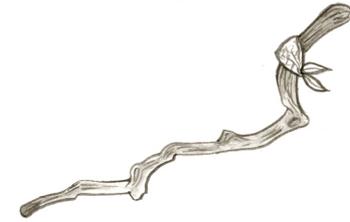




1



“Mother?”

There was no reply. She hadn’t expected one. Her mother had been dead now for four days, and Kira could tell that the last of the spirit was drifting away.

“Mother.” She said it again, quietly, to whatever was leaving. She thought that she could feel its leavetaking, the way one could feel a small whisper of breeze at night.

Now she was all alone. Kira felt the aloneness, the uncertainty, and a great sadness.

This had been her mother, the warm and vital woman whose name had been Katrina. Then after the brief and unexpected sickness, it had become the body of Katrina, still containing the lingering spirit. After four sunsets and sunrises, the spirit, too, was gone. It was simply a body. Diggers would come and sprinkle a layer of soil over the flesh, but even so it would be eaten by the clawing, hungry creatures that came at night. Then the bones would scatter, rot, and crumble to become part of the earth.

Kira wiped briefly at her eyes, which had filled suddenly with tears. She had loved her mother, and would miss her terribly. But it was time for her to go. She wedged her walking stick in the soft ground, leaned on it, and pulled herself up.



8



Matt wanted to come.

“You be needing me and Branch for protectors,” he said. “Them woods is full of fierce creatures.”

Kira laughed. “Protectors? You?”

“Me and Branchie, us is tough,” Matt said. He flexed what passed for muscles in his scrawny arms. “I only *look* wee.”

“Jamison said it was safe as long as we stay on the path,” Kira reminded the boy. Secretly, she thought it would be fun to have both of them, boy and dog, for company.

“But suppose you was to get lost,” Matt said. “Me and Branch can find our way out of anywheres. You be needing us for certain iffen you get lost.”

“But I’ll be gone all day. You’ll get hungry.”

Triumphantly Matt pulled a thick wad of bread from the voluminous pocket of his baggy shorts. “Filched this crustie from the baker,” he announced with pride.

So the young boy won, to Kira’s delight, and she had company for the journey into the forest.

It was about an hours walk. Jamison was correct; there seemed to be no danger. Although thick trees shaded the path and they could hear rustling in the undergrowth and unfamiliar cries or strange forest birds, nothing seemed threatening.



23



Alone in the dim pre-dawn moonlight of not-yet morning, Kira went down to the dyer's garden that had been so carefully created for her. There, gently patting earth around the moist roots, she planted the woad. "Gather fresh leaves from first year's growth of woad" She repeated the words that Annabella had said. "And soft rainwater; that makes the blue." She carried water from a container in the shed, and soaked the soil around the fragile plants. It would be a long time until the first year's growth. She would not be here to gather those leaves.

When the plants were watered, she sat alone, knees to chin, and rocked herself back and forth as the sun began to rise, a faint pink stain creeping up the eastern rim of the sky. The village was still silent. She tried to put it all together in her mind, to make some sense of it.

But there was no sense, no meaning at all.

Her mother's death : a sudden violent, isolated illness. Such things were rare. Usually illness struck the village and many were taken.

Perhaps her mother had been poisoned?

But why?

Because they wanted Kira.

Why?

So that they could capture her gift : her skill with the threads.