

The Bargain

By: Katharine Kerr

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Katharine Kerr, best known for her Deverry series, rarely writes short fiction. “The Bargain” is thus a very rare event and a very special story. And even now, I’m wondering if Kit has managed to get out of committing short fiction yet again—I’ve got my suspicion that “The Bargain,” a story of Deverry, is a ballad written in the form of prose. Certainly, it has the wry Celtic wisdom on which Kit has built her reputation.

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A long time ago, when Deverry men first sailed west to the province they called Elditina, but which we know today as Eldidd, there lived a man named Paran of Aberwyn. Half scribe and half hunter, he was the son of a merchant house but a restless soul who preferred to explore new territory rather than haggle in the marketplace. All alone he traveled wild places and lived out of his pack like a peddler, but he carried dry chunks of ink, a stone for grinding them with water, bunches of river reeds that he could cut into pens, and strips of parchment. Since in those days there were no lodestones and astrolabes, his maps were rough, of course. He squinted out the directions from the sun and estimated the distances from how far and fast he’d been walking, but he always put in plenty of landmarks—watercourses and suchlike—so that others could follow him. Both the merchant guilds and the noble lords paid high for those maps and the stories he told to go with them.

On one of his trips west, however, Paran ended up with a fair bit more than he’d bargained for. After about a week’s walk on foot to the west of Aberwyn, he came to a place where, through a tangle of sapling hazels and fern, he saw a river flowing silently, clear water over white sand. The path he’d been following, a deer trail or so he assumed then, turned to skirt the water and lead deeper into the trees. At the bank itself, he found a clearing, a sunny luxury after days in the wild forest. He swung his heavy pack off his shoulders and laid it down for a good stretch of his sore back. To either hand the river ran through a tunnel of trees that promised hard walking ahead. Nearby, the *pock pock pock* loud in the drowsy summer day, a woodpecker hammered an oak.

“Good morrow, little carpenter,” Paran remarked.

The bird ignored the sound of his voice—puzzling, that. He sat down by his pack, unlaced the leather sack at the top of the wooden frame, and took out a long roll of parchment, scratched and spotted with his map and his notes. He was just having a look at how far he’d come when he heard the barest trace of a sound behind him. He was on his feet and turning in an instant, his hand reaching for the hilt of his sword, but he drew it only to find himself facing an archer, his horn bow

drawn, an arrow nocked and ready, out of reach at the forest edge. When Paran let his sword fall and raised his hands in the air, the archer smiled. He was a pale young man, with a long tangle of hair so blond it was nearly white, and boyish-slender with long, narrow fingers. Barefoot, he wore a knee-length tunic of fine pale buckskin, belted in with the quiver of arrows slung at his hip. Around his neck on thongs hung a collection of tiny leather pouches and what seemed to be carved bone charms or decorations. When he spoke quickly in a melodious, lilting, and utterly unknown language, Paran gave a helpless sort of shrug. “My apologies, lad, but I don’t understand.” The archer cocked his head in surprise, looked Paran over for a moment, then whistled three sharp notes. From a far distance they heard first one answering whistle, then another. Two more archers stepped out of the forest, and when the three of them strolled over to inspect their prize, Paran was in for the shock of his life. Their eyes were dark purple, and the enormous irises were slit vertically with pupils like those of cats. Their ears were abnormally long, too, and curled to delicate points like seashells. They in their turn were pointing out his eyes and ears to each other and chattering away about them, too, from the sound of it. “Uh, I mean you no harm. Truly I don’t.” The three of them smiled in a rather unpleasant way. “And what have we here?”

The voice seemed to speak in Paran’s language, but the young men called out a greeting in their own. As she materialized between two trees, the woman looked as blonde and boyish as her companions, dressed much like them, too, but when Paran tried to look at her face, her image swam and flickered, as if he’d drunk himself blind. She seemed to age, her tunic changing back and forth from blue to green to gray; then she suddenly was young again. The archers, however, stayed as visible and substantial as himself as they stared at the woman in awe, lips half-parted.

“This is a strange deer you’ve caught in my forest,” she said to them, then turned to Paran. “Who are you?”

“Paran of Aberwyn, my lady. Do you know the place? It’s a little town down by the sea.”

“I don’t, and the sea means naught to me. What are you doing here?”

“Just seeing what I can see. I’m a curious man, my lady, and no man of my race has ever been here.”

“I’m well aware of that, my thanks.”

She studied him with narrow eyes, cold now and yellow as a snake’s, and her lips were tight, too, perhaps in rage, perhaps in contempt—it was hard to tell with her constant shape-shifting—yet of one thing he was sure, that he’d never seen a woman so beautiful or so dangerous. If she gave the word, the archers would fill him with arrows like a leather target at a festival.

“I swear it, my lady. I mean you not the slightest harm.”

“No doubt, but harm can come without a meaning behind it. Your people are the ones who are taking slaves from the river villages, aren’t you?”

“Are those your vassals? I’ll swear to you on the gods of my people that I’ve naught to do with that. My kind of clan doesn’t need bondmen. We don’t have any lands.”

“They’re not mine, but they’re gentle souls who do no harm and make their tools out of stones. Your people stink of blood and iron.” She turned old, very old, old beyond belief yet still beautiful, and her heavy cloak was gray with mourning. “How much have you killed in my woods?”

“Some squirrels, some hares, and some fish from the river. Forgive me: I didn’t know I was poaching. I didn’t know anyone lived out here.”

“And what will you give me in return?”

“Anything of mine you desire.” Paron pointed at his pack. “Look through it, or take it all if you want.”

Suddenly she was young again, with a smile as disdainful as any highborn lady’s in Elditina. Her beauty seemed to hang around her like a cloud of scent or crackle in the air like heat lightning: he found himself struggling for words, and him a man who’d always been able to talk his way out of anything before.

“Keep your greasy trinkets,” she said. “I want the truth for my dues. What truly made you come here?”

“A change from the merchants of Aberwyn. They wish to find out what lies in this country because they wish to trade. Naught more—only to caravan goods back and forth in peace.”

“But who comes behind them? Those blood-soaked men who build the ugly stone towers and take slaves?”

Paron could only nod in agreement. Like most common-born men in Eldidd, he had never approved of making bondmen out of people who were neither criminals nor debtors. It infuriated him that he was on the edge of paying for the arrogance of lords.

“If I have you killed,” she said in a musing sort of voice. “No doubt someone else will come, sooner or later. I have no desire to be as cruel as your folk, Paron of Aberwyn. You walk out of my forest alive if you leave today.”

“I will, then. I’ll even walk hungry to spare your game.”

“No need of that, as long as you take only what you truly need to feed yourself.”

With a smile she laid a slender hand on his cheek, her fingers oddly cool and

smooth; she even allowed him to turn his head and kiss her fingers. Then she was gone; they were all gone; there was only the clearing, the sunlight, his pack and his sword lying in grass. Something else had been there, not but a moment before—Paran couldn't remember what. Deer, perhaps? Birds? A badger? He shrugged the wondering away. Whatever it was, he'd gone far enough into this useless forest, and it was time to head back to Aberwyn.

Yet when he knelt to retrieve his pack, he found his map. As he picked it up and read his notes, the memory came back to him, sharp and clear, and he laughed in triumph. Dweomer the lady had, strange and powerful dweomer, but she knew nothing of the ways of men, who write things down to outlast their remembering. Of course, if he told this story of a sorceress in the woods and her cat-eyed servants, no one was going to believe him anyway. As he set off, he was wondering just how to phrase the thing to the merchant guild of Aberwyn, or if he should say anything at all.

Five men on horseback, and a couple of mules carrying supplies—the effort seemed more than one stinking bondman was worth, but at stake was the honor of the thing, Addaric decided. This snot-faced Grunno belonged to Lord Cadlomar, and if he had the gall to go sneaking off, then Addaric would fetch him back for his lordship if it took him a fortnight. They took the hounds to Grunno's hut and let the dogs sniff his greasy blankets while his filthy woman watched, gasping for breath with a sound like mice chittering. When they brought the dogs to the edge of the village, they picked up the scent at once and went baying across the pastureland with the riders trotting after, the kennelmaster first, then the four men from the warband. The boy with the mules followed as best he could.

At the edge of the pasture, the ground turned rough with rock and burrow, and Omillo, the kennelmaster, called in the big black-and-gray boarhounds. Addaric rode up to join him.

“He's got a good head start,” Omillo said.

“So he does. But we've got horses. We'll get him, sure enough.”

Yet that evening they reached the big river, so newly discovered that most people called it only “the one that flows into the Gwyn” or “the western one.” Here in late summer it flowed so broad and shallow that a man could wade in it for miles and let it wash all his scent away. As they milled around on the riverbank, the hounds snapped at each other in sheer frustration.

“Well, young Addaric, which way do you think he went?”

“That's an easy one—upstream. Down would bring him right back to the Gwyn and settled land again.”

On the morrow Addaric was proved right. Although they had to crisscross the river for a tedious ten miles before the hounds picked up the scent, find it they did.

They sang out and raced away to the northwest while the men followed at a cavalry pace, walking and trotting, stopping frequently to rest the pack. Still they were moving far faster than a frightened man could run. Toward evening the hounds found a leather sack, which they grabbed and shook, growling.

“It must stink of the man,” Addaric remarked. “Looks to me like he’s run out of food, too.”

The very next morning, for a few brief moments they thought they’d found their prey. As they traveled across wild meadowland, they saw far ahead of them a small shape that had to be a man walking. With a whoop of triumph they kicked their horses forward, but the whoop died when they realized that the fellow was coming calmly toward them, not running away. When they met, Addaric at first thought he was a peddler, because he was carrying a heavy pack of the same sort that a traveling man would use, but there was not one out here to buy ribands and needles and trinkets. The fellow was imposing, too, a tall man with the raven-dark hair and cornflower blue eyes so common in the province, but tanned and tough with a calm if watchful look about him that seemed to say he’d faced worse trouble than five riders before.

“Good morrow, good sir,” Addaric said. “You’re a good long way from settled country.”

“I could say the same of you, lad.” He smiled to take any sting from the words. “My name’s Paran of Aberwyn.”

“Well, by the gods! Truly, good sir, I’ve heard of you. I’ll wager we all have, and many a time, too. The bards all call you the bravest man in Elditina, going off alone for months like that.”

The men with him muttered their agreement and rode up close to get a good look at this famous person. Paran turned embarrassed.

“Er, just on my way home,” he muttered, stepping back a little. “And what of you? What brings armed men to a wilderness?”

“Looking for an escaped bondman. One of my lord’s men had the blasted gall to run away, and his lordship sent me to get him back again.” Addaric couldn’t help letting his pride sound in his voice, that Lord Cadlomar had placed him in charge. “Have you seen any trace of him?”

“I haven’t, at that.” Paran thought for a moment. “Now listen, lad. Before the day’s over, you’ll come to a forest, and a wild, huge one it is. Don’t go in there. I swear it to you: that forest is no place to go a-hunting anything down. If you honor me, then for the love of our gods, let the poor bastard be.”

When he stared directly into Addaric’s eyes, the lad felt himself blushing and looked away.

“I’ve got my orders from our lord,” he stammered.

“Lords have been given cut-down versions of truth’s cloak before. Your bondman’s only going to die in that forest, anyway, so stay out of it.”

Perhaps some of the gods agreed with Paran. The hunters had ridden only a scant couple of miles when the sky began churning with gray clouds and the wind brought a smell of damp in the air, but the rain did hold off till evening, and by then they were within sight of the forest. For some time they’d seen it on the horizon like a second bank of clouds; just as the sunset turned the sky blood-colored they came within clear sight of it. The meadowland bordering the river stopped abruptly in a tangle of shrubby growth; then the trees began, a dark wall, stretching out and back farther than any of them could see or guess. The men paused their horses in a little knob and simply stared at it for a long time.

“I see what Paran meant,” Addaric said. “We’re going to have a hellish time in there.”

“Are we turning back?” Matun, his closest friend in the warband, edged his horse up beside him.

“What? And lie to your lord? I’d rather die than that.”

Yet the forest was so silent, so dark under the scarlet sky, that he felt his battle-hardened nerves run just a little cold. His nerves grew on him, too, after they’d made camp. Since they needed meat for the dogs, Omillo took a short hunting bow and one of the pack and started toward the forest to track them a deer. Addaric went with him some ways across the meadow.

“Be careful in there.”

“What? And haven’t I been hunting in our lord’s service for a good twenty years now?”

“I was just thinking of Paran’s warning. They say he knows wild country better than any man alive.”

When Omillo walked into the trees, the forest seemed to cover him over like deep water. Addaric waited, pacing back and forth, until he returned, staggering under the weight of a three-month fawn while the dogs pranced around him and drooled in anticipation.

They’d no sooner reached the fire when the rain came, pouring down and dousing them and the flames both in a matter of minutes. Cursing and swearing, Omillo had to hack the fawn up in the dark while the dogs crowded round and whined, and the other men swore at the wet night ahead of them and the meager meals, too—they’d been looking forward to the roast meat. Although Addaric wanted to set a watch, everyone grumbled, and since he was young and only a temporary commander at that, he gave in. Yet he himself slept so restlessly,

dreaming of voices in the forest and things creeping through tangled undergrowth, that he woke some two hours before dawn.

By then the rain had stopped, but he and his bedroll were soaked straight through. Since they'd all slept wet on many a campaign, the rest of the men were hunched up with their saddles over their heads and still asleep, but he got up, buckling his baldric over his shoulder and feeling the weight of the sword at his hip as a solid comfort. He walked away from the camp until he stood some twenty paces from the forest edge and thought of Grunno, somewhere in the ominous dark. He was probably so terrified that he'd be glad to go home and take his flogging.

"You'll never find him."

With a yelp Addaric spun round, but there was no one there. He heard laughter, then, coming from everywhere and nowhere, a woman's mocking-sweet laugh.

"You took a fawn from my woods. I'll have a price for that. What will you give me?"

"By the black ass of the Lord of Hell, show yourself, wench, and then maybe we'll talk about bargaining."

"Let me warn you somewhat. If a price isn't offered me, then I take what I want."

"Oh, will you now?" Addaric drew his sword. "Just try to steal from us."

She laughed again, a mocking ripple that blended with the riversound, grew loud, louder, until it seemed to ring in his head and deafen him.

"Hold your tongue! Stop that! I said stop it!"

The laughter died away. In the camp someone shouted. Matun and Omillo came running, swords in hand. But there was no one there, no woman, no speaker, only the wind, rising as the eastern sky began to turn gray. When Addaric told his story, everyone mocked and said he'd been having naught more than a nightmare. He felt the shame of their laughter burn his cheeks, and it ran through him and poisoned his stomach so badly that he couldn't eat breakfast.

The shame drove him into the forest, too, when the time came. Since there was no use in taking all five men to crash around and warn Grunno they were coming, Addaric left the others with the horses while he and Omillo took the two best hounds after their prey. As they walked across the last stretch of open land, Addaric felt a little coldness around his heart. He'd ridden to battle and never felt fear, but now the coldness tightened around his lungs and grew tendrils down into his stomach. For a moment he thought of turning back, but the shame of it forced him to walk into the silent darkness of the trees.

“Here’s the deer track I found yesterday,” Omillo said. “We can follow it a-ways and hope the dogs pick the scent out of the air.”

Out of his saddlebags Omillo got Grunno’s sack and let the hounds sniff it. For a moment they milled around, confused; then one of them growled and headed straight off down the path. Although Addaric tried to keep up with Omillo and the dogs, his baldric kept catching on the shrubs and bracken. Once they left the river behind, the path twisted through bush and bracken until Addaric had no idea where the open country lay. He felt things watching, eyes from among the ferns, eyes above him in the leaves, and he heard voices whispering in the rising wind. Once he thought he felt a hand grab his arm, but it was only the twiggy touch of a sapling. He drew his sword and cut the thing clear through.

Ahead, as if at a signal, the hounds sang out and leapt forward. With a shout, Omillo darted after. Addaric tripped, swore, got up, and hurled himself after, but at that precise moment the rain broke again, pattering first on the canopy far above, then slashing down like so many spears made of water. The wind howled and shook the trees in a flurry of falling leaves.

“Omillo! Hold a minute! I can’t see you.”

He tripped again, or something tripped him. He felt a clutch at his ankles and went down, sprawling into the mucky-wet leaves on the deer trail. In the howl of the wind he was sure he heard laughter. Yelling for Omillo, he scrambled up, but the rain was sweeping through the woods in a gray curtain. Stumbling and swearing, he followed the path until he came to a fork. When he found not a trace of man or dog on either path, he had the grim thought that he’d expected no less. No matter which he took, it would be the wrong one. He was sure of that. For a long time he stood there, the rain drenching his clothes and running down the steel blade of his sword, simply stood and listened to his heart pound.

“You won’t trap me so easy, wench.”

Addaric turned and went back the way he’d come, but the rain had turned their tracks into mere mud and leaf-mold, and in the driving grayness one thin spot in the underbrush looked much like any other. Addaric knew he was lost not fifty yards after he started. He kept walking for want of anything else to do, used his sword to slash his way through bush and bracken alike for the sheer pleasure of venting his rage on the woods.

It wasn’t only the rain that kept him company. He could feel eyes upon him, hear voices, and at times, he caught a glimpse of something moving out of the corner of his eye. Whenever he turned to look directly at this mysterious something, it would disappear. When the growling in his stomach told him it was well past noon, he sat down in the muck beneath a tree and choked back the tears that threatened to shame him.

“I’ll just sit here. Curse it all, I should have done that in the first wretched

place! Just sit here and let Omillo find me. He can give the dogs the scent from my saddle.”

But the rain was washing the forest clean in a steady gray pour while the wind plucked at the leaves and sang of death by starving, death from cold, or perhaps even a worse death from the things that clustered round to mock him in the rustle of branch and leaf. All afternoon, as he sat there waiting, he saw them. In the water drops bright eyes gleamed, in the rough bark fingers pinched. Once, when he looked sharply to his left, he saw a tiny naked girl-child with a lizard hanging on her shoulder like a pet. Then she disappeared, if indeed anything had ever been there at all, and laughter rippled in the trees. Addaric gripped his sword hilt in both hands.

“I won’t go mad. Even if I starve, I’ll die sane. It’s a battle, and curse you all to the hells, I’m going to win.”

The voices snickered in disbelief.

At sunset he struggled to his feet on aching legs and braced himself against the trunk. As the rain died away, the voices around him grew hushed, expectant. Clutching his sword like a talisman, Addaric waited with them in the damp dark. It wasn’t long before he saw a light moving among the trees, the distant, bobbing glow of a torch.

“Omillo! Omillo! I’m over here!”

“Oh, I know where you are, sure enough.” It was the woman’s voice that answered, full of her musical laughter.

With barely a sound they slipped through the trees and underbrush to surround him, the woman slender and boyish in her short gray cloak, but beautiful with moonbeam pale hair and violet eyes. With her were three young men in buckskin tunics, all armed with bows. By the light of the torch she carried, Addaric could see the glittering points of nocked arrows.

“I’ve come for the price of my fawn. What’s your name, lad?”

“Addaric of Belglaedd.”

“Addaric of Belglaedd? Addaric of Belglaedd, Addaric of Belglaedd.”

All at once his head was swimming with a longing for sleep. As he leaned back against the tree, the weight of his sword seemed to pull his arm down of its own will.

“You called me a wench, too. I’ll have repayment for that as well as the fawn. What will you offer me?”

“I’d die before I gave you one cursed thing.”

She set her hands on her hips and frowned. All at once he realized that the

torch hung above her in the air and flowed with the bluish light of something other than fire.

“You come to my woods hunting a man as if he were a deer. I shan’t have that. And then you kill without offering me dues. I shan’t have that, either. I’ll take you as my price for the fawn.”

When the archers snickered, she waved them into silence. Addaric looked at the drawn bows and saw his death glittering on arrow points. With one last wrench of his will, he raised his sword, determined to drag her to the Otherlands with him.

“Oh, you utter lout, I’m not talking of killing you. How strange that the gods would make such a pretty lad but not give him any wits! You’re coming with me, Addaric of Belglaedd, Addaric of Belglaedd, Addaric of Belglaedd.”

Addaric tried to swing at her, but the sword fell from his hand as he crumpled into sleep. Dimly he was aware of being picked up, then carried a long way only to be laid down on something soft and warm. He heard her whispering his name three times again; then the sleep deepened to a welcome darkness that swallowed him whole.

When he woke, he found himself lying naked in soft blankets, and around him was the dim glow of sunlight filtering through the walls of a round tent, about ten feet across, made of hides stitched together with thongs. Leather cushions lay scattered on the floor, and brightly colored bags hung from the tent poles. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, realizing that his muscles no longer ached. In a blinding glare of sunlight, the woman pushed open the tent flaps and came in, carrying a wooden bowl. Once the flaps closed again, he could see her better in the dim light, her pale hair, unbound to fall down her back in a spill of gold, her delicate face. Her eyes were oddly hidden, so much so that he couldn’t tell their color.

“I’ve brought you somewhat to eat,” she announced.

She handed him the bowl, then sat down facing him and studied him so curiously that he bundled the blanket firmly around his waist.

“You people grow hair on your faces and on your chests. Fancy that.”

Addaric had the annoying feeling that he was blushing. In the bowl he found a flat cake of some coarsely ground grain, smeared with wild honey, and slices of cold roast venison. While he ate, she clasped her arms around her knees and watched. She seemed younger than ever, a lass about his own age of nineteen, perhaps, and very pretty indeed.

“I’ve told you my name. Won’t you tell me yours?”

“I won’t, never. My people call me Melario. It means wood rose in their tongue. Or you may call me Briaclan, that means the same in yours.”

When he finished the food, he handed her the bowl. With a smile of cold triumph she raised it high, then rose and with a ritual care set it outside the tent door. All at once he realized that he never should have eaten her food. Why, he wasn't exactly sure, but he felt the sting of an old tale at his mind. Too late, now: still smiling she came back to stand over him.

“And just what do you want with me?”

“Oh, come now. What kind of a man are you, that you can't guess?”

Since he thought she was setting him a riddle, he honestly tried to think of an answer, but with a laugh she unclasped her belt, then pulled off her tunic. Naked she was so beautiful that he could think of nothing but her body, glowing softly as if her flesh captured sunlight. Then she lay down next to him on the blanket and kissed him on the mouth.

Some two weeks later, Paran heard a very strange story about Addaric's disappearance. While in Aberwyn, he lived with his father, a widower, and his unmarried sister. They had one of the biggest houses in town, a two-story roundhouse set on a couple of acres where they kept a cow and three pigs, while a flock of chickens roamed among the greens and turnips in the kitchen garden. That particular afternoon he was working in the garden, in fact, when a horseman rode up to the gate in the earthen wall that surrounded the homestead. At the hysterical barking of the family dogs, Paran got up, dusting off the knees of his brigga, and recognized Matun from Lord Cadlomar's warband.

“Morrow, lad! What brings you here? My sister's down at the market with my father, if it's either love or commerce.”

“Neither, truly, but a word with you.”

“Come in, then. Ye gods, hounds! Will you stop your demon-get barking?”

Inside, the central fire smoldered under the smoke hole. In the curve of the round wall, under a row of tankards hanging from pegs, stood a big barrel of ale. Paran dipped them both out some drink and sat his guest down at the wooden table by the hearthstone.

“It's about Addaric,” Matun said. “Did you hear that he was killed in that god-cursed forest you warned us about?”

“I hadn't, but it aches my heart to hear it now. What did he do, charge right in there?”

“Just that.” Matun looked up, his eyes snapping rage. “He and the kennel master went in, but only Omillo came out. We searched and searched, and finally we found the place where he'd been killed. Here, you might have warned us about the blasted bears!”

“Bears? I didn’t see any bears.”

“But that’s what got him. We found its tracks, and they were huge. It must have been an enormous bear, or so the kennel master said. There was a tuft of black fur caught on a thorn, too. Addaric’s bloody sword was nearby.”

“Did you ever find his body?”

Matun shook his head no. There were tears in his eyes.

“He was a good friend of yours, was he?”

“I loved him, and I don’t give a pig’s fart who knows it, either.” He had a long swallow of ale. “I loved him better than that rotten little bitch he had in the village did, too, her and her cursed mincing and flirting with the rest of us lads.” Then he did cry, dropping his face into his hands and sobbing aloud.

Paran got up and wandered to the doorway to look out while Matun got himself under control. He wondered very much about that huge black bear, very much indeed, because the only bears he’d ever seen to the west were small brown ones. He glanced back to find Matun sniffing into his sleeve and swallowing heavily, gave him an encouraging smile, and wandered back to the table again.

“So you came here to reproach me for your friend’s death?”

“I did, but it seems stupid now. You did warn us about the forest, and even if you’d told us about the bears, that wouldn’t have held Addaric back anyway. He was all keen to go into the cursed place because he felt shamed.”

“And why did he feel shamed?”

“Oh, the night before he woke us all up. He said he heard someone talking to him, but when he got there, she was gone.”

“She?”

“That’s what he said. Some woman’s voice.”

“Oh, did he now? Well, lad, my heart truly aches for you and Addaric both. I only wish he’d listened to me and left the forest alone. I think me it’s wilder than we can know.”

For the rest of that day Paran tried to talk himself out of the idea that kept haunting him, but when his father and sister returned from the marketplace, he announced that he was leaving on the morrow to set off west again. He couldn’t quite bring himself to say why.

Since he’d already traveled this stretch of country, Paran reached the forest with no trouble. Round about noon on a hot summer day, he even found the exact spot where Addaric and his men had camped, thanks to the scar left on the land by

their fire pit and the bones of the fawn, scattered all over the meadow by the ravens and badgers. He shrugged off his pack, laid it down by the pit, and stood for a long time, shading his eyes with one hand and staring at the dark and silent wall of forest. Now that he'd come so far, he certainly wasn't about to turn round and go home again, but he had to admit that he was frightened, and more than fear, he felt futility. For all he knew, Addaric might be wandering through a ghost forest in the Otherlands.

"Well," he said to nothing in particular. "I might as well wait till the morrow, go in right at dawn, like, when there's a whole day's light ahead of me."

Yet, once the sun was well down and the not quite full moon rising, the sorceress came to him. Paran was on his knees, nursing a fire of gleaned deadfall, when he heard her laughing behind him.

"Good eve, my lady. Won't you join me at my fire?"

"You *are* a civil man, Paran of Aberwyn. Unlike some as I could mention."

Moving silently on bare feet, she came round and stood before him as he kneeled. That night she seemed more solid than he was remembering her, a young lass dressed in a boy's tunic, a hunting bow dangling carelessly in one hand.

"I suppose you've come to ask me to give him back," she said.

"Addaric? I have, at that. He's got kinfolk at home who love him and miss him, you see. It's for their sake I've come, to be honest, not so much for his."

"Civil and a good judge of character." She grinned, revealing sharp-pointed teeth. "What will you give me in return?"

"What would you like? Gold and jewels? I'm not a rich man, and no more are Addaric's friends, but no doubt I could scrounge together a ransom once I know your demands."

"I have no use for that."

"Fine horses? Addaric's lord owes a legal blood price for the lad, two war-worthy geldings and a broodmare."

"No use for them, either. There's no fodder for horses in my forests."

"Well, then, won't you name me a price?"

"You."

Paran could only stare. All at once he understood what that tired old way of speaking, "feeling your blood run cold," meant in the flesh. She was smiling, staring down at the dirt scattered round the fire pit, drawing a pattern in it with her big toe like some shy country lass.

“What would you want with me?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll wager you’re less boring than he is. He’s a pretty lad, but your gods didn’t give him much in the way of wits.” She looked up, and suddenly her smile was all malice, her eyes cold and snakelike. “But that doesn’t matter. I’ve named my price. Will you pay it or not?”

All at once he saw her as huge, towering over him, towering over the forest, swelling up the way a candle flame will do in a draught, and he knew that he’d been a fool to ever think her human and a sorceress.

“Are you a goddess, then?”

“Naught of the sort.” She flickered back to a normal shape, as a candle flame will do when the door’s been shut and the draft stopped. “This is my forest, and the folk who live here are mine to guard, but the gods are far, far above the likes of me.” She smiled again, but briefly. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“If I just go away again, what will happen to Addaric?”

“He’ll wander with my people till he dies.”

Sitting on his heels Paran considered his tiny fire as if it could give him advice. For all that he loved hidden things, at that moment he found himself thirsting for his family’s company and the familiar streets of Aberwyn. But he, at least, could learn from the lady, while Addaric would wander with her retinue like a tame beast.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” he said at last. “If I’m the prize you want, then you shall have me. But how will Addaric find his way home again? Without a guide, he’ll wander around out here and starve to death. Can you take him home with your dweomer?”

“I can take him to the edge of his lord’s fields, and surely even he can find his way back from there.”

“I’m sure he will, my lady.” Paran got to his feet, but he felt as if he were hauling up an enormous weight. “Done, then. That’ll be our bargain. You take Addaric home, and I’ll come with you.”

She laughed, jiggling a few steps of a dance like a farm lass. For a brief moment she looked to be a lovely young lass, too, all golden and smiling as she held her arms out to him.

“Give me a kiss, Paran of Aberwyn.”

“Whatever my lady wants.”

“What? Don’t you want to take one?”

When he said nothing, she scowled, staring into his eyes as if she were

reading his thoughts.

“Well, then,” she snapped. “I’ll do the taking!”

Never in his life had he been kissed like that, with a passion as sweet as it was urgent. With a gasp he caught his breath and reached to kiss her again. She was gone. He stood alone by a dying fire under the spread of stars and heard her voice, flying round like a lark.

“All that will have to wait, since you value your blood kin more highly than me. You drive a hard bargain, Paran of Aberwyn. I hope you like the terms of it once you’re home.”

Across the meadow, the dark forest stretched like a rampart. Paran dropped to his knees and wept, just from the missing of her.

In the morning, with the first light of dawn, Addaric came stumbling out of the forest, and he was carrying a leather sack stuffed with food for their journey home, as well. He tossed the sack down, fell at Paran’s feet, and threw his arms around his rescuer’s knees so fervently that he nearly tumbled Paran to the ground.

“Thank the gods, oh thank the gods you came! How did you—what did you—that bitch! That wretched rotten bitch! How did you get the better of her?”

Paran nearly slapped him across the face, but he restrained himself.

“Get up, lad, get up. We’ve got a long walk ahead of us.”

“Walk?” Addaric let him go and slouched back on his heels. “Walk? Walk the whole cursed way? Didn’t you bring any horses?”

“I didn’t at that. Now get up before I leave you here.”

The long walk home improved neither Addaric’s moral fiber nor his temper, and Paran was more than glad to leave him at his lord’s door by the time they reached it. He was also glad to take the lord’s reward, too, not so much for saving Addaric, as for enduring him on the walk home, and he gave the fine horses in question to his sister for her dowry. No one believed Addaric, of course, when he talked of being ensnared by a beautiful sorceress. The lad had just plain gotten himself lost, or so the popular opinion ran, and he was too piss-proud stubborn to admit the truth. For some months their adventure was the talk of Aberwyn, but by spring, the folk found other things to marvel over and, as folk will, forgot.

Paran, however, always remembered that kiss in the wild meadow. Torn as he was between fear and regret, her memory haunted his dreams for years, while awake he shuddered at the thought of her. Although his mapping took him back to her forest many a time, he never saw her or her strange shy people again, not even when he lingered by her river in hopes of catching a glimpse of her—not, of course, that he could admit he was lingering. During all those long years he never married, living

alone in the roundhouse after his father died and his sister found a man of her own. Finally, when his hair had turned steel gray, and he knew that his legs were beginning to lose their spring, he gave away everything he owned and left Aberwyn for the west. When he never came back, most people believed that he'd died in the wilderness, eaten by bears, maybe, or drowned, more likely, or just plain starved to death somewhere in the wild.

The truth of the matter is, though, that he walked into her forest and found the circular clearing, not far from the river that we call Delonderiel, which was the place where first he'd seen her. He shrugged off his pack and stood for a moment, staring around at the silent trees.

“Lady?” he called. “My lady Briaclan, can you hear me? I’ve come as a suppliant. I’ll sit here and starve myself at your doorstep, just as if you were a great lord who’d wronged me, and the last word I speak will be the name you told to young Addaric, all those years ago.”

He stooped and turned out his pack, strewing the stuff about to show her that he carried not a morsel of food, then sat down cross-legged in the grass. He’d barely settled himself, though, when she came strolling through the trees. She was wearing a dress of some pale stuff that shimmered round her like sunlight.

“So, you’ve come back to me, have you, Paran of Aberwyn?”

“I’ve come back many a time. You never showed yourself.”

“You never asked, nor did you call to me, nor say one word about me. Why?”

“Why didn’t you ever call out to me?”

“I asked my question first, and so you answer first.”

“Fair enough. I was afraid that I’d love you more than any man should love a woman, and then I’d be a different man.”

“Odd, that. I was afraid I’d love you more than one of my kind should love a mortal, and then I’d have changed beyond thinking. I’d say our answers are much alike.”

“And I’d say the same.” He looked away with a sigh for the foolishness of pride. “Is it too late for you to have me back?”

“Never. Come here.”

Hand in hand they walked off through the woods, and never once did he look back nor think of his pack and his gear, lying scattered over the grass. And some say that thanks to the lady’s great dweomer, Paran is still alive, wandering with her and her people under the wheel of the sky, but as to the truth of that, I couldn’t say.

