URSULA KROEBER LE GUIN

ON THE HIGH MARSH

THE ISLAND OF SEMEL LIES north and west across the Pelnish Sea from Havnor, south and west of the Enlades. Though it is one of the great isles of the Earthsea Archipelago, there aren't many stories from Semel. Enlad has its glorious history, and Havnor its wealth, and Paln its ill repute, but Semel has only cattle and sheep, forests and little towns, and the great silent volcano called Andanden standing over all.

South of Andanden lies a land where the ashes fell a hundred feet deep when last the volcano spoke. Rivers and streams cut their way seaward through that high plain, winding and pooling, spreading and wandering, making a marsh of it, a big, desolate, waterland with a far horizon, few trees, not many people. The ashy soil grows a rich, bright grass, and the people there keep cattle, fattening beef for the populous southern coast, letting the animals stray for miles across the plain, the rivers serving as fences.

As mountains will, Andanden makes the weather. It gathers clouds around it. The summer is short, the winter long, out on the high marsh.

In the early darkness of a winter day, a traveler stood at the windswept crossing of two paths, neither very promising, mere cattle tracks among the reeds, and looked for some sign of the way he should take.

As he came down the last slope of the mountain, he had seen houses here and there out in the marshlands, a village not far away. He had thought he was on the way to the village, but had taken a wrong turning somewhere. Tall reeds rose up close beside the paths, so that if a light shone anywhere he could not see it. Water chuckled softly somewhere near his feet. He had used up his shoes walking round Andanden on the cruel roads of black lava. The soles were worn right through, and his feet ached with the icy damp of the marsh paths.

It grew darker quickly. A haze was coming up from the south, blotting out the sky. Only above the huge, dim bulk of the mountain did stars burn clearly. Wind whistled in the reeds, soft, dismal.

The traveler stood at the crossway and whistled back at the reeds.

Something moved on one of the tracks, something big, dark, in the darkness.

"Are you there, my dear?" said the traveler. He spoke in the Old Speech, the Language

of the Making. “Come along, then, Ulla,” he said, and the heifer came a step or two towards him, towards her name, while he walked to meet her. He made out the big head more by touch than sight, stroking the silken dip between her eyes, scratching her forehead at the roots of the nubbin horns. “Beautiful, you are beautiful,” he told her, breathing her grassy breath, leaning against her large warmth. “Will you lead me, dear Ulla? Will you lead me where I need to go?”

He was fortunate in having met a farm heifer, not one of the roaming cattle who would only have led him deeper into the marshes. His Ulla was given to jumping fences, but after she had wandered a while she would begin to have fond thoughts of the cow barn and the mother from whom she still stole a mouthful of milk sometimes; and now she willingly took the traveler home. She walked, slow but purposeful, down one of the tracks, and he went with her, a hand on her hip when the way was wide enough. When she waded a knee-deep stream, he held on to her tail. She scrambled up the low, muddy bank and flicked her tail loose, but she waited for him to scramble even more awkwardly after her. Then she plodded gently on. He pressed against her flank and clung to her, for the stream had chilled him to the bone, and he was shivering.

“Moo,” said his guide, softly, and he saw the dim, small square of yellow light just a little to his left.

“Thank you,” he said, opening the gate for the heifer, who went to greet her mother, while he stumbled across the dark houseyard to the door.

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IT WOULD BE BERRY AT the door, though why he knocked she didn’t know. “Come in, you fool!” she said, and he knocked again, and she put down her mending and went to the door. “Can you be drunk already?” she said, and then saw him.

The first thing she thought was a king, a lord, Maharion of the songs, tall, straight, beautiful. The next thing she thought was a beggar, a lost man, in dirty clothes, hugging himself with shivering arms.

He said, “I lost my way. Have I come to the village?” His voice was hoarse and harsh, a beggar’s voice, but not a beggar’s accent.

“It’s a half mile on,” said Gift.

“Is there an inn?”

“Not till you’d come to Oraby, a ten-twelve miles on south.” She considered only briefly. “If you need a room for the night, I have one. Or San might, if you’re going to the village.”

“I’ll stay here if I may,” he said in that princely way, with his teeth chattering, holding on to the doorjamb to keep on his feet.

“Take your shoes off,” she said, “they’re soaking. Come in then.” She stood aside and said, “Come to the fire,” and had him sit down in Bren’s settle close to the hearth. “Stir the fire up a bit,” she said. “Will you have a bit of soup? It’s still hot.”

“Thank you, mistress,” he muttered, crouching at the fire. She brought him a bowl of broth. He drank from it eagerly yet warily, as if long unaccustomed to hot soup.

“You came over the mountain?”

He nodded.

“Whatever for?”

“To come here,” he said. He was beginning to tremble less. His bare feet were a sad sight, bruised, swollen, sodden. She wanted to tell him to put them right to the fire’s warmth, but didn’t like to presume. Whatever he was, he wasn’t a beggar by choice.

“Not many come here to the High Marsh,” she said. “Peddlers and such. But not in winter.”

He finished his soup, and she took the bowl. She sat down in her place, the stool by the oil lamp to the right of the hearth, and took up her mending. “Get warm through, and then I’ll show you your bed,” she said. “There’s no fire in that room. Did you meet weather, up on the mountain? They say there’s been snow.”

“Some flurries,” he said. She got a good look at him now in the light of lamp and fire. He was not a young man, thin, not as tall as she had thought. It was a fine face, but there was something wrong, something amiss. He looks ruined, she thought, a ruined man.

“Why would you come to the Marsh?” she asked. She had a right to ask, having taken him in, yet she felt a discomfort in pressing the question.

“I was told there’s a murrain among the cattle here.” Now that he wasn’t all locked up with cold his voice was beautiful. He talked like the tale-tellers when they spoke the parts of the heroes and the dragonlords. Maybe he was a teller or a singer? But no; the murrain, he had said.

“There is.”

“I may be able to help the beasts.”

“You’re a curer?”

He nodded.

“Then you’ll be more than welcome. The plague is terrible among the cattle. And getting worse.”

He said nothing. She could see the warmth coming into him, untying him.

“Put your feet up to the fire,” she said abruptly. “I have some old shoes of my husband’s.” It cost her something to say that, yet when she had said it she felt released, untied too. What was she keeping Bren’s shoes for, anyhow? They were too small for Berry and too big for her. She’d given away his clothes, but kept the shoes, she didn’t know what for. For this fellow, it would seem. Things came round if you could wait for them, she thought. “I’ll set ’em out for you,” she said. “Yours are perished.”

He glanced at her. His dark eyes were large, deep, opaque like a horse’s eyes, unreadable.

“He’s dead,” she said, “two years. The marsh fever. You have to watch out for that, here. The water. I live with my brother. He’s in the village, at the tavern. We keep a dairy. I make cheese. Our herd’s been all right,” and she made the sign to avert evil. “I keep ’em close in. Out on the ranges, the murrain’s very bad. Maybe the cold weather’ll put an end to it.”

“More likely to kill the beasts that sicken with it,” the man said. He sounded a bit sleepy.

“I’m called Gift,” she said. “My brother’s Berry.”

“Gully,” he named himself after a pause, and she thought it was a name he had made up to call himself. It did not fit him. Nothing about him fit together, made a whole. Yet she felt no distrust of him. She was easy with him. He meant no harm to her. She thought there was kindness in him, the way he spoke of the animals. He would have a way with them, she thought. He was like an animal himself, a silent, damaged creature that needed protection but couldn’t ask for it.

“Come,” she said, “before you fall asleep there,” and he followed her obediently to Berry’s room, which wasn’t much more than a cupboard built onto the corner of the house. Her room was behind the chimney. Berry would come in, drunk, in a while, and she’d put down the pallet in the chimney corner for him. Let the traveler have a good

bed for a night. Maybe he'd leave a copper or two with her when he went on. There was a terrible shortage of coppers in her household these days.

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HE WOKE, AS HE ALWAYS did, in his room in the Great House. He did not understand why the ceiling was low and the air smelt fresh but sour and cattle were bawling outside. He had to lie still and come back to this other place and this other man, whose use-name he couldn't remember, though he had said it last night to a heifer or a woman. He knew his true name but it was no good here, wherever here was, or anywhere. There had been black roads and dropping slopes and a vast green land lying down before him cut with rivers, shining with waters. A cold wind blowing. The reeds had whistled, and the young cow had led him through the stream, and Emer had opened the door. He had known her name as soon as he saw her. But he must use some other name. He must not call her by her name. He must remember what name he had told her to call him. He must not be Irioth, though he was Irioth. Maybe in time he would be another man. No; that was wrong; he must be this man. This man's legs ached and his feet hurt. But it was a good bed, a feather bed, warm, and he need not get out of it yet. He drowsed a while, drifting away from Irioth.

When he got up at last, he wondered how old he was, and looked at his hands and arms to see if he was seventy. He still looked forty, though he felt seventy and moved like it, wincing. He got his clothes on, foul as they were from days and days of travel. There was a pair of shoes under the chair, worn but good, strong shoes, and a pair of knit wool stockings to go with them. He put the stockings on his battered feet and limped into the kitchen. Emer stood at the big sink, straining something heavy in a cloth.

"Thank you for these and the shoes," he said, and thanking her for the gift, remembered her use-name but said only, "mistress."

"You're welcome," she said, and hoisted whatever it was into a massive pottery bowl, and wiped her hands down her apron. He knew nothing at all about women. He had not lived where women were since he was ten years old. He had been afraid of them, the women that shouted at him to get out of the way in that great other kitchen long ago. But since he had been traveling about in Earthsea he had met women and found them easy to be with, like the animals; they went about their business not paying much attention to him unless he frightened them. He tried not to do that. He had no wish or reason to frighten them. They were not men.

"Would you like some fresh curds? It makes a good breakfast." She was eyeing him, but not for long, and not meeting his eyes. Like an animal, like a cat, she was, sizing him up but not challenging. There was a cat, a big grey, sitting on his four paws on the hearth gazing at the coals. Irioth accepted the bowl and spoon she handed him and sat

down on the settle. The cat jumped up beside him and purred.

“Look at that,” said the woman. “He’s not friendly with most folk.”

“It’s the curds.”

“He knows a curer, maybe.”

It was peaceful here with the woman and the cat. He had come to a good house.

“It’s cold out,” she said. “Ice on the trough this morning. Will you be going on, this day?”

There was a pause. He forgot that he had to answer in words. “I’d stay if I might,” he said. “I’d stay here.”

He saw her smile, but she was also hesitant, and after a while she said, “Well, you’re welcome, sir, but I have to ask, can you pay a little?”

“Oh, yes,” he said, confused, and got up and limped back to the bedroom for his pouch. He brought her a piece of money, a little Enladian crownpiece of gold.

“Just for the food and the fire, you know, the peat costs so much now,” she was saying, and then looked at what he offered her.

“Oh, sir,” she said, and he knew he had done wrong.

“There’s nobody in the village could change that,” she said. She looked up into his face for a moment. “The whole village together couldn’t change that!” she said, and laughed. It was all right, then, though the word “change” rang and rang in his head.

“It hasn’t been changed,” he said, but he knew that was not what she meant. “I’m sorry,” he said. “If I stayed a month, if I stayed the winter, would that use it up? I should have a place to stay, while I work with the beasts.”

“Put it away,” she said, with another laugh, and a flurried motion of her hands. “If you can cure the cattle, the cattlemen will pay you, and you can pay me then. Call that surety, if you like. But put it away, sir! It makes me dizzy to look at it.—Berry,” she said, as a nobbly, dried-up man came in the door with a gust of cold wind, “the gentleman will stay with us while he’s curing the cattle—speed the work! He’s given us surety of payment. So you’ll sleep in the chimney corner, and him in the room. This is my brother Berry, sir.”

Berry ducked his head and muttered. His eyes were dull. It seemed to Irioth that the

man had been poisoned. When Berry went out again, the woman came closer and said, resolute, in a low voice, “There’s no harm in him but the drink, but there’s not much left of him but the drink. It’s eaten up most of his mind, and most of what we have. So, do you see, put up your money where he won’t see it, if you don’t mind, sir. He won’t come looking for it. But if he saw it, he’d take it. He often doesn’t know what he’s doing, do you see.”

“Yes,” Irioth said. “I understand. You are a kind woman.” She was talking about him, about his not knowing what he was doing. She was forgiving him. “A kind sister,” he said. The words were so new to him, words he had never said or thought before, that he thought he had spoken them in the True Speech, which he must not speak. But she only shrugged, with a frowning smile.

“Times I could shake his fool head off,” she said, and went back to her work.

He had not known how tired he was until he came to haven. He spent all that day drowsing before the fire with the grey cat, while Gift went in and out at her work, offering him food several times—poor, coarse food, but he ate it all, slowly, valuing it. Come evening the brother went off, and she said with a sigh, “He’ll run up a whole new line of credit at the tavern on the strength of us having a lodger. Not that it’s your fault.”

“Oh, yes,” Irioth said. “It was my fault.” But she forgave; and the grey cat was pressed up against his thigh, dreaming. The cat’s dreams came into his mind, in the low fields where he spoke with the animals, the dusky places. The cat leapt there, and then there was milk, and the deep soft thrilling. There was no fault, only the great innocence. No need for words. They would not find him here. He was not here to find. There was no need to speak any name. There was nobody but her, and the cat dreaming, and the fire flickering. He had come over the dead mountain on black roads, but here the streams ran slow among the pastures.

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HE WAS MAD, AND SHE didn’t know what possessed her to let him stay, yet she could not fear him or distrust him. What did it matter if he was mad? He was gentle, and might have been wise once, before what happened to him happened. And he wasn’t so mad as all that. Mad in patches, mad at moments. Nothing in him was whole, not even his madness. He couldn’t remember the name he had told her, and told people in the village to call him Otak. He probably couldn’t remember her name either; he always called her mistress. But maybe that was his courtesy. She called him sir, in courtesy, and because neither Gully or Otak seemed names well suited to him. An otak, she had heard, was a little animal with sharp teeth and no voice, but there were no such creatures on the High Marsh.

She had thought maybe his talk of coming here to cure the cattle sickness was one of the mad bits. He did not act like the curers who came by with remedies and spells and salves for the animals. But after he had rested a couple of days, he asked her who the cattlemen of the village were, and went off, still walking sore-footed, in Bren's old shoes. It made her heart turn in her, seeing that.

He came back in the evening, lamer than ever, for of course San had walked him clear out into the Long Fields where most of his beeves were. Nobody had horses but Alder, and they were for his cowboys. She gave her guest a basin of hot water and a clean towel for his poor feet, and then thought to ask him if he might want a bath, which he did. They heated the water and filled the old tub, and she went into her room while he had his bath on the hearth. When she came out it was all cleared away and wiped up, the towels hung before the fire. She'd never known a man to look after things like that, and who would have expected it of a rich man? Wouldn't he have servants, where he came from? But he was no more trouble than the cat. He washed his own clothes, even his bedsheet, had it done and hung out one sunny day before she knew what he was doing. "You needn't do that, sir, I'll do your things with mine," she said.

"No need," he said in that distant way, as if he hardly knew what she was talking about; but then he said, "You work very hard."

"Who doesn't? I like the cheese making. There's an interest to it. And I'm strong. All I fear is getting old, when I can't lift the buckets and the molds." She showed him her round, muscular arm, making a fist and smiling. "Pretty good for fifty years old!" she said. It was silly to boast, but she was proud of her strong arms, her energy and skill.

"Speed the work," he said gravely.

He had a way with her cows that was wonderful. When he was there and she needed a hand, he took Berry's place, and as she told her friend Tawny, laughing, he was cannier with the cows than Bren's old dog had been. "He talks to 'em, and I'll swear they consider what he says. And that heifer follows him about like a puppy." Whatever he was doing out on the ranges with the beeves, the cattlemen were coming to think well of him. Of course they would grab at any promise of help. Half San's herd was dead. Alder would not say how many head he had lost. The bodies of cattle were everywhere. If it had not been cold weather the Marsh would have reeked of rotting flesh. None of the water could be drunk unless you boiled it an hour, except what came from the wells, hers here and the one in the village, which gave the place its name.

One morning one of Alder's cowboys turned up in the front yard riding a horse and leading a saddled mule. "Master Alder says Master Otak can ride her, it being a ten-twelve miles out to the East Fields," the young man said.

Her guest came out of the house. It was a bright, misty morning, the marshes hidden by gleaming vapors. Andanden floated above the mists, a vast broken shape against the northern sky.

The curer said nothing to the cowboy but went straight to the mule, or hinny, rather, being out of San's big jenny by Alder's white horse. She was a whitey roan, young, with a pretty face. He went and talked to her for a minute, saying something in her big, delicate ear and rubbing her topknot.

"He does that," the cowboy said to Gift. "Talks at 'em." He was amused, disdainful. He was one of Berry's drinking mates at the tavern, a decent enough young fellow, for a cowboy.

"Is he curing the cattle?" she asked.

"Well, he can't lift the murrain all at once. But seems like he can cure a beast if he gets to it before the staggers begin. And those not struck yet, he says he can keep it off 'em. So the master's sending him all about the range to do what can be done. It's too late for many."

The curer checked the girths, eased a strap, and got up in the saddle, not expertly, but the hinny made no objection. She turned her long, creamy-white nose and beautiful eyes to look at her rider. He smiled. Gift had never seen him smile.

"Shall we go?" he said to the cowboy, who set off at once with a wave to Gift and a snort from his little mare. The curer followed. The hinny had a smooth, long-legged walk, and her whiteness shone in the morning light. Gift thought it was like seeing a prince ride off, like something out of a tale, the mounted figures that walked through bright mist across the vague dun of the winter fields, and faded into the light, and were gone.

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IT WAS HARD WORK OUT in the pastures. "Who doesn't do hard work?" Emer had asked, showing her round, strong arms, her hard, red hands. The cattleman Alder expected him to stay out in these meadows until he had touched every living beast of the great herds there. Alder had sent two cowboys along. They made a camp of sorts, with a groundcloth and a half tent. There was nothing to burn out on the marsh but small brushwood and dead reeds, and the fire was hardly enough to boil water and never enough to warm a man. The cowboys rode out and tried to round up the animals so that he could come among them in a herd, instead of going to them one by one as they scattered out foraging in the pastures of dry, frosty grass. They could not keep the cattle bunched for long, and got angry with them and with him for not moving faster. It was strange to him that they had no patience with the animals, which they

treated as things, handling them as a log rafter handles logs in a river, by mere force.

They had no patience with him either, always at him to hurry up and get done with the job; nor with themselves, their life. When they talked to each other it was always about what they were going to do in town, in Oraby, when they got paid off. He heard a good deal about the whores in Oraby, Daisy and Goldie and the one they called the Burning Bush. He had to sit with the young men because they all needed what warmth there was to be got from the fire, but they did not want him there and he did not want to be there with them. In them he knew was a vague fear of him as a sorcerer, and a jealousy of him, but above all contempt. He was old, other, not one of them. Fear and jealousy he knew and shrank from, and contempt he remembered. He was glad he was not one of them, that they did not want to talk to him. He was afraid of doing wrong to them.

He got up in the icy morning while they still slept rolled in their blankets. He knew where the cattle were nearby, and went to them. The sickness was very familiar to him now. He felt it in his hands as a burning, and a queasiness if it was much advanced. Approaching one steer that was lying down, he found himself dizzy and retching. He came no closer, but said words that might ease the dying, and went on.

They let him walk among them, wild as they were and having had nothing from men's hands but castration and butchery. He had a pleasure in their trust in him, a pride in it. He should not, but he did. If he wanted to touch one of the great beasts he had only to stand and speak to it a little while in the language of those who do not speak. "Ulla," he said, naming them. "Ellu. Ellua." They stood, big, indifferent; sometimes one looked at him for a long time. Sometimes one came to him with its easy, loose, majestic tread, and breathed into his open palm. All those that came to him he could cure. He laid his hands on them, on the stiff-haired, hot flanks and neck, and sent the healing into his hands with the words of power spoken over and over. After a while the beast would give a shake, or toss its head a bit, or step on. And he would drop his hands and stand there, drained and blank, for a while. Then there would be another one, big, curious, shyly bold, muddy-coated, with the sickness in it like a prickling, a tingling, a hotness in his hands, a dizziness. "Ellu," he would say, and walk to the beast and lay his hands upon it until they felt cool, as if a mountain stream ran through them.

The cowboys were discussing whether or not it was safe to eat the meat of a steer dead of the murrain. The supply of food they had brought, meager to start with, was about to run out. Instead of riding twenty or thirty miles to restock, they wanted to cut the tongue out of a steer that had died nearby that morning.

He had forced them to boil any water they used. Now he said, "If you eat that meat, in a year you'll begin to get dizzy. You'll end with the blind staggers and die as they do."

They cursed and sneered, but believed him. He had no idea if what he said was true. It had seemed true as he said it. Perhaps he wanted to spite them. Perhaps he wanted to get rid of them.

“Ride back,” he said. “Leave me here. There’s enough food for one man for three or four days more. The hinny will bring me back.”

They needed no persuasion. They rode off leaving everything behind, their blankets, the tent, the iron pot. “How do we get all that back to the village?” he asked the hinny. She looked after the two ponies and said what hinnies say. “Aaawww!” she said. She would miss the ponies.

“We have to finish the work here,” he told her, and she looked at him mildly. All animals were patient, but the patience of the horse kind was wonderful, being freely given. Dogs were loyal, but there was more of obedience in it. Dogs were hierarchs, dividing the world into lords and commoners. Horses were all lords. They agreed to collude. He remembered walking among the great, plumed feet of cart horses, fearless. The comfort of their breath on his head. A long time ago. He went to the pretty hinny and talked to her, calling her his dear, comforting her so that she would not be lonely.

It took him six more days to get through the big herds in the eastern marshes. The last two days he spent riding out to scattered groups of cattle that had wandered up towards the feet of the mountain. Many of them were not infected yet, and he could protect them. The hinny carried him bareback and made the going easy. But there was nothing left for him to eat. When he rode back to the village he was light-headed and weak-kneed. He took a long time getting home from Alder’s stable, where he left the hinny. Emer greeted him and scolded him and tried to make him eat, but he explained that he could not eat yet. “As I stayed there in the sickness, in the sick fields, I felt sick. After a while I’ll be able to eat again,” he explained.

“You’re crazy,” she said, very angry. It was a sweet anger. Why could not more anger be sweet?

“At least have a bath!” she said.

He knew what he smelled like, and thanked her.

“What’s Alder paying you for all this?” she demanded while the water was heating. She was still indignant, speaking more bluntly even than usual.

“I don’t know,” he said.

She stopped and stared at him.

“You didn’t set a price?”

“Set a price?” he flashed out. Then he remembered who he was not, and spoke humbly. “No. I didn’t.”

“Of all the innocence,” Gift said, hissing the word. “He’ll skin you.” She dumped a kettleful of steaming water into the bath. “He has ivory,” she said. “Tell him ivory it has to be. Out there ten days starving in the cold to cure his beasts! San’s got nothing but copper, but Alder can pay you in ivory. I’m sorry if I’m meddling in your business. Sir.” She flung out the door with two buckets, going to the pump. She would not use the stream water for anything at all, these days. She was wise, and kind. Why had he lived so long among those who were not kind?

“We’ll have to see,” said Alder, the next day, “if my beasts are cured. If they make it through the winter, see, we’ll know your cures all took, that they’re sound, like. Not that I doubt it, but fair’s fair, right? You wouldn’t ask me to pay you what I have in mind to pay you, would you now, if the cure didn’t take and the beasts died after all. Avert the chance! But I wouldn’t ask you to wait all that time unpaid, neither. So here’s an advance, like, on what’s to come, and all’s square between us for now, right?”

The coppers weren’t decently in a bag, even. Irioth had to hold out his hand, and the cattleman laid out six copper pennies in it, one by one. “Now then! That’s fair and square!” he said, expansive. “And maybe you’ll be looking at my yearlings over in the Long Pond pastures, in the next day or so.”

“No,” Irioth said. “San’s herd was going down fast when I left. I’m needed there.”

“Oh, no, you’re not, Master Otak. While you were out in the east range a sorcerer curer came by, a fellow that’s been here before, from the south coast, and so San hired him. You work for me and you’ll be paid well. Better than copper, maybe, if the beasts fare well!”

Irioth did not say yes, or no, or thanks, but went off unspeaking. The cattleman looked after him and spat. “Avert,” he said.

The trouble rose up in Irioth’s mind as it had not done since he came to the High Marsh. He struggled against it. A man of power had come to heal the cattle, another man of power. But a sorcerer, Alder had said. Not a wizard, not a mage. Only a curer, a cattle healer. I do not need to fear him. I do not need to fear his power. I do not need his power. I must see him, to be sure, to be certain. If he does what I do here there is no harm. We can work together. If I do what he does here. If he uses only sorcery and means no harm. As I do.

He walked down the straggling street of Purewells to San's house, which was about midway, opposite the tavern. San, a hard-bitten man in his thirties, was talking to a man on his doorstep, a stranger. When they saw Irioth they looked uneasy. San went into his house and the stranger followed.

Irioth came up onto the doorstep. He did not go in, but spoke in the open door. "Master San, it's about the cattle you have there between the rivers. I can go to them today." He did not know why he said this. It was not what he had meant to say.

"Ah," San said, coming to the door, and hemmed a bit. "No need, Master Otak. This here is Master Sunbright, come up to deal with the murrain. He's cured beasts for me before, the hoof rot and all. Being as how you have all one man can do with Alder's beeves, you see . . ."

The sorcerer came out from behind San. His name was Ayeth. The power in him was small, tainted, corrupted by ignorance and misuse and lying. But the jealousy in him was like a stinging fire. "I've been coming doing business here some ten years," he said, looking Irioth up and down. "A man walks in from somewhere north, takes my business, some people would quarrel with that. A quarrel of sorcerers is a bad thing. If you're a sorcerer, a man of power, that is. I am. As the good people here well know."

Irioth tried to say he did not want a quarrel. He tried to say that there was work for two. He tried to say he would not take the man's work from him. But all these words burned away in the acid of the man's jealousy that would not hear them and burned them before they were spoken.

Ayeth's stare grew more insolent as he watched Irioth stammer. He began to say something to San, but Irioth spoke.

"You have—" he said—"you have to go. Back." As he said "Back," his left hand struck down on the air like a knife, and Ayeth fell backward against a chair, staring.

He was only a little sorcerer, a cheating healer with a few sorry spells. Or so he seemed. What if he was cheating, hiding his power, a rival hiding his power? A jealous rival. He must be stopped, he must be bound, named, called. Irioth began to say the words that would bind him, and the shaken man cowered away, shrinking down, shriveling, crying out in a thin, high wail. It is wrong, wrong, I am doing the wrong, I am the ill, Irioth thought. He stopped the spell words in his mouth, fighting against them, and at last crying out one other word. Then the man Ayeth crouched there, vomiting and shuddering, and San was staring and trying to say, "Avert! Avert!" And no harm was done. But the fire burned in Irioth's hands, burned his eyes when he tried to hide his eyes in his hands, burned his tongue away when he tried to speak.

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FOR A LONG TIME NOBODY would touch him. He had fallen down in a fit in San's doorway. He lay there now like a dead man. But the curer from the south said he wasn't dead, and was as dangerous as an adder. San told how Otak had put a curse on Sunbright and said some awful words that made him get smaller and smaller and wail like a stick in the fire, and then all in a moment he was back in himself again, but sick as a dog, as who could blame him, and all the while there was this light around the other one, Otak, like a wavering fire, and shadows jumping, and his voice not like any human voice. A terrible thing.

Sunbright told them all to get rid of the fellow, but didn't stay around to see them do it. He went back down the south road as soon as he'd gulped a pint of beer at the tavern, telling them there was no room for two sorcerers in one village and he'd be back, maybe, when that man, or whatever he was, had gone.

Nobody would touch him. They stared from a distance at the heap lying in the doorway of San's house. San's wife wept aloud up and down the street. "Bad cess! Bad cess!" she cried. "Oh, my babe will be born dead, I know it!"

Berry went and fetched his sister, after he had heard Sunbright's tale at the tavern, and San's version of it, and several other versions already current. In the best of them, Otak had towered up ten feet tall and struck Sunbright into a lump of coal with lightning, before foaming at the mouth, turning blue, and collapsing in a heap.

Gift hurried to the village. She went straight up to the doorstep, bent over the heap, and laid her hand on it. Everybody gasped and muttered, "Avert! Avert!" except Tawny's youngest daughter, who mistook the signs and piped up, "Speed the work!"

The heap moved, and roused up slowly. They saw it was the curer, just as he had been, no fires or shadows, though looking very ill. "Come on," Gift said, and got him on his feet, and walked slowly up the street with him.

The villagers shook their heads. Gift was a brave woman, but there was such a thing as being too brave. Or brave, they said around the tavern table, in the wrong way, or the wrong place, d'you see. Nobody should ought to meddle with sorcery that ain't born to it. Nor with sorcerers. You forget that. They seem the same as other folk. But they ain't like other folk. Seems there's no harm in a curer. Heal the foot rot, clear a caked udder. That's all fine. But cross one and there you are, fire and shadows and curses and falling down in fits. Uncanny. Always was uncanny, that one. Where'd he come from, anyhow? Answer me that.

***

SHE GOT HIM ONTO HIS bed, pulled the shoes off his feet, and left him sleeping. Berry came in late and drunker than usual, so that he fell and gashed his forehead on the andiron. Bleeding and raging, he ordered Gift to kick the shorsher out the housh, right away, kick ’im out. Then he vomited into the ashes and fell asleep on the hearth. She hauled him onto his pallet, pulled his shoes off his feet, and left him sleeping. She went to look at the other one. He looked feverish, and she put her hand on his forehead. He opened his eyes, looking straight into hers without expression. “Emer,” he said, and closed his eyes again.

She backed away from him, terrified.

In her bed, in the dark, she lay and thought: He knew the wizard who named me. Or I said my name. Maybe I said it out loud in my sleep. Or somebody told him. But nobody knows it. Nobody ever knew my name but the wizard, and my mother. And they’re dead, they’re dead . . . I said it in my sleep . . .

But she knew better.

***

SHE STOOD WITH THE LITTLE oil lamp in her hand, and the light of it shone red between her fingers and golden on her face. He said her name. She gave him sleep.

***

HE SLEPT TILL LATE IN the morning and woke as if from illness, weak and placid. She was unable to be afraid of him. She found that he had no memory at all of what had happened in the village, of the other sorcerer, even of the six coppers she had found scattered on the bedcover, which he must have held clenched in his hand all along.

“No doubt that’s what Alder gave you,” she said. “The flint!”

“I said I’d see to his beasts at . . . at the pasture between the rivers, was it?” he said, getting anxious, the hunted look coming back into him, and he got up from the settle.

“Sit down,” she said. He sat down, but he sat fretting.

“How can you cure when you’re sick?” she said.

“How else?” he said.

But he quieted down again presently, stroking the grey cat.

Her brother came in. “Come on out,” he said to her as soon as he saw the curer dozing on the settle. She stepped outside with him.

“Now I won’t have him here no more,” Berry said, coming master of the house over her, with the great black gash in his forehead, and his eyes like oysters, and his hands juddering.

“Where’ll you go?” she said.

“It’s him has to go.”

“It’s my house. Bren’s house. He stays. Go or stay, it’s up to you.”

“It’s up to me too if he stays or goes, and he goes. You haven’t got all the sayso. All the people say he ought to go. He’s not canny.”

“Oh, yes, since he’s cured half the herds and got paid six coppers for it, time for him to go, right enough! I’ll have him here as long as I choose, and that’s the end of it.”

“They won’t buy our milk and cheese,” Berry whined.

“Who says that?”

“San’s wife. All the women.”

“Then I’ll carry the cheeses to Oraby,” she said, “and sell ’em there. In the name of honor, brother, go wash out that cut, and change your shirt. You stink of the pothouse.” And she went back into the house. “Oh, dear,” she said, and burst into tears.

“What’s the matter, Emer?” said the curer, turning his thin face and strange eyes to her.

“Oh, it’s no good, I know it’s no good. Nothing’s any good with a drunkard,” she said. She wiped her eyes with her apron. “Was that what broke you,” she said, “the drink?”

“No,” he said, taking no offense, perhaps not understanding.

“Of course it wasn’t. I beg your pardon,” she said.

“Maybe he drinks to try to be another man,” he said. “To alter, to change . . .”

“He drinks because he drinks,” she said. “With some, that’s all it is. I’ll be in the dairy, now. I’ll lock the house door. There’s . . . there’s been strangers about. You rest

yourself. It’s bitter out.” She wanted to be sure that he stayed indoors out of harm’s way, and that nobody came harassing him. Later on she would go into the village, have a word with some of the sensible people, and put a stop to this rubbishy talk, if she could.

When she did so, Alder’s wife Tawny and several other people agreed with her that a squabble between sorcerers over work was nothing new and nothing to take on about. But San and his wife and the tavern crew wouldn’t let it rest, it being the only thing of interest to talk about for the rest of the winter, except the cattle dying. “Besides,” Tawny said, “my man’s never averse to paying copper where he thought he might have to pay ivory.”

“Are the cattle he touched keeping afoot, then?”

“So far as we can see, they are. And no new sickenings.”

“He’s a true sorcerer, Tawny,” Gift said, very earnest. “I know it.”

“That’s the trouble, love,” said Tawny. “And you know it! This is no place for a man like that. Whoever he is is none of our business, but why did he come here, is what you have to ask.”

“To cure the beasts,” Gift said.

***

SUNBRIGHT HAD NOT BEEN GONE three days when a new stranger appeared in town: a man riding up the south road on a good horse and asking at the tavern for lodging. They sent him to San’s house, but San’s wife screeched when she heard there was a stranger at the door, crying that if San let another witch-man in the door her baby would be born dead twice over. Her screaming could be heard for several houses up and down the street, and a crowd, that is, ten or eleven people, gathered between San’s house and the tavern.

“Well, that won’t do,” said the stranger pleasantly. “I can’t be bringing on a birth untimely. Is there maybe a room above the tavern?”

“Send him on out to the dairy,” said one of Alder’s cowboys. “Gift’s taking whatever comes.” There was some sniggering and shushing.

“Back that way,” said the taverner.

“Thanks,” said the traveler, and led his horse along the way they pointed.

“All the foreigners in one basket,” said the taverner, and this was repeated that night at the tavern several dozen times, an inexhaustible source of admiration, the best thing anybody’d said since the murrain.

***

GIFT WAS IN THE DAIRY, having finished the evening milking. She was straining the milk and setting out the pans. “Mistress,” said a voice at the door, and she thought it was the curer and said, “Just a minute while I finish this,” and then turning saw a stranger and nearly dropped the pan. “Oh, you startled me!” she said. “What can I do for you, then?”

“I’m looking for a bed for the night.”

“No, I’m sorry, there’s my lodger, and my brother, and me. Maybe San, in the village—”

“They sent me here. They said, ‘All the foreigners in one basket.’” The stranger was in his thirties, with a blunt face and a pleasant look, dressed plain, though the cob that stood behind him was a good horse. “Put me up in the cow barn, mistress, it’ll do fine. It’s my horse needs a good bed; he’s tired. I’ll sleep in the barn and be off in the morning. Cows are a pleasure to sleep with on a cold night. I’ll be glad to pay you, mistress, if two coppers would suit, and my name’s Hawk.”

“I’m Gift,” she said, a bit flustered, but liking the fellow. “All right, then, Master Hawk. Put your horse up and see to him. There’s the pump, there’s plenty of hay. Come on in the house after. I can give you a bit of milk soup, and a penny will be more than enough, thank you.” She didn’t feel like calling him sir, as she always did the curer. This one had nothing of that lordly way about him. She hadn’t seen a king when she first saw him, as with the other one.

When she finished in the dairy and went to the house, the new fellow, Hawk, was squatting on the hearth, skillfully making up the fire. The curer was in his room asleep. She looked in, and closed the door.

“He’s not too well,” she said, speaking low. “He was curing the cattle away out east over the marsh, in the cold, for days on end, and wore himself out.”

As she went about her work in the kitchen, Hawk lent her a hand now and then in the most natural way, so that she began to wonder if men from foreign parts were all so much handier about the house than the men of the Marsh. He was easy to talk with, and she told him about the curer, since there was nothing much to say about herself.

“They’ll use a sorcerer and then ill-mouth him for his usefulness,” she said. “It’s not

just.”

“But he scared ’em, somehow, did he?”

“I guess he did. Another curer came up this way, a fellow that’s been by here before. Doesn’t amount to much that I can see. He did no good to my cow with the caked bag, two years ago. And his balm’s just pig fat, I’d swear. Well, so, he says to Otak, you’re taking my business. And maybe Otak says the same back. And they lose their tempers, and they did some black spells, maybe. I guess Otak did. But he did no harm to the man at all, but fell down in a swoon himself. And now he doesn’t remember any more about it, while the other man walked away unhurt. And they say every beast he touched is standing yet, and hale. Ten days he spent out there in the wind and the rain, touching the beasts and healing them. And you know what the cattleman gave him? Six pennies! Can you wonder he was a little rageous? But I don’t say . . .” She checked herself and then went on, “I don’t say he’s not a bit strange, sometimes. The way witches and sorcerers are, I guess. Maybe they have to be, dealing with such powers and evils as they do. But he is a true man, and kind.”

“Mistress,” said Hawk, “may I tell you a story?”

“Oh, are you a teller? Oh, why didn’t you say so to begin with! Is that what you are then? I wondered, it being winter and all, and you being on the roads. But with that horse, I thought you must be a merchant. Can you tell me a story? It would be the joy of my life, and the longer the better! But drink your soup first, and let me sit down to hear . . .”

“I’m not truly a teller, mistress,” he said with his pleasant smile, “but I do have a story for you.” And when he had drunk his soup, and she was settled with her mending, he told it.

“In the Inmost Sea, on the Isle of the Wise, on Roke Island, where all magery is taught, there are nine Masters,” he began.

She closed her eyes in bliss and listened.

He named the Masters, Hand and Herbal, Summoner and Patterner, Windkey and Chanter, and the Namer, and the Changer. “The Changer’s and the Summoner’s are very perilous arts,” he said. “Changing, or transformation, you maybe know of, mistress. Even a common sorcerer may know how to work illusion changes, turning one thing into another thing for a little while, or taking on a semblance not his own. Have you seen that?”

“Heard of it,” she whispered.

“And sometimes witches and sorcerers will say that they’ve summoned the dead to speak through them. Maybe a child the parents are grieving for. In the witch’s hut, in the darkness, they hear it cry, or laugh . . .”

She nodded.

“Those are spells of illusion only, of seeming. But there are true changes, and true summonings. And these may be true temptations to the wizard! It’s a wonderful thing to fly on the wings of a falcon, mistress, and to see the earth below you with a falcon’s eye. And summoning, which is naming truly, is a great power. To know the true name is to have power, as you know, mistress. And the summoner’s art goes straight to that. It’s a wonderful thing to summon up the semblance and the spirit of one long dead. To see the beauty of Elfarran in the orchards of Soléa, as Morred saw it when the world was young . . .”

His voice had become very soft, very dark.

“Well, to my story. Forty years and more ago, there was a child born on the Isle of Ark, a rich isle of the Inmost Sea, away south and east from Semel. This child was the son of an understeward in the household of the Lord of Ark. Not a poor man’s son, but not a child of much account. And the parents died young. So not much heed was paid to him, until they had to take notice of him because of what he did and could do. He was an uncanny brat, as they say. He had powers. He could light a fire or douse it with a word. He could make pots and pans fly through the air. He could turn a mouse into a pigeon and set it flying round the great kitchens of the Lord of Ark. And if he was crossed, or frightened, then he did harm. He turned a kettle of boiling water over a cook who had mistreated him.”

“Mercy,” whispered Gift. She had not sewn a stitch since he began.

“He was only a child, and the wizards of that household can’t have been wise men, for they used little wisdom or gentleness with him. Maybe they were afraid of him. They bound his hands and gagged his mouth to keep him from making spells. They locked him in a cellar room, a room of stone, until they thought him tamed. Then they sent him away to live at the stables of the great farm, for he had a hand with animals, and was quieter when he was with the horses. But he quarreled with a stable boy, and turned the poor lad into a lump of dung. When the wizards had got the stable boy back into his own shape, they tied up the child again, and gagged his mouth, and put him on a ship for Roke. They thought maybe the Masters there could tame him.”

“Poor child,” she murmured.

“Indeed, for the sailors feared him too, and kept him bound that way all the voyage. When the Doorkeeper of the Great House of Roke saw him, he loosed his hands and

freed his tongue. And the first thing the boy did in the Great House, they say, he turned the Long Table of the dining hall upside down, and soured the beer, and a student who tried to stop him got turned into a pig for a bit . . . But the boy had met his match in the Masters.

“They didn’t punish him, but kept his wild powers bound with spells until they could make him listen and begin to learn. It took them a long time. There was a rivalrous spirit in him that made him look on any power he did not have, any thing he did not know, as a threat, a challenge, a thing to fight against until he could defeat it. There are many boys like that. I was one. But I was lucky. I learned my lesson young.

“Well, this boy did learn at last to tame his anger and control his power. And a very great power it was. Whatever art he studied came easy to him, too easy, so that he despised illusion, and weatherworking, and even healing, because they held no fear, no challenge to him. He saw no virtue in himself for his mastery of them. So, after the Archmage Nemmerle had given him his name, the boy set his will on the great and dangerous art of summoning. And he studied with the Master of that art for a long time.

“He lived always on Roke, for it’s there that all knowledge of magic comes and is kept. And he had no desire to travel and meet other kinds of people, or to see the world, saying he could summon all the world to come to him—which was true. Maybe that’s where the danger of that art lies.

“Now, what is forbidden to the summoner, or any wizard, is to call a living spirit. We can call to them, yes. We can send to them a voice or a presentment, a seeming, of ourself. But we do not summon them, in spirit or in flesh, to come to us. Only the dead may we summon. Only the shadows. You can see why this must be. To summon a living man is to have entire power over him, body and mind. No one, no matter how strong or wise or great, can rightly own and use another.

“But the spirit of rivalry worked in the boy as he grew to be a man. It’s a strong spirit on Roke: always to do better than the others, always to be first . . . The art becomes a contest, a game. The end becomes a means to an end less than itself . . . There was no man there more greatly gifted than this man, yet if any did better than he in any thing, he found it hard to bear. It frightened him, it galled him.

“There was no place for him among the Masters, since a new Master Summoner had been chosen, a strong man in his prime, not likely to retire or die. Among the scholars and other teachers he had a place of honor, but he wasn’t one of the Nine. He’d been passed over. Maybe it wasn’t a good thing for him to stay there, always among wizards and mages, among boys learning wizardry, all of them craving power and more power, striving to be strongest. At any rate, as the years went on he became more and more aloof, pursuing his studies in his tower cell apart from others, teaching few students,

speaking little. The Summoner would send gifted students to him, but many of the boys there scarcely knew of him. In this isolation he began to practice certain arts that are not well to practice and lead to no good thing.

“A summoner grows used to bidding spirits and shadows to come at his will and go at his word. Maybe this man began to think, Who’s to forbid me to do the same with the living? Why have I the power if I cannot use it? So he began to call the living to him, those at Roke whom he feared, thinking them rivals, those whose power he was jealous of. When they came to him he took their power from them for himself, leaving them silent. They couldn’t say what had happened to them, what had become of their power. They didn’t know.

“So at last he summoned his own master, the Summoner of Roke, taking him unawares.

“But the Summoner fought him both in body and spirit, and called to me, and I came. Together we fought against the will that would destroy us.”

Night had come. Gift’s lamp had flickered out. Only the red glow of the fire shone on Hawk’s face. It was not the face she had thought it. It was worn, and hard, and scarred all down one side. The hawk’s face, she thought. She held still, listening.

“This is not a teller’s tale, mistress. This is not a story you will ever hear anyone else tell.

“I was new at the business of being Archmage then. And younger than the man we fought, and maybe not afraid enough of him. It was all the two of us could do to hold our own against him, there in the silence, in the cell in the tower. Nobody else knew what was going on. We fought. A long time we fought. And then it was over. He broke. Like a stick breaking. He was broken. But he fled away. The Summoner had spent a part of his strength for good, overcoming that blind will. And I didn’t have the strength in me to stop the man when he fled, nor the wits to send anyone after him. And not a shred of power left in me to follow him with. So he got away from Roke. Clean gone.

“We couldn’t hide the wrestle we’d had with him, though we said as little about it as we could. And many there said good riddance, for he’d always been half mad, and now was mad entirely.

“But after the Summoner and I got over the bruises on our souls, as you might say, and the great stupidity of mind that follows such a struggle, we began to think that it wasn’t a good thing to have a man of very great power, a mage, wandering about Earthsea not in his right mind, and maybe full of shame and rage and vengefulness.

“We could find no trace of him. No doubt he changed himself to a bird or a fish when

he left Roke, until he came to some other island. And a wizard can hide himself from all finding spells. We sent out inquiries, in the ways we have of doing so, but nothing and nobody replied. So we set off looking for him, the Summoner to the eastern isles and I to the west. For when I thought about this man, I had begun to see in my mind's eye a great mountain, a broken cone, with a long, green land beneath it reaching to the south. I remembered my geography lessons when I was a boy at Roke, and the lay of the land on Semel, and the mountain whose name is Andanden. So I came to the High Marsh. I think I came the right way."

There was a silence. The fire whispered.

"Should I speak to him?" Gift asked in a steady voice.

"No need," said the man like a falcon. "I will." And he said, "Irioth."

She looked at the door of the bedroom. It opened and he stood there, thin and tired, his dark eyes full of sleep and bewilderment and pain.

"Ged," he said. He bowed his head. After a while he looked up and asked, "Will you take my name from me?"

"Why should I do that?"

"It means only hurt. Hate, pride, greed."

"I'll take those names from you, Irioth, but not your own."

"I didn't understand," Irioth said, "about the others. That they are other. We are all other. We must be. I was wrong."

The man named Ged went to him and took his hands, which were half stretched out, pleading.

"You went wrong. You've come back. But you're tired, Irioth, and the way's hard when you go alone. Come home with me."

Irioth's head drooped as if in utter weariness. All tension and passion had gone out of his body. But he looked up, not at Ged but at Gift, silent in the hearth corner.

"I have work here," he said.

Ged too looked at her.

"He does," she said. "He heals the cattle."

“They show me what I should do,” Irioth said, “and who I am. They know my name. But they never say it.”

After a while Ged gently drew the older man to him and held him in his arms. He said something quietly to him and let him go. Irioth drew a deep breath.

“I’m no good there, you see, Ged,” he said. “I am, here. If they’ll let me do the work.” He looked again at Gift, and Ged did also. She looked at them both.

“What say you, Emer?” asked the one like a falcon.

“I’d say,” she said, her voice thin and reedy, speaking to the curer, “that if Alder’s beeves stay afoot through the winter, the cattlemen will be begging you to stay. Though they may not love you.”

“Nobody loves a sorcerer,” said the Archmage. “Well, Irioth! Did I come all this way for you in the dead of winter, and must go back alone?”

“Tell them—tell them I was wrong,” Irioth said. “Tell them I did wrong. Tell Thorion—” He halted, confused.

“I’ll tell him that the changes in a man’s life may be beyond all the arts we know, and all our wisdom,” said the Archmage. He looked at Emer again. “May he stay here, mistress? Is that your wish as well as his?”

“He’s ten times the use and company to me my brother is,” she said. “And a kind true man, as I told you. Sir.”

“Very well, then. Irioth, my dear companion, teacher, rival, friend, farewell. Emer, brave woman, my honor and thanks to you. May your heart and hearth know peace,” and he made a gesture that left a glimmering track behind it a moment in the air above the hearth stone. “Now I’m off to the cow barn,” he said, and he was.

The door closed. It was silent except for the whisper of the fire.

“Come to the fire,” she said. Irioth came and sat down on the settle.

“Was that the Archmage? Truly?”

He nodded.

“The Archmage of the world,” she said. “In my cow barn. He should have my bed—”

“He won’t,” said Irioth.

She knew he was right.

“Your name is beautiful, Irioth,” she said after a while. “I never knew my husband’s true name. Nor he mine. I won’t speak yours again. But I like to know it, since you know mine.”

“Your name is beautiful, Emer,” he said. “I will speak it when you tell me to.”