

Sacrifice

LR Saul



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www.littlemanbooks.com

info@littlemanbooks.com

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*For Jeff, my best friend.
This one is for you - the one you've
always liked the most.*



I must warn that if you are easily disturbed, you should swiftly put down this document and move to other matters, for I must record with sharp detail what I saw that dark night.

I, Castus Poet-Scribe, was one of five selected to witness the terrible sacrifice of the Daughter of the Hunstons. I hereby declare it to be a true and accurate recording of the events – as I saw them – that transpired that night, 10th of Raven Month, the year 1044.

It was midnight, an hour of some importance to the Ashrone priests, when the girl was brought into the large, icy, windowless chamber with its pitched-beam ceiling and unadorned stone walls. She was already bound at the hands, but her legs were free, allowing her to walk unaided into the room between two guards sworn to secrecy. She wore a long velvet dress – white for virginity, and trimmed with black for death. Her face remained calm, regal, but as I recall, fear tainted the dark blue eyes.

From the look on the guards' faces, I knew they did not want to be here, as I did not. They directed her, through a circle

of Ashrones, to the central altar – a cold grey marble slab flecked with black veins.

She stood in front of the altar, her face to me and the four other scribes. The guards departed then. Speedily, I should add, although at least in a dignified manner.

The master priest, sturdy with a youth of thirty-two years not common to his position, stepped from within the circle and up to the girl. He faced her, his blue eyes watching everything in the girl's face, as seemed to be his habit. I noted, with a dark heart, that most of the thirty other priests, all in black for mourning, did not meet the girl's eyes. To be fair in my description, perhaps concentration claimed them.

The thirty priests of Ashrone linked hands in a chain, creating an unbroken ring around the young woman and the central altar. Their chants droned, and the air reeked of bitter plath root that bound the girl's hands tightly at her stomach. The plath root held some significance the Ashrones would not divulge.

Despite myself, I felt a shiver pass at the ominous monotone chanting. Right at that terrible moment in time, I wanted to be anywhere except here, in any role save this one. I wondered that the master priest could look the Hunston girl in her frightened blue eyes and still allow the priests to circle, to chant, to begin what could not be undone.

The chanting ceased abruptly; left a chill of silence in the air colder than a dark winter's night.

"Lower her," the eldest of the thirty priests said to the master priest.

The master, still standing near the girl, put hands beneath her arms, lifted her and helped her to sit on the altar. His hands

supported her briefly as she kicked her bare feet free of her long velvet dress. The thirty linked priests kept their circle tight as the girl tossed her head and flung her spun gold hair over her shoulder.

The master Ashrone's young hands helped lower her to a prostrate position on the grey marble slab. He spread her hair neatly for her, for dignity.

"Daughter of Kildes, do you know why you are here?" the master asked solemnly.

"I understand," the young woman said.

"Daughter of Kildes," the lean, young master priest continued, "you will die tonight for your country. Are you willing to accept?"

The girl nodded. "I accept for my country."

"Daughter of Kildes," the master said. "I ask you once more for the sake of the witnesses here in this room: do you freely accept this fate?"

"I accept."

The scribe in the raised witness box beside me shook his head slowly, but whether disappointed or disgusted, I could not be sure.

The master nodded. "Daughter of Kildes, we have tied your hands and I now tie you to the altar so that you do not escape when the fire hits your lungs." The master's hands worked on the twined root ropes. He tied her around the immovable, grey slab suspended on carved marble legs. "Are you willing to go through the pain?"

My eyes narrowed then, and I held my breath for the longest time. The girl's seeming bravery was born of ignorance. I had been told, forewarned, what the fire did to a person. The next

three minutes would remove all traces of bravery from those eyes – would even remove the eyes.

“I am willing,” the girl said, her eyes still shaped by fear – and something else. I guessed that anger lay behind the gaze, but its cause escaped me. I write this because I cannot be sure that the anger wasn’t silent protest at being held against her will. All words indicated the contrary – but they were, after all, just words. Despite the eyes, her voice remained composed, gentle. “For the sake of my people, I accept.”

The master priest exhaled slowly, and I realised he had – as had we all – expected the girl to change her mind. His hands worked the last of the ropes – tight to restrain but not painful. “Very well, child; please open your mouth.”

The girl opened her mouth, and the priests, still holding hands in their circle, started chanting again in a strange language, their eyes glazing with concentration. I was instructed that no matter what I did, I must not disturb those chants, or cause in any way for the circle to break. I was informed that no matter how much the girl screamed, or how hideous the stunning woman became, they could not afford to break the chants or it would be worse – far worse. I could not in that moment imagine what could be worse than what the girl would go through.

The master reached under the slab, to a smooth stone shelf, for the small vial. He opened it; it issued red steam. It smelled of soured milk and salty blood. He poured the crimson contents in a thin stream slowly into the girl’s mouth. He allowed her to swallow before pouring more past her lips. With a padded cloth, he wiped the excess from her mouth, giving her the final dignity she deserved, then placed a hand on her brow. “May the Almighty richly bless you for your sacrifice.”

I longed to call out a blessing of my own, to praise the girl for her courage. More than that, I yearned to beg her to change her mind, but my instructions were to remain silent, and to record with my mind for later scribing, every detail that transpired.

The master moved back as far as he could – stood just a pace within the outer unbroken circle. Even from my distance, I saw a bead of sweat run down the girl’s cheek and onto the marble.

There was nothing for a moment, just the sound of the ominous chanting that rose, quickened. Then pain started as a distant burning, I could tell, for the girl began to grow restless, edgy. Moments passed, then the girl shook, winced. She did not scream. Not yet. But she would.

In an instant, the girl’s stunning body exploded into flame. The heat shriveled the silken gold hair to the bald, blistering head. The searing started to char her dress black. She rocked her head back, arched and screamed. Flame and smoke plumed from her mouth. The fire coursed down her body, consuming everything. The blood started to boil in her body, to spit and hiss like pinesap in a forest fire. Her once beautiful features distorted into a hideous, monstrous mess that shocked me like the moments of waking from a nightmare.

She screamed and screamed and screamed, and then the fire seared up so hot, it shriveled the master’s white eyebrows. With the final shock of the heat, the girl’s life force had mercifully gone.

The chanting and unnatural flames dissipated swiftly, leaving only silence and a smoking pile of ash on the scorched altar.

Silence filled the space for the longest time, then we one by one, left the room, our eyes paying homage to the ash pile as though to the grave of a great king.

I found myself the last to leave the room, although as I stepped beyond the solid doorframe, I knew a part of me would never leave that room for as long as the Almighty blessed or cursed me with life.

Castus Poet-Scribe II

1

Emme knelt cautiously to the soil, traced a fingertip around the fresh imprint. The unusual footprints appeared frequently now and closer to the village. Whoever circled had not yet found what he or she looked for.

He, Emme decided. The footprints were too large, too heavy, to be a woman's.

Emme stood, scanned the area, eyes narrowed. Although the forest looked recently disturbed, the source remained illusive. How could anyone carelessly leave an imprint and trail, yet be so hard to find?

Emme followed the trail onward. It led to an aged tree trunk, the roots spreading with a partial rise from the earth. There the prints stopped, as though the owner had been absorbed into the tree. The cinnamon tang of bark and acorns filled the air, but no remnant of a campfire or cooking.

Emme tilted her head back, strained eyes upward. Surely the mystery man had not climbed the enormous oak and stayed there. No scuffle marks on the trunk indicated boots had clambered up the tree, and no recently displaced leaves carpeted the grass, felled from human movements within the expansive, solid branches.

Emme peered around the tree, careful to note all signs of recent movement. Only animal trails, some fresh, others long abandoned, spread from the shadowed side of the tree. Again she knelt. She selected a small piece of grassless earth from inside the footprint and raised it to her nose, sniffed once. An unknown animal-skin boot had made the print, and the tread remained unfamiliar to her. This stranger came from no village nearby.

A squirrel shot past her boots and up the trunk of the tree. Halfway it stopped, peered at her curiously, then scampered into the thick of the leaves.

Emme frowned, deeply puzzled. The trail could not possibly have just vanished, yet it always did. No matter how far she followed it, eventually it ended in a void.

Damn him. Emme scowled, kicked the trunk of the tree.

She turned to go home and flicked a glance at the sun. The end of the day neared, and Wendaya would berate Emme for their lack of supper. Not unusual; Wendaya would always find something to abuse Emme for. If not for a lack of food, it would be the first thing that came to mind, perhaps even some lie Wendaya had been fed.

Emme broke into a run and flew down the forest trail. Summer perspiration cooled on her brow as she ran. Her long, thin legs carried her with ease beyond denser woodland to the edge of the slope that fell gently to the clearing. At its base the village sat, smouldering in the summer twilight.

Emme stopped to observe the pattern of traffic. Nothing seemed untoward. The inhabitants drifted home for meals before most would leave to commune in the village drink-house. Three hunters returned from the eastern forest border, recent kills in

hand, and strode to the smokehouse. Others ambled in from tending outland crops and herds.

Tiny huts, scattered throughout the clearing, lay beneath several tree huts connected by suspension bridges. The early summer foliage of the mighty oaks and hornbeams shifted slightly, sighed in the tranquil breeze. Evening light danced between the leaves before drifting down through them to speckle the soft forest floor. It was a pretty village, spoilt only by its inhabitants.

Emme jogged down the slope, through a gap in the huts and onto the main village stretch.

“Wendaya’s looking for you,” one of the village boys called out on his way home. “She seems pretty mad, and we all know what that means.” He had the tone and sly grin of one anticipating dark retribution.

“Yeah, and let’s hope she finishes the job this time,” his companion answered as Emme ran past them. “Finally gets rid of Emme.”

The two laughed maliciously, and all the way down the street they congratulated each other for their stupid wit.

Emme dashed past the tiny timber huts. She ran down the narrow gap between two of them. Twine fences, supported by thick timber posts, marked the boundaries of each block. Everyone seemed so reluctant to share when they did not have to.

She hurried to the cluster of outdoor chimneys that were often lit when too hot to cook indoors. She knelt at one, felt inside the sooty chimney that was yet to be scrubbed by the lazy village chimneysweep. Her fingers groped for the hook that should contain . . . *Damn it.* Someone had stolen her hidden basket of berries. Now she *would* get a beating.

“Looking for something?” Serasayn, the young, burly son of the village chieftain, peered around one of the chimneys. His spiteful grin revealed he knew the answer to the question.

“You pig.” Emme snapped to her feet, stance ready and fists curled. “You stole my berries.”

“I just wanted to see what sort of bruise you would have tomorrow.”

“You vile pig. I’ll give you a bruise of your own right now if you don’t give me back my berries.”

“I’d have to vomit them. I ate them for my lunch.”

Emme launched at him, but Serasayn anticipated the movement. He bolted towards his house, shrieking his father’s name. Emme stopped. Serasayn’s father would have her thrown in the stocks and hurtled with stones if caught harming his smug little son.

Emme let out a string of curses as her enemy ran away. She stooped, picked up a rock and threw it at the retreating figure. It struck Serasayn on the back of the head with precise aim.

“You bitch.” His bulk jolted to a standstill, and his thick hand rubbed his head. He turned sideways, glowered at Emme. The thick hand gestured at her. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Right after you pay for eating my berries.” She took a theatrical step forward, and the coward dashed down the corridor of houses and into the safety of the homebound crowd. She could see just beyond the tiny gap in the houses where his fat figure paused on the main street to turn to her.

“Find a better hiding place,” Serasayn bellowed.

She briefly watched his heavy steps as he jogged from view and away to his hut. *He’ll probably run straight to a mirror where he can check his stupid looks.*

Emme sat down in the dirt and ash to think. She picked up a stick and repetitively stabbed a useless hole. She could go and find more food in the forest and receive a beating for tardiness. Or she could return home empty-handed.

Or – A better idea popped into her head, and she stood swiftly. She ducked behind houses, edged her way behind trees, until she reached Serasayn’s yard – a fenced area beneath his family’s tree hut. She carefully climbed the fence and crouched near the chicken coop. They weren’t Serasayn’s chickens; they were his mother’s. Regardless, it would mean no eggs for his breakfast.

Emme felt a moment of guilt flush her cheeks. She had never stolen before, despite those countless times the villagers stole from her and her mother.

The whole village hated Emme. They listened to Wendaya too often, and too often Wendaya listened to them. When she was a child, they had beaten and teased Emme as much as Wendaya did. When she learned to fight back, they found other, crueller ways to torment her – crueller even than stealing her food and belongings. They would report false stories to Wendaya, for they knew that the worst pain would always be Wendaya’s rage. All Emme had ever wanted was her mother’s love.

Nearly every day now, Wendaya beat Emme for something. Tonight it would at least not be because Emme had neglected to find food.

The grubby chickens squawked and fluttered when she reached in to take the eggs. She brushed off dirt and muck, then gently, almost lovingly, tucked the eggs into the animal-skin pouch around her waist. She counted them. Eight eggs – a good number for a meal. Of course, Wendaya would only eat

two. For a woman so slight, Wendaya could give such a good beating.

Emme returned home, eyes steely with resolve to cope with whatever Wendaya dished out. Emme paused at the tiny timber door, inhaled deeply and entered.

Instantly a shrill voice screamed from the back of the messy cottage. "Where have you been? You're late."

Emme knew she was not late. Not yet. Wendaya's rage would be founded on another illusive matter. Emme kicked aside a stack of Wendaya's dirty clothes that blocked the hut entrance. They struck the close timber wall and crumpled to the floor.

A sharp, shrewd face appeared from the dimness of the two-room hut. Wendaya sped towards Emme, broom in hand. Wendaya's dark hair, pulled tight off her face, made her face harsh. Still young compared to other women with daughters Emme's age, Wendaya had a speed that always caught Emme off guard.

"I've been getting us some dinner." Emme opened the pouch and carefully lifted an egg.

Wendaya swiftly swung the broom handle to Emme. It smacked against Emme's wrist and sent the egg flying across the room. The egg smashed against a timber wall, oozed sticky and orange to the floor. Pain forced a cry from Emme's lips. Emme gripped her good hand onto her throbbing wrist. *What was that for?* she wanted to scream, but nothing came out. It would not matter what it was for. It never did.

Wendaya pulled the broom handle back again and smacked it across Emme's temple. It cracked like fracturing bones through Emme's head.

She fell chest down to the floor, heard the gritty crunch as the eggs crushed inside the bag. They began to seep out the lacing. She did not cry out again as Wendaya hit her over and over with the broom handle. She simply lay quietly in the foetal position; eyes squeezed shut. *It will be over soon. It will be over soon.*

Time seemed suspended. The beating, just a few minutes, felt long in the descending darkness. The stick whacked her thigh, then no more. Emme hesitated to open her eyes. She heard scuffling about the hut, then the sounds of a fire being built and lit. Emme finally opened her eyes. Darkness hovered in the spaces the light did not reach. Wendaya would be preparing a hot tea for them as if nothing had happened.

Emme rose to her knees. Every inch of her body ached from bruises. She felt her wrists swell where the bulk of the beating had occurred. She groaned once, felt with fingertips the lump on her head, then stood.

The explanation may come. It did not always come, but this time it might. Wendaya put a hot cup on the table. She went to the store cupboard and pulled out a small sack of salty crackers. She untied the laces of the hessian bag and placed the rustling sack on the table, open for hands to reach in and grab the meagre, dull fare.

“I guess we just have tea and crackers tonight, do we?” Wendaya asked snidely.

Emme felt words thicken in her throat. What was it about her mother that made standing up for herself difficult? She could outfight almost any man in the village, could bawl insults with the best of them, and yet found herself childlike and vulnerable around her mother.

Emme stiffly sat down at the table. Silently she sipped her tea.

"I'm sorry I was so angry," Wendaya said softly as if an angel, not the devil. She always apologised, and somehow, Emme always forgave. "But I heard you were seen kissing that Serasayn boy."

I've never kissed a boy, Mother. Never. But you'd never believe that. Silence was always prudent.

"I've told you a thousand times, Mistake, men are dangerous," Wendaya continued. "They'll only take advantage of you. You don't want anything to do with men. Don't you see – that's why I'm so hard on you. Why I hit you. I want you to be tough so no man will ever take advantage of you like they did me."

Emme felt tears sting her eyes. Bitter pride swept them away. "Was it so bad that I resulted from that, Mother?" Emme's voice was barely a whisper.

Wendaya gave her a dark, hard look, and Emme knew the answer. Mistake. That's what she'd been named all her life – what she had been given at her compulsory birth ceremony. Mistake. When she was ten, Emme had taken matters into her own hands. She had shortened Mistake to M, then insisted that people spell her name E double-ME. No other spelling would do or the person would get a swift thumping. Of course, all but seven people in the village could not read or write – Emme included. But she had at least learned to spell her name, and insisted that every other illiterate person out there learn the difference too.

Wendaya still called Emme 'Mistake'. Nothing would change that, and somehow Emme felt too weak to stop her.

When would she fight back? When would she stand up to her mother? Emme was stronger than the tiny woman

who had once been the town's beauty, the town's delight. People whispered that Wendaya had been a happy, charming woman, loved by all, until one night and one drink changed everything.

Wendaya always insisted she had only ever consumed one drink at the village banquet, just one. Yet the next morning, she could not remember anything that happened. Eight months and three weeks later, Emme had been born, and Wendaya had become an outcast in a village that despised immoral women. If the father had just owned up to the child and agreed to live with Wendaya, all would have been forgiven, but no man had.

Wendaya had become bitter, angry, had hated Emme from the moment Emme was born. Had told Emme all her life not to trust men; that men were the vilest of creation and would always take advantage of women.

Emme believed her. After all, Emme was living proof of what men would do. And Emme went to great pains to see that men would not take advantage of her as they had her mother.

Poor Wendaya. Emme sharply pulled herself up. She always did that. Felt sorry for her mother and the suffering Emme's birth had caused the woman. Why did her mother make Emme feel like a vulnerable little child inside?

Emme slowly finished the rest of her mug of tea and hobbled over to her mat beside the hearth. The bag of crackers lay untouched. Wendaya packed the sack away, rinsed the mugs in a bucket of soapy water, and left without a goodnight. She shut the door to her bedroom. Emme listened for the soft clack of the lock, for the familiar scuffling in the bedroom. No doubt Wendaya would be brushing her hair for the next half-hour. Wendaya always did that; stared at the tarnished mirror and incessantly

brushed waist-length chestnut hair as if admiring a beauty long since passed. Resentment made Wendaya unattractive. Her brown eyes were no longer large, soft, but pinched and hard. Now only Emme's eyes shadowed what Wendaya's had once been.

Stiffly Emme lowered herself to the mat. Her bruises smarted terribly as they always did in summer. Winter's ice and snow from the forest soothed her stings and swells, but summer amplified the wounds. The pervasive heat and unrelenting mosquitoes, that even now whined around her ears, made it difficult to sleep off the injuries.

Emme lay on her aching back and stared at the underside of the thatched roof. She longed to run away, to start her own life. But where would she go? And who would accept her? Every village nearby knew the story of Mistake. She would be no better off there. And every neighbouring villager would only send her straight back rather than risk angering the chieftain of Underoak Village.

More than likely they would anger the chieftain if they sent Emme back. Emme laughed in the darkness, then groaned as bruises protested the violent movements. The bruises would heal, but somehow the hurt always remained inside.

She silently cursed the day some vile male had taken advantage of her drunken mother and conceived Emme's pitiful life.

Emme shook the thoughts from her head. Tomorrow, with distance between herself and Wendaya, Emme would be fiery again with a determination to make the most of her life. Yet here, on her bedmat, in this tiny, disorganised hut, she became the child who still longed for her mother's love. Not for the acceptance of

the villagers. They could go rot. But her mother – oh, how Emme longed to know what it felt like to have her mother wrap an arm around her; to tell Emme she loved her; that Emme was all Wendaya ever wanted. No, not necessarily Wendaya; it didn't have to be Wendaya. Any mother. She would accept any mother.

Emme patted the dagger in her pouch once, just to feel it was there. The egg yolk had congealed on the pelt. Emme would have to clean out the pouch, but not tonight. She was too sore, too weary to do anything but lie in the only comfortable position she could find.

Slowly Emme's eyes closed, and she fell into a shallow, fitful sleep. In the morning, she woke early. Peering out the window, she quickly deduced another hot cloudless day lay ahead. She donned an angora singlet-top, her thin deerskin pants and stiff pigskin boots, and tiptoed out of the house before Wendaya woke.

Emme had a task to complete. Find this mystery man. Of course, Wendaya would be angry that Emme had not told the villagers of the tracks sooner, but Emme did not want the villagers thumping through the forest trying to find the illusive stranger. Not one of the rotten villagers had the tracking skills Emme had and would only make it obvious to a man who did not want to be seen, that he was being pursued.

After washing her pouch in the river, Emme jogged along the forest trail, eyes focused for any unusual signs. No recent strange prints marked the forest floor. She veered down a left trail, leaving the main trail to wander where it willed. If she knew anything about her mystery man, he did not take key routes. She carefully chose a few more trails, some to the right, most to the left, then stopped abruptly.

Her eyes observed where the forest floor had been heavily disturbed as if something large had pushed through the undergrowth to find a track. The disturbance seemed to begin from nowhere as if the creature or person had suddenly appeared. Her eyes ran along the forest floor and noted where the disturbance met the path.

Emme knelt at the junction and smiled grimly. Many footprints, all careless, led along the path where it inclined upward. Cautiously she followed the imprints. This trail led to the caves. Perhaps the group had gone there. Whoever they were, they were neither villagers nor neighbours.

What foreigners would be out wandering through this part of the forest overnight? For that matter, was her mystery man one of them?

Nearing the caves, she heard voices. The trees provided ample cover as she inched her way to a better viewing point. She glanced up at the caves ahead. Five men, all dressed in similar and unusual clothes, stood around a fire. They stared at it, stretched hands over it to ward off the early morning chill. The enticing smell of cooking meat hung in the air. They muttered words to each other that Emme strained to hear.

Emme immediately detected the abnormality of the men. Solid knee-high black boots, brown woollen jumpers and thick pants clashed with the brilliant summer weather the forest had been enjoying. Each wore a tiny tight white cap on his crown that made Emme want to laugh despite the danger. If they hoped those caps would shield them from the hot sun, they were gravely mistaken. She noted the hands of some who poked sticks into the fire. Dark green and brown designs coloured the back of each right hand – a tattoo perhaps – unrecognisable from where she stood.

Emme slid the dagger from her waist pouch. The simple bronze dagger, normally intimately familiar to her palm, felt faintly foreign. Puzzled, she glanced at the bolted bone handle, then scowled with realisation. Although she had cleaned the pouch early that morning, the dagger still felt sticky from the egg that had crushed through the bag.

Stealthily Emme moved to within earshot. Sheltered by silver fir trunks, she picked her way over clusters of broken cones.

“Well, hello there.” A voice behind Emme startled her. She spun, sticky dagger curled back over her shoulder ready to throw.

An older man, early fifties, and adorned with the same tattoo and cap, stood with a pile of thick sticks in his arms. Swiftly he raised hands, releasing the sticks. The clatter of wood against wood alerted his companions. The five men around the fire stopped their conversation and looked to the disturbance. Eyes noted the dishevelled, abandoned stick pile, then the face of the man above it. They tried to follow his line of sight but from their position, could only see the tree he seemingly stared at.

“We mean you no harm,” the unaccompanied man said to Emme. “My friends and I are just camping here the night.”

A soft-eyed man called from beside the fire, “Anderson? What is it? What have you seen?”

“A woman here with a knife.” The men around the fire shifted at the response and caught their first glimpse of Emme.

Emme stared defiantly from the group to the man. “Who are you all, and what are you doing here?”

“We’re just passing through,” the man before her said.

“Passing through? From where? You don’t look like men from around these parts.”

The isolated man seemed to notice something on Emme's arm still curled back ready to throw her weapon. His eyes narrowed slightly before his expression changed to an odd friendliness that sent a sharp prickle down Emme's back. "Will you come and share some breakfast with us?" He gestured to the fire.

"No. Tell me where you're from or I'll report this to my chieftain."

"We're from . . ." The man faltered. "Very far away. You wouldn't know the place."

"What are you doing here?"

"Passing through," he replied. "Wouldn't you like some breakfast? We promise we're not going to harm you."

"No one has ever passed through. There is nothing to pass through to. I've never seen anyone who isn't from the nearby villages."

"Could you possibly put that dagger down?" the man asked. "It's making me nervous."

Emme considered briefly. "I'll put it down, but not away. I'm very quick with a dagger, you know."

"I don't doubt it. Will you come and share our fire? We'll tell you all about where we're from."

No one spoke for some time. Not even the silver fir needles stirred. "Very well then," Emme said, all caution gone. She turned and walked confidently to the tall fire, boots cracking the fir cones. She knew if she had to, she could run faster than these old men. Besides, she wanted to know if her mystery man was one of them.

She walked to the fire and feigned interest in the meat roasting over the coals whilst she glanced at their feet. No, not

her mystery man, but more than likely connected. In her twenty-two years, she had only ever seen one stranger. Now she had seen six with a seventh out there somewhere. The events were entirely too unusual to be anything but related.

She briefly noted them all, their strange linen and wool clothes, no animal skins, no furs. Most had dark hair – some with flecks of grey – and white skin. Only one had hair so grey it was almost white. No tans like the villagers. The youngest seemed fifty, the eldest, at a guess, late sixties. The tattoos were of nothing notable; just a swirling, twisted design, like ropes tangled into a complex, symmetrical pattern. Difficult to copy, yet each appeared identical.

“So where are you all heading to?”

“Do you know the country well?” one of the dark-haired men asked.

“No.” With the forest her whole world, she only knew the surrounding villages.

“Well then, it’s no use explaining, is it,” the man replied with a thin smile.

Emme glared at him. “Try me.”

The man she had first threatened – Anderson they had called him – turned and whispered something to the white-haired man beside him. The white one’s eyes lit briefly, then to the others he tapped his wrist. Although clearly intended to be covert, it did not go unnoticed by Emme. She began to wonder how these heavy-booted, incompetent men managed to catch that creature on the fire in the first place. Especially with no weapons, Emme noted for the first time. A creeping sense of dread started to empty her insides.

She pretended not to notice the reaction to the clandestine tapping of the wrist. The men clearly knew exactly what the

gesture meant, and their faces reacted with thoughts Emme could only guess at. This was entirely too suspicious. She backed away a step, feigning a reaction to the heat of the fire.

“So tell us about yourself,” Anderson said.

“Nothing to tell. I come from Underoak Village. That village just over there.” A hand waved with more casualness than she felt. “My chieftain is the most powerful chieftain of Oakwood Forest.” She placed intentional emphasis on ‘powerful’. They did not need to know he was too far away to hear any cries for help.

“And your parents?” one man asked.

Emme’s face closed over. “I believe I am asking the questions here. You are intruding on *my* forest. Now, why are you travelling?”

The men exchanged questioning glances, seemed reluctant to speak.

“Are you chasing someone?”

Anderson flinched faintly. “Why do you ask?”

“Because there are another man’s tracks, and he’s circling the forest. Are you trying to find him?”

“A man?” Anderson asked. “How do you know it’s a man?”

“Pl-*ease*.” Emme rolled her eyes at him. “I am quite skilled at tracking. I found all of *you*, didn’t I?” *Not that it was hard, you careless thugs.*

“Is he a villager?”

“No - he has unusual shoes. Like yours but not quite. A much more impressive sole.”

The men turned and whispered to each other. Hands gestured strongly. Long frustrating moments passed. But for the low voices, Emme could easily have supposed they had

forgotten about her. She guessed she could have just walked away and left them to their quiet arguing, but the few intriguing phrases she caught, phrases that made little sense, kept her grounded with curiosity. "But we have no time." "Not if he's here." "But then she might . . ."

They finally seemed to reach some verdict.

"Child," the grey, almost white-haired man said.

"I'm not a child; I'm twenty-two winters."

"Of course." The man smiled gently. "Madam, this is -"

"Madam is even worse. Don't call me madam."

"What may I call you, then?"

"I'm Emme. Spelt E Double-M E."

The man smiled faintly, then the smile faded. "Emme - this is going to sound rather strange, but you are in danger. We cannot say why, but we must hurry. We do not have much time before he finds you."

"Before who finds me?"

"I'm afraid we cannot tell you his name."

"Why?"

"We can protect you from him, but you must let us. You must let us take you somewhere safe."

"Safe? My village is safe. The chieftain is the most powerful of any of the villages."

"I'm afraid, child - Emme - that your chieftain is of no use here. The matter is far more complicated than that."

"Then you'd better explain it."

"We can't," the man called Anderson said. "It will only endanger you if we do. But we can take you to a place where we *can* actually explain it to you. You just have to trust us and say that you are willing to go."

Emme took another step back. Her hand tightened on the bone handle of the dagger. "Go where? Where is this place?"

"To our city."

"Your city? What's a city?"

"It's like a very big village," one of the older men said. "Like a thousand of your village in size."

Emme laughed curtly. "Places like that don't exist."

"Yes, they do." Anderson furtively looked around as though expecting dangers any moment. He turned back to Emme. "Please, madam - Emme. I know it's a big ask, but you must trust us or he will find you. And he only means you harm."

"Who? Why are you saying all of this?"

"That we cannot tell you either, but you must trust us. You are in danger."

Emme took another step backwards. "You don't even know who I am. You didn't even know my name. You didn't even know what village I was from. You must have the wrong person."

"No, we don't have the wrong person." Anderson took a step forward, hand outstretched as if to take hers. "Please, all can be explained, if you just come with us."

Fear and determination shot like a potent drug through Emme's veins. She turned and bolted down the path.

"Someone stop her," Anderson ordered.

Behind her she heard running, the crunching of sticks, fir cones and brittle bracken. Foliage of undergrowth hissed as swift legs pushed past. Many men followed. She quickened her pace. Her long legs leapt swiftly over undergrowth and into the dense heart of the forest where every tree, every tall shrub, every vine, provided perfect shelter.

She easily lost them. Her speed and knowledge of lesser-known tracks gave her a superior advantage. To be safe, she tucked the dagger in her pouch, gripped the thick low-lying branches of a pine and scrambled up the scratchy trunk. She hoisted up into the highest branches and sat, puffing.

What was that all about? Surely they had the wrong person. She pitied the person they were talking about. Those six men may have acted politely on the outside, but something sinister lay beneath the surface of their intentions. Well, she would just stay out of their way until they found whoever it was they looked for. But at a distance, she would keep an eye on their comings and goings. The sooner they left Oakwood Forest, the better.

She wondered then if she should tell the chieftain. It was her duty as forest tracker to report any incidences, no matter how minor, but those village thugs would probably march in here and destroy the strangers before she had a chance to find out answers. The chieftain always opted for violence over cunning.

Emme shifted around on the spiky branch and looked out through dark green pine needles behind her. A faint ribboning rise of smoke caught her attention. It seemed too thin, too controlled, to be the beginnings of a forest fire. Most likely it belonged to a single campfire.

Emme's brows dipped, puzzled. No village lay that way. The forest was too dense, too wild, for permanent habitation. But several trails wound through there, mostly used by hunters from other villages. However, a hunter rarely risked a fire that would scare away the game. Only winter demanded fires to ward off frostbite.

She scanned the rich-green tree line flecked with yellow sunlight. No other signs of movement caught her attention.

Perhaps the hunters smoked out their game. Occasionally that occurred, but mostly in winter when the baking summer sunshine had not ripened the land for a forest fire. Still, it was worth investigation.

She waited more moments until sure she was safe from the strange men, then climbed down the tree with graceless ease. Her feet thudded onto the soft needle blanket beneath the mighty pine.

She patted the trunk as though it had deliberately provided protection for her. Then she peered around and darted into shadows.

She found a thin trail, overgrown slightly with new fern fronds and lantana shoots. The tufts of grass growing under the shady shelter of the fronds had recently been disturbed. She knelt, felt the ground. Her mystery man.

Dark excitement stirred. With careful skill, she manoeuvred through the thick woods to where the smoke rose. She stopped at the edge of a small, leaf-strewn clearing and peeped around the trunk of a young elm.

A handsome man, possibly in his late thirties, squatted trying to get a fire going that poured smoke into the atmosphere. Early morning light had not yet dried the dew from the clearing that was edged by curly fronds and soft balls of yellow flowers. The fire's rock-edged bed was neither new, nor recently used. Forest gatherers in winters past must have warmed hands and feet over the sooty circle. She noted that the stranger had courage to be occupying a spot he could not have known was no longer used. Courage, perhaps, or ignorance of brutally maintained territorial rules.

So this was her mystery man. The man stopped poking at noncompliant sticks, calmly ran a hand through his dark, neat

hair. A short brown beard hugged his chin and offset apple-green eyes. His all-cotton clothes, no skins or furs, confirmed her suspicions. He was somehow connected to the other strangers. He wore a cotton tunic with elaborate woven designs Emme had never seen before, tucked in by a sword belt oddly empty of a sword. His pants were thick but smooth. He looked muscular, strong, as he knelt beside the fire, poking more green sticks into it. She smiled faintly at his poor forest skills.

Still staring at the smoking sticks, the man said, "Well, don't just stand there laughing at me. You could at least come and help me."

Emme stiffened. Was there another person about? Her eyes darted sideways as she scanned the shadows.

The man looked up from the fire, directly at her. "You can come out from behind that tree. I know you're there."

Emme frowned. Her skills seemed to have greatly lapsed today. No, they couldn't have. She could out-spy, even at close range, the best trackers of any village. He must have been talking to someone else.

"I would really appreciate a hand with this fire. I'm very cold from the dew that fell this morning." He was looking straight at her, despite the heavy shadows enveloping her. Emme noted warily his well-pronounced words and polite sentences, the smooth voice so different from most of the gruff male villagers. He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Emme straightened and stepped from the trees. "All right, I'll help you with your fire. Your sticks are too green and the wrong kind of timber. You need to find darker wood that looks like..." She looked at the ground around her feet for a specimen. "None of this wood is any good."

The man sat back onto the ground, leant back on immaculate hands – hands that could not have done even a day of hard labour. “Is that what my problem is?” His eyes seemed to be smiling.

Emme turned behind her and swept up a few dry sticks. Thicker hornbeam branches, a dry, very hard timber, lay a few paces away. She picked them up, ears all the while alert to any sound of movement near the fire.

She stepped back into the clearing, branches in hand. She squatted on the other side of the fire, winced briefly as stretched bruises ached on her legs, then piled the sticks onto the fire. Soon a fine blaze replaced the smoke. The sweet scent of baking timber filled the tiny clearing.

“Thank you,” the man said, and Emme knew he had never removed his eyes from her.

“How did you know I was there?” she asked.

The man only smiled as though hiding a pleasant surprise. “I’m Jaimis, by the way.” He stretched out his hand politely.

Emme ignored the hand. “Emme. Spelt E Double-M E.”

The man’s brow arched neatly. “How else would you spell it?”

“So, what are you doing here in these woods? You’re obviously not from around here.”

“I’m running away from some very bad people who hope to harm me.”

“Would that be six men?”

The man nodded. “Yes. Have you seen them?”

“Back there.” She gestured broadly behind her. “Why? What did you do to them?”

"It's all very complicated, and you'll have to forgive me if I don't want to talk about it. Let's just say that I'm trying to stop some very bad things they are doing in my city, and so now they are trying to stop *me*."

City - the big village the men spoke of. "I see. They did seem a little bit sinister."

"You spoke to them?"

Emme nodded.

"Did they ask about me?"

"Why would they think I know you?"

Jaimis watched Emme briefly. "I only meant perhaps they'd asked if you had seen me around."

"I mentioned that I had. I'm sorry if that gets you into trouble, but you people have got to stop sneaking around my forest. Wherever you came from, you should take the issues home with you."

"Perhaps you're right. I am going back to my city, today hopefully."

"How far away is this city?"

"Very far."

"And they followed you all the way here? You must have really made them angry."

"Yes - I did." The man turned to his pack and began rummaging through it. Emme's hand instantly went to her pouch, ready to remove the dagger. At last the man drew out a sack of food. "Listen, I have some salted meat here. Would you like to share some? You don't look like you eat much."

"What do you mean? I eat just fine."

"Where I come from, you would be considered too skinny."

"I'm a perfectly acceptable size in my village. Maybe I don't have hips and breasts like the other girls, but who wants that?"

A smile curled half his mouth, and his eyes danced a little. "I would have thought that girls do."

"I'm not a girl - not one that a man can take advantage of anyway."

"I see. So do you want some?" He pulled the meat from the wrappings and held it up for her to see.

"What sort of meat is that? It looks strange."

"Beef."

"Beef? What's beef?"

Jaimis watched her for a moment, as though trying to guess at her question. "Beef is from cows."

"What's a cow?"

His brows shot up. "You don't know what a cow is?" The brows lowered. "No, I don't suppose you do in this forest. Do you have buffalo?"

"No."

"Oxen?"

"Yes."

"It's the same animal family."

"You eat your oxen? What pulls your ploughs?"

"Well, no, we don't eat our oxen as such. And mostly our horses pull our ploughs."

Emme laughed. "Horses? You've got wild horses pulling your ploughs? Now I know you're lying."

"Well, they're not wild where I come from. They're quite tame."

"Is that what you're wearing on your feet? Cowskin?"

Emme openly studied the stiff glossy black boots that laced up to his knees over the neat brown pants.

“Yes. We don’t call it cowskin; we call it leather. So do you want to try some?”

Emme nodded. He broke off a chunk and passed her some. She settled onto her bottom and chewed. “Tough. It tastes like . . . hmmm, not like deer, but close.”

Emme pulled back a little against the heat of the fire.

The man stared at her arms. “You have some very nasty bruises there. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Emme stiffened slightly.

“You don’t look fine. Did someone hurt you?”

“I said I’m fine.”

“That mark on your wrist. That’s not a bruise, is it.”

“This?” She held up her wrist to the light. “This is a birthmark.” She inspected the unusual brown mark that had adorned her slender wrist since birth. Shaped like a small wobbly cauldron with its handle up, the mark made Emme’s wrist look dirty, even after she had scrubbed herself clean with pumice stone and soap. She shrugged to herself and tucked her hand back in her lap. “So tell me about this city.”

“I can help you with those injuries, you know. I have a salve here.”

“I’ll be all right. I always heal.”

“Always? Does this happen to you all the time?”

“It’s my mother. She does it when I make her mad.”

“She shouldn’t treat you like that, you know. No one should treat anyone like that.”

Emme stared at him. Of course – he did not know about the circumstances of her birth. He most certainly would not be

so seemingly concerned if he knew. She decided to enjoy her anonymity, however brief it was.

“So tell me, Kara, how long has your mother treated you like that?”

“My name is Emme.”

“What did I say?”

“Kara.”

“Ah yes – sorry, Emme. My mistake.”

“The names are very different.” She stared at him coldly.

“My sister’s name is Kara. You look a lot like her.”

“Then your sister must look very different to you.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Yes, she does; she’s a half-sister.”

“Only one sister?”

“Only one.”

“Brothers?”

“None.” The two watched each other briefly, then Jaimis added, “Will you let me rub a salve into those wounds? I’ll feel much better if you’ll let me.”

Emme scowled. “You can damn-well keep your hands to yourself, you pervert.”

Jaimis blinked once. “Very well, if that’s the way you feel.” His face relaxed. “You shouldn’t have to put up with that, you know.”

“I wouldn’t if I had anywhere else to go.”

“Don’t you have any towns you can travel to?”

“I only know this forest.”

He seemed to be considering something. Finally he said, “Why don’t you come with me to my city.”

“Where is this city?”

“It’s difficult to explain. It’s very far away.”

“Why would I want to go there?” Emme’s mouth was flat, but her eyes were faintly curious.

“It’s a great place. I have a lot of influence there. I could help you get some work, find you a house.”

“Perhaps you should first tell me about these bad men. Whatever those six bad men are doing, it does make me wonder if your city is such a great place to live.”

Jaimis surprised Emme by laughing.

“That’s hardly a funny question.” Her acorn-brown eyes blazed.

“No, you’re right. You needn’t worry about those bad men. I know how to handle them, and you won’t find them a problem.”

“So how long a walk is it to this city?”

“Do you want to come?”

“I’m warming up to the idea.”

Jaimis slid the leftover beef into the food sack. He dropped the sack back in his half-empty bag. Not a lot of belongings for one who had travelled so far from this – this city. “Well, I’ll tell you what: you say you’ll come with me, and I’ll tell you all about it on the way.”

“And if I don’t like the sound of this city after you’ve told me about it? I can’t exactly go home once I’ve run away. The beatings will be even worse.” She popped the last of the strange meat into her mouth and swallowed.

“I can assure you that my city and what awaits you there, is far better than those beatings you receive all the time. Far better. Emme, do you have any other family other than your mother?”

“No.”

“No one in nearby villages?”

She shook her head.

“Do you have friends in the village?”

Emme’s stony silence spoke volumes.

“No? Then what have you got to lose? You have nothing back there.”

Emme stuck her chin out. “I have my forest.”

“Is it worth going through beatings just to live in this forest?”

Emme faltered. “No – well, I guess not.”

“So do you want to come with me?”

Emme felt a flush of courage. How long had she yearned to run away? Now here was her chance. And if he turned out to be a rotten travelling companion, she could always find out where this city was and go on her own. He couldn’t possibly treat her any worse than her mother did, unless he took advantage of her; but he would have one hell of a fight on his hands if he tried anything. She was well able to hold her own against a man like Jaimis.

“Well?” Jaimis asked.

“All right, then. I’ll go with you.”

Jaimis grinned, and his eyes gleamed as though she had just handed him a nugget of gold. He stood swiftly.

“We’re not going now, are we?” she asked.

Jaimis ignored her and took a step to her. She snapped to her feet, fingers at the mouth of the pouch. Jaimis began to murmur something.

“Speak up, I can’t hear you.”

Again he ignored her. The mumbling continued. A hand traced a pattern in the air, and she felt something unnatural stir

behind her. She turned fully to see a swirling, tumbling black image appear, like a large oval mirror that reflected a bleak night sky. It sounded like a rushing, howling wind, and it pulled at her as though she were water and it was a black cavernous mouth sucking her in. She steeled back against the pull, dug her foot into the dewy soil, stretched her muscles to take a step back against the current. "What the -"

Without warning, Jaimis stepped to Emme's back and pushed at her, dislodged her balance of locked posture. She felt the pull grow stronger, felt herself fall; fall forward and towards the black space. Something caught her before she fell to her face - a violent up-current. Soon she was rushing into the void, like a body trapped within a fiercely flooding river. Then the void swelled to become a confined, choking universe within a universe. Within terrifying seconds her forest, her whole world, had completely disappeared.