

## Wayfinder

*By: Janny Wurts*

\* \* \* \*

In heroic and high fantasy, the questing hero has a counterpart—the questing heroine, who seeks not only help for her people, but a value for herself. Tough, unselfish Sabin, apprentice to a hard life, is an excellent example of the breed. But, as you might expect, having set up that pattern, author Janny Wurts transcends it, liberating Sabin to find her own way.

\* \* \* \*

Ciondo had blown out the lanterns for the night when Sabin remembered her mistake. Lately arrived to help out on the sloop for the summer, she had forgotten to bring in her jacket. It lay where it had been left, draped over the upturned keel of the dory; wet by now in the fog, and growing redolent of the mildew that would speckle its patched, sun-faded shoulders if someone did not crawl out of warm blankets and fetch it up from the beach.

The wind had risen. Gusts slammed and whined across the eaves, and moaned through the windbreak of pines that lined the cliffs. Winter had revisited since sundown; the drafts through the chinks held the scent of northern snow. The floorboards, too, were cold under Sabin's bare feet. She looked out through the crack in the shutter, dressing quickly as she did so. The sky had given her a moon, but a thin, ragged cloud cover sent shadows chasing in ink and silver across the sea. The path to the harborside was steep, even dangerous, all rocks and twined roots that could trip the unwary even in brightest sunlight.

Stupid, she had been, and ever a fool for letting her mind stray in daydreams. She longed to curse in irritation as her uncle did when his hands slipped on a net, but she dreaded to raise a disturbance. The household was sleeping. Even her aunt who wept in her pillow each night for the son just lost to the sea; Sabin's cousin, who was four years older than her undersized fourteen, and whose boots she could never grow to fill.

“A girl can work hard and master a boy's chores,” Uncle Ciondo had summed up gruffly. “But you will never be strong enough to take the place of a man.”

Yet the nets were heavy and the sloop was old, its scarred, patched planking in constant need of repairs. A girl's hands were better than going without, or so her mother insisted. Grudgingly, Uncle Ciondo agreed that Aunt Kala would do better if an empty chair no longer faced her through mealtimes. Sabin was given blankets and a lumpy cot in the loft, and cast-off sailor's clothing that smelled of cod and oakum, poor gifts, but precious for the fact they could ill be spared.

Her lapse over the jacket could not go unremedied.

She fumbled and found her damp boots in the dark. Too lazy to bother with trousers, she pulled on the man-size fisher's smock that hung halfway to her knees. The loose cuffs had to be rolled to free her hands. She knotted the waist with rope to hold it from billowing in the wind, although in the deeps of the night, no one was abroad to care if she ran outside half-clothed.

The board floor squeaked to her step, and the outer latch clanged down as she shut the weathered plank door. "Sabin," she admonished as she hooked a heel on the door stoop and caught herself short of a stumble, "Don't you go tripping and banging, or someone will mistake you for trouble and shoot you in the back for a troll."

Except that no one in her village kept so much as a bow. The fisherfolk had only rigging knives and cutlery for the kitchen, and those were risky things to be throwing at trolls in the dark. Given any metal at all, and a troll will someday do murder with it; or so her mother used to threaten to scare out her habit of mislaying things. Sabin sighed at her failure, since her jacket was not hanging as it should to dry on the hook by the hearth.

Cloud cover smothered the moon. Past the garden gate, the trail to the sea plunged deep into shadow. She stubbed her toes on corners of slate, and cursed like a fishwife, since her uncle was not there to scold. The path switched back once, twice, in tortuous descent. Westward it was faced by sheer rock cliffs, moss-grown, and stuffed with old bird nests in the niches. The moon reemerged. The pines that clawed foothold in on the lower slope moaned in the lash of the winds, their trunks in stark silhouette against silver-lace sheets of spent breakers as they slid in fan curves back to sea. Sabin tossed tangled hair from her eyes. The night was wild around her. She could feel the great waves thud and boom over the barrier reefs even through the leather of her bootsoles.

A night to bring boat wrecks, she knew, the sea in her blood enough now that her ear had attuned to its moods. She hurried as the slate path leveled out and gave way at last to sand, ground of the same black stone, and unpleasant with chill in the dark. The last fringe of trees passed behind, and she started across the crescent beach. The moon went and came again. Out on the reefs, the high-flying spindrift carved up by the rocks tossed like the manes of white horses; great herds there seemed to be, galloping with arched necks, the surf roll became the thunder of churning hooves. Sabin forgot the folly of the daydreams that had forced her out of bed. As if someone's voice had addressed her, she stopped very still and stared. For a second the horses seemed *real*. There, the red flare of nostrils in the moon-whitened planes of wedged faces, and now, a ringing neigh on the wind that tore past her ears.

Impossible, she insisted, and yet—

A cloud scudded over the moon. Her wonder vanished, and she chided herself. There was nothing. Only the tide-swept sand of the beach and herself, a scarecrow figure of a girl with mussed hair and no sense, gawping at a span of wild waters. The village idiot knew horses did not run in the sea. Sabin shivered and felt cold. The dory lay beached above the tide-line, a brisk walk distant up the beach. She turned that way, determined to fetch back her jacket without another lapse into silliness.

But before she had gone half the distance, something else caught her eye in the surf. Not a horse, but a dark clot of rags that at first she mistook for flotsam. Then the crest of a wave rolled it over, and she saw a man. He was floundering to keep his face above water, and only a hairsbreadth from drowning.

Fear and memory drove her. She spun and plunged into the sea. Cousin Juard had been lost to the waves, ripped from the decks of her uncle's boat during the fury of a storm. As the racking, retching coughs of the man who struggled reached her, she wondered if Juard had died as miserably, his body bent into spasms as the cold salt water stung his lungs.

Then the swirl of a comber cascaded over her boot-tops and foamed up around her chest, and her gasping shudder killed thought. The castaway born along by the tide tumbled under, and the weight of him slammed her in the knees.

She dropped, clutching at a shoulder whose shirt was all tatters, and skin underneath that was ice. As the rough sands scoured under her shins, she hooked his elbow, and braced against the drag of the ebb.

Her head broke water. Through a plastering of hair, Sabin huffed what she hoped was encouragement. "This way. The beach."

His struggles were clumsy. She labored to raise him, distracted by a chink of metal: iron, she saw in the flash of bared moonlight. He was fettered in rusted chains, the skin of both wrists torn raw from their chafing.

"Mother of mercy," she blasphemed. He had found his knees, an old man, white-haired and wasted of body. His head dangled with fatigue. She said, "Nobody could swim pulled down by all this chain!"

"Didn't," he husked; he had no breath to speak. He thrashed in attempt to rise, and fell again as the water hit and dashed in fountains around his chin.

She gripped him under his flaccid arms and dragged mightily. Despite her best effort, his head dipped under the flood. He swallowed a mouthful, gagging on salt, while she grunted in tearful frustration. The wave sucked back. He dragged his face free of its deadly, clinging currents with the dregs of his failing strength. His feet seemed fastened to the shoaling sands as if they were moored in place.

Belatedly suspicious, Sabin kept tugging. "Your ankles. Are they in irons

also?"

He made a sound between a laugh, a sob, and a cough. "Always."

His floundering efforts managed to coordinate for a moment with hers. Together they stumbled a few yards shoreward, harried on by flooding water. Again the wave ebbed, and he sank and bumped against the sand. Panting, Sabin locked her fingers in his shirt. She held him braced against the hungry drag of the sea, desperate, while her heart raced drumrolls with the surf. Something was not quite right, she thought, her stressed mind sluggish to reason. The incoming tide carried no flotsam, not a stick or a plank that a shipwrecked man might have used to float his way ashore. "You never swam," she accused again, as he regained the surface and sputtered.

Weak as he was, her sharpness stung him. He raised his chin, and eyes that were piercingly clear met hers, lit by the uncertain moonlight. "I didn't." His voice held a roughness like harpstrings slackened out of tune. "I begged help from the seaborne spirits that can be called to take the shape of horses. They answered and drew me to land, but they could not see me safe. To lead one even once from the water dooms it to mortal life ashore."

The interval between waves seemed drawn out, an unnatural interruption of rhythm like a breath too long held suspended. Even disallowing for chains, his weight was too much for a girl; but it was a spasm of recognition like fear that locked Sabin's limbs and tongue—until those cut-crystal eyes looked down. As if released from bewitchment, she blurted, "Who are you?"

She thought the wind took her words. Or that they were lost in the grinding thunder of the sea as she scrabbled the last yards to dry sand. But when, safe at last, he collapsed in bruised exhaustion, he answered. "I am a wayfinder, and the son of a way-finder." His cracked tone broke to a whisper. "And I was a slave for more time than I care to remember." He spoke nonsense, she determined, and said so. He was a madman and no doubt a convict who had fled in the shallows to hide his tracks from dogs. A denial she did not understand closed her eyes and her heart against the logic that argued for him: that the road ran high above the cliffs, and those few paths that turned shoreward were much too steep for a captive to negotiate in chains. Had he come that way, he should have fallen, and broken his legs or his neck. Through teeth that chattered, Sabin waited. Yet the refugee stayed silent. She poked him in the ribs with her toe and found he had succumbed at last to the beating the sea had given him; either he slept or had dropped unconscious. The wind bit at wet flesh, made cruel by driven spray. The tide rose still, and the sand where he lay would very soon be submerged. Forced by necessity, Sabin arose. The jacket she had left on the dory would have to serve the old man as a blanket until Uncle Ciondo could be fetched from his bed.

Sabin awakened to sunlight. Afraid of her uncle's gruff scolding, she shot straight, too fast. The blood left her head. Dizziness held her still and blinking, and

she realized: Uncle Ciondo *was* shouting. His voice drifted up through the trapdoor to the ladder, though he probably stood in the kitchen by the stove, shaking a fist as he ranted.

“A condemned man, what else could he be! Or why should anyone have chained him? Those fetters were not closed with locks. They were riveted. We cannot shelter such a man, Kala.”

The castaway, Sabin remembered. She pushed out of bed, and tripped in her haste over the wet smock she had discarded without hanging last night. From the clothes chest she grabbed her only spare, and followed with the woolen britches every fisher’s lad wore to sea. She left her boots. Even if they were not drenched and salt-stiff, they would make too much noise and draw notice.

Masked by the murmur of her aunt’s voice, declaiming, Sabin set bare feet on the ladder. At the bottom, the door to Juard’s room lay cracked open, beyond the stairwell, which tunneled the bellow of her uncle’s protest. “Kala, that’s daft and you know it! He could be dangerous, a murderer. I say we send him inland in the fish wagon and leave his fate to the King’s bailiff.”

Sabin’s uncle was not hard-hearted, but only a sailor, and the sea rewards no man for sentiment. Ciondo would care very little if the rescued man could hear the rough anger in his voice. But as a girl not born to a fisher’s trade, Sabin flinched. She tiptoed down the hall and slipped through the opened door, a ghost with mousy, tangled hair and a sailcloth smock flocked at the cuffs with the rusty blood of gutted cod.

The man the sea had cast up was asleep. Chain lay on him still, looped at wrists and ankles with spare line that tied him spread-eagled to the bedposts. Ciondo had taken no chances, but had secured the refugee with the same half hitches he might use to hold a dory against a squall. Still, the undyed wool of the blankets hung half kicked off, as if the prisoner had thrashed in nightmares. His rags were gone. Daylight through the opened shutters exposed a history of abuse, from the salt-galled sores left by shackles to a mapwork of dry, welted scars. He was not old after all, Sabin saw, but starved like a mongrel dog. His skin was sun-cured to teak and creases, and his hair bleached lusterless white. He looked as weatherworn as the fishing tackle on the sloop’s decks, beaten by years of hard use.

Aunt Kala’s voice filtered through the doorway, raised to unusual sharpness. “Ciondo, I’ll be sending no man on to the bailiff before he finds his wits and tells his name! Nor will any needy stranger leave our roof hungry, the more shame to you for witless fears! As if anybody so starved could cause harm while bound up in metal chains! Now, be off! Go down to the beach with the rest, and leave me in peace to stir the soup.”

A grumbling followed, and a scrape of boots on the brick. Few could stand up to Kala when she was angry, and since Juard’s death, none dared. She was apt to

weep when distressed, and if anyone saw her, she would throw cooking pots at them with an aim that could flatten a pigeon.

Cautious in the quiet after the door slammed, Sabin crept to the window. The sun threw slanting bars of yellow through gently tossing pines. Yet if the vicious, tearing winds had quieted, the sea mirrored no such calm. Beyond the spit off the point, the breakers still reared on the reefs, booming down in tall geysers of spray. The surge rushed on untamed, through the harbor gates where the round-bottomed boats rolled at anchor, an ominous sign. Sabin bit her lip. She squinted against the scintillant brightness of reflections and saw wreckage scattered amid the foam: the sundered masts and planking of ships gutted wholesale by the reefs.

No one had shaken her awake at dawn because today the twine would not be cast out for fish. When the wrecks littered the beach, men plied their nets to glean a storm's harvest from the waves. Custom barred girls and women from such labor, lest the nets bring up dead bodies, and the sight of drowned flesh sour the luck of their sons, born and unborn, and curse them to the horror that had befallen cousin Juard, to be taken alive by the sea.

The man on the bed had escaped that fate, just barely. He had come in on a ship that was now ripped to fragments, Sabin knew for a surety. He had not swam; not in chains. And horses did not run in the sea. Unwilling to risk misfortune by looking too closely at the waves, or what tossed and surfaced in the whitening tumble of foam, Sabin spun away from the window. She shivered in the sun that fell on her back, and shivered again as she saw that the man on the bed had awakened. He studied her, his eyes like fine flawed crystal broken to a razor's edge.

"You do not trust me," he said in his rusty whisper. He flexed one wrist, and immediately grimaced in pain.

"My uncle thinks you're a murderer."

He ground out a bitter, silent laugh. "Oh, but I am, though my hand has never taken life."

She frowned, a plain-spoken girl who dreamed, but had always hated riddles. "What is a wayfinder?"

Riddles came back in answer, as he regarded the beams of the ceiling. "One who hears the sea. One who can read the earth. One who can travel and never be lost."

"I don't understand." She stepped back, and sat on the clothes chest that had once held the shirt she was wearing, when it had been Juard's, and she had spent days spinning thread for her father's loom. Now her hands had grown horny and tough, and fine wool would catch on the callus. But the incessant lapses of attention had not left her; she forgot to mind sheet lines as readily as she had faltered at spindle and wheel. She curled her knees up and clasped her hands to bury that

recognition. “Anyone can be lost.”

He stirred in the faintest impatience, jerked back by the cut of his chains. “Inland to the east, there is a road, a very dusty road with stone markers that winds through a forest. Beyond lie farmlands, and three villages, and lastly a trader’s town. Beyond brick walls are wide sands, called by the desert people who live there Dei’eh’vikia.” His head tipped sideways toward Sabin. His eyes now were darkened as gray sapphires, and he considered her as though she should be awed.

She was not. “You could have spoken to someone who passed that way,” she accused. “Perhaps you lived there yourself.” But she knew as she spoke that he did not. His vessel had broken on the reef, and never sought harbor in these isles. Few ships did, for the rocks gave hostile greeting to mariners from afar.

He looked at her in sadness or maybe pain, as if he had offered riches to the village halfwit who had use for no coin at all. He kept staring until she twisted her fingers together, embarrassed as if caught at a lie. For all his foreign accent, he *had* pronounced the place-name as crisply as the nomads who made the desert their home. Townsmen and traders slurred over the vowels and called it Daaviki, in contempt for the troublesome native speech.

He perceived that she knew this. He saw also that stubbornness kept her silent.

He looked at her still, his gaze heavy-lidded, almost glazed as a drunk’s. The angle of his neck must have pulled at his shoulders and wrists, but he shed any sign of discomfort as he said, “Sabin, outside this room, there is a passage covered with braided rugs. It leads to a stairway that winds around itself twice. Downstairs, to the right of the kitchen lies a door that leads to a springhouse. Purple flowers grow by the path, and seven steps to the left lead to the sea cliff where there is a little slate ledge. You like to sit there on sunny mornings, in what you call your chair seat. But the people who inhabited these coasts before yours used the site as a shrine.” His grainy voice was almost gentle as he finished. “They left carvings. You have seen them, when you scratched at the moss.”

Sabin jumped up with her mouth opened like a fish’s. He had been carried into this house, unconscious. Ciondo had brought him through the front door. Someone might have mentioned her name in his hearing, but there was no way he could have seen the springhouse, or have known of her fondness for that ledge. Her aunt and uncle did not know, nor her own mother and father.

“I am a wayfinder,” he said simply, as if that sealed a truth that she realized, shivering, could not be other than magic. Her need to escape that room, and that compelling, mesmerizing gaze came out in a rush of speech. “I have to go, now.”

The Wayfinder let his head fall back on the pillow. At a word from him, she would have fled; she waited, tautly poised on one foot. But he made no sound. He closed his eyes, and curiosity welled over her fear and held her rooted. “Still there?”

he murmured after a while.

“Maybe.” Sabin put her foot down, but quietly.

He did not open his eyes. “You have a piece of the gift yourself, you know, Sabin.”

She quivered again, as much from anger. “What gift!”

His hands were not relaxed now, but bunched into white-knuckled fists. One of his sores had begun to bleed from the pressure; he was trying her uncle’s knots, and finding them dishearteningly firm. “You came to the beach at my call.”

She stamped her foot, as much to drive off uneasiness. “You called nothing! I forgot my jacket. That was all.”

“No.” His hands gave up their fretting. “You have given your jacket as the reason. But it was my call that caused you to forget it in the first place. When I asked the spirits for their help, you heard also. That was the true cause of the forgetfulness that drew you outside in the night.”

“I’ve been scolded for carelessness all my life,” she protested, “and my jacket was forgotten at twilight!”

“And so at that hour I called.” He was smiling.

She wanted to curse him, for that. He seemed so smug. Like Juard had been when he teased her; and that remembrance called up tears. Sabin whirled violently toward the doorway and collided headlong with her aunt.

“Sabin! Merciful god, you’ve spilled the soup.” Kala raised the wooden tray to keep it beyond reach of calamity, and her plump face dimpled into a frown. “What are you doing here anyway? A sick man has no need for prying girls.”

“Talk to him,” Sabin snapped back. “He’s the one who pries.”

“Awake, is he?” Kala stiffened primly. She glanced toward the bed and stopped cold, her chins sagging beneath her opened mouth, and the tray forgotten in her hands. For a moment she seemed to breathe smoke as she inhaled rising steam from the soup bowl.

Then she exploded. “My fool of a husband! Rope ties! The cruelty and the shame of it.” She stepped sideways, banged her tray down on the clothes chest, and in a fit of total distraction, failed to bemoan the slopped soup. “Sabin, run out and fetch our mallet and chisel.” She added to the stranger on the bed, “We’ll have you free in just minutes.”

For an instant, the Wayfinder’s cut-crystal eyes seemed to mirror all of the earth. “Your good man thinks I’m a murderer.”



“My good man is a fool who thinks in circles like a sand crab.” Kala noticed that Sabin still lingered in the doorway. “Girl, must you always be idling about waiting for speech from the wind? Get along! Hammer and chisel, and quickly.”

Kala had matters well in hand before the last fetter was struck. “You’re taking up no space that’s needed,” she insisted with determined steadiness. “Juard’s bed is yours, he’s dead and at rest in the sea, and if you care to lend a hand at the chores, we could use the help, truly. Sabin belongs home with her family.”

She ended with a strike of the mallet. As the last rivet sheared away, and rusted metal fell open and clanged in a heap on the floor, the Wayfinder raised his freed wrists. He rubbed at torn skin, then looked up at Kala, who stood over him gripping the tools with both fists braced on broad hips. In profile, Sabin saw the stranger give her aunt that same, heavy-lidded gaze that had earlier caused her the shivers.

“He’s not lost, your Juard,” the broken voice announced softly.

Kala went white. She dropped the tools with a clatter and clapped her palms behind her back to distract bad luck, and avert the misfortune of hearing false words. “Do not spin me lies! Respect our loss. Ill comes of wishing drowned men back from death, for they hear. They rise in sorrow and walk the sea bed without rest for all of eternity.”

The Wayfinder cocked up his eyebrows in sad self-mockery. “I never lie. And no such lost spirits walk the sea, nor ever have.” At Kala’s shocked stiffness, he thumped his marred fist on the mattress in frustration. “Your boy is not dead, only washed up on a beach, as I was.”

Aunt Kala turned her back, which was as near to an insult as anyone ever got from her. The Wayfinder glared fiercely, his ice-gray eyes lit to burning. Then his jaw hardened until the muscles jumped and his speech scraped out of his throat. “Your son fetched up on the Barraken Rock, to the west. At this moment, he is gutting a fish with a knife he chipped from a mussel shell.”

“My son is dead!” Kala snapped back. “Now say no more, or when Ciondo comes back, you will go trussed in the wagon to the bailiffs. I’ll hear your word.”

The Wayfinder sighed, as though sucked down in a chasm of weariness. “Woman, you’ll get no word from me, but neither will you hear any, either, if that is your desire.”

“It is.” Kala stamped out through the doorway without looking back. “Sabin,” she yelled from the threshold at the head of the stairwell. “You’ll see that yon man eats his soup, and bring down the tray when he’s finished.”

But Kala’s bidding was impossible to carry out, Sabin found. On the bed, the Wayfinder had closed his eyes and fallen deeply asleep.

The house stayed quiet for the rest of the morning, with Kala beating quilts with a ferocity that outlasted the dust. At noon Uncle Ciondo returned from the beach, swathed in dripping oilskins, his boots caked to the ankles with damp sand. The bull bellow of his voice carried up through the second-storied window where Sabin kept vigil with the invalid. “Kala! Where is that man?”

The thwack of the broom against fabric faltered. “Where else would he be, but in bed? The shame on you, Ciondo, for leaving him trussed like the felon he certainly isn’t.” Smack! went the broom at the quilts.

When only the cottage door hammered closed in reply, Sabin gripped her knees with sweaty hands. She all but cowered as her uncle’s angry tread ascended the stairs; bits of grit and shell scattered from his boots and fell pattering against the baseboards as he hurried the length of the hall. The next instant his hulking shoulders filled the bedroom doorway, and his sailor’s squint fixed on the empty shackles that lay where they had fallen on the floor.

“Fool woman,” he growled in reference to his wife. He raised hands scraped raw from his labors with net and sea, and swiped salt-drenched hair from his temples. Then he noticed Sabin. “Out, imp.”

Her chin jerked up to indicate the man on the bed. “I found him.”

“So you did.” Ciondo’s grimness did not ease as he strode closer, but he did not send her away. Sabin watched as he, too, met the uncanny gaze of the stranger who had wakened again at the noise. The sword-edged clarity of that stare arrested her uncle also, for he stopped, his hands clenched at his sides. “Do you know that all morning we have been dragging in bits of burst ships? Not just one, but a fleet of them.”

The Wayfinder said a touch tartly, “Karbashi warships.”

“So you know them.” Ciondo sighed. “At least you admit it.” His annoyance stayed at odds with his gesture as he noticed his boots, and the sand left tracked in wet clumps. Hopeful as a miscreant mongrel, he bent and scuffed the mess beneath the bed where Kala might not notice. He dusted his fingers, ham-pink and swollen from salt water, on the already gritty patches of his oilskins. “You were a criminal? Their prisoner perhaps?”

The Wayfinder’s Up curled in a spasm of distaste. “Worse than that.”

Ciondo straightened. “You’d better tell me. Everything. Our people fear such fleets, for where they go, they bring ruin.”

The man propped up by the pillows seemed brown and wasted as stormwrack cast up and dried on the beach. In a whisper napped like spoiled velvet, he said, “I was their Wayfinder. Kept bound in chains to the flagship’s mast, to guide them on their raids. When I refused to see the way for their murdering, or led

them in circles at sea, they made sure that I suffered. But by the grace of your kindness, no more.”

Uncle Ciondo’s square face looked vacant with astonishment. “You!” He took a breath. “*You?* One of the *in’am shealdi*, the ones who are never lost? I don’t believe it.”

“Then don’t.” The Wayfinder closed his eyes. His lashes were dark at the roots, and bleached white at the tips from too much sun. “Your wife named me liar also.”

“Storm and tide! She’ll fling any manner of insult at a man, if she thinks it will help make him listen.” Ciondo shifted stance in disgust. “And I did not say you spoke falsehood, but only that I can’t believe you.”

At this, the Wayfinder’s eyes flicked open. Though he tensed no muscle, Sabin felt warning charge his presence that swept the room like cold wind. “Is it proof you want? You shall have it. Leave me blindfolded on any of your fishing sloops, and give me the tiller, and I will set you an accurate course for the spit called the Barraken Rock.”

“A wager?” Ciondo covered uneasiness with a cough. Thoughtfully, he added, “The trial would have to be at night, or the sun on your face might guide you.”

“Be it night, or in storm, I care very little,” the Wayfinder challenged. “But if I win, I’d have your promise: not a word of my gift shall go beyond this village. Your King, if he found me, would send me back as a bribe to plead for an exemption from tribute. Greedy traders anywhere would sell the secret of my survival. The Karbasch make unforgiving masters. If they learned I still lived, a warrior fleet would sail to collect me, and killing and looting would follow. If your people have no riches to adorn Karbaschi honor, your noses would burn, and your daughters know the miseries of slavery.”

Ciondo went pale, even to the end of his nose that seasons of winds had buffed red. He stepped back from the edge of the mattress and sat without care for soggy oilskins on the cushion by the windowseat. “If you are *in’am shealdi*, then you steered those ships afoul of the currents. Was it you who set your Karbasch overlords on our reef to drown and then took your chance in the sea?”

The Wayfinder denied nothing, but regarded his wrists as if the weals dug by fetters could plead his testimony for him. A tight-drawn interval followed, broken at last by the rattle of pots in the kitchen; Kala had relented enough to oversee the noon meal. Her industry spoiled the quiet, and forced the Wayfinder to raise his burred voice to be heard.

“Men travel the land, but they do not hear it. They sail the waters, yet they do not know the sea. The Karbaschi warships carve paths of destruction, and the

peoples they conquer grieve for slain husbands and sons. But where the Karbasch stay to settle, they bring cruelties more lasting than death to the flesh. The lands they rule will wither in time, because they are a race who take and give nothing back. Their habit of pillage has deafened them, until they plow up forests for fields and raise towns without asking leave. The rituals mouthed by their priests are empty of truth, and without care for the still, small needs of the earth.” Here, the invalid lifted his wasted, leathery shoulders in a shrug. “*In’am shealdi* are actually guardians. We nurture the spirits that the Karbasch run over roughshod, because they love only the desires of humanity. It is such spirits that show me the way. If I call, they answer, though the Karbasch ruled my body as a man might course a hunting dog. The guidance given to me in trust was forced to ill-use, and inevitably brought the earth sorrow. The day came when I could not endure its pain, or my own, any longer.”

The Wayfinder sounded wistful as he finished. “I expected to die in the sea. Since I did not, I should like very much to stay. To live simply, and make use of my talent very little. I wish for nothing beyond your leave to guide your village sloops back to anchorage each night for the rest of my life.”

Secure in the belief she was forgotten where she sat on the clothes chest, only Sabin caught the half glance he flicked in her direction. As if his cracked voice informed her, she knew: because of her he begged sanctuary—because of the gift he claimed she shared; and not least, for the sake of Juard, *who was dead, who had to be dead, else magic and spirits were real and horses ran wild in the sea.*

If in truth such beauty existed, she would never shed the distraction of dreams, but helplessly become consumed by them until the small inattentions that cursed her grew monstrous and took over her life.

Spooked by strangeness that threatened to draw her like some hapless moth to a flame, Sabin sprang to her feet and fled. Out and through the hall she pounded, and on down the stair beyond. Kala called out as she passed through the kitchen, to say the noon meal was waiting. But the girl did not stop until she had left the house, and raced at reckless speed down the cliff path to the place she called her chair seat.

There she spent the afternoon, while the Wayfinder slept. She did not return for supper, though Kala called from the back door to say that their guest had risen for the meal. By that Sabin understood that her uncle had accepted the Wayfinder at his word; an outsider who spoke false might stay because he was ill and had need, but he would not be invited to table. One supposed that Kala and the stranger had settled their hostilities by not speaking.

At nightfall, when most folk gathered at the tavern, the beachhead glittered with torches. Word had passed round of a wager, and every boy with the sea in his blood turned out to ask Ciondo’s leave to man the sloop, never mind that the craft was handy and needed little crew. The commotion as boasts were made and shouted down, and lots were finally drawn to keep the choice fair, enabled Sabin to sneak past and hide under the nets in the dory. Certain she had not been seen, she peered

out cautiously and saw the tight knot of men stepping back. They left the Wayfinder standing alone with black cloth muffling his head. He turned unerringly toward the tender that was Ciondo's. If his steps were unsteady due to weakness, the line he walked was straight. He crossed and found the thwart without fumbling, and spoke so no others could hear. "Your good aunt does not know where we sail. I never mentioned to your uncle that I know your cousin Juard to be alive. Before we arrive at the Barraken Rock, I give you the burden of telling him."

"Aunt Kala would curse you for putting your lies in my mouth," Sabin accused from under damp nets, the reek of which suddenly made her dizzy. She was trembling again, and that made her angry, for he sensed her fear, she was certain. She could feel those pale eyes burning even through their veiling of cloth as he said, "But you are not Kala. You are the child of a weaver, and your fears are not ruled by the sea."

"They are when I sit in a boat!" she snapped back, more like her aunt than herself.

He laughed in his broken, rasping way, and because there was no malice in him, she wanted to hit him or scream. Instead she shrank into a tight huddle. Light and voices intruded, and the boat lifted, jostling, to be launched. As the keel smacked the water, and blown spray trickled through her cocoon of nets, she tasted warm salt with the cold. Tears: she was crying. The man seemed so certain that poor, lost Juard still breathed.

Sabin felt the rampaging buck of the surf toss the dory over a swell. The alternative terrified, that her cousin had rightly drowned, and that this stranger who lured the people laughing to their boats to follow his blindfolded quest was a sorcerer who could swim in iron chains. They might rescue Juard, or else join him, leaving more bereaved families to weep and to curse at the sea.

Sabin rubbed the stinging cheek her uncle had smacked when he found her, and smacked again when she told what the Wayfinder had said of her lost cousin. While the wind shifted fitfully, slapping sails and stays in contrary gusts, and moonlight silvered the wavelets, she braced against the windward rail, away from the men by the binnacle. Their talk grew ever more sullen as Juard's fate was uneasily discussed, and shoreline and lights shrank astern.

"Nothing lives on the Barraken Rock but fishing birds that drink seawater!" cried Tebald over the wear of patched canvas. Young, and a friend of Juard's, his jutted chin and narrowed eyes were wasted.

Blind behind swaths of black rag, the Wayfinder stood serene before aggression, his thin hands draped on the tiller as if the wood underneath were alive.

Darru argued further. "Without a fresh spring, a castaway would perish."

"It has rained twice in the past week," the stranger rebuked. "Oilskins can be

rigged to trap water, and the seabirds are plentiful enough to snare.” Ciondo’s spare smock flapped off his shoulders like an ill-fitting sail, the cuffs tied back to keep from troubling his sores. The linen bindings covering his wrists emphasized prominent bones; a man so gaunt should not have been able to stand up, far less command the muscle to mind the helm. But Sabin could see from where she stood that the sloop held flawless course. The wake carved an arrow’s track astern.

Ciondo glowered and said nothing, but his hand strayed often to the rigging knife at his belt.

“We should put about and sail back,” Tebald said.

Darru was more adamant. “We should let you swim back, stranger, for your lies.”

The Wayfinder answered in the absent way of a man whose thoughts are interrupted. “If I prove wrong, you may kill me.”

At this came a good deal of footshifting, and one or two gestures to ward ill luck. No one voiced the obvious, that they could kill him only if malfortune went elsewhere and they lived to make good such a threat.

The night wore on, and the stars turned. The wind settled to a steady northeast, brisk and coldly clear. Moonset threw darkness on the water, and the land invisible astern. Once, Darru repeated the suggestion that the wager be abandoned, that the sloop seek return by the stars. He spoke to Ciondo by the mainmast pinrail, but was answered in gruff-voiced challenge by the Wayfinder aft at the helm. “Would you take such a chance, just to keep Juard’s doom a clear certainty?”

Darru spun in vicious anger, jerked back by Ciondo’s braced hand. “Don’t provoke him! He is *in’am shealdi*, or how else does he steer without sight? Find faith in the straight course he sails, or else give the decency of holding your tongue until you have true cause to doubt.”

“Grief for your son has turned your head,” Darru muttered, shrugging himself free. But he could not argue that lacking clear stars or a compass, no ordinary man could keep a heading hour after hour without mistake.

Night waned. Sabin slept through the dawn curled against a bight of rope. She dreamed of waves and white horses, and the rolling thunder of troubled seas until Tebald’s shout awakened her. “The Barraken Rock! Dead off our bow, do you see!”

She opened her eyes to a dazzle of sunlight, and the soured smell of seaweed beached and dried. “Juard,” she whispered.

No one noticed. Ciondo stood as a man frozen in place by the foremast stay; the more volatile Darru gave back laughter and cried to his fellow crewman, “Where were you an hour ago when the spit rose out of the sea?”

“Sleeping,” Tebald confessed. His awed glance encompassed the scarecrow figure who guided the tiller with a feather touch, and whose eyesight was yet swathed in cloth. The mouth that showed underneath seemed turned up in detached amusement. Tebald leaned down and ruffled Sabin’s hair as he passed, his discomfort masked by a shrug.

Peevish and oddly unrefreshed, she tried a kick that missed at his ankle. “Don’t do that. I’m not a little girl anymore.”

Tebald ignored her as if she were a bothersome younger sister. To Ciondo he said, “The wager’s won, I’d say. Your *in’am shealdi* should take off his blindfold. It’s probably making him sweat.”

“I said so,” Ciondo admitted. With one hand fastened to the head stay, he kept his eyes trained on the rock that jutted like a spindle from the sea. “Tell him again if you want.”

But with the arcane powers of the helmsman now proven, no one seemed anxious to speak. Sun glared like molten brass off the wet shine of the deck, and the sheet lines creaked under their burden of sail. The pitiless isolation of the sea seemed to amplify the wind and the mingled cries of seabirds that squabbled and flew above the rock. The deeper shout that was human seemed to rend the day’s peace like a mortal blow to the heart.

On that gale-carved, desolate spit, splashing in sea-water to the knees, a raggedy figure ran, dancing and gyrating to a paean of reborn hope.

“It’s Juard!” Darru gasped. He glanced nervously back at the Wayfinder, ashamed for his unkind threats. Tebald at his side held his breath in wordless shock, and Ciondo just buried his face in his hands and let the tears spill through his fingers.

It was Sabin who moved to free sheetlines when the Wayfinder threw up the helm. While Tebald and Darru roused belatedly to set the anchor, the girl un-lashed an empty bait barrel. She stood it on end by the sternpost, climbed up, and as the Wayfinder bent his head to receive her touch, she picked out the knots of his blindfold. The cloth fell away. Hair bleached like bone tumbled free in the breeze, and she confronted a face set level with hers that had been battered into pallor by exhaustion. The eyes no longer burned, but seemed wide and drugged as a dreamer’s. Almost, she could plumb their depths, and sense the echoes of the spirits whose guidance had led without charts.

“You could hear them yourself, were you taught,” the Wayfinder murmured in his grainy bass. Yet before those eyes could brighten and tempt her irrevocably to sacrifice the reality she understood, she retreated to a braced stance behind the barrel.

“The moment Juard can sail with his father, I’ll be sent back home. Whether or not there are horses in the sea, I shan’t be getting lost behind a loom.” Her bare

feet made no sound as she whirled and bounded off to help Ciondo, who was struggling in feverish eagerness to launch the tender by himself.

The sloop was met on her return by men with streaming torches. Juard's reappearance from the lost brought cries of joy and disbelief. Kala was fetched from her bed for a tearful reunion with the son miraculously restored to her. For Juard was alive; starved thin, his hair matted in tangles so thick they could only be shorn, and his skin marred everywhere with festering scratches that needed immediate care. The greedy sea had been forced to give back its plunder, and the news swept like fire through the village.

A crowd gathered. Children in nightshirts gamboled on the fringes, while their parents jabbered in amazement. The Wayfinder, whose feat had engineered the commotion, stood aloof, his weight braced against the stempost of a dry dory, as if he needed help to stand up. From farther back in the shadows, outside the ring of torchlight, Sabin watched him. She listened, as he did, to the noise and the happiness, and she alone saw him shiver and stiffen and suddenly stride into the press with his light eyes hardened to purpose.

He set a hand marked as Juard's on Ciondo's arm, and said, "No, I forbid this," to the fisherman who had been boasting the loudest. "You will not be repeating this tale to any traders, nor be offering my service to outsiders. This is my bargain for Juard's life."

Silence fell with the suddenness of a thunderclap. Surf and the snap of flame remained, and a ring of stupefied faces unfamiliarly edged with hostility. "Which of us made any such bargain?" shouted someone from the sidelines.

The Wayfinder's peaked brows rose. "Ciondo is my witness, and here is my warning. For yourselves, you may ask of me as you will. The guiding and ward of your fleet I shall do as I can; but let none beyond this village ever know that I am *in'am shealdi*. Say nothing, or sorrow will come of it."

Finished speaking, or perhaps too weary to stay standing, the Wayfinder strode out of the pack. He left all the village muttering and wondering as he moved in slow steps toward the path. On the chill sands outside the torchlight, Sabin watched him vanish in the darkness under the pines. She did not follow; nor did she feel moved to join the villagers. The waking dream had touched her. Curiosity no longer drove her to discuss the stranger Kala sheltered.

"Was he a felon, to want such secrecy?" one good-wife muttered from the sidelines.

Ciondo replied in indignation. "Does it matter?" Then good sense prevailed over argument, and Kala scolded the gawkers roundly for keeping poor Juard from his bed.

A month passed, and seven days. Juard recovered his health and returned to



fishing on the sloop. The Wayfinder who had brought his recovery took a longer time to mend. Kala pressed food and comforts on him constantly, until he complained of her coddling. Unlike anybody else, she listened, and left him alone. His white hair grew out its natural color, a golden, honey-brown, until Sabin sitting in her chair seat on the cliff-side could no longer pick him out from the villagers who manned the sloops. She saw him seldom, and spoke with him not at all. Winding the skeins of wool and stringing the looms in her father's craft shop in furious concentration, she avoided walking the beach. Since the night she forgot her jacket, she could not bear to watch the combers. She heard them, felt them, even indoors with her ears filled with the clack of shuttle and loom—the thunder of what might be hooves, and the tumble of white, upflung spray that pounded the beaches in procession. She swept cut threads from the floor, and helped her mother bake, and each night begged her sleep to show her silence.

It did not. She misplaced socks and tools, and once, let the fire burn out. The waking world came to seem as a dream, and herself, strangely separate, adrift. She was scolded more often for stargazing, and seemed more than ever to care less.

The Wayfinder laughed in the tavern at night, accepted, but with a reverence that marked him apart. Two boats he saved from ruin when storms caused shoaling off the reefs. Another smack was recovered with a damaged compass after squall winds blew it astray. No one knowingly broke the Wayfinder's faith, but his presence loomed too large to shelter. Sabin understood this, her hands fallen idle over wool she was meant to be spinning. She twisted the red-dyed fibers aimlessly, knowing: there were traders who had heard of Juard's loss, and who saw him back among the men. They asked questions. Driven by balked curiosity, they pressured and cajoled, and won themselves no satisfaction.

The silence itself caused talk.

Summer passed. The winds shifted and blew in cold from the northeast, and the fleet changed quarter to follow the shoals of fish. The looms in the weaver's shop worked overtime to meet the demand for new blankets. Sabin crawled into bed each evening too tired to blow out the lamp; and so it chanced that she awakened in the deeps of night by the blood-dim glow of a spent wick. This time no forgotten jacket needed recovery from shore. The restlessness that stirred her refused to be denied.

She arose, dressed in haste, and let herself out the back door. Lights still burned in the tavern, and a few drunken voices inside argued over ways to cure sharkskin. Sabin slipped past, down the lane toward her uncle's cottage. Once there she did not knock; every window was dark. Instead she went on down the cliff path. Her shins brushed the stalks of purple flowers, dried now, and rattling with seedheads in the change of season. Wind snatched her clothing and snapped at the ends of her hair. A wild night, yet again, the kind that was wont to bring wrecks. She completed the last, familiar steps to the chair seat, dreading what she might find.

The horizon was clearly delineated under a waning half moon. Clouds scudded past like dirty streamers, muddling the swells pewter and gray, and against them, like pen strokes in charcoal, an advancing forest of black masts. Where peaceful craft would have plied sails, this fleet cleaved against the wind, lashing up coils of foam beneath the driving stroke of banked oars.

War galleys, Sabin identified, though the Karbasch to her were just talk. The Wayfinder's secret was loose in the world, and his overlords returned now to claim him. Poised to run and rouse the town, Sabin found she could not move. Her flesh became riveted by a cry that had no sound, but ripped between the fabric of the air itself to echo and ring through her inner mind.

The vibration negated her scream of terrified surprise, and filled her unasked with its essence: that of rage and sorrow and mystery, and a wounding edge of betrayal.

Dizzied almost to sickness, she clawed at the rocks for a handhold to ward off a tumbling fall. The summons faded but did not leave silence. The grind of the sea overwhelmed her ears with a mauling crescendo of sound. Cowering down in the cleft of the chair seat, Sabin saw the sea roll back. It sucked in white arrows of current off the tide flats until slate, shingle, and reef were laid bare. Fish flapped in confused crescents across settled streamers of weed, and the scuttled, half-rotted hull of a schooner turned turtle with a smack in the mud, Fishing boats settled on their anchor chains, and townside, the bell in the harbormaster's house began steadily tolling alarm.

Faintly, from the cottage behind, Sabin heard her uncle's bellow of inquiry as the clangor aroused him from bed. Juard, also, would be tossing off blankets, and stumbling out with the rest.

Sabin did not move. She, who had been born in a village of seafarers, and should have been, *would have been*, one of them, could only stare with her joints locked immobile. She alone did not flee in blind concern toward the beach path to stave off the threat to the boats.

Had she gone, it would not have mattered; the chair seat offered an untrammelled view as the horses thundered in from the sea.

They came on in a vast, white herd, manes tossing, and forehooves carving up arcs of flying spray. The water swirled under their bellies and legs, and rushed in black torrents behind uncountable upflung tails. Wave after wave, they surged in, plowing up weeds and fish and muddy gouts of sea bottom, and milling the shells of galleys and sloops into shreds and splinters as they passed. Spars of fishing smacks entangled with snapped-off oars and the dragon-horned timbers of Karbaschi shipwrights; the cries of warriors and oarsmen entangled in the flood mingled with shouts from the villagers who saw their fleet and that of the raiders become smashed to kindling at a stroke. The horses swept on in a boil of foam that boomed like a

god-wielded hammer against the shore. Spindrift sluiced across the cliffs. Ancient pines shivered and cracked at the blow, and boulders broke off and tumbled.

Drenched to her heels by cold water, Sabin cowered down, weeping for the beauty of a thousand salt-white steeds that reared up and struck at the windy sky. And with that release came understanding, at last, of what all along had been wrong: her heart held no sorrow for the terrible, irreversible destruction that rendered her whole village destitute.

Lights flickered through the pines at her back, as angry men lit torches. Shouts and curses carried on the wind, and the tolling bell fell silent, leaving the seethe of the seas a scouring roar across the reef. Sabin pressed her knuckles to her face. The Wayfinder was going to be blamed. This ruin was his doing, every man knew, and when they found him, they would tear him in pieces.

Pressed into her cranny by a weight of remorse she could not shed, Sabin saw the wild horses swirl like a vortex and turn. Back, they plunged into the sea that had spawned them, leaving churned sand and burst wood and snarled bits of rope. Amid the roil of foam, a lone swell arose and broke; one mare spun away and parted from her companions.

Sabin saw her stop with lifted head, as if she listened to something far away. She tossed her mane, shedding spray, then raised up one forehoof and stepped, not into water, but most irrevocably, out onto wrack-strewn sand.

Sabin cried out at that moment, as if some force of nature wrenched her, spirit from flesh. Reflex overturned thought, and she was up and running inland at a pace that left her breathless. Voices called out to her as she reached the lane, people she knew, but she had no answer. The torchlight in the market did not slow her, nor the press of enraged men who gathered to seek their revenge. Scraps of conversation touched her ears and glanced away without impression—the *in'am shealdi* and his vicious, unfair bargain—Juard's life, in exchange for the livelihood of all the village. Boats had been broken and sunk. Folk would starve. The Wayfinder would be made to pay, made to burn; they would pack him off in chains to rot in the dungeons of the King's bailiff. A hangman was too good for him, someone yelled, his words torn through with the sounds of a woman's crying.

Sabin stumbled and kept going, past the cedar shingles of the wool shop where her mother stood on the door stoop. "Girl, where are you off to, there's salvage work to be done, and soup to be fixed for the men."

But the rebuke of her parent was meaningless, now, and had been for quite some time.

Deep darkness wrapped the hollow where the crossroads met the town and the lane led inland through forest. Sabin went that way, her lungs burning, and her eyes streaming tears. The terrible truth pursued her: she did not weep for loss. The village was nothing to her, its hold inexorably diminished since the moment she left a

jacket on the beach.

By the stone marker on the hill above the market, the Wayfinder waited, as she knew he would. He sat astride a mare whose coat caught the moonlight like sea-foam, and whose eyes held the darkness and mystery of water countless fathoms deep. She tossed her head at Sabin's arrival, as if chiding the girl for being tardy, and her mane lifted like a veil of spindrift; subsided like falling spray.

The Wayfinder regarded Sabin gravely, the burning in his eyes near to scalding. "You heard my call," he said. "The mare came, and you answered also."

Sabin found speech at last. "You knew I would."

He shook his head, his unbleached honey-colored hair veiling his weather-beaten face. "I wasn't sure. I hoped you might. Gifts such as yours are needed sorely."

The white mare stamped, impatient. She blew a salty, gusty snort. New tears welled in tracks down Sabin's cheeks, and she reached out trembling fingers and touched the shimmering white shoulder. It was icy as sea-water; magical and terrifying and beautiful enough to bring madness. The words she struggled to shape came out choked. "If the horse cannot return, then neither will I."

"You are both my responsibility," the Wayfinder admitted. "And will be, to the end of my days." He extended his hand, no longer so thin, but disfigured still with old scars. "You must know the Karbasch would have burned more than boats, and slaughtered and raped did they land."

Sabin felt as if she had swallowed a stone. "You spared the whole village, and they hate you."

He sighed, and the mare shifted under him, anxious to be away. "Oh my dear, it could not be helped. What is a boat? Or a man? New trees will grow and be fashioned into planks, and women will birth babies that age and grow senile and die. But just as this mare can't return to the waves, so an earth spirit that is maimed can never heal. The Karbasch shed more than mortal blood. I could not allow myself to be captured, however bitter the price."

"You could have died," Sabin said, her gaze transfixed by the horse.

And he saw it was not his exile, but the fate of the mare that she mourned. The two of them, man and girl, were alike to the very core.

A shout knifed the quiet, and torches shimmered through the trees. The mare stamped again, and was restrained by a touch as the Wayfinder said in measured calm, "I can still die. But you must know, the mare should be cared for. She is not of mortal flesh. If I give myself up, hear warning. Your talents will blossom with time. A horse such as this will draw notice, and the Karbasch will send another fleet. Their craving for conquest is insatiable as the ocean is vast, and *in'am shealdi* to

guide them, most rare.”

She made no move, and her rejection seemed to shatter his detachment. He lifted his head as the noise of the mob came closer. The edgy, unaccountable wariness that every offered kindness had not softened gentled very suddenly into pity. “*In’am shealdi,*” he murmured in the grainy, musical voice that had commanded the horse from the sea. “This mare left the water at my call, you are right, but her sacrifice was never made for me.”

Sabin looked up, stricken. “For my life?” she gasped, “or my gift?”

“Both.” His eyes were not cold. Inside the serenity lent by power lay a human being who could bleed. “If you treasure the beauty of the horses, heed this. We are the only ones who know their kind. Others see no more than surf and foam. It is our protection, Sabin, that keep this spirit-mare alive, our call that lends her substance.”

The torches reached the crossroad, and light flared and arrowed between the trees.

“There he is!” someone shouted, and the note of the mob quickened like the baying of hounds that sight game.

To her dream-filled ears, the pursuers uttered no words, but made only a cacophony of vicious noise. The roll of the sea held more meaning, and from this time forward, always would.

Sabin grasped the Wayfinder’s hand. Clinging as if to a lifeline, she let him pull her up astride the mare. As the villagers burst into the clearing, they lost their quarry in a half-glimpsed flash of white. The clearing resounded to what could have been hoof beats, or the enduring thunder of a comber pounding the pebbles of the shore.