

FAINT HEART, FOUL LADY



BY NINA KIRIKI HOFFMAN

Faint Heart, Foul Lady:
A Novelette
& Bonus Story: Night Life

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Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Beginning](#)

[Bonus Story: Night Life](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

[Other Nina Kiriki Hoffman Titles](#)

Faint Heart, Foul Lady

OF A SURETY, I received my knighthood. After years of rigorous training as a squire, at Pentecost I had a ritual bath in rose water to cleanse me of sin. Then I was dressed in a white robe to signify the cleanness of the body, a scarlet cloak to remind me to always be ready to shed my blood in defense of the Church, my king, all women, and the poor and oppressed, brown stockings to remind me of the grave where I would ultimately lie so that I would always be prepared for death, and a white belt signifying chastity. I spent my vigil night in the church, praying to God to purify me of earthly desires and to make me a fine and upstanding knight.

The next morning I heard mass. Afterward, I knelt before my king, who gave me a blow on the shoulder. “Arise, Sir Bran, Knight of the Realm,” he said. Then the king with his own hands took a sword from the altar and girded it around me, and two knights fixed golden spurs to my boots to remind me to swiftly follow God’s commandments as a pricked charger follows the commands of his knight. I arose in my third self since my birth, second since my baptism.

In the first days of my knighthood, I clove to God and honor.

But in the months that followed, with no war, no prospect of war, no one to fight save each other, we knights at court were at loose ends. We jousted and tourneyed for the amusement of the court and to demonstrate our prowess. We told stories and sang songs and dallied with the court ladies; we listened to minstrels and watched jongleurs practice their arts, and attended raconteurs who spoke of glorious adventures to be found just over the next hill. We lost our fire.

I discovered my own sins and weaknesses, of which sloth played a part, but looming larger (though not as mortal) was cowardice.

I did not begin a coward. I went to all my knightly studies with a good will and a clean heart. But somehow I could not get my limbs and my weapons to act in concert.

I knew I lacked jousting skill before I was knighted, but thought application would overcome shame. No matter how much I practiced against the quintain, I did not improve. A wooden dummy could unseat me, and left me with bruises to the head and dignity. Even the meanest of the other knights could unhorse me.

I became a laughingstock in the court. If not for some little skill at hand-to-hand combat and sword fighting, and enough skill with flute and fiddle to keep others entertained, I would have been wholly humiliated.

My father was slain when I was a child, and he did not leave me much more than a competence, a too-large suit of chain mail, and his horse; I could not afford to tourney, for I risked losing all my possessions to whoever beat me, and everyone could. It was due only to my skill with dice that I managed to pay for stabling and training while I was a squire, and after my dubbing, I was enjoined by my king in the interests of honor against playing games of chance.

Of my secret dream to be a bard, I never spoke. In the resting hours between arms practice, sleep, and meals, it was not thought unseemly for knights to take up the arts of music; one could pursue anything that would entertain the ladies, and so I learned from the castle bard some basic fiddle techniques and tunes, though I kept most of my

practices secret.

Alas, for a lad whose noble father was killed by a wicked knight and whose noble mother's heart was full of vengeance, there was only one future; one must become a knight and avenge one's father's death. My mother told me that my father had been like me, gentle and not good at jousting. He was beloved of everyone, a raconteur around whom people gathered wherever he went. He could jest even the sourest knight out of ill humors, and his words lent brightness to many an ordinary day.

Would that I had such skills; I was only a shadow of my father, save for my luck, which often ran strong, stronger than his, I hoped.

Why did the Knight of the Pearl, a stranger to our court, arrive on a tourney day and insist that my father meet him in a joust? Why, after he had unhorsed my father, did the Knight leap to the ground and strike off my father's head after my father had laughed and yielded to him? My mother said my father had no enemies but his creditors. Who was the Knight of the Pearl? No one recognized his devices, and he rode off directly following his base and cowardly act.

My mother told me the story of my father's death many times as I grew up. She planted the goal of vengeance in my heart. I, in my clumsiness, planted my own fears almost as deep.

No matter how many soothsayers I consulted, the fates always fell out the same way. Somewhere along my path, I would meet the man who had killed my father. I had the subsequent outcome told a dozen different ways, but that one point they all agreed on.

Any road, I had to make shift to prove myself better than I knew I was, lest I be cast out of court by the king and sent to guard some fortress at the far end of the wind-whipped world, where perchance I might never see another human face.

When I heard that Sir Wulfric, strong and brave and in all matters of arms and warfare knowledgeable, though known to be headstrong and fearless to the point of foolishness, was about to set off in search of adventure, I asked if I might accompany him. He granted me permission to join his quest, or to join mine with his. Sir Wulfric promised that if we heard rumors of the Knight of the Pearl we could pursue them.

Before we left court, I talked to all the ladies, begging one of them to inspire in my heart the knightly virtues of prowess, loyalty, generosity, courtesy, and an open and honest noble bearing. Most of the ladies laughed, but one of the queen's attendants, Amicia, kindly granted me permission to enshrine her in my heart, and gave me a red sleeve to bind around my sword arm to remind me of her regard.

She was not the most lovely of those who waited on the queen, but her brown eyes were merry, her brown hair curled softly about her face, and her figure was plump and generous. Her lips were plump too, and red as berries; in all, a lady of whom one could dream fine dreams.

It was only later that night when I was having a farewell ale with the other knights that I learned Amicia was beloved of a number of us, mostly the lowest among us. The others' favors were green, blue, white, and yellow; it warmed my heart that to me Amicia had given a red sleeve. Better an overgenerous love than none at all. I hid my favor and stayed out of the ensuing quarrels to see who ranked highest in her regard.

The next morning Sir Wulfric and I set out. Sir Wulfric had a squire named Eudo,

and I, impoverished, had none, nor was my gear in good shape, since I had to polish everything myself, and I was not handy with mending leather or reweaving chain. When I myself was a squire, my knight booted me for my shortcomings until I learned to pay one of the pages with my winnings at dice to do my work.

My horse, however, was a good one, though elderly; he had been my father's destrier.

Sir Wulfric's squire Eudo was a kindly lad. He helped me with my armor after he had tended to his lord's, and managed fire and food and pack animals and weapons for the three of us without complaint. In this wise I traveled in more comfort than that to which I had been accustomed.

We had been three days on the road, beyond the edge of our best maps, and found ourselves in a deep, dark forest, with trees so dense they eclipsed the sky, when we met with our first adventure.

Sir Wulfric had chosen the least-traveled path, for he feared that other knights who had gone ahead of us would dispose of any adventures on the well-trod ways. As a consequence, we often had to pick out traces of the path through the underbrush. We were searching through brush for our path that afternoon and did not notice we had arrived in a clearing until we heard the noise.

A sliding, slithery, scales-scraping-on-rock sound it was, and then the moaning of a maiden. We looked up and beheld a horrid sight: a giant silver-green serpent as thick through as a man's chest had wrapped its noxious coils around a golden-haired damsel, encircling her in its cold embrace so completely that only her head could be seen. She appeared a high-born damsel, her skin pale as lilies, her forehead broad and high, her eyes a fine gray.

The serpent's hideous long-nosed head, which bore a red fanned frill and waving whiskers, lifted high above its prey. Golden eyes with narrow pupils regarded us.

The creature hissed. Flame shot from its mouth. The scent of scorched grasses surrounded us.

My heart quailed. I had never seen such a monster. Fear urged me to turn and ride back into the forest any which way, so long as it was away.

"Eudo! My lance!" cried Sir Wulfric. His squire handed him his lance, and Sir Wulfric charged the creature.

Eudo glanced enquiringly at me. He had all our extra arms on his pack mules.

"Let us see how Sir Wulfric fares," I muttered. Perhaps this caution could pass for wisdom rather than cowardice.

The worm's head lifted higher, then shot forth as Wulfric approached, and knocked him out of the saddle. His lance fell to the ground.

Sir Wulfric struggled to his feet and drew his sword. The serpent's head was so high Wulfric would never lay a blade on it. He should attack the body, I thought, but he waved his blade at the head.

Meanwhile, the serpent watched me, ignoring the threat closer to it.

"Now, sir?" Eudo asked me. The trapped damsel treated us to a wide array of screams.

I marshaled my fears and nodded. I had made myself a vow ere I started this journey that I would no longer run from danger; henceforth I would be foolhardy and hope that somehow I could win regard, if not from my peers, at least from God, who

saw into all hearts. If the dragon ate me, still the court would respect me more than they did at present. “The light lance.” I had no finesse with the heavy lance.

Eudo frowned. He was not allowed to question my choices, but I could nearly hear his thoughts. The light lance, not tipped with iron like the heavy lance, would not even pierce the monster’s hide, should I be lucky enough to land a blow.

I held out my hand, and he put the light lance into it.

I thought fondly of my lady Amicia, in whose honor I had vowed to fight. I couched the lance and charged, my heart pounding faster than my horse’s hooves. I pointed the tip of my lance at the damsel’s head.

“What ails you? Are you a lunatic?” she screamed.

Sir Wulfric cried, “Thou hideous, stinking worm!” and thrust upward with his sword through the air, a blow so strong it nearly overturned him. “Engage!”

Nearer and nearer the serpent’s coils I drew, my lance point unwaveringly aimed at the damsel. Truth to tell, I had no finesse with the light lance either, and I never hit what I aimed at, so I conjectured that if I aimed at the one thing I wanted not to hit, I would hit something else; if the fates smiled, something vital belonging to the serpent.

At the last moment, while the damsel screamed and Sir Wulfric raged (he had never even turned to see what she was crying about), the monster shifted and I charged past without striking anything.

A familiar feeling of futility washed through me, seasoned with a hearty dash of terror.

“Curse you for a black-hearted knave!” the damsel cried. “May you never love until you love the one who overmasters you, and may you suffer from that love as long as you live!”

Her words did not inspire me with courage and the will to save her, but nevertheless, I managed to wheel my destrier and gallop back in the general direction of the serpent.

Then a startling apparition charged from the forest, a besmirched boy on a shaggy pony, yelling and brandishing a short sword. The beardless youth wore a soup pot on his head with the handle to the back, and a ragged dun surcoat under armor pieced together from mats of woven straw, the sort of figure of a knight one saw in comic plays.

He charged straight at the serpent and jabbed its hide. To my astonishment, he opened a wide slash in the serpent’s outermost coil. Green ichor boiled forth, and the monster poured out an ear-splitting cry of rage and pain. The lad sliced it again with the short sword. His blade gleamed with green fire. Again he opened a wound in the serpent’s side.

Wailing and spitting flames, the worm relaxed its hold on the damsel and fled into the forest.

“My savior!” the damsel cried to the lad.

The boy slid off his pony’s back and wiped his blade on the grass, then took out a rag and cleaned the blade and sheathed it. His face suffused with crimson at the damsel’s words, and he ducked his head.

I pulled up beside him just as Sir Wulfric, apoplectic with rage, charged forward, sword extended. Whether he intended to spit the boy I did not wait to determine. I grasped the boy by the scruff of the neck and dragged him onto my horse. My

muscles, hampered by chain mail, protested such a maneuver. Fortunately the boy was agile and scrambled to safety behind me. My good horse bore us both a little ways off. “Well done, lad,” I said.

Sir Wulfric ran after us until the weight of his mail and shield and sword slowed and stopped him. When at last he halted, puffing and huffing, I pulled my horse up.

“Sir,” said the boy behind me, “thank you, sir. May I be your squire?”

“Are you of noble birth?”

His arms, which he had closed about my waist in our flight from the foot charge of Sir Wulfric, loosened their hold. “No,” he murmured.

“One must have noble blood to be a squire,” I said. “Only the king can else appoint a candidate to knighthood. It is not in my power.”

“I humbly beseech you,” he said.

“Listen, lad. I would love to have you as my squire, you and your sword and your skill and luck, but there are rules. I can take you as my servant, but I cannot elevate you to squire. I am sorry.”

For a moment we sat. I watched the berserker rage drain from Sir Wulfric’s face. He lowered his sword and reached under his helmet to scratch his head. “What happened?” he asked.

The damsel, behind us a ways and beyond sight, cried, “Where are you, sirs? Where are my protectors? The beast might return at any moment!”

“You drove off the serpent,” I told Sir Wulfric. The boy’s arms tightened around me again, perhaps in protest. “You were magnificent. I shall sing your praises: Sir Wulfric, mighty in battle.”

Sir Wulfric chewed his ginger mustache. “There was a boy,” he said. “I am certain there was a boy.”

“Yes. He’s up behind me.”

Sir Wulfric toddled closer and peered up at the boy. “Had a notion he interfered with my fight.”

“You saved us all,” I said.

Sir Wulfric smiled.

“Help? Help? Help!” cried the damsel.

Sir Wulfric shook his head, then trotted off toward the clearing.

The boy poked me in the back. “Why did you tell such great lies?”

“Didn’t you see he was ready to slice you lengthwise and spill your guts over the ground? He doesn’t remember what happened. What use have you for glory? You’ll never be a knight. This way praise will be heaped on Sir Wulfric, and he will be happy. Unless,” I muttered, sotto voce, “Eudo tells him a different story. We’d best go back so I can warn him.” I wheeled my horse and we cantered back to the clearing.

We arrived a little in advance of Sir Wulfric. “Help!” cried the damsel. I glanced toward her, and saw that though her garments were somewhat crushed she seemed otherwise in good spirits. The monster was nowhere in evidence.

I rode directly to Eudo. “I’ve told Sir Wulfric he routed the beast,” I murmured to him.

“He believed you?”

“The madness of battle overcame him. He remembers nothing.”

“Does that stripling on the back of your horse have aught to say about this?”

“Yes. He complains about my choice in tales. Convince him I am correct.”

The lad’s arms loosed from about me, and he slid the ground. “Never mind who tells what tales. I’ll get myself gone from here now.”

“Wait.” For some reason I didn’t want the boy to leave us, and it wasn’t just a matter of treasuring his skill with the sword. There was something about him I liked.

I wanted to dismount, but it was a difficult maneuver when one was wearing mail and still clutching a lance. I was a champion at falling off horses fully armored. I didn’t enjoy demonstrating that particular skill. I handed the lance to Eudo, then rode to a nearby fallen forest giant of a tree. I gave my good horse the command to stand. The boy watched sullenly as I maneuvered myself off my horse with the aid of the log and slid to the ground.

“Moon curse you, have you lost your wits, such as they are?” the damsel cried. “How dare you dismount when danger is all around us? Suppose the monster returns? How will you fight it from the ground?”

Sir Wulfric puffed up then and bowed to her. “Damsel,” he said.

“And you, you fat, worthless fool!” she cried. “What ails you? Where are all your knightly skills?”

“Is it thus you address your deliverer?” asked Sir Wulfric.

“My deliverer! Devils pull out your hairs one by one, fool! What had you to do with anything besides irritating the captor worm?”

I had forgot to straighten out our story with the damsel, but then again, she didn’t seem like the sort with whom one could reason.

“Wait,” I said to the boy. “Who are you?”

“I am Nix of the Wilderland.”

“I am Sir Bran of Elstan. Won’t you bide with us?”

His frown was ferocious. “No. Somewhere I will find someone who will help me become a knight. I see no profit in staying here.”

He had the right of that. I had no money or goods to offer him, even if he decided to accept a post as my servant. “I cannot offer you material things,” I said, “but I can instruct you in matters of chivalry. Even if one cannot be a knight, one may assume the virtues of one.”

The boy glared at me from under the rim of his soup pot.

“Yonder stands my savior,” cried the damsel. Nix and I glanced at her. She pointed to Nix.

Sir Wulfric’s face took on a dark and purple hue.

“All your knightly virtues didn’t teach you to aim a lance,” Nix said.

I sighed. “Sadly true. Perhaps you are right. You would do well to seek someone who could teach you truer than I could.”

“All you’ve taught me so far is that you lie when there’s not the least need.”

“Oh, there was need,” I muttered. Sir Wulfric was a powerful knight, and not to be thwarted lightly. He craved any excuse to fight, and regarded as insults remarks which others would see as innocence.

Sir Wulfric, sweat dotting his brow, came toward us, sword unsheathed.

“What transpires?” screamed the damsel, rushing toward us. “Sir knight! What are your intentions?”

Sir Wulfric turned toward her, and at that moment Eudo rode past the knight,

leading his pack mules so that he separated the boy and me from Sir Wulfric.

“I intend to see you safe from all base creatures, Damsel,” Sir Wulfric said.

“If you mean to retreat, now would be a good time,” I murmured to the lad.

Nix nodded and let out a whistle. His pony galloped up and the boy jumped up on the log I had used to dismount, then leapt into the pony’s saddle and galloped away.

#

The damsel, of course, had no mount, no palfrey, not even a hackney. She would not ride one of the pack mules. She would not ride Eudo’s rouncey. Only a destrier would do.

The damsel managed to arrange herself on my saddle as though it were an accustomed mode of transport.

After Eudo aided Sir Wulfric in remounting his destrier, he helped me remove my mail and store it on one of the laden pack mules. He offered me his horse, but I decided to stretch my legs. The soft spring evening was pleasant for walking, and I felt light without my hauberk.

“What is your story, damsel?” I asked. “How did that serpent get you in its coils?”

“I do not converse with lunatics who mean me ill.”

“Nay, but it’s a solid question,” said Sir Wulfric. “How came you to be in such straits, and whither are you bound now, that we may help you get there?”

“Neither do I converse with blind fat fools,” said the damsel.

“This should make an interesting journey,” I said to Eudo, beside whose horse I walked. Even Sir Wulfric could not start a duel with a lady, no matter how rudely she behaved.

Eudo laughed, and the damsel turned to glare at us with fire in her eyes. “Do you make sport of me?” she cried.

“Pay us no heed; we are people with whom you do not deign to speak.”

“I will speak with the squire, whom I hold blameless.”

Eudo looked to his master. Sir Wulfric’s face bore purple banners in its cheeks; he snarled beneath his mustaches, but gave Eudo a curt nod.

“How came you into trouble, maiden, and where do you desire to go now?” Eudo asked.

“I was stolen from my older sister’s castle in the night by that creature. I thought it was a very nightmare of mine, but found I could not wake. It stole me the night before I was to secretly set out for the king’s court in search of a knight to defend my sister from a marauding knight who has laid siege to her castle and who wants to marry her. For many days I have been in the monster’s clutches, and it has defeated and devoured knight after knight who would save me.” Her head drooped. “Finally I found and lost a savior in the space of half an hour,” she murmured.

“Where lies your sister’s castle?” Eudo asked.

“In the north country, where the sea meets the feet of the mountains, and all the beach is cobbled stones. I wit not how far the serpent carried me, for it moved not like a horse; there was no measuring its stride. I have been in this forest a fortnight, I trow, while it went widewhere with me.”

“Who is the knight who lays siege to your sister’s castle?” asked Eudo.

She shuddered in the saddle. “The Knight of the Pearl,” she whispered.

“Damsel, may we carry you home?” I asked. Bitter bile was in the back of my throat. I swallowed. “For I am fated to meet that knight. He slew my father.”

Crimson touched her cheeks. “Why did you try to kill me, knave?”

“I didn’t try to kill you. My luck is such that I never hit the thing at which I aim. I meant to keep you safe.”

“This is a strange tale,” she said. Slowly she smiled. “But perhaps true. Yes. You may accompany me home.”

#

We traveled all the rest of the day, but no sign of human habitation where we might overnight did we see, nor sign of aught else but the puissance of trees. In the dustier stretches of our way, I covered my face with a kerchief and let the others move ahead of me. After they had pulled too far ahead one time, Eudo rode back and urged me to take his horse and let him walk. Thrice I said him nay, but the fourth time I accepted his offer. Thereafter we traded the horse between us.

In the stretches of stillness when I was like to be alone in the forest, I was sure I heard the sound of something not on our trail but somewhere nearby. Something pursued us, but not fast enough to overtake us. I rested my hand on the hilt of my dagger, which was hammered from sky iron, a bequest from my mother’s father and always lucky for me. Our pursuer never broke cover.

When Sir Wulfric decreed we must stop for the night, I suggested we take watches. He grunted. “You watch first,” he said. I was near to falling down with exhaustion, but I shrugged and agreed.

Eudo cooked a pot of porridge for us, dropping in dried apples and meat. The smell alone was heavenly, and the taste was ambrosial after all the dust I had eaten that day.

The spring night turned chilly. I offered the damsel my best cape for her bed, and she accepted it. My second best cape was threadbare, torn in places, but good enough for a man who shouldn’t sleep through his watch.

“Wake me when your head nods too often,” Eudo murmured to me. I told him I would.

But withal I did not. Despite the chill and my determination, my grinding fear that the serpent had followed us and wanted to eat us in the dark, I fell asleep beside the ashes of our fire, and only woke when iron scraped stone.

I startled up. All around me was darkness, for we were close in under the trees so that only a star or two glimmered between branches thick with young leaves. Then I saw a glow of green fire only a few feet from me. The monster’s eyes? I leapt to my feet. “What goes there?”

Something clinked and clunked. I unsheathed my dagger. “Answer me,” I said.

“Shh,” said something near the green flame.

A hiss! Surely a serpent! My sky-iron knife outstretched, I started toward the noise, but tripped on one of the firestones where Eudo had cooked our dinner and fell headlong. My front smacked the ground. My breath flew out of me.

“Fare you well?” asked a low voice.

I waited till my breathing smoothed. What of the others? Had they heard my fall?

Nothing else in our camp stirred. Small wonder if they were all tired after such a day.

I groaned. "Not well, but not too ill."

Something knelt over me, tugged at my arm. I heard its breath, and knew from its size and sounds that it was no serpent. It helped me sit up.

"Fare you well?" I asked Nix, for it could only be he by the size and familiarity of him.

"My hunger overmastered me," he whispered. "I smelled your supper. I sat amongst the trees as long as I could. Is there any left?"

Eudo had sliced the cooled porridge into portions for tomorrow's breakfast and wrapped them in linen, then hid them in a saddlebag against marauding vermin. I unbuckled the straps around the saddlebag and gave my morning portion to the boy, whose hunger was no doubt greater than mine.

"Gramercy, noble knight," he whispered after he had finished.

"Here's a change in tune."

"How and I should insult one who has succored me?" Since he spoke in a whisper, I could not tell whether he mocked me.

"How and you should lie? I thought it was a fault not in your character."

"For all I know, you may be noble, by birth if not by deed. In balance, you must be; you are a knight, are you not? And the very one who told me one must be noble-born to be a knight."

"I'm not the one who fashioned these laws. I imagine some time in the dim past it was not so; who was the first knight? I only tell you what I know to be true in the present day. There may be a way around this. Distinguish yourself with deeds so that the king hears of it, or sees it. If you display your prowess, he may elevate you, as was done in the romances of ages past."

The boy sighed. "Here's a tale I would hear more of."

"Why not speak of it tomorrow?" muttered a voice from the darkness.

"Eudo. Sorry we disturbed your rest," I murmured.

"Since I wake I may as well watch. What o'clock is it?"

"There are not enough stars to say." I yawned.

"Well, well," he grumbled, and sat up, a dim form in the darkness. "Rest you now. I'll wake you later."

So Nix joined our company, by stealth, in dark of night, under my aegis.

#

In the morning Eudo and I drew the damsel away from our camp and spoke to her before Sir Wulfric woke.

"The boy has rejoined us, and might stay, if we are careful," I told the damsel.

"The lad is as shy as a wild bird," Eudo said. "The merest word might make him take flight."

"Please, as you value the boy's life and his service to you, don't point to him and call him savior," I added. "Sir Wulfric is testy about such things and might take offense, and in so doing, harm the boy. He is a man of much wrath, quick to strike and powerful. Pretend the boy is only my squire; perhaps the knight won't notice him then."

She frowned a mighty frown. "You would ask me to betray what I know as truth?"

"No, no!" Eudo flapped his hands in the air.

“Keep the truth in your heart, not on your lips,” I said. “Silence is all we ask.”

She heaved a great sigh and nodded.

So we went back, and some of us had cold porridge for breakfast. Sir Wulfric took no notice of the boy; in like manner he had never taken notice of servants at court.

Another day we traveled, the boy and I to the rear. Sometimes he led his pony, and sometimes he rode it. I took out one of my willow whistles and tried to remember tunes from court, when I had breath to blow and there was not too much dust in my mouth. Nix listened closely, and sometimes whistled with his mouth when he caught a tune. I was more pleased than I had a right to be that he could carry a tune. Were we to stay together, music would add to our pleasure in each other’s company.

Other times I told the boy about court life, and marvels I had heard, and ways that knights had earned glory. He had a great hunger for such stories.

Just after we lost the sun, we fought free of the dark forest, and saw before us a fine castle built of black rock, surrounded by a moat of dark water, with torch light gleaming from some of the embrasures, and flickers of fire reflected on the water’s surface. A soldier strolled the wall walk above against the soft blue spring evening, then stopped to watch us.

“God’s mercy. Tonight we will feast, and sleep with a roof over our heads,” said Sir Wulfric. He urged his horse to the drawbridge, which was down, and hailed the gatekeeper. “Who lives here? Will he give hospitality to two knights and a lady?”

“It would be his honor to aid you,” said the gatekeeper, and stood aside so we could enter the inner courtyard

Stable boys came to take our mounts. Eudo followed them to see that the stables were clean and well-stocked with hay, and that they took proper care of our horses, then joined us in the great hall.

The lord and lady of the castle made us welcome. They were both handsome, though the brown of their hair had silvered over with age. The lady took our damsel away with her to wash somewhere else. The lord summoned servants to disarm us and to fetch ewers of warm water for us to wash, and they arranged for pallets to be laid by the fireplace, where we could later sleep. The boy would not let the servants touch his armor, and washed only his hands, leaving his face dirty. I opened my mouth to speak, and he glared at me with his honey-colored eyes.

“Supper will be served directly,” said the lord after we had finished our ablutions. He showed us to table.

Then they served us a marvelous meal, bread, wine, venison, salt to our tongues’ content, and asked that we share our story.

At this Eudo and I exchanged glances, for who would tell a story that each of us knew variously? Would the lady speak her truth? Would the boy speak at all? Eudo and I had arranged that he sat farthest down the table from our hosts, for we knew he was untutored in manners, and hoped he would escape notice.

The damsel began the tale. “I am Tegwen of Morcant.” She told how the serpent had ravished her away from her siege-embattled home in the north country, and how she had endured days as its hostage, and how knight after knight had come upon her and the serpent in the forest and tried to rescue her, but died in the attempt, and how finally we came and set her free.

The lord and lady praised us.

Sir Wulfric took up the tale. "I challenged the great beast! When it saw well what it would have to fight, it released the damsel and departed!" He smiled and stroked his mustache.

Eudo and I stared anxiously at the boy. He sliced off a morsel of venison and ate it from the point of his knife, then drank wine from a silver goblet, and said nothing.

"How fortunate that your fierceness inspired such fear in a creature more like to eat knights than run from them," murmured the lady. Her brows drew together in confusion.

"And now we are returning the damsel to her home," I said before questions could be asked. "We hope to overcome the knight who is besieging her sister."

"Who is that knight?" asked the lord.

"The Knight of the Pearl," whispered the damsel.

The lady blanched, and the lord straightened. "We have heard of this perilous knight. His prowess is unmatched and his reputation is cruel. They say he hangs the bodies of those he defeats from trees so the ravens may sup, and leaves them there unburied, showing them greatest dishonor."

"He slew my father, after my father yielded to him," I said. Fire kindled in my gut, fear and anger mixed. "All my life I have known I must face him."

"God protect you, then," said the lord, and the lady murmured assent.

I felt a heat against my face, and turned. The boy stared at me with his honey eyes, his face a fierce mask.

"God protect me," I repeated. For my mother's grief, for my father's dishonor, for my own purpose in life, I must go forward, though in my heart I knew there was no chance of victory for me. I would end up a hanging corpse, no doubt, which fate was better than to have all honorable knights laugh at me living.

I turned from the boy's gaze, and for a moment let my mind wander through my own dream of a future, one where I went armed only with my dagger and fiddle and whistles, and my treasury of stories and songs, and traveled not to battle but to entertain.

"I will face this pearly knight too," Sir Wulfric said, his voice hearty. "I search out adventure. I fear no knight. Sir Bran may have first battle with this knight to satisfy his honor. I will face him after, and I will beat him."

"But how unkind to say such a thing," said the boy, "as though there were no chance Sir Bran might beat him."

"Hush," I said. "He knows me well."

The boy gave me a scorching look such that it made me wonder where his thoughts had traveled.

Eudo turned the subject to news from court, and we spoke no more about our future that night.

#

In the midst of the night, when the fire flickered low and the wine I had drunk whispered to me it was ready to quit me, I rose to find a latrine, of which I knew there were three in the walls off the great hall. I saw that two other pallets were as empty as mine, the boy's and Eudo's, so I took a taper, kindled a flame in the fire, and went to the farthest latrine, reckoning the closer two would be occupied. I came silent down

the narrow crooked hall to the seat, and there beheld —

For the first time, I saw the boy without his helm and such armor as covered his lower half. When he saw me, he sprang to his feet.

I could not help seeing what I saw.

A curtain of red-blond braids hung from his head, each long enough to reach his waist.

Her waist.

I turned so swiftly my taper blew itself out. I stood with my back to her. The light of her taper threw my shadow on the wall before me. “I beg your pardon a thousand times,” I said.

“You may not have it,” she said crossly.

I bit my lip and left the latrine hallway, waited in the great hall until she emerged, wrapped in her straw and surcoat, her hair hidden up under the soup pot again. She waved her taper out and leaned against the wall beside me. For a while we watched the flicker of firelight across the rushes on the floor and listened to the thunderous snores from Sir Wulfric. Need overcame me, and I went into the latrine in the dark, which was not wise, but I remembered the turns in the hall, and only scuffed an elbow; I relieved myself into the chute, and came back out, wondering if she would still be standing there or would have retreated into sleep.

She waited, brave in this as in all things.

“I have never heard of a lady knight. I don’t know how you will make a knight,” I whispered.

“By deeds. As you said.”

“By deeds and deception?”

“Sometimes deception is necessary, even to knights. You taught me that.”

“Why do you want this?”

She looked away. “I will not be locked in a house. I was born in the wild, and I have the heart of a warrior. I must fight, or I will go mad.”

I had seen knights who had a like problem, berserker blood that could not be denied. They were those who took affront easily and forced fights on others, taking offense at innocent words turned insult by misapprehension. They were never more alive than when battling anyone or anything. One walked wide around them, unless one were another such hot-blood.

Yet Nix did not seem wild in that way. She hunched like a falcon, though, who spots prey. It seemed to me that maybe she hosted a different wildness, the wild of the hunt.

She said, “When we reach the castle where the Knight of the Pearl holds sway, if you are as ill a knight as you profess to be, you must let me face him first, Bran.”

“No.”

“But it seems you have no hope of winning against him.”

“You are a maid, and half a head shorter than I. This is my fight, has been my charge since I was a child. How could I be chivalrous and let you risk yourself?”

Her eyes seemed lit by yellow fires within. She leapt on me then. There had been no challenge, and I was unarmed and surprised. But still, by my greater size and my small skill in hand-to-hand, I would have thought I could overmaster her.

It did not thus transpire. Soon she sat atop me, her hands crushing my wrists to

the floor despite my struggles. “Yield,” she whispered between clenched teeth.

I fought to flip us over, and could not. Her muscles had set like iron; she sat unmoving on my stomach, heavier by far than her appearance had suggested, her face a foot above mine, fierce as a falcon’s. “Yield. You cannot overcome me, for my mother was a water maiden, and gifted me with powers of which you wot not.”

Sweat bloomed on my brow. I brought my knees up against her back and felt as though I had knocked them into a stone wall.

“Yield, Bran.”

I thought of the fair Amicia, wondered what she would say if she could see one of her many champions now, helpless beneath a maiden. Once more I threw myself into every effort to escape Nix’s hold. Nothing I tried dislodged her, or even shifted her. I sank back and whispered, “I yield.”

She was off me and back on her feet in an instant. “I claim first battle rights with that knight,” she said.

Filled with shame, I knelt before her. I felt faint and confused, but I remembered what chivalry demanded of me. “I swear my homage and fealty to you,” I whispered, staring at the rushes on the floor. “All that I own is at your service.”

“What nonsense is this? Get up, Bran.” She prodded me with her toe. A moment longer I stared at the floor, as I released all hold I had on dreams and vows and vengeance, and, indeed, on my lady Amicia. I gave myself leave to feel how now I was born yet a fourth time, out of my old self and into this one who owed life and service to Nix.

Then I felt cheerful, and got to my feet. Whatever came next lay in a pattern I had not yet foreseen. We went back to our pallets and I thought of men hanging dead in trees, with ravens eating out their eyes, and for the first time since the lord’s tale at supper I did not picture my corpse among theirs.

#

In the morning we heard mass and broke our fast with the lord and lady. The lady saw to it that the cook gave Eudo supplies. “Have you all else that you need for your journey?” asked the lord.

The damsel Tegwen said, “If it chances that you have a palfrey I might ride, I could return this noble destrier to Sir Bran.”

I said, “If it chances you have mail that would fit Sir Nix — ”

All turned to stare at me, lord, lady, Eudo, Sir Wulfric, Mistress Tegwen, and Nix. Nix’s eyes were sharp and harsh, her yellow falcon eyes. Eudo and Tegwen looked confused, and Sir Wulfric dubious.

“The lad needs mail,” I said. “He means to fight, and who can he fight in such garb? Suppose the dragon had set his armor afire. What would have happened then?”

Sir Wulfric frowned. Tegwen glanced askance at him, and Eudo made a motion to me of his hand cutting his throat. The lord and lady, of course, did not know of what I spoke.

“I have a hauberk my son outgrew before he went adventuring,” the lady said. “The child is welcome to it; would that it protects him as it did my son, in God’s good name.” She went to fetch it.

“I cannot offer you a palfrey, but I have a hackney I can spare,” the lord said. He sent a servant to fetch it.

Presently returned the lady with youth-sized mail, aketon, a shining helm, milk white coif, a round green shield, and a clean, whole surcoat in white and green, which she offered to Nix.

For a moment Nix just stared. Then she said, "O, thank you. Thank you." She took the clothes inside the keep.

I searched my saddlebags for aught I could give in return for the horse and mail. I found no money, but an emerald brooch my mother had given me which I had never gamed away, the only token of hers that I carried with me always. "Please, for your kindness," I said, and offered it to the lady. She refused it three times, but the fourth time, she accepted.

Nix emerged, her face at last washed. She was clad in real mail, with the green and white surcoat overtop, and again all her hair tucked up out of sight under the new helm. She looked a faerie knight.

She was not like any lady I had ever seen or courted. Yet I felt such stirrings in my breast as signaled the start of a fortunate fall. Just so had I felt when first I beheld the queen's fairest attendant, Catrin, whom all the knights courted. Yet as I studied Nix I felt something more, something strange and new for which I did not yet have words.

Eudo's eyes widened. He watched Nix, then glanced at me.

I stepped forward and held Nix's stirrup so she could mount. She climbed up onto her pony, then dug her toe into my stomach. "Stop it," she whispered.

I smiled and turned away.

#

The damsel gave me back my destrier and consented to ride on the lord's hackney. Thus we proceeded, with other adventures, into the north country whence she had been abducted, until presently we approached her home. We passed through a village she knew. When they heard the sound of our horses' hooves on the packed earth streets, the dwellers came out of their wattle-and-daub houses. "Where are you going?" some asked.

"Morcant," said the damsel.

"Turn back," the men told us. "All who travel there die shameful deaths. The air is full of the stench of bodies rotting. Turn back."

"Is that you, Mistress Tegwen?" asked an old woman.

"It is, and I have brought these champions to face the Knight of the Pearl."

"It is a wicked day when a damsel brings men to their doom," cried the old woman.

For the first time since I had met her, I saw Tegwen stop and think. She studied each of us in turn. "Truly," she said, "I may be doing you great ill."

"Had I not met you, still, fate would have brought me here," I said.

"I am ripe for any challenge," said Sir Wulfric. "An he had killed a hundred, still would I face him, for he has never yet met me."

"I will fight anything that brings shame and dishonor to women or children or knights," said Nix.

Everyone looked at Eudo. He shrugged. "I live and learn, and hand them their arms."

"Still, I release you all from any pledge you may have made to uphold me," Tegwen said. "From here on, accompany me by choice or turn back. I must go on."

When last I was home, my sister and her family and vassals and servants and soldiers were close to the edge of starvation with this siege. I must do what I can to aid her.”

“Let us go,” said Nix.

We rode on through the village. The villagers did not seem to know whether to cheer for us or mourn. Some few trailed a ways with us, but then we went through a slender pass in the hills, and lost our followers.

On the crest of the last hill, we looked to the land below, a dark-treed wood, a few buildings beyond, huddled at the base of the curtain wall of a castle built of pale green stone on a spit of land. And beyond the castle —

For the first time in my life I beheld the sea.

It transfixed me. Something strange and light rose in my chest. How could such a great gray-and-green expanse stretch out into eternity before one and not rouse a spirit of wonder?

“Bran,” Nix murmured. She touched my sleeve.

I blinked and looked at the company. I realized that I held one of my willow whistles. That I had been playing it, all unknowing. Tegwen and Eudo stared at me with wonder in their faces.

Sir Wulfric’s face was purple with impatience. “Let us not tarry for such silly tootling,” he said. “If fear has seized you, turn back.”

“Fear,” I murmured. Strange, but I had forgot my fear. I put my whistle away and we rode on down the track to the wood.

“That deaf fool,” Nix muttered. “’Twas eternity and ocean you played. Who could hear and not understand?”

I took her hand and kissed the back. She jerked away from me, spurred her horse, and caught up with Eudo.

Now, I thought, I have dishonored my master. I will have to make it up to her somehow. Still, I smiled.

My smile vanished when the road took us into the trees. Just as the lord had said, as the villagers had said. The stench of death was so thick it made us choke and cough. Knights, dead knights, in various states of decay, hung by the neck from low branches all through that horrid wood, their cloven shields and broken swords hung up beside them in a dreadful display of evil and dishonor. Clouds of flies attended them; crows pecked at them. At the Last Judgment, how should they rise up from such a place?

Even Sir Wulfric was quiet as we traversed that wood.

Beyond it we came to an open field that might once have been a fair jousting ground. In the meadow was pitched a magnificent pavilion, and beside it lay a black dog large as a pony. As soon as the dog spied us, it rose to its feet and howled, and out from the pavilion strode a knight, attended by a host of servants. At the same time, on the wall walk of the castle came many people.

“Sister!” cried a beautiful golden-haired lady from above.

“Sister!” cried Tegwen. “How fare you?”

“The better for sight of you!” she cried. But all on the wall walk looked gaunt and weary.

I stared at the knight, the man who had killed my father and whom I had never before seen. All I could discern was that he was a large man and wore black mail beneath a black surcoat, and in the center of the surcoat’s chest there was a circle of

pale pearls.

“Have you come to challenge me?” he called. His voice was smooth, and sweet as hot cider.

“We have,” said Sir Wulfric.

I kned my horse to the fore. “I am Sir Bran of Elstan. You slew my father and dishonored my family, and I must face you.”

“What a barking pup to put out of its misery,” he said. “This should take but a moment of my time.”

Nix rode in front of me. “Now, Bran. I accept your fealty and homage, and press you into my service,” she said. “Give me your favor. I will be your champion.”

I had forgotten everything at the sight of this man but the ancient goal carved into my soul. I blinked three times, for a moment mazed in mind by what Nix said. My stomach jumped as I fought to change course. Then I remembered my fourth self, which I had pledged to her. I took three breaths and glanced down at what I wore, then tore the hem off my blue surcoat and held it out.

She presented her right arm, and I tied my favor about it. I still felt as though sword-smote.

“What are you playing at?” asked Sir Wulfric.

“Nix will be a knight,” I said, “and is already my master.”

“I claim first battle right,” Nix said. She rode to the pack mule and took the heaviest lance we had. “Knight! For all the evil you have done, repent you, and prepare to die!”

“I do not fight children.”

“Call me a dwarf then, and have at you!”

The Knight of the Pearl laughed.

Nix sat her pony, with her lance couched, and waited.

Sir Wulfric turned three shades of purple. Eudo spoke softly to him and they both rode to the side of the ground. Tegwen stared long at me, then bit her lip and looked away. I watched Nix.

When the Knight finished laughing, he said, “So be it,” and told his servants to set his spurs on his heels and bring him his black horse and black spear, and then he mounted and withdrew to the far end of the jousting ground.

I could not let Nix do this.

I must abide by my word to do her bidding.

I must protect her, protect what was beautiful, fierce, wild, and precious. Suddenly it was more important than even my honor. I would willingly die for her if need be.

How could I protect her when I couldn’t protect myself?

She had the strength of her mother’s people. She could overmaster me in a trice. I couldn’t protect her. I must trust she could protect herself.

Sickness roiled in my stomach.

The Knight shouted, and they set off toward each other, gaining speed as they grew closer. Each smote the other in the midst of their shields with such force that both fell from their mounts and lay stunned upon the ground, the reins still in their hands.

Did they live? Did Nix live?