor mute child fall so perfectly in love with the lady, it had done Francha no good, and likely much harm. She would not let me touch her now, scrambled to the far corner of the bed when I lay down and tried to draw her in, and huddled there for all that I dared do without waking the others. In the end I gave it up and closed my eyes. I was on the bed's edge. Francha was pressed against the wall. She would have to climb over me to escape.

One moment, it seemed, I was fretting over Francha. The next, the

red cock was crowing, and I was staggering up, stumbling to the morning's duties. There was no sign of Lys. She had had no more than the clothes on her back; those were gone. She might never have been there at all.

I unlidded the fire and poked it up, and fed it carefully. I filled the pot and hung it over the flames. I milked the cow, I found two eggs in the nest that the black hen had thought so well hidden. I fed the pigs and scratched the old sow's back and promised her a day in the wood, if I could persuade Bertrand to take her out with his own herd. I fed Mamère Mondine her bowl of porridge with a little honey dripped in it, and a little more for each of the children. Perrin and Celine gobbled theirs and wanted more. Francha would not eat. When I tried to feed her as I had when I first took her in, she slapped the spoon out of my hand. The other children were delighted. So were the cats, who set to at once, licking porridge from the wall and the table and the floor.

I sighed and retrieved the spoon. Francha's face was locked shut. There would be no reasoning with her today, or, I suspected, for days hereafter. Inside myself I cursed this woman who had come, enchanted a poor broken child, and gone away without a word. And if Francha sickened over it, if she pined and died—as she well could, as she almost had before I took her—

I dipped the porridge back into the pot. I wiped the children's faces and Francha's hands. I did what needed doing. And all the while my anger grew.

The rain had gone away with the night. The last of the clouds blew away eastward, and the sun came up, warming the wet earth, raising pillars and curtains of mist. The threshers would be at it soon, as should I.

But I stood in my kitchen garden and looked over the hedge, and saw the wall of grey and green that was the Wood. One of the cats wound about my ankles. I gathered her up. She purred. "I know where the lady went," I said. "She went west. She said she would. God protect her; nothing else will, where she was going."

The cat's purring stopped. She raked my hand with her claws and struggled free; hissed at me; and darted away round the midden.

I sucked my smarting hand. Celine ran out of the house, shrilling in the tone I was doing my best to slap out of her: "Francha's crying again, mama! Francha won't stop crying!"

What I was thinking of was quite mad. I should go inside, of course I should, and do what I could to comfort Francha, and gather the children together, and go to the threshing.

I knelt in the dirt between the poles of beans, and took Celine by the shoulders. She stopped her shrieking to stare at me. "Are you a big girl?" I asked her.

She drew herself up. "I'm grown up," she said. "You know that, mama."

"Can you look after Francha, then? And Perrin? And take them both to Mère Adele?"

She frowned. "Won't you come, too?"

Too clever by half, was my Celine. "I have to do something else," I said. "Can you do it, Celine? And tell Mère Adele that I'll be back as soon as I can?"

Celine thought about it. I held my breath. Finally she nodded. "I'll take Perrin and Francha to Mère Adele. And tell her you'll come back. Then can I go play with Jeannot?"

"No," I said. Then: "Yes. Play with Jeannot. Stay with him till I come back. Can you do that?"

She looked at me in perfect disgust. "Of course I can do that. I'm grown up."

I bit my lips to keep from laughing. I kissed her once on each cheek for each of the others, and once on the forehead for herself. "Go on," I said. "Be quick."

She went. I stood up. In a little while I heard them go, Perrin declar-ing loudly that he was going to eat honeycakes with Mère Adele. I went into the kitchen and filled a napkin with bread and cheese and apples, and put the knife in, too, wrapped close in the cloth, and tied it all in my kerchief. Mamère Mondine was asleep. She would be well enough till evening. If I was out longer, then Mère Adele would know to send some-one. I kissed her and laid my cheek for a moment against her dry old one. She sighed but did not wake. I drew myself up and went back through the kitchen garden.

Our house is one of the last in the village. The garden wall is part of Messire Arnaud's palisade, though we train beans up over it, and I have a grapevine that almost prospers. Claudel had cut a door in it, which could have got us in trouble if Messire Arnaud had lived to find out about it; but milord was dead and his heirs far away, and our little postern was hidden well in vines within and brambles without.

I escaped with a scratch or six, but with most of my dignity intact. It was the last of the wine in me, I was sure, and anger for Francha's sake, and maybe a little honest worry, too. Lys had been a guest in my house. If any harm came to her, the guilt would fall on me.

And I had not gone outside the palisade, except to the fields, since Claudel went away. I wanted the sun on my face, no children tugging at my skirts, the memory of death far away. I was afraid of what I went to, of course I was; the Wood was a horror from my earliest memory. But it was hard to be properly terrified, walking the path under the first out-riders of the trees, where the sun slanted down in long sheets, and the wind murmured in the leaves, and the birds sang sweet and unafraid. The path was thick with mould under my feet. The air was scented with green things, richer from the rain, with the deep earthy promise of mushrooms. I found a whole small field of them, and gathered as many as my apron would carry, but moving quickly through them and not lingering after.

By then Sency was well behind me and the trees were closing in. The path wound through them, neither broader nor narrower than before. I began to wonder if I should have gone to fetch the Allards' dog. I had company, it was true: the striped cat had followed me. She was more com-fort than I might have expected.

The two of us went on. The scent of mushrooms was all around me like a charm to keep the devils out. I laughed at that. The sound fell soft amid the trees. Beeches turning gold with autumn. Oaks going bronze. Ash with its feathery leaves, thorn huddling in thickets. The birds were singing still, but the quiet was vast beneath.

The cat walked ahead of me now, tail up and elegantly curved. One would think that she had come this way before.

I had, longer ago than I liked to think. I had walked as I walked now, but without the warding of mushrooms, crossing myself, it seemed, at every turn of the path. I had taken that last, suddenly steep slope, and rounded the thicket—hedge, it might have been—of thorn, and come to the sunlit space. It had dazzled me then as it dazzled me now, so much light after the

green gloom. I blinked to clear my eyes.

The chapel was as it had been when last I came to it. The two walls that stood; the one that was half fallen. The remnant of a porch, the arch of a gate, with the carving on it still, much blurred with age and weather. The upper arm of the cross had broken. The Lady who sat beneath it had lost her upraised hand, but the Child slept as ever in her lap, and her smile, even so worn, was sweet.

I crossed myself in front of her. No devils flapped shrieking through the broken roof. Nothing moved at all, except the cat, which picked its way delicately across the porch and vanished into the chapel.

My hands were cold. I shifted my grip on my bundle. I was hungry, suddenly, which made me want to laugh, or maybe to cry. My stomach lived in a time of its own; neither fear nor anger mattered in the least to it.

I would feed it soon enough. I gathered my courage and stepped under the arch, ducking my head though it was more than high enough: this was a holy place, though not, maybe, to the God I knew.

The pavement had been handsome once. It was dull and broken now. The altar was fallen. The font was whole, but blurred as was the carving on the gate. A spring bubbled into it and bubbled out again through channels in the wall. It was itself an odd thing, the stump of a great tree—oak, the stories said—lined with lead long stripped of its gilding, and carved with crosses. Here the roof was almost intact, giving shelter from the rain; or the ancient wood would long ago have crumbled into dust.

She was kneeling on the edge of the font, her dark head bent over it, her white hands clenched on its rim. I could not see the water. I did not want to see it. I could hear her, but she spoke no language I knew. Her tone was troubling enough: pure throttled desperation, pleading so strong that I lurched forward, hand outstretched. I stopped myself before I could touch her. If she was scrying her lover, then she was calling him up from the dead.

I shuddered. I made no sound, but she started and wheeled. Her face was white as death. Her eyes—

She lidded them. Her body eased by degrees. She did not seem surprised or angered, or anything but tired. “Jeannette,” she said.

“You left,” I said. “Francha cried all night.”

Her face tightened. "I had to go."

"Here?"

She looked about. She might have laughed, maybe, if she had had the strength. "It was to be here first," she said. "Now it seems that it will be here last, and always. And never."

I looked at her.

She shook her head. "You don't understand. How can you?"

"I can try," I said. "I'm no lady, I grant you that, but I've wits enough for a peasant's brat."

"Of course you have." She seemed surprised. As if I had been doing the doubting, and not she. "Very well. I'll tell you. He won't let me back."

"He?"

"He," said Lys, pointing at the font. There was nothing in it but water. No face. No image of a lover that would be. "My lord of the Wood. The cold king."

I shivered. "We don't name him here."

"Wise," said Lys.

"He won't let you pass?" I asked. "Then go around. Go south, as Mere Adele told you. It's a long way, but it's safe, and it takes you west eventually."

"I don't want to go around," said Lys. "I want to go in."

"You're mad," I said.

"Yes," she said. "He won't let me in. I walked, you see. I passed this place. I went where the trees are old, old, and where the sun seldom comes, even at high noon. Little by little they closed in front of me. Then at last I could go no farther. *Go back*, the trees said to me. *Go back and let us be!*"

"You were wise to do it," I said.

“Mad,” she said, “and wise.” Her smile was crooked. “Oh, yes. So I came back to this place, which is the gate and the guard. And he spoke to me in the water. *Go back*, he said, as the trees had. I laughed at him. Had he no better word to offer me? *Only this*, he said. *The way is shut. If you would open it, if you can—then you may. It is not mine to do.*”

I looked at her. She was thinner than ever, the weight of her belly dragging her down. “Why?” I asked. “Why do you want to get in? It’s mad-ness there. Every story says so.”

“So it is,” Lys said. “That was why I left.”

There was a silence. It rang.

“You don’t look like a devil,” I said. “Or a devil’s minion.”

She laughed. It was a sweet, awful sound. “But, my good woman, I am. I am everything that is black and terrible.”

“You are about to drop where you stand.” I got my arm around her before she did it, and sat her down on the font’s rim. I could not help a glance at the water. It was still only water.

“We are going to rest,” I said, “because I need it. And eat, because I’m hungry. Then we’re going back to Sency.”

“Not I,” said Lys.

I paid her no mind. I untied my kerchief and spread out what I had, and put in a fistful of mushrooms, too; promising myself that I would stop when I went back, and fill my apron again. There was nothing to drink but water, but it would do. Lys would not drink from the font, but from the spring above it. I did as she did, to keep the peace. The cat came to share the cheese and a nibble or two of the bread. She turned up her nose at the mushrooms. “All the more for us,” I said to her. She filliped her tail and went in search of better prey.

We ate without speaking. Lys was hungry: she ate as delicately and fiercely as a cat. A cat was what I thought of when I looked at her, a white she-cat who would not meet my eyes.

When we were done I gathered the crumbs in my skirt and went out to the porch and scattered them for the birds. I slanted an eye at the sun. A bit

past noon. I had thought it would be later.

Lys came up behind me. Her step was soundless but her shadow fell cool across me, making me shiver.

“There is another reason,” she said, “why I should stay and you should leave. My lord who is dead: he had a brother. That one lives, and hunts me.”

I turned to face her.

“He wants me for what I am,” she said, “and for what he thinks I can give him. For myself, too, maybe. A little. I tricked him in Rouen: cut my hair and put on a nun’s habit and walked out peacefully in the abbess’s train. He will have learned of that long since, and begun his tracking of me.”

I shrugged. “What’s one man in the whole of Normandy—or one woman, for the matter of that? Chance is he’ll never find you.”

“He’ll find me,” Lys said with quelling certainty.

“So let him.” I shook my skirts one last time and stepped down off the porch.

I was not at all sure that she would follow. But when I came to the trees, she was behind me. “You don’t know who he is. He’ll come armed, Jeannette, and with his men at his back.”

That gave me pause, but I was not about to let her see that. “We have walls,” I said. “If he comes. Better he find you there than in a broken chapel, beating on a door that stays fast shut.”

“Walls can break,” said Lys.

“And doors?”

She did not answer that. Neither did she leave me.

After a while she asked it. “Why?”

“You’re my guest,” I said.

“Not once I left you.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

She started to speak. Stopped. Started again. One word. “Francha.”

“Francha.” I let some of the anger show. “God knows why, God knows how, but she has decided that she belongs to you. You went off and left her. Her mother is dead, her father died on top of her; we found her so, mute as she is now, and he had begun to rot.” I could not see her, to know if she flinched. I hoped that she did. “I took her in. I coaxed her to eat, to face the world, to live. Then you came. She fixed the whole of herself on you. And you left her.”

“I had no choice.”

“Of course you did,” I said. “You had to have known that the way was shut. He exiled you, didn’t he? your cold king.”

“I exiled myself.”

Her voice was stiff with pride. I snorted at it. “I believe you, you know. That you’re one of Them. No one but a soulless thing would do what you did to Francha.”

“Would a soulless thing go back? Would it admit that it had erred?”

“Have you done either?”

She seized my sleeve and spun me about. She was strong; her fingers were cruel, digging into my arm. She glared into my face.

I glared back. I was not afraid, not at all. Even when I saw her true. Cat, had I thought, back in the chapel? Cat, yes, and cat-eyed, and nothing human in her at all.

Except the voice, raw and roughened with anger. “Now you see. Now you know.”

I crossed myself, to be safe. She did not go up in a cloud of smoke. I had not honestly expected her to. That was a cross she wore at her throat, glimmering under the robe. “So they’re true,” I said. “The stories.”

“Some of them.” She let me go. “He wants that, my lord Giscard. He wants the child I carry, that he thinks will be the making of his house.”

“Then maybe you should face him,” I said, “and call the lightnings down on him.”

She looked as shocked as if I had done as much myself. “That is the Sin! How can you speak so lightly of it?”

“Sin?” I asked. “Among the soulless ones of the Wood?”

“We are as Christian as you,” she said.

That was so improbable that it could only be true. I turned my back on her—not without a pricking in my nape—and went on down the path. In a little while she followed me.

* * * *



When the threshing was done and the granaries full, the apples in and the windfalls pressed for cider, my lone proud grapevine harvested and its fruit dried in the sun, and all of Sency made fast against a winter that had not yet come, a company of men rode up to our gate. We had been expecting them, Lys and I and Mère Adele, since the leaves began to fall. We kept a boy by the gate, most days, and shut and barred it at night. Weapons we had none of, except our scythes and our pruning hooks, and an ancient, rusted sword that the smith’s widow had unearthed from the forge.

Pierre Allard was at the gate the day milord Giscard came, and Celine tagging after him as she too often did. It was she who came running to find me.

I was nearly there already. All that day Lys had been as twitchy as a cat. Suddenly in the middle of mending Francha’s shirt, she sprang up and bolted. I nearly ran her down just past the well, where she stood rigid and staring, the needle still in one hand, and the shirt dangling from the other. I shook her hard.

She came to herself, a little. “If he sees me,” she said, “if he knows I’m here...”

“So,” I said. “You’re a coward, then.”

“No!” She glared at me, all Lys again, and touchy-proud as ever she

could be. "I'm a coward for your sake. He'll burn the village about your ears, for harboring me."

"Not," I said, "if we have anything to say about it."

I tucked up my skirt and climbed the gate. Pierre was up there, and Mère Adele come from who knew where; it was a good long run from the priory, and she was barely breathing hard. She had her best wimple on, I noticed, and her jeweled cross. The sun struck dazzles on the stones, white and red and one as green as new grass. She greeted me with a grunt and Lys with a nod, but kept her eyes on the men below.

They were a pretty company. Much like the one that had taken Claudel away: men in grey mail with bright surcoats, and one with a banner—red, this, like blood, with something gold on it.

"Lion rampant," said Lys. She was still on the stair below the parapet. She could hardly have seen the banner. But she would know what it was. "Arms of Montsalvat."

The lord was in mail like his men. There was a mule behind him, with what I supposed was his armor on it. He rode a tall red horse, and he was tall himself, as far as I could tell. I was not so much above him, standing on the gate. He turned his face up to me. It was a surprising face, after all that I had heard. Younger, much, than I had expected, and shaven clean. Not that he would have much beard, I thought. His hair was barley-fair.

He smiled at me. His teeth were white and almost even. His eyes were pure guileless blue. "Now here's a handsome guardsman!" he said laughing, sweeping a bow in his high saddle. "Fair lady, will you have mercy on poor travelers, and let us into your bower?"

Mère Adele snorted. "I'd sooner let a bull in with the cows. Are you here to take what's left of our men? Or will you believe that we're drained dry?"

"That," said Lys behind, still on the stair, "was hardly wise."

"Let me judge that," said Mère Adele without turning. She folded her arms on the parapet and leaned over, for all the world like a good wife at her window. "That's not a device from hereabouts," she said, cocking her head at the banner. "What interest has Montsalvat in poor Sency?"

"Why, none," said milord, still smiling. "Nor in your men, indeed,

reverend lady. We're looking for one of our own who was lost to us. Maybe you've seen her? She would seem to be on pilgrimage."

"We see a pilgrim now and then," said Mere Adele. "This would be an old woman, then? With a boy to look after her, and a little dog, and a fat white mule?"

I struggled not to laugh. My lord Giscard—for that he was, no doubt of it—blinked his wide blue eyes and looked a perfect fool. "Why, no, madam, nothing so memorable. She is young, our cousin, and alone." He lowered his voice. "And not...not quite, if you understand me. She was my brother's mistress, you see. He died, and she went mad with grief, and ran away."

"Poor thing," said Mère Adele. Her tone lacked somewhat of sympathy.

"Oh," he said, and if he did not shed a tear, he wept quite adequately with his voice. "Oh, poor Alys! She was full of terrible fancies. We had to bind her lest she harm herself; but that only made her worse. Hardly had we let her go when she escaped."

"Commendable of you," said Mère Adele, "to care so much for a brother's kept woman that you'll cross the width of Normandy to find her. Unless she took somewhat of the family jewels with her?"

Lys hissed behind me. Mère Adele took no notice. Milord Giscard shook his head. "No. No, of course not! Her wits were all we lost, and those were hers to begin with."

"So," said Mère Adele. "Why do you want to find her?"

His eyes narrowed. He did not look so pretty now, or so much the fool. "She's here, then?"

"Yes, I am here." Lys came up beside me. She had lost a little of her thinness, living with us. The weight of the child did nothing to hamper her grace. Her hands cradled it, I noticed, below the parapet where he could not see. She looked down into his face. For a moment I thought that she would spit. "Where were you? I looked for you at Michaelmas, and here it's nigh All Hallows."

He looked somewhat disconcerted, but he answered readily enough. "There was trouble on the road," he said: "English, and Normans riding with them."

“You won,” she said. It was not a question.

“We talked our way out of it.” He studied her. “You look well.”

“I am well,” she said.

“The baby?”

“Well.”

I saw the hunger in him then, a dark, yearning thing, so much at odds with his face that I shut my eyes against it. When I opened them again, it was gone. He was smiling. “Good news, my lady. Good news, indeed.”

“She is not for you,” said Lys, hard and cold and still.

“If it is a son, it is an heir to Montsalvat.”

“It is a daughter,” said Lys. “You know how I know it.”

He did not move, but his men crossed themselves. “Even so,” he said. “I loved my brother, too. Won’t you share what is left of him?”

“You have his bones,” said Lys, “and his tomb in Montsalvat.”

“I think,” said Mère Adele, cutting across this gentle, deadly colloquy, “that this were best discussed in walls. And not,” she added as hope leaped in milord’s face, “Sency’s. St. Agnes’s priory can house a noble guest. Let you go there, and we will follow.”

He bowed and obeyed. We went down from the gate. But Mère Adele did not go at once to St. Agnes’s. People had come to see what we were about. She sent them off on errands that she had given them long since: shoring up the walls, bringing in such of the animals as were still with-out, shutting Sency against, if need be, a siege.

“Not that I expect a fight,” she said, “but with these gentry you never know.” She turned to me. “You come.” She did not need to turn to Lys. The lady would go whether she was bidden or no: it was written in every line of her.

It was also written in Francha, who was never far from her side. But she took the child’s face in her long white hands, and said, “Go and wait for

me. I'll come back."

One would hardly expect Francha to trust her, and yet the child did. She nodded gravely, not a flicker of resistance. Only acceptance, and adoration.

Not so Celine. In the end I bribed her with Pierre, and him with the promise of a raisin tart if he took her home and kept her there.

* * * *

Mère Adele set a brisk pace to the priory, one which gave me no time to think about my frayed kerchief and my skirt with the stains around the hem and my bare feet. Of course milord would come when I had been setting out to clean the pigsty.

Lys stopped us at the priory's gate, came round to face us. The men had gone inside; we could hear them, horses clattering and snorting, deep voices muted in the cloister court. Lys spoke above it, softly, but with the edge which she had shown Messire Giscard. "Why?"

Mère Adele raised her brows.

Lys looked ready to shake her. "Why do you do so much for me?"

"You're our guest," said Mère Adele.

Lys threw back her head. I thought that she would laugh, or cry out. She did neither. She said, "This goes beyond plain hospitality. To chance a war for me."

"There will be no war," said Mère Adele. "Unless you're fool enough to start one." She set her hand on the lady's arm and set her tidily aside, and nodded to Sister Portress, who looked near to bursting with the excitement of it all, and went inside.

* * * *

Messire Giscard had time for all the proper things, food and rest and wash-ing if he wanted it. He took all three, while we waited, and I wished more than ever that I had stopped to change my dress. I brushed at the one I had, and one of the sisters lent me a clean kerchief. When they brought him in at last, I was as presentable as I could be.

Mère Adele's receiving room was an imposing place, long and wide with a vaulted ceiling, carved and painted and gilded, and a great stone hearth at the end of it. It was not her favored place to work in; that was the closet by her cell, bare and plain and foreign to pretension as the prioress herself. This was for overaweing strangers; and friends, too, for the matter of that. I hardly knew what to do with the chair she set me in, so big as it was, and carved everywhere, and with a cushion that must have been real silk—it was impossibly soft, like a kitten's ear. It let me tuck up my feet at least, though I was sorry for that when the servant let milord in, and I had to untangle myself and stand and try to bow and not fall over. Lys and Mère Adele sat as soon as milord did, which meant that I could sit, too: stiffly upright this time.

He was at his ease, of course. He knew about chairs, and gilded ceil-ings. He smiled at me—there was no mistaking it: I was somewhat to the side, so that he had to turn a little. I felt my cheeks grow hot.

“This lady I know,” he said, turning his eyes away from me and fixing them on Lys. “And you, reverend prioress? And this charming demoi-selle?”

Well, I thought. That cured my blush. Charming I was not, whatever else I was.

“I am Mère Adele,” said Mère Adele, “and this is Jeannette Laclos of Sency. You are Giscard de Montsalvat from the other side of Normandy, and you say you have a claim on our guest?”

That took him properly aback. He was not used to such directness, maybe, in the courts that he had come from. But he had a quick wit, and a smooth tongue to go with it. “My claim is no more than I have said. She was my brother's lover. She carries his child. He wished to ac-knowledge it; he bound me before he died, to do all that I could on its behalf.”

“For bastard seed?” asked Mère Adele. “I should think you'd be glad to see the last of her. Wasn't your brother the elder? And wouldn't her baby be his heir, if it were male, and she a wife?”

“She would never marry him,” said Messire Giscard. “She was noble enough, she said, but exiled, and no dowry to her name.”

“Then all the more cause for you to let her go. Why do you hunt her down? She's no thief, you say. What does she have that you want?”

He looked at his feet in their fine soft shoes. He was out of his reck-oning, maybe. My stomach drew tight as I watched him. Men like drat— big beautiful animals who had never known a moment's thirst or hunger except what they themselves chose, in war or in the chase; who had never been crossed, nor knew what to do when they were—such men were dan-gerous. One of them had met me in the wood before I married Claudel; and so Celine was a fair child, like the Norman who had sired her. A Nor-man very like this one, only not so pretty to look at. He had been gentle in his way. But he wanted me, and what he wanted, he took. He never asked my name. I never asked his.

This one had asked. It softened me—more than I liked to admit. Of course he did not care. He wanted to know his adversaries, that was all. If it had been the two of us under the trees and the blood rising in him, names would not have mattered.

Lys spoke, making me start; I was deep in myself. "He wants me," she said. "Somewhat for my beauty. More for what he thinks that I will give."

Messire Giscard smiled his easy smile. "So then, you tempt me. I'd hardly sin so far as to lust after my brother's woman. That is incest, and forbidden by holy Church." He crossed himself devoutly. "No, Mère Adele; beautiful she may be, but I swore a vow to my brother."

"You promised to let me go," said Lys.

"Poor lady," he said. "You were beside yourself with grief. What could I do but say yes to anything you said? I beg your pardon for the false-hood; I reckoned, truly, that it was needful. I never meant to cast you out."

"You never meant to set me free."

"Do you hate him that much?" asked Mère Adele.

Lys looked at her, and then at him. He was still smiling. Pretty, oh, so pretty, with the sun aslant on his bright hair, and his white teeth gleam-ing.

"Aymeric was never so fair," said Lys. "That was all given to his brother. He was a little frog-mouthed bandy-legged man, as swarthy as a Saracen, bad eyes and bad teeth and nothing about him that was beautiful. Ex-cept," she said, "he was. He would come into a room, and one would think, 'What an ugly little man!' Then he would smile, and nothing in the world would matter, except that he was happy. Everyone loved him. Even his enemies—they hated him with sincere respect, and admired him

profoundly. I was his enemy, in the beginning. I was a hard proud cruel thing, exile by free choice from my own country, sworn to make my way in the world, myself alone and with no other. He—he wanted to protect me. ‘You are a woman,’ he said. As if that was all the reason he needed.

“I hate him for that. He was so certain, and so insufferable, mere mortal man before all that I was and had been. But he would not yield for aught that I could do, and in the end, like all the rest, I fell under his spell.”

“Or he under yours,” said Messire Giscard. “From the moment he saw you, he was bewitched.”

“That was my face,” said Lys, “and no more. The rest grew as I resisted him. He loved a fight, did Aymeric. We never surrendered, either of us. To the day he died he was determined to protect me, as was I to resist him.”

Messire Giscard smiled, triumphant. “You see!” he said to Mère Adele. “Still she resists. And yet, am I not her sole kinsman in this world? Did not my brother entrust her to me? Shall I not carry out my promise that I made as he was dying?”

“She doesn’t want you to,” said Mère Adele.

“Ah,” said Messire Giscard. “Bearing women—you know how they are. She’s distraught; she grieves. As in truth she should. But she should be thinking too of the baby, and of her lover’s wishes. He would never have allowed her to tramp on foot across the width of Normandy, looking for God knew what.”

“Looking for my kin,” said Lys. “I do have them, Giscard. One of them even is a king.”

“What, the fairy king?” Giscard shook his head. “Mère Adele, if you’ll believe it, she says that she’s the elf-king’s child.”

“I am,” said Lys, “his brother’s daughter.” And she looked it, just then, with her white wild face. “You can’t shock them with that, Giscard, or hope to prove me mad. They know. They live on the edge of his Wood.”

He leaned forward in his chair. All the brightness was gone, all the sweet false seeming. He was as hard and cold and cruel as she. “So,” he said. “So, Alys. Tell them the rest. Tell them what you did that made my brother love you so.”

“What, that I was his whore?”

I looked at her and shivered. No, he could not be so hard, or so cold, or so cruel. He was a human man. She...

She laughed. “That should be obvious to a blind man. Which these,” she said, “are not. Neither blind, nor men, nor fools.”

“Do they know what else you are?” He was almost standing over her. “Do they know that?”

“They could hardly avoid it,” she said, “knowing whose kin I am.”

“If they believe you. If they don’t just humor the madwoman.”

“We believe her,” said Mère Adele. “Is that what you want? To burn her for a witch?”

He crossed himself. “Sweet saints, no!”

“No,” said Lys. “He wants to use me. For what he thinks I am. For what he believes I can do.”

“For what you *can* do,” he said. “I saw you. Up on the hill at night, with stars in your hair. Dancing; and the moon came down and danced at your side. And he watched, and clapped his hands like a child.” His face twisted. “I would never have been so simple. I would have wielded you like a sword.”

Lys was beyond speech. Mère Adele spoke dryly in her silence. “I can see,” she said, “why she might be reluctant to consent to it. Women are cursed enough by nature, weak and frail as all the wise men say they are; and made, it’s said, for men’s use and little else. Sometimes they don’t take kindly to it. It’s a flaw in them, I’m sure.”

“But a flaw that can be mended,” said Messire Giscard. “A firm hand, a touch of the spur—but some gentleness, too. That’s what such a woman needs.”

“It works for mares,” said Mère Adele. She stood up. I had never seen her look as she did then, both smaller and larger than she was. Smaller, because he was so big. Larger, because she managed, one way

and an-other, to tower over him. “We’ll think on what you’ve said. You’re welcome meanwhile to the hospitality of our priory. We do ask you, of your courtesy, to refrain from visiting the town. There’s been sickness in it; it’s not quite past.”

He agreed readily: so readily that I was hard put not to laugh. He did not need to know that it was an autumn fever, a fret among the children, and nothing to endanger any but the weakest. Sickness, that year, spoke too clearly of the Death.

* * * *

“That will hold him for a while,” said Mère Adele when we were back in safety again: inside Sency’s walls, under my new-thatched roof. People walking by could lift a corner of it and look in, but I was not afraid of that. Most were in their own houses, eating their dinner, or down in the tavern drinking it.

We had finished our own, made rich with a joint from a priory sheep. Perrin’s face was shiny with the grease. Even Francha had eaten enough for once to keep a bird alive. She curled in her lady’s lap, thumb in mouth, and drowsed, while we considered what to do.

“He won’t go where there’s sickness,” Mère Adele said, “but I doubt he’ll go away. He wants you badly.”

Lys’s mouth twisted. “He wants my witchcraft. No more and no less. If my body came with it—he’d not mind. But it’s my power he wants; or what he fancies is my power.”

“Why?” I asked. “To make himself lord of Normandy?”

“Oh, no,” said Lys. “He’d never aim so high. Just to be a better lord in Montsalvat. Just that. If later it should be more—if his good angel should call him to greater glory—why then, would he be wise to refuse?”

“He’d burn for it,” said Mère Adele. “And you with him. They’re not gentle now with witches.”

“Were they ever?” Lys combed Francha’s hair with her fingers, smoothing out the tangles. “It’s worse in the south, in Provence, where the Inquisition hunts the heretics still. But the north is hardly more hospitable to such as I.”

“We’re northerners,” I said.

She glanced at me: a touch like a knife’s edge. “You live on the edge of the Wood. That changes you.”

I shrugged. “I don’t feel different. Is the story true? That your king was a mortal king once, in the western kingdom?”

“He was never mortal,” she said. “He was king of mortal men, yes, for a hundred years and more. But in the end he left. It was no mercy for his people, to be ruled by one who could never age nor die.”

“No mercy for him, either,” said Mère Adele, “to see them grow old and die.” And when Lys looked at her with wide startled eyes: “No, I’m no wiser than I ought to be. I read a book, that’s all. I wanted to know what the stories were. He swore a vow, they said, that he would go under the trees and never come out; not in this age of the world.”

“Nor will he,” Lys said, bitter. “Nor any who went in with him, nor any who was born thereafter. It’s a wider realm than you can conceive of, and this world is but a corner of it; and yet it is a prison. I wanted this air, this sun, this earth. His vow—sworn before ever I was born—forbade me even to think of it.”

“So of course you thought of it,” Mère Adele sighed. “Young things never change.”

“That is what he said,” said Lys, so tight with anger that I could barely hear her. “That is exactly what he said.”

“He let you go.”

“How could he stop me? He knew what would happen. That the walls would close, once I’d opened them. That there’d be no going back.”

“Did you want to?”

“Then,” said Lys, “no. Now...” Her fingers knotted in Francha’s curls. Carefully she unclenched them. “This is no world for the likes of me. It hates me, or fears me, or both together; it sees me as a thing, to use or to burn. Even you who took me in, who dare to be fond of me—you know how you could suffer for it. You will, you’re as brave as that. But in the end you’d come to loathe me.”

“Probably,” said Mère Adele. “Possibly not. I doubt you’ll be here long enough for that.”

“I will not go back to Montsalvat,” said Lys, each word shaped and cut in stone.

“You might not have a choice,” Mère Adele said. “Unless you can think of a way to get rid of milord. We can hold him off for a while, but he has armed men, and horses. We have neither.”

Lys lowered her head. “I know,” she said. “Oh, I know.”

“You know too much,” I said. I was angry, suddenly; sick of all this talk. “Why don’t you stop knowing and do? There are twenty men out there, and a man in front of them who wants a witch for a pet. Either give in to him now, before he kills somebody, or find a way to get him out. You can call down the moon, he said. Why not the lightning, too?”

“I can’t kill,” said Lys, so appalled that I knew it for truth. “I *can’t* kill.”

“You said that before,” I said. “Is that all your witching is worth, then? To throw up your hands and surrender, and thank God you won’t use what He gave you?”

“If He gave it,” she said, “and not the Other.”

“That’s heresy,” said Mère Adele, but not as if she cared about it. “I think you had better do some thinking. Playing the good Christian woman brought you where you are. He’ll take you, child. Be sure of it. And make us pay for keeping you.”

Lys stood up with Francha in her arms, sound asleep. She laid the child in the bed and covered her carefully, and kissed her. Then she turned. “Very well,” she said. “I’ll give myself up. I’ll let him take me back to Montsalvat.”

Mère Adele was up so fast, and moved so sudden, that I did not know what she had done till I heard the slap.

Lys stood with her hand to her cheek. I could see the red weal grow-ing on the white skin. She looked perfectly, blankly shocked.

“Is that all you can do?” Mère Adele snapped at her. “Hide and cower and whine, and make great noises about fighting back, and give in at the

drop of a threat?"

"What else can I do?" Lys snapped back.

"Think," said Mère Adele. And walked out.

* * * *

It was a very quiet night. I surprised myself: I slept. I was even more surprised to wake and find Lys still there. She had been sitting by the fire when I went to sleep. She was sitting there still, but the cover was on the fire, and her knees were up as far as they would go with her belly so big, and she was rocking, back and forth, back and forth.

She came to herself quickly enough once I reached past her to lift the firelid; did the morning duties she had taken for her own, seemed no different than she ever had. But I had seen the tracks of tears on her face, that first moment, before she got up to fetch the pot.

When she straightened herself with her hands in the small of her back like any bearing woman since Mother Eve, I was ready to hear her say it. "I'm going to the priory."

I went with her. It was a grey morning, turning cold; there was a bite in the air. This time I had on my good dress and my best kerchief, and Claudel's woolen cloak. They were armor of a sort. Lys had her beauty and my blue mantle that I had woven for my wedding. She had a way of seeming almost ordinary—of looking less than she was. A glamour, Mère Adele called it. It was not on her this morning. She looked no more human than an angel on an altar.

* * * *

Messire Giscard met us a little distance from the priory, up on his big horse with a handful of his men behind him. He smiled down at us. "A fair morning to you, fair ladies," he said.

We did not smile back. Lys kept on walking as if he had not been there. I was wavier, and that was foolish: he saw me looking at him, and turned the full measure of his smile on me. "Will you ride with me, Jeannette Laclos? It's not far, I know, but Flambard would be glad to carry you."

I fixed my eyes on Lys and walked faster. The red horse walked

be-side me. I did not look up, though my nape crawled. In a moment—in just a moment—he would seize me and throw me across his saddle.

“Oh, come,” he said in his light, princely voice. “I’m not as wicked a devil as that. If I do fancy you, and you are well worth a man’s fancy— what can I do you but good? Wouldn’t you like to live in a fine house and dress in silk?”

“And bear your bastards?” I asked him, still not looking at him. “Thank you, no. I gave that up six years ago Lent.”

He laughed. “Pretty, and a sharp wit, too! You’re a jewel in this mid-den.”

I stopped short. “Sency is no man’s dungheap!”

I was angry enough to dare a glance. He was not angry at all. He was grinning. “I like a woman with spirit,” he said.

His horse, just then, snaked its head and tried to bite. I hit it as hard as I could. It veered off, shying, and its master cursing. I let myself laugh, once, before I greeted Sister Portress.

* * * *

“I will go back with you,” said Lys.

We were in Mère Adele’s receiving room again, the four of us. This time he had his sergeant with him, whether to guard him or bear witness for him I did not know. The man stood behind his lord’s chair and watched us, and said nothing, but what he thought of us was clear enough. We were mere weak women. We would never stand against his lord.

Lys sat with her hands in what was left of her lap, knotting and unknotting them. “I’ve done my thinking,” she said. “I can do no more. I’ll give you what you ask. I’ll go back to Montsalvat.”

I opened my mouth. But this was not my place to speak. Messire Giscard was openly delighted. Mère Adele had no expression at all. “You do mean this?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Lys.

Messire Giscard showed her his warmest, sweetest face. “I’ll see that

you don't regret it," he said.

Lys raised her eyes to him. Her real eyes, not the ones people wanted to see. I heard the hiss of his breath. His sergeant made the sign of the horns, and quickly after, that of the cross.

She smiled. "That will do you no good, Raimbaut."

The sergeant flushed darkly. Lys turned the force of her eyes upon Giscard. "Yes, I will go back with you," she said. "I will be your witch. Your mistress, too, maybe, when my daughter is born; if you will have me. I am an exile, after all, and poor, and I have no kin in this world."

His joy was fading fast. Mine was not rising, not yet. But Lys had not surrendered. I saw it in her face; in the fierceness of her smile.

"But before I go," she said, "or you accept me, you should know what it is that you take."

"I know," he said a little sharply. "You are a witch. You won't grow old, or lose your beauty. Fire is your servant. The stars come down when you call."

"Men, too," she said, "if I wish."

For a moment I saw the naked greed. He covered it as children learn to do. "You can see what will be. Aymeric told me that."

"Did he?" Lys arched a brow. "He promised me he wouldn't."

"I coaxed it out of him," said Messire Giscard. "I'd guessed already, from things he said."

"He was never good at hiding anything," said Lys. "Yes, I have that gift."

"A very great one," he said, "and very terrible."

"You have the wits to understand that," said Lys. "Or you imagine that you do." She rose. The sergeant flinched. Messire Giscard sat still, but his eyes had narrowed. Lys came to stand in front of him. Her hand was on the swell of her belly, as if to protect it. "Let us make a bargain, my lord. I have agreed to yield to your will. But before you take me away, let me read your fate for you. Then if you are certain still that I am the making of your fortune,

you may have me, and do with me as you will.”

He saw the trap in it. So could I; and I was no lord’s child. “A fine bargain,” he said, “when all you need do is foretell my death, and so be rid of me.”

“No,” she said. “It’s not your death I see. I’ll tell you the truth, Giscard. My word on it.”

“On the cross,” he said.

She laid her hand on Mère Adele’s cross and swore to it. Mère Adele did not say anything. She was waiting, as I was, to see what Lys would do.

She crossed herself; her lips moved in what could only be a prayer. Then she knelt in front of Giscard and took his hands in hers. I saw how he stiffened for a moment, as if to pull away. She held. He eased. She met his eyes. Again he made as if to resist; but she would not let him go.

My hands were fists. My heart was beating. There were no bolts of lightning, no clouds of brimstone. Only the slender big-bellied figure in my blue mantle, and the soft low voice.

She read his future for him. How he would ride out from Sency, and she behind. How they would go back to Rouen. How the war was rag-ing there, and how it would rage for years out of count. How the Death would come back, and come back again. How he would fight in the war, and outlive the Death, and have great glory, with her at his side: ever young, ever beautiful, ever watchful for his advantage. “Always,” she said. “Always I shall be with you, awake and asleep, in war and at peace, in your heart as in your mind, soul of your soul, indissolubly a part of you. Every breath you draw, every thought you think, every sight your eye lights upon—all these shall be mine. You will be chaste, Giscard, ex-cept for me; sinless, but that you love me. For nothing that you do shall go unknown to me. So we were, Aymeric and I, perfect in love as in amity. So shall we two be.”

For a long while after she stopped speaking, none of us moved. Messire Giscard’s lips were parted. Gaping, I would have said, in a man less good to look at.

Lys smiled with awful tenderness. “Will you have me, Giscard? Will you have the glory that I can give you?”

He wrenched free. The sweep of his arm sent her sprawling.

I leaped for him, veered, dropped beside her. She was doubled up, knotted round her center.

Laughing. Laughing like a mad thing. Laughing till she wept.

By the time she stopped, he was gone. She lay exhausted in my arms. My dress was soaked with her tears.

“Could you really have done it?” I asked her.

She nodded. She struggled to sit up. I helped her; gave her my kerchief to wipe her face.

“I can do it to you, too,” she said. Her voice was raw. “I can hear everything, see it, feel it—every thought in every head. Every hope, dream, love, hate, fear, folly—everything.” She clutched her head. *“Everything!”*

I held her and rocked her. I did not know why I was not afraid. Too far past it, I supposed. And she had lived with us since Michaelmas; if there was anything left to hide from her, then it was hidden deeper than I could hope to find.

She was crying again, deep racking sobs. “I was the best, my father said. Of all that are in the Wood, the strongest to shield, the clearest to see both how the walls were raised, and how to bring them down. None of us was better fit to walk among human folk. So I defied them all, brought down the ban, walked out of the Wood. And I could do it. I *could* live as the hu-mans lived. But I could—not—die as they died. I could not.” Her voice rose to a wail. “I wanted to the with Aymeric. And I could not even take sick!”

“Oh, hush.” Mère Adele stood over us, hands on hips. She had gone out when Giscard took flight; now she was back, not an eyelash out of place, and no awe at all for the woman of the Wood. “If you had really wanted to cast yourself in your lover’s grave, you would have found a way to do it. There’s no more *can’t* in killing yourself than in killing some-one else. It’s all *won’t*, and a good fat measure of *pity-me*”

Lys could have killed her then. Oh, easily. But I was glad for whatever it was that stopped her, *can’t* or *won’t* or plain astonishment.

She got to her feet with the first failing of grace that I had ever seen in

her. Even her beauty was pinched and pale, too thin and too sharp and too odd.

Mère Adele regarded her with utter lack of sympathy. “You got rid of his lordship,” she said, “and handily, too. He’ll see the back of hell before he comes by Sency again. You do know, I suppose, that he could have sworn to bring the Inquisition down on us, and burn us all for what you did to him.”

“No,” said Lys. “He would not. I made sure of that.”

“You—made—sure?”

Even Lys could wither in the face of Mère Adele’s wrath. She raised her hands to her face, let them fall. “I made him do nothing but what he was best minded to do.”

“You made him.”

“Would you rather he came back with fire and sword?”

For a moment they faced one another, like fire and sword themselves. Mère Adele shook her head and sighed. “It’s done. I can’t say I want it undone. That’s a wanting I’ll pay dearly for in penance. You—maybe you’ve paid already. You never should have left your Wood.”

“No,” said Lys. “I don’t think that. But that I’ve stayed too long—yes.” Mère Adele started a little. Lys smiled a thin cold smile. “No, I’m not in your mind. It’s written in your face. You want me gone.”

“Not gone,” said Mère Adele. “Gone home.”

Lys closed her eyes. “Sweet saints, to be home—to live within those walls again—to be what I am, all that I am, where my own people are—” Her breath shuddered as she drew it in. “Don’t you think I’ve tried? That’s why I came here. To find the door. To break it down. To go back.”

“You didn’t try hard enough,” said Mère Adele. “*Won’t* again. Always *won’t*.”

“Not my *won’t*” said Lys. “My king’s.”

“Yours,” said Mère Adele, immovable. “I can read faces, too. Are they all as stubborn as you, where you come from?”

“No,” said Lys. Her eyes opened. She drew herself up. “Some are worse.”

“I doubt that,” said Mère Adele. “You’re welcome here. Don’t ever doubt it. But this isn’t your world. We aren’t your kind. You said it your-self. You love us, and we die on you.”

“You can’t help it,” said Lys.

Mère Adele laughed, which made Lys stare. “Go on, child. Go home. We’re no better for you than you are for us.”

Lys was mortally insulted. She was older than Mère Adele, maybe, and higher born. But she held her tongue. She bent her head in honest reverence. If not precisely in acceptance.

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The Wood was cold in the grey light of evening. No bird sang. No wind stirred the branches of the trees.

Lys had tried to slip away alone. She should have known better. This time it was not my fault, not entirely: I had followed Francha. So we stood on the porch of the ruined chapel, Francha with both arms about her waist, I simply facing her.

“If the walls can open at all,” Lys said, careful and cold, “your mortal presence will assure that they stay shut.”

I heard her, but I was not listening. “Are you going to leave Francha again?”

Lys frowned and looked down at the child who clung to her. “She can’t go, even if I can get in.”

“Why not?”

“She’s human.”

“She can’t live in this world,” I said. “She was barely doing it when you

came. When you go, she'll die."

"We are forbidden—"

"You were forbidden to leave. But you did it."

Lys had her arms around Francha, almost as if she could not help it. She gathered the child up and held her. "Oh, God! If I could only be the hard cold creature that I pretend to be!"

"You're cold enough," I said, "and as heartless as a cat. But even a cat has its weaknesses."

Lys looked at me. "You should have been one of us."

I shivered. "Thank God He spared me that." I glanced at the sky. "You'd best do it if you're going to. Before it's dark."

Lys might have argued, but even she could not keep the sun from setting.

She did not go into the chapel as I had thought she would. She stood outside of it, facing the Wood, still holding Francha. It was already dark under the trees; a grey mist wound up, twining through the branches.

Lys's eyes opened wide. "It's open," she said. "The walls are down. But—"

"Stop talking," I said. My throat hurt. "Just go."

She stayed where she was. "It's a trap. Or a deception. The ban is clever; it knows what it is for."

Francha struggled in her arms. She let the child go. Francha slid down the curve of her, keeping a grip on her hand. Pulling her toward the Wood.

She looked into wide eyes as human as hers were not. "No, Francha. It's a trap."

Francha set her chin and leaned, putting all her weight into it. It was as loud as a shout. *Come!*

"Go," I said. "How will you know it's a trap till you've tried it? Go!"

Lys glared at me. “How can humans know—”

I said a word that shocked her into silence. While she wavered I pushed, and Francha pulled. Dragging her toward the thing she wanted most in the world.

Later it would hurt. Now I only wanted her gone. Before I gave in. Before I let her stay.

She was walking by herself now, if slowly. The trees were close. I could smell the mist, dank and cold, like the breath of the dead.

“No!” cried Lys, flinging up her hand.

Light flew from it. The mist withered and fled. The trees towered higher than any mortal trees, great pillars upholding a roof of gold.

The light shrank. The trees were trees again, but their leaves were golden still, pale in the evening. There was a path among them, glimmering faintly as it wound into the gloom. It would not be there long, I knew in my bones. I braced myself to drag her down it. What would happen if it closed while I was on it, I refused to think.

She set foot on it of her own will. Walked a step, two, three.

Turned.

Held out her hand. She was going. I had won that much. Now she offered me what I had made her take. The bright country. The people who knew no age nor sickness nor death. Escape. Freedom.

From what? I asked her inside myself. I would grow old no matter where I was.

“Let Francha have it,” I said. “Maybe you can heal her; maybe she’ll find a voice again. Maybe she’ll learn to sing.”

Lys did not lower her hand. She knew, damn her. How easily, how happily, I could take it.

My fists knotted in my skirt. “I was born on this earth. I will die on it.”

Francha let go Lys’s hand. She ran to me, hugged me tight. But not to hold. Not to stay. Her choice was made. Had been made at harvest time, on

another edge of this Wood.

Lys looked as if she would speak. I willed her not to. She heard me, maybe; or she simply understood, as humans did, from the look on my face. She said nothing. Only looked, long and long.

The path was fading fast. She turned suddenly, swept Francha up, began to run. Down into the glimmering dark; down to a light that I could almost see. There were people there. Pale princes, pale queens. Pale king who was not cold at all. Almost—almost—I could see his grey eyes; how they smiled, not only at the prodigal come home, but at me, mere mortal flesh, alone beside a broken shrine.

I laughed painfully. She had my wedding cloak. What Claudel would say when he came back—

If he came back.

When, said a whisper in the Wood. A gift. A promise.

I turned my back on the shadow and the trees, and turned my face toward home: warmth and light, and my children's voices, and Mamère Mondine asleep by the fire. Above me as I walked, like a guard and a guide, rose a lone white star.

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