

The Delphinian Woods

Prelude

As the long chime of the bell faded into the air, I turned to face my opponent. Of course, what I faced was his broad chest. He was fifteen inches taller than me, and carried at least one hundred more pounds of muscle. I felt like a twig facing down a tree. I craned my neck to look up at his face. The deep scar that began at his hairline and cut diagonally all the way to his chin gave his already fierce expression a savagery that his pale grey eyes did not remotely assuage. Indeed those eyes glared at me with a hatred I could not remotely fathom.

To the north, a row of Kingsguard held back the surging crowd of spectators that seemed to have somehow grown. The bravest few clung to the tall columns or risked an endless fall by hanging out the wide windows, all to get a good view of the pending spectacle. To the east and west, only a few narrow columns delineated the wide spaces that opened onto nothing but the sky. To the south was the wide dais, upon which was everyone who had set my fate today.

The Principal Astrologer Gaelen could not rest his gaze on me without bursting into baffling laughter. He stood now, at the edge of the dais, and suppressed his mirth only long enough lift his arms in a signal of readiness. My opponent and I each nodded a curt bow to the other. With a fresh peal of laughter, Gaelen struck the hook of the pikali down onto the stones with a resounding crack. I flexed my legs and sprang forward at full speed. I would defeat this man or die.

How in the names of all the stars had my life's path led me here?

1

I slipped out the side door of the Astrologer's temple, snuck around back and halted, listening for the mention of my name. The large balcony jutting out the back of the temple hung over the wide, steep steps that spanned the full width of the building.

There was no outcry, so I ran along the top step as quickly as I could. If I fell, I would tumble over endless jagged steps right into the water. Once under the balcony, I was hidden from view, and I paused there to listen again.

I gazed longingly at the river, flowing sixty feet below me. It would be cool and refreshing. I was already too warm in my best clothes: woven grey linen leggings laced at the waist, a fine knit wool shirt, and a topcoat, which was a much smaller version of the coat my father wore. I had pleaded to get it and ignored his laughter at my desire to dress just like him. It was sea green, and had full sleeves, which belled at the wrists. It was much too large for me so that I could get years of wear from it. It hung nearly to my knees.

I fingered the double rows of polished shell buttons on the front, as I always did to my father's buttons. A familiar action, but with it came little comfort. The cap on my head was less functional than the one I habitually wore and it felt odd. It was clean, for one thing, light grey with a dark band around it just above a little brim.

Hearing nothing but meaningless chatter from above, I darted out from underneath the balcony to the far side of the temple. At the edge of the steps, I slid underneath the stone railing, hung for a moment, feet awkwardly dangling six feet above the narrow laneway, then pushed away from the wall and let go. I landed between the walls on either side without cracking my head. I learned from my mistakes.

The laneway ran between the Astrologers small house and the temple, connecting the main square and the river. Turning left, I made my way to the river, because once on the curving, dirt path that ran along the banks, I could run mostly unseen. I hoped to be on the other side of town before anyone noticed I was missing from the temple.

I ran for a full five minutes along the river, and turned right onto one of the paths that laced across the hillside. I passed beneath the house of my uncle Davlis, which overlooked the forge. As my path branched, I always chose the fork that wended its way up the hill.

My path ended at a crevice in the rockiest, steepest part of the hill. Here, a wide chunk of rock had long separated from the cliff-face creating a dramatic and hidden entrance to the hilltop. I reached the highest point of the path, still surrounded by high rocks, and then descended a few feet as the path sloped down and emerged with a clear view of the town below.

Arriving here always had the disorienting sensation of having descended to this high spot. We called this ridge Delphin Tor. It had sweeping views to North, West and South, and the dense forest to block the wind from the east.

The largest outcropping on Delphin Tor was thirty feet wide and deep, with a rocky face that that was a sheer drop one hundred feet down. Its foot was covered here and there with shrubs and small trees, some of which tenaciously clung to the cliff-face. Right in the centre of the outcropping was Delphin Tor Tree. The tree was unique in all the world I knew of, which was admittedly a very small world.

The trunk was a grown man's arm span wide, and yet only the same arm span tall; it supported a cloud of leafy branches that spread fifteen feet in every direction. In spring, the tree flowered. Enormous, burnt-orange, clustered florets thickly covered every branch. From a distance, it could seem as if the tree was quietly aflame. Then tiny needle-like leaves poked out through the flowers, and soon grew to six inches in length. They were no wider than a piece of straw and as pliable as horse leather. One warm day every May, the leaves all opened, quite suddenly, like pale green fans, nearly obscuring the flowers.

There was always little, if any warning. But we had a springtime ritual of a daily hike up to the tree, to picnic and wait, and hope to be there when the leaves opened. Generally, there was a fest in town that evening

My eyes could not penetrate the mass of leaves now, as I came underneath it's sheltering branches, and leaned my back against the trunk.

The view was more than familiar to me, unchanged forever, but forever changing. The town of Delphin spread down over one of the low foothills that were the southern edge of the Callus Mountains to the north. The Delph River that flowed out of the forest to my back rimmed the north edge of the town, with only a few houses on the far side. That left endless fields for Wanderers to stake their tents or caravans. To the south and west, farms and fields were ripening into the harvest season. The dirt road, out of Delphin, ran due west for almost a mile, before it began to wind around the hills. There was nobody traveling on the road, or none that I could still see.

The Mother Star was still dropping toward the fields. On a bright shining day like this, she would wake all the other stars to watch over us all night, but now the sky was enormous and blue, and all I wanted was to lose myself in it.

“Junia?” I asked softly.

“Olly?” came the voice from above me.

I heard soft rustling in the branches. My sister poked her head through the leaves and her large, hazel eyes met mine.

“They gone?”

“No, Junie, everyone is still at the temple. Could you come back? I promise to stay right beside you the whole time.”

“Don’t want to.”

Neither did I. “Can you come down from the tree maybe? So I can see you? Please?”

Junia was always eager to please anyone she loved. She wiggled her legs out of the leafy canopy, slid down from the branches and dropped awkwardly to the ground.

“If you come back with me now, I will make you a new cap tomorrow. I promise.”

“With a twisty strap?”

My sister Junia was taller than me by a full eight inches. She was eleven, my elder by a full two years. But by the measure of the stardust inside us: I had long since surpassed her. Junia’s head was in the stars, and so was her heart, and she trod lightly on the soil of the world. It worried me that she was so very pretty.

“If you like.”

I clasped her right firmly in my left. “Ok, Junie?”

“Not let go.”

We walked hand in hand back through the narrow crevice, me reaching my arm behind me to maintain contact with Junia, and then down the path. We paused occasionally along the way as we found pretty blooms and seed pods, cutting them with my belt-knife. I gathered them into a posy in my free hand, Junia might have tossed them away as we walked. We took a faster route through the centre of town. We didn’t have to avoid anyone now.

Junia gripped my hand almost painfully as we walked up the steps, past the rows of guard standing at attention: our unwanted honour guard. As we passed through their ranks, they saluted us. I knew only one of them, the captain.

At the threshold of the high doors, I tried to smile for her. "Everything will be ok." I said. And I hoped it would.

The temple was largest building in Delphin, in the whole province of Behidia. Entirely constructed of Callan stone, hewn from the Callus Mountains in the north, and hauled here on barges down the Callilian River that defined the south and western borders of our land of Ilia. Callan stone split on clean flat lines, and once it was weathered to a pale grey, it stabilized, strengthened and lasted forever.

The grand doors opened into an even grander wide, open hall, surrounded by square pillars, which rose to carved capitals. Above these, the four walls leaned in to form a pyramid, which was topped with a polished glass lens to let in the starlight. In front of each pillar hung an iron lamp, the light reflecting against the pale stone.

The entire population of the town could fit easily into the Astrologers temple in Delphin. Almost all of them were here now. The few who were not were probably now out searching for us, I thought guiltily. Every head turned as we came in. Friends, neighbours and family were sitting on the stone and wood benches, or standing all around the edges of the great room. The whispered conversations we had heard as we entered faded away. Junia froze.

More than anything in the world, I wanted to hang my head, and shuffle into a seat unnoticed, but I raised my head and peered at everyone from under the brim of my cap.

My cousin Sessia, also dressed in her finest clothes, opened her mouth, surely to silently mouth something tart to us, but my Uncle Davlis shook his head and by twisting in his seat to look at us, shifted his massive body in front of her. He met my gaze, and as he scarcely raised the corners of his mouth, I could sense the echo of my own recent, encouraging smile. I too, was eager to please those I loved.

He nodded to me, and inclined his head to the center of the room, toward the bench nearest the center altar. I never let go of Junia's hand as we walked between the rows of people and sat.

The central altar was ten feet long, and three feet wide and high. Its sides were elaborately carved, depicting coiling vines, patterns of stars, and warriors wielding pikalia. The altar itself was raised up on a low platform, with space enough to walk all around the altar.

Jimmy Bellswood was the new apprentice to our Chief Astrologer, Catheryn. For training, Jimador had gone all the way to Iliasa; the royal seat of Ilia. He had already completed one year of training with the principal astrologers. And now Jimmy, the wildest boy in town, was Jimador the apprentice astrologer of the famous temple of Delphin.

I liked the old Jimmy better. He had always included the younger kids in his adventures. When I was only six, he had taught me to capture wild ponies across the river. None of the adults in town were impressed, but I certainly had been.

Now, as Catheryn remained to the side of the Altar, Jimmy stepped down. He came and stood before us, in the light blue cloak of an astrologer.

“All others have made their offerings to the Father Star, would you like to do so now?” his voice had a resonance very recently acquired.

We stood. Jimmy held his hand out to Junia, but she shied back from him, saying, “Jimmy smells.”

This close to Jimmy, I could see he was stifling a smile, and I could not resent him for it. For all his wildness, he had always been nice to Junia. He kept his head averted from Catheryn. I hoped no one else had heard Junia’s words.

I stepped up onto the platform, then turned to Junia, and pulled her up with me. The altar was covered in flowers, vines, and bundles of grass, heads heavy with seed. In the center of all this abundance lay a man. I offered my posy of flowers to Junia. She clasped her hand around mine, and together we laid the little posy beside his head, in the only space left.

He was dressed in his best clothes. His long, dark hair flowed around his shoulders. My chin was just above the level of his chest. I reached forward and caressed the soft sea green fabric of his coat. I fingered his polished shell buttons.

2

Or perhaps, my life’s path had changed before that. I was following unknown paths, after all, as I was told again and again.

My father, Fermin, ran the smythy, the forge in Delphin with my Uncle Davlis, his brother. My grandfather and great uncles had run it before them, and their fathers and

grandfathers and grandfather's fathers and mothers before that. The forge was the oldest structure in town. At least parts of it were.

My grandfather was still working there when I was born, I remember him in sounds and smells and vague impressions, but I could not picture his face. Everyone agrees that Davlis is the image of him, so it is likely my memories of each of the two of them are seamed together.

Davlis, the larger and older of the two brothers was the happiest man in town. His brother, my father, very nearly matched him for joy in life. Our cousins Sess and Arol completed our home of six, and we all lived together in the house Davlis had inherited as eldest son.

Sess and Arol's mother had left, and then died before I was born. I had heard talk in town that this was partly why my uncle was indeed so very happy.

Loving though the household was, I cherished my solitary times. Mornings, I liked to rise before anyone else, most often before the Mother Star, and walk down to the forge. There were stairs beside the house, but I liked to walk around the path by the river. In summer, I could wash in the river, and check my Da's traps for fish. In winter I would bring the barrow and fetch ice.

In the forge, I loaded fuel into the furnace and stoked it just enough to get it started. Da and Davlis had let me start playing with bits of cold copper when I was strong enough to hold a tiny jeweler's hammer in my chubby fist. They had first let me start soldering, and hammering small bits of metal and now I could fashion rough bands and would soon work silver and iron together. I had made a light bangle for Junia for New Year. It was far from a master's work, but I had been rather proud. I knew that someday soon, or in the next few years they would let me begin to learn to work pikalia.

We kept one horse in the stable; she was a light grey, but dappled on the behind with white spots like a deer, with a white mane and tail. She was so very well tempered that even when I barely came to her knee, I'd had no fear of her. Davlis had bought her years before, hoping to teach her to jump and race, but a quiet trot was all that was in her nature. He named her Travesty. I scooped a measure of grain, and climbed the stable gate to pour it into her trough. Travesty nuzzled her warm snout into my hand lovingly before she bent her head to eat.

If I had caught fish in the night, I returned by the river, sitting down on the bank to scale and clean the trout or salmon with my tiny belt-knife. Generally they were small, but in the fall, I caught many that were well over a foot long. Often times, my traps were empty, so I would pick a wire egg basket from the many I had piled up in a corner of the forge. Egg baskets were good practice for exacting solder work. I would return by the stairs, then clamber over the fence to Mara's hen house to get eggs. Our neighbour had scores of hens, and we were allotted 12 eggs a day if we liked. After I had rooted around under the warm, clucking hens, I would reach into the box at the door and pick out the ragged loop of fabric from which hung a tag marked with an 'S'. I would hang this on a nail by the door, to show her I had been in.

There was a different tag for every house on the hill. Mara had the only henhouse. Mara disliked getting up early to gather the eggs and it was my father who had come up with the system of tags. The 'S' was almost always the first tag to be hung every morning.

The fence loosely surrounded our house, the forge with tiny stables attached, the kitchen garden, storage shed, root cellar and a yard. In summers we pulled a rough table out of the shed and ate most meals outdoors. Comfortable benches sat against the south and west walls of the house and they were warm, protected spots to rest in the warming rays of the Mother Star.

The kitchen of our house was bright, windowed and the best room in the house. We also had three rooms for sleeping and a winding staircase, which you could climb to a rooftop balcony.

Da and Davlis each had their own room, Junia shared with Sess. Arol and I each curled up on pallets by the fire in the kitchen. In summers, we slept on the balcony.

I banked the fire each night with chunks of sod, so it was easy to build it up again in the morning. This woke Arol, and he helped me lay the table, toast bread and brew the tea, and by the time we had fish or eggs, or pika if we were very lucky, cooking in the hearth, the rest of the family was stirring. We could sit down to eat together. Nobody was ever called down to eat, if they missed it, it meant they were far too tired, and we let them sleep. My Uncle ran a genial household.

Four days in the week I was in the forge or I wandered the forest with my Da. Arol liked to come with us sometimes, but more often, it was only the two of us.

The other three days a week, Arol, Sess and I would leave for school. Junia stayed behind and cleaned a little, but mostly she worked in the garden. Junia had a talent for gardening, and she loved to weed and keep her plants in organized little rows. Even in cold months, she managed to harvest leeks or chard and turnips.

After school, Sess would linger with friends. Arol would stay behind for extra lessons and I would run home to work in the forge for a few hours before dinner. There, my uncle was far less genial. There were strict rules, especially when I was wandering around underfoot. Davlis and Da worked the great forges together with four or more apprentices. From long practice, and strict observance of the rules, they all danced around each other as they worked.

Twelve months of the year, they worked in iron, silver, bronze and pika. It was Delphin's proximity to the forest, which made the forge so valuable. Wild pika grew only in the forest at our backs and training to work it was an honour. The apprentices had come from surrounding towns, but occasionally a devotee from the coast, or Iliasa. Not all of them could take the meticulous detail of the pikalia-forging. Not all of them stayed. Not many of them stayed very long. I stayed. I had nowhere else to go, but that made no difference. I loved the forge. I knew that when I grew older, I would work in the forge all the time, all my life. Well, all the time I wasn't in the forest.

We all started school at six years old, attending three days a week. My first year is when I met Jimmy. He was one of the dedicated and slightly rare students in Delphin who stayed in school right until the end. After four years, if any child wanted to stay and get serious about studying, they started attending four days a week. After four more years, any very serious students who wanted to continue were expected to spend six days a week in the school for another two years.

The tuition was not overly costly. Now was a time of peace and prosperity, and King Chantz had sent astrologers and scribes to every corner of the kingdom to encourage an exchange of knowledge. The two instructors of the Delphin School were each here for a rotation of at least five years.

But to spend time in school was to miss out on apprenticeships in town, in learning to ride, or join the IliGuard. Most anyone wanting to stay until the bitter end usually had their hearts set on being Astrologers, or instructors themselves.

School held very little interest for me. I wanted out, but my Da had different ideas.

3

On my first-ever day of school, he walked into town, just to walk me back home. He held my tiny hand in his massive one. His hands were always warm, even though so heavily calloused. My tiny reader in hand, he asked me what I thought of school.

“It makes my bottom sore, and you have to sit all day and not run around. And if you do you get in trouble.”

“Aye, I remember that from school myself. But what else did you think? Did you learn any letters?”

“I already know all the letters,” I had sat over the shoulder of my cousin Sess, as she had done her homework for the last few years, “and Instructor Karin said that I should have been in school last year and I was disturbing the others who were practicing their first letters. And I can do my numbers too, and Instructor Karin says that you should teach me better things to do with them than to measure everyone’s hair.”

He laughed. “What better use is there than that?”

“So,” I announced, and I truly felt that I was settling the matter, “I don’t think I want to go back anymore, I think I know everything I could ever need to.”

We were walking home by the river, and he sat down on the bank. Picking up some flat stones, he dropped some into my hand as I sat beside him. Dad pulled back his arm, and sent a pebble skipping across the Delph.

I pulled back my own arm, sent a small stone flying and watched it sink into the river with a small ‘plop’. He pulled again, and his new pebble skittered across the surface nine or ten times. My next sunk like, well, just like a stone.

“Olly, wrap your index finger around the edge of the pebble, twist your arm a little bit back, then twist yourself forward when you fling it, and let the pebble roll out, down your finger, like this.” He showed me carefully what he meant, and he sent another stone across the water.

I picked up the biggest, darkest one that I had been saving for last. It was two inches across and nice and flat. I wrapped my head around what he said, and then wrapped

my finger around the stone. I twisted to bring my right arm back, and then flung my arm forward and let the stone fly.

As I released, Da said “However many times it skips, that is how many years you will stay in school.”

I swung my head to stare at him open-mouthed, then swung it back to watch the stone hit the surface of the water, and bounce. I would swear that time, itself, slowed down for us. It landed again, and bounced, less high, less far this time. I found myself standing; I have no idea how. The stone skipped again, tiny water droplets flowering out from it and then once more. Its inertia was exhausted, and the random stone that spelled my fate split the water with a tiny splash and sank beneath the surface.

“Four years” Da said. “At the very least, four years.”

“But Da, four years!!”

He held up his hands. “You just learned to skip stones. Don’t you like to learn?”

“But I learned that here by the river!”

“Yes, So just think of what you will learn in school. Every day brings us something new. You will like school. Even if I you don’t want to be an astrologer, what could it hurt to have more knowledge?”

“My bottom.”

“At least four years, Olly.”

I recognized defeat. “Four years. But then I can work in the forge?”

Da smiled. “You work there now, you mad thing.” He stood, ‘Let’s get back home. No work tonight. You can show me what you did today.’”

And I did.

The schoolhouse had been built at the same time as the temple, far before my grandfather’s or even theirs were thought of. It was much like the temple, but a fraction of the size and grandeur, and it sat directly across the main square.

Delphin’s square was everything. Temple and school were opposite each other, dorms and shops on the other two sides. Market days, the square filled with stalls. Fest days, it filled with musicians and dancing.

There was an inn, The Rabbits Hook, named after the trailing end of the wide, arcing, white Rabbit Track that bisected the night sky. Its tables spilled out onto the paving stones in fair weather. Arol and I had some of the same friends, he made them more easily than I. But we both ran with Tedd and Gregga, who were the Innkeeper's son and daughter, so I knew the Rabbit well. Interspersed around the square were grassy bits to lie on in summer, and in the center was a three-foot high stone slab, a shrine to The Maiden. Anyone could stand upon its flat surface and orate, or perform. Most of us in school thought that yelling as we jumped on and off it was fine oration indeed. Three sides of the stand were carved from the Maiden's life.

The school consisted mostly of three large rooms. I spent four years in the largest of them, with every other local child close to my age. My Da was right, I did kind of grow to like it, but not to love it, and what I liked most were the few friends I made. Aside from Tedd and Gregga, who were twins, and as alike as they were different, there was Emil. Emil was good company. He was always as ready as any, for any fun to be had. His Ma was from away, so though his hair was much like Junia's, he had darker skin, near as dark as his Ma's, and green eyes. We, in the hills, were so much alike with our dark hair and eyes and our caramel skin, that Emil was a novelty.

Three days a week, I attended school. The other four were mine.

I thought of it as The Forest or the woods, but it was called The Delphinian Woods. I learned in school that across the border in Coronado, they called it by another name. It extended for countless miles through Ilia and far into Coronado. Delphin sat at the far northern edge of the forest. It was a place of endless wonder to me.

Soon after I was allowed to start poking about in the forge, my Da started taking me with him into the forest, hunting Pika.

The pika plant was valuable, but the forest as a whole was invaluable, for being the only known place where the pika grew wild. Ages ago nomads, foresters and farmers who stumbled across the wild plants would dig them up from the forest floor, and transplant them. But outside the forest, they soon withered and died. No harvest was ever made from a transplanted Pika. Many pioneering and ambitious sorts had tried carefully harvesting the seeds. The astrologers were consulted for best planting times, and gave the star's answer; that this could not be seen. The farmers sowed the seed anyway, and were

rewarded finally with a crop of tiny, plants, with leaves similar to pika, but nowhere near as strong or large, and no fruit, no barbs. They made the best of it, called it Piki and crafted baby-soft felted clothes from the leaves.

Nobody ever managed to cultivate the pika, so harvesting in the wild was eventually left to foresters, and my family. It was no accident that the informal compound of our home and the forge sat at the very edge of the forest. My ancestors had been slipping into the forest to hunt pika as long as anyone kept records, and probably much longer.

4

I was five when Da finally allowed Arol and me to come with him. “I want you to promise me that you’ll listen carefully, and do everything I say. The Woods are dangerous: hidden bogs, sharp rocks and branches, twisting vines that grab at your ankles, fierce animals. Poisonous plants. Most grown men fear it.”

“And you will take us tomorrow? You promise?” My Da’s speech was surely designed to dissuade us, unfortunately for him, Arol and I only got more excited.

“You two!” he shouted. “There’s something wrong with you.”

“But you are still taking us? Into the forest, right? Tomorrow?”

It was late spring, and Arol and I were already sleeping on the rooftop on clear nights. The slightest hint of light over the trees usually woke me and by five-thirty, I was nudging him awake. We covered out pallets, in case the weather changed. We lit our lantern and I held it as he crawled through the low door and descended to the main room. I leaned down and handed it to him. By the time I was down, Arol was pulling clothes out of our chests. Rough leggings for both of us, sleeveless shirts, and full caps to tidy our hair away. We each took an oiled canvas backpack and carefully wrapped some bread and boiled eggs. We added skins of water. We were ready.

I knocked at Da’s door.

“THE MOTHER STAR IS NOT EVEN UP YET!”

But I knew that he would be out soon, dressed and ready to go. Shortly he came out, dressed much the same as us, but far from ready. He had to have tea, and breakfast,

and that woke Davlis, who then wanted breakfast too. By the time we were getting our boots on, it was bright outside.

Arol stood beside my Da and complained unabashed. “We need a full day if we are going to find anything, let’s go!”

Without putting down his mug of tea, Da wrapped his other arm around Arol’s head and clamped his large hand over his mouth. Arol’s eyes bulged.

“First part of doing what I say. Quit talking. Now. No complaining. No whining. Agreed?”

Arol nodded his head. Da went back to his tea and bread. He did not release Arol. He finished his meal, drank his tea, chatting with Davlis the whole time. Finally, he stood, still holding Arol’s head.

“Shall we then?” He asked us.

I nodded vehemently.

He released Arol’s mouth. “Arol, are you ready?”

“Yes, I a...” Da’s hand went back over his mouth.

“Arol, are you ready?”

Arol nodded. Da let him go.

“Let’s see your supplies, then.” And we ran to get out sacks. He peered into each, both almost empty, mine with water sacks, Arol’s with the bundle of food.

“Very good.” He said. “This will make a nice picnic for a quick hike. We’ll be back in time to do a full day’s work in the forge.”

It was a full hour before Da was finally pleased and we were ready to leave. We added much more food to the backpacks, then a small folding saw, and axe, several woven bags, one of them full of tiny metal clips, and a folded belt of small tools.

Sess and Junia, who had slept undisturbed through all of the ruckus we made, were finally up. Junia rose to hug me a quiet goodbye.

“No be scared Olly, stars shiny all night.”

“They are shiny every night, Junia,” said Sess. My cousin Sess could be like an irritating burr under my collar, I fretted that Junie spent too much time with her.

“Sessia, to school now. Junia, off to Mara’s. You can help with the hens today.”
Said Davlis.

“Hi Ho.” Said Da, and we followed him out the door.

We walked around to the side of our house, walked fifteen yards and we were at the edge of the forest. We had never been allowed past this point before now.

Da paused. Arol and I were stepping from side to side in our excitement.

“You stay right behind me, unless I say otherwise. You be quiet, so we can hear. And you listen to what I say.” Arol nodded.

“I promise. I’ll live these next hours of my life the best I can.” I said.

They both stared at me. I did not know where the words came from, but they felt right.

“Me too?” said Arol.

Da nodded and waved his arms melodramatically. “Come into the Delphinian Woods with me, we search for the pika.” As if we needed to be more stirred up.

He stepped into the path. I expected shadows to cover him instantly, sticks to crack ominously, but it was really a very nice path, with broad swaths of lights filtering through the trees. I followed him, Arol right behind me. I turned back to him and grinned. He too was already smiling ear to ear. We had been waiting for this our whole lives. Considering all the misbehavior and freedom we children in town enjoyed, not one of us ever disobeyed the injunction to stay out of the forest. At least once a year, some starving, half-crazed lostling would stagger from the woods, claiming to have been wandering for weeks, and having been chased by terrifying, winged and fanged creatures. My Da reasoned that they had probably eaten mushrooms they shouldn’t have touched, and were lucky to be alive at all.

Da led us down the path.

“This main track cuts almost straight south-east for two or three miles, then starts to curve around to the south. The path isn’t very well maintained, but it is cut through rock, so it is usually pretty easy to clear. Other paths branch out from it, and then get smaller and branch into other paths. There are no real paths through the forest to

Coronado. Until you know the forest, you stay on the paths, or in sight of them, if you wander into the brush, always look back every couple feet to make sure you can see the path, when you can't, you turn around and head back.”

He was right, within a hundred feet of the forest edge, our broad path had become a narrow, dark trail. The trees to either side of it were dense and filled with fallen brush.

He showed us how to find the hidden forks of some of the smallest paths and we wandered down path after path, some dark and sheltered, and some brightly lit as the forest thinned out to let trails of light stream through the leafy canopy. Both of us were jumpy, imagining foul beasts and madmen behind every second tree.

At one complex fork in the path, he picked up a twig, no longer than five inches, notched it with his knife and then bent it and stuck it one end into the ground, the other end pointing back the way we had come. He sent us down the path ahead of him. We walked along, Da pointing out different trees, asking us their names. We got maybe one in ten, but he would always wait for us to guess before he supplied the name. When he asked again, we often got it. Some of the trees, I had never seen, but of those many I had seen before, I now wished I had paid more attention to them as he demanded to know their names, their times to blossom.

“Spring?” was our guess each time.

He reeled off times and months, a confusion of names. When young, we think we know everything there is to know. It is when we find how little we understand and how infinite and unknowable the world is that we begin to learn. My father had been wandering through these woods for thirty years and more. In thirty minutes, I was realizing it could be more than I might ever understand. Being utterly humbled is what finally drove the nervousness out of my head. The forest ceased to frighten or excite me. It enthralled me.

He stopped at a willow and peeled the bark back, showing the pith underneath, which he said we could eat if we were ever needful. We each took a nibble. It tasted more awful than I could believe.

“Someday you may recall this, and that one day it might keep you alive. Look at the branching pattern on this willow; this one has tasty bark. If you see a pattern that alternates side to side, avoid it, it is far too bitter.”

We turned back at that point and came to the complex fork. There were three different paths to choose from. Arol and I scanned the ground for the twig, but it was nowhere to be seen.

“I kicked it away,” said Da. “So what do you do now?”

What we did was stare at him.

“Say someone else accidentally kicked over your marker, or an animal knocked it over, what would you do now?”

I pointed up the path just to our left.

“Go that way.” I said, with no certainty.

“If you chose that path, you would come out of the forest about ten miles south of home.” He looked pointedly at me. “In about three days.”

So... not that way then.

“Why didn’t you make two of those twig things, you could have put one on the other side of the path.”

Da smiled broadly. “Good one Olly. See here.” He gestured to the branches over our heads. “I also twined these branches together in a loop, and,” He lowered his finger to the trunk of the tree. “I notched the trunk right below this branch” He showed us a two-inch slash, cut with his belt knife into the bark of the tree, just under a branch. If you didn’t know what you were looking for, it was invisible.

“You never know what might happen, or how fast you will be heading home, but always make at least two trail-markers.”

Over a few hours he taught us how to notch trees, twine branches, bend twigs, bundle weeds or grasses with a reed, ram long pointed branches into the ground and how to make rock piles to mark our turnings. Da showed us how he and Davlis had made lop-sticks on all the paths that led back home; they always used pine or fir trees, with one level of branches cut short all around. I couldn’t reach as high as the cut branches, but I could see them on tiptoe. He also carried little forked branches in his pockets, which he placed carefully in branches, or on the ground as we walked. As we backtracked, he picked them up and handed us a few each.

“Always point them back toward your path home.”

Home, my stomach growled in response. Strange, but it felt both as if we had been in the forest for mere moments, and simultaneously that we had been here for days. But it was just now lunchtime. Da led us off the path a few feet, stopping first for Arol and me to excessively mark our trail. We each set three markers. We sat for lunch in a small clearing. The ground was soft and dry and we were ravenous. We made short work of all the supplies we had brought, and fell with gusto on the biscuits Da had wisely thought to bring along.

“Willow bark would even be tasty right now.” I said.

Arol pulled out a twig from underneath him, “I would eat this, if I could.”

Da reached behind him and pulled random pile of weeds and grasses.

He held up the little handful in his palm and started sorting through them.

“This is cow-weed, you could eat it if you had to, but it can give you a stomach-ache, and this leafy one is called Taraxacum in Roma; when it is young and soft, it is delicious.” He handed us each a leaf, and we lay on our backs and chewed it pleasurably. It was slightly bitter, but palatable.

Da woke me what seemed like seconds later. I had not meant to nod off, but I was, for all my bravado, still very young. He sat on a stump behind me, held a finger to his lips and directed his eyes to the edge of the clearing. I pushed up to my elbows and lifted my head. Not ten feet away, a family of ermine was scampering past us, the babies beginning to mottle from white to brown.

The man was standing in the woods behind them, just past the edge of the clearing. He was taller even than Davlis, but slender, with salt and pepper hair that was cut short, and hung unbound just to his shoulders. His skin was a pale, golden colour. He was dressed in a manner I had never seen; a deeply dyed burgundy vest embroidered at all the edges with vivid silver and gold designs; it was cut to his mid-thigh and was circled by a wide metal belt, which gleamed in the dim light, the enormous buckle like a crest. His leggings and shirt were almost white, and he had no pack, he was carrying nothing on him at all. His boots appeared to be dark leather right up to the knees, laced all around, with an artful fold that fell back a few inches from the top. My first thought upon seeing him was that I wanted a pair of those boots. The next was surprise that he was there.

“Who is he?” I whispered.

Da looked at me with confusion. “They’re ermine Olly.”

I glanced at Da and looked back to the woods the man was gone. I quickly looked from side to side. Had I dreamt him? Could I have dreamt of boots I had never seen?

“Da, would you ever make a whole pair of boots out of leather?”

Da laughed. “Aye. If I was rich, I certainly would.” I was still lying on the ground, hanging my head back and staring at him behind me. He was leaning over, looking down at me with mirth in his eyes, and I suddenly felt ridiculous. I got up abruptly, walked to where the ermine had passed, and looked into the forest where the man had been standing. The trees were not overly thick, and I could see the forest floor, carpeted with grasses and tiny flowering plants. Nothing seemed crushed to me, but what did I know of tracking? I felt too foolish to ask Da to look.

Da was packing up, we followed him and he let us obsessively pick up all the markers we had left at the path. In the afternoon, unasked, we stilled our chatter and saw far more wildlife; tiny deer, ground squirrels, a marmot, and at a distance, an elk on it’s own. We laughed at a great sloth, hanging almost invisibly from a high branch.

“You won’t laugh when it drops on you, or swings those long claws at you. Sloth cuts fester and kill.” Da said. Also there were countless lizards, and snakes. He showed us two that were venomous, and said there were many more.

“The day is usually safe, but at evening, you get more predators. You can see lynx and cougars, wolves and bears, but keep your horn to hand and you can frighten them off.”

“We don’t have horns.”

“No, but I do, and before you ever will come on our own, you will too.”

The elk was still in our sight, Da pulled out his horn, eight inches of curved silver and shell. He raised it to his lips, we plugged our ears and he blew. The sound pierced the whole world. The Elk took off as if shot from a catapult. Mice and chipmunks, which we had not yet noticed, suddenly scattered away from us.

“A horn is handy to have, but try to only use it when you need it. Why disturb the woods without need?”

Da seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, and possibly the sides. He saw everything. He even pointed out a nest of Bright Eyes. Named for their crystalline, aqua eyes, the color-changing birds could shut their inner translucent eyelids and blend almost invisibly into their surroundings. They were now mottled brown and green like the mossy log in which they had nested.

“We can sell them to the mayor or the temple. If they can be trained young enough, they make excellent messenger birds. Even their feet are blue against a clear sky, and I swear they have the shimmering glint of the stars when they fly overhead at night.”

Arol and I did not have the heart to disturb the bird’s nest, so Da left it alone.

We walked the paths all day, wandering from time to time into the brush, pushing branches aside, Da asking us occasionally to name what we saw and touched. Our boots were good oiled canvas, stitched to thick, leather soles, but trouble-burrs still attached to our laces, our leggings.

The trouble-plant was the bane of farmers in the foothills. It had clusters of nasty burrs. I knew from experience that they could tear apart a knit shirt. The stems were ungainly, twisted, harsh and unyielding. The plants grew low, camouflaging themselves under other vegetation, and it wasn’t until you felt a slap against the leg that you knew that you would be picking burrs later. Its fuzzy leaves could be irritating to the skin.

We sat down on a log to pull some of them off. When we stood, Arol looked into the sky. The day had clouded over, no telling direction from the Mother Star. He and I argued about which way we had been headed. We had left no markers while sitting right at the edge of the path.

Da knew the way, but before he told us he showed us he how he knew. There were ways to tell direction, even in the center of the forest on cloudy days. He directed us to learn moss patterns on trees, the way that rocks had broken down, the direction that streams and rills flowed and what that meant. He stepped carefully but with speed. He chastised us for every twig we snapped on the path. As the day wore on, our tempers were shortened. My brain overflowed with information.

It finally occurred to me that we hadn’t even really been looking for Pika, which was the whole reason we had come into the forest. I asked why.

“I have been looking. Everything I am showing you all helps in looking for pika. It seldom grows on the path. Most often we will have to hike far into the woods to find it, and it most always a matter of luck. Once you find it, you have to get it back home, and before you will ever go looking on your own, you need to know your way back.”

“Will we find any today?”

As luck would have it, we did.

We turned for home in the late afternoon. With all our backtracking, we had not wandered all that far from the edge of the forest. Da stopped on the path and sniffed. He turned and winked at us.

“This way, could be close.”

Not fifteen feet from the path, we found one.

The pika was five feet high, and covered in long, broad, furry leaves. The leaves were butter soft to the touch, but strong and pliable, fresh pika leaves could be felted into perfectly fitted caps, boots, and clothes. There were crofters in town, who dyed and wove them into cloth: soft as wool, and much stronger.

This plant had three fruits; lovely and fresh, mottled pink and grey, each the size of a full watermelon. Da wrapped his hands around one.

“They’re perfectly ripe.” He took out his belt-knife and deftly cut the stem, then took a woven bag out of his backpack and placed the large fruit inside. He wrapped his hands around another. “When they are ripe, you can often twist them off the stem.”

He showed us how to twist, pulling away from the stem so that it broke away clean, leaving a small indent in the fruit. He pulled out a separate bag for it and another one for the last fruit.

“You have both seen the ones we have in the root cellar now, the skin is far more brown and rough, with the scaly pattern on it. That was fruit picked when not yet ripened. It lasts a lot longer in our cold room, and we dry it for lean times, but it will never taste like these lovelies will.” He handed me the knife. I shook my head and pulled my own out of my belt, it was very small and fit nicely into my hand but it seemed huge to me. Plus, it was mine. Davlis had made it just for me.

He guided my blade to the stem of the last fruit. “Support it with your other hand so that it doesn’t fall when it is cut free.” This was far easier said than done. In the end, Arol and I took turns holding the large fruit and sawing at the stem. It finally came free and it rolled back into my chest. I sat down abruptly and gazed at the miraculous things sitting in my lap.

Ripe pika fruit was my favourite food; it was everyone’s favorite. The rind was soft and thick, it was delicious peeled off and fried or baked to a delectable crunchy texture. The dense flesh had the texture of roasted yams, and it tasted like honeyed and spiced groundnuts.

When almost over-ripe, the fruit was so sweet and soft that the juice would run down your face. The huge nut at the center of each one was full of the protein and health-some nutriments that all the parents in town raved about. We liked it anyway. It could be roasted, and eaten in slices, or slivered and toasted. A few time every year, we started up the smoke-house and cured as many as we could; I liked to slice smoke pika-nut thin, fry it in goat butter and eat it with eggs or fresh greens.

Da helped us to wrestle it into another bag. “We take every fruit, then the plant will produce again. But if we leave one fruit on, it will just get larger until it explodes and goes to waste.”

Once the fruits were off the pika, he cut some of the leaves off at the stems, to reveal the best prize yet, pika barbs. The barbs were small yet, as thick as my Da’s finger and twice as long, pale brown in color. He lifted and moved leaves, scouting along the height of the plant. We found nine barbs, less than half were curved hooks, the others almost straight spikes. The barbs were essentially giant thorns. Some were curved and some straight as blades. Da and Davlis transformed the pika barbs into pikalia, the famous Ilian fighting sticks.

“These are all too small for us yet. But we can help them along...”

Da reached into his bag, and pulled out the bag of tiny iron clips. I had seen these made in the forge, but did not know their use. He took out two clips. Each was two inches long, bent like fishhooks, but as wide as his thumb, with holes at the flat end. He took some short lengths of chain out next, and hooked the chain through the holes, then he

looped one of the bent clips around the bottom of one of the barbs, and the stretched the other clip around the tip.

“While the pika barbs are small and still pliable, like this, you can encourage them to grow into a shape you like. The stem and the tip will grow closer together, and the part between will keep growing, and you’ll get a much larger curve on the barb. Straight barbs are all variations on the same shape, but we guide the hooks if we can. If we find a double barb, that is the best prize yet, I’ll show you what to do then. “

He had both of us try to loop a clip around the pika barbs, but neither of us had hands that were strong enough. He picked out three to be clipped and made short work of it. Then he cut more of the leaves from the plant, leaving less than half of them.

“Always leave enough leaves for the plant to live, just take the best leaves, untorn, large and soft.”

Next he wrapped clips around the main stalk of the plant, attaching them in patterns I didn’t begin to understand.

“This will be an excellent shaft, I am just going to try to make some natural hand-grips.”

We took the leaves and wrapped them around the pika fruits and then re-nestled them in the bags.

He loaded two bags into his backpack. He looked about the area and picked up a long stick, then tied the last bag to the center of it.

“You two can haul this home like a captive, brave hunters that you are.”

We each crouched, put an end of the pole on our shoulders, and stood up. It made for a light burden.

“It’s getting on.” Da said. “I say this was a good day.”

Happily, we followed him home.

A meal of fresh, ripe pika was a treat. When we arrived, Junia, Sess and Davlis were all resting contentedly on the bench outside. Davlis watched us emerge from the forest, his feet up on an up-ended crate, a mug of red wine dwarfed in his massive hand. He saw the looks on our faces, and bellowed.

“Mara! Fresh pika!”

Mara was over the low gate by the time we arrived at the house, and she took one home in her strong arms, thanking Arol and I with kisses on our cheeks. Word spreads fast, and ten minutes later, another neighbour had stopped by and we sold the third one. Ripe pika doesn't last long, before it rots and smells. And it brings good coin, Da added a few Trintos to his string.

Davlis was already chopping and stoking the hearth by the time the three of us had cleaned ourselves up. I gave up on my heavily burred leggings, a job for another day.

When we finally sat to eat, it was dark, but just warm enough to eat outside. Da made a toast. "To the brave hunters!"

"A kill on your first hunt!" Davlis jested loudly.

Da was the best cook in the family. He had ground most of the nut into small chunks, and fried them with onion root and potatoes. He poured light cream over thin strips of warmed pale-pink pika flesh and covered it in ground nutmeg and chopped peppers.

We thanked our sister, the world, for our bounty and ate.