

Herding Instinct

By Susan Dexter

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HER MOTHER WAS A SHEEP-dog, the pride of her valley — where a good working dog was worth her weight in scarce silver coin. Sheep needed to range far to scour a meal from the steep mountainsides that ringed the valley round, and a shepherd needed legs more tireless than his own to bring a flock back safe to the fold ere darkness fell and wolves were a certainty. Strong and clever was Mai's mother, always guiding her charges home no matter how mountains and weather tested her, and her first litter was eagerly awaited, as if she were a king's wife brought to bed of royal heirs.

Mai was the seventh and the last-born, all of the pups wet and wiggling, looking— and squeaking— quite like rats, save for the splashes of white on their black or brown fur. The litter shared a warm nest of rags by the fireside in the shepherd's tiny hut, shared also their mother's good milk, jostling about to get as much of it and her attention as each could. Mai, forward and bold, was always well fed, her brown and white body plump as a young coney's.

After a fortnight, six pairs of puppy eyes opened, showed a deep babyish blue color, then settled to a wise brown, the same as their mother's. Mai's eyes, however, opened and remained blue as the inside of an ice cave, paler than the shell of a robin's egg. The shepherd at first feared her blind — then, seeing that notion proved unfounded by her obviously sighted play with her littermates, feared far worse.

Six of the weaned puppies went to new homes after the Market Fair. Mai went for a walk, tagging along behind the shepherd with nary a sheep in sight. They left their valley, followed a river a little way, until they came to a cottage builded of smooth river stones and sticky river mud, thatched with silver-green river rushes. There was a man tending herbs in the dooryard, and the shepherd spoke to him for a while, and showed Mai to him.

“You may be wrong,” the wizard Corlinn said gently. “Sometimes a blue-eyed dog simply has blue eyes.”

“Her mother had proper brown eyes,” the shepherd insisted, twisting his cap in his hands.

“And the father!”

“That's what worries me, sir. Suppose some mountain spirit came upon her—”

The wizard dismissed the superstition, though he did not expect for a moment that the shepherd would follow his will and do likewise. He bent to the puppy, fondled her soft brown ears, which stood tall only to droop over at the tips. She lowered them in pleasure at his notice, and wiggled all over. Unable to long contain such overmastering joy, she sprang up so that Corlinn had to step hastily back, nearly falling, unable to avoid her wet nose and dirty paws. He did evade most of the wet kisses the puppy sought to bestow, to the pup's dismay. She redoubled her efforts.

The shepherd seized her by her ruff, held her down and spoke sternly. The puppy stared past him as if his words had no connection with any world she knew, then struggled to be free of his fingers, not too polite to add teeth to her weapons.

"She's strong-willed — and were she human, a trial to any father!" Corlinn chuckled. "But she's merely a dog. An ordinary dog," the wizard stressed.

"You're sure?" Uncertainly. "Sir?"

Corlinn looked again, with all the Sight he possessed. But though the ice-blue eyes were unusual, even unnerving, they were in no wise demonic. He nodded.

"Will you take her, sir?"

"I?" The wizard transferred his gaze and attention from dog to shepherd with some surprise and no little difficulty. "I have just said, she is only a dog. Even if she were . . . as you thought . . . I have neither wish nor need for a familiar. I am in retirement here, and puppies are inconducive to rest and study, whether they be witchbred or not. Take her? No, not likely."

The shepherd nodded and replaced his cap, prepared to go. He snapped his fingers for Mai, who left off sniffing at an herb-plot to frisk back to his side, her earlier scolding forgotten the instant 'twas heard — if it had been heard at all.

"What will you do with her?" the wizard wondered, his tongue taking his ears by surprise. But it could hardly be a bargaining trick — no mention of price had been made.

The shepherd frowned down at the leggy pup, her tail curling over her back and waving gently side to side. "What I'd have done when she was born, if I'd known. 'Tis kinder when they're small."

"Because of her eyes?" the wizard asked, a chill of realization striking through. His say that the pup was normal counted for nothing against the weight of peasant lore. "Just because they're blue?"

"Because I always cull the weak ones, or the deformed. Same as w' the

sheep.”

“She’s healthy.” Protest, as much as observation.

“Aye. And what else besides? I won’t foul your river, sir, never fear.” The shepherd squared his shoulders, under the fleece he wore for warmth. “There’s a fast-running beck nearer to home, ‘twill serve.”

The puppy spied a butterfly, and bounced stiff-legged to challenge and chase, blissfully unaware of her impending fate.

“Besides, sir, she’s got no herding touch,” the shepherd explained. “Her mother rounded up the falling leaves, at this age. The rest of her litter couldn’t bear to see chair parted from table, but they must herd it back to its place. This one — only wants to chase. No use with sheep. No use to anyone.”

I have done with familiars, Corlinn thought stemly. I have no sheep, nor desire a flock. No work for a dog— I will not keep a pet.

He had not bred the pup. He had not judged her unfit to live. He had merely been asked his opinion, and then been ignored. He bore no responsibility — he had not sentenced her to death on a superstition, though that sentence had been passed in his hearing. That he could alter it did not mean that he must. He bore no obligation.

The shepherd snapped his fingers again to call the pup, but she chose to take her leave of Corlinn first, and gazed up at him with those summer-sky eyes, her ears lowered with delight even though he had not acknowledged her, her tail thrashing fiercely, making a breeze.

He cursed himself for every sort of fool, but Corlinn kept her, and kept the name the shepherd’s wife had given her: Mai.

Mai might have been enchanted, by the way she grew. Corlinn, who saw her each and every day, took no especial note of the continual small changes — till he realized that when she reared up and put her generally muddy paws on his shoulders, she could very nearly look him in the eye — and he was by no means a stocky man. Any height Mai might have lacked was quite made up by the length of her muzzle— it put her tongue in easy reach of every part of his face, however he twisted to avoid its caress.

When he could hold her at sufficient length to get a proper look at her, Corlinn’s eyes beheld a body like a blooded horse’s — long and slender, on very long legs. Her coat, neither long nor short, was a pleasant honey-brown color, tipped with black, pied with white irregularly on her legs, throat, chest, and a stripe down the middle of her face. The tip of her ever-waving tail looked as if it had been dipped

in a paint-pot. One large ear stayed mostly erect, whilst the other often flew gaily off to one side, and both flicked to follow every sound, missing nothing. Mai looked nothing like a mountain sheepdog. She was, in every part, as exotic as her eyes.

Mai was fond of racing about the cottage in an excess of high spirits, as if fiends were on her track, her back humped and all of her paws briefly occupying the selfsame spot, sliding wildly on the polished dirt as she turned. Her speed dazzled as much as it distressed — Corlinn was often not in time to rescue some bottle or pot from disaster because he could not imagine it even remotely to be in danger. He thought to banish the creature from the cottage — a dog should be kenneled outside anyway. Mai howled till he did not know which of them he pitied the more. Corlinn steeled himself to ignore her noise, which would surely cease when she resigned herself to her fate. The howling did not abate. It grew frenzied, hysterical. Scrabbling sounds joined it. Sleep was impossible. Corlinn relented, and opened the door. Mai tumbled in. The face of the door was scarred from her frantic attempts to gain entry. It looked as if a bear had been at it. She fell asleep at his feet, all innocence and having quite forgiven him for locking her out.

Such peace was a rare novelty. Mai enjoyed dragging Corlinn's cloak to the floor, to lie upon— and to chew the hem out of, so that he discovered the garment soggy and ripped, shoved under the bedstead. He reprimanded the puppy sternly — and often. But if she could not obtain the cherished cloak, Mai was happy to chew on his books — removing them carefully from the shelves first, while she selected the most toothsome among them. Height was no obstacle, not to Mai. Corlinn's boots also suffered, were pocked by teeth. The dog found the tilled earth of the herb garden ideal for crafting holes — a practice Corlinn generally discovered when, wondering why Mai had left him untroubled for an hour's space, he stepped outdoors and literally stumbled upon the destruction. He forbade her to sleep on his bed, yet there each dawning was Mai, crept stealthily in after he had dropped off, curled at his back. As she grew, she took a larger share of bed and blanket, heedlessly.

Then, she began to wander. To the river, where she learned to swim by leaping dauntlessly into the water — frightening the pike Corlinn was clumsily attempting to lure into his fish-weir. Into the woods — where she found smelly things without number, to be rolled in, their stench fetched proudly home like a trophy. If she found naught else, there was always mud — Mai would come home covered with it, ears to paws, and share out her bounty gladly with a clean cloak or bedcover.

All these things distressed, but what Corlinn minded most was her nose, thrust suddenly and coldly into his ribs or the side of his elbow while he was peaceably engaged in his studies. Always it startled him, sometimes he actually shouted. Several times he was minded to return the blow, no matter that Mai meant it only as a friendly greeting, or a request for his attention. He forbore, mostly, because his guilt afterward much eclipsed any fleeting satisfaction got from his churlish behavior.

Corlinn told himself that Mai was older every day— that surely matters would change for the better by the end of the coming winter, when she would be more mature, more settled. But it remained true that he had retreated to this lonely spot because it was lonely. He had not desired company, even a dog's, and there were many times he heartily wished he had let the shepherd take Mai away, to whatever fate would have been hers. Cats, owls, snakes -those were the proper familiars for a wizard who desired the advantage of their link to animal wisdom —not a reckless, enthusiastic, reckless puppy. In short, Corlinn remembered that he had never wanted a dog, and chose to forget why his heart had softened.

As all dogs will, Mai from time to time looked at things that were not there— especially when winter's shrill winds blew. Corlinn knew this was no sign of magic — he was with her each day, every night. Mai was a bright dog, a demanding one, willful as any father-coddled princess, but she earned no taint of the extraordinary. Her blue eyes, once one was accustomed to them, were simply blue, unusual by no more than their hue. They saw what any dog saw — which was not much. Dogs relied upon keen noses, above sight. And ears, which explained her attention to the wind.

By the mid of winter, the wizard was wondering why it had not occurred to him earlier to simply apply his arts to the puppy— it would be a small thing to change blue eyes to common brown for a week or two, and trade her to some herder in need of a good dog. A flock of sheep to look after would settle her in short order, keep her too busy for mischief. He would, of course, need to take her a valley or two away, lest Mai be traced back to him when the spell faded and her eyes were blue once more. That required that he wait for a break in the weather, a reliable week or two in which to travel. Mai, who looked up in surprise from uprooting a potted chive clump when he shouted, was all unwitting of her future. No, those blue eyes did not gift a special sight.

RUNNING water is a bane to wizards, for even the mightiest of them dare cross its unbridled power only at great peril. Thus had Corlinn sited his cottage where he did — the river was as good as a wall at his back, in case of sorcerous attack. Likewise the water-smoothed stones, the river mud and rushes he had used to build his home — washed so long by the flowing water, they retained its properties to the extent that no ill-wish could work harm upon them. It stood to reason, he had never been across the unbridged river.

Winters in the backlands seemed harsher than those of the tamed city—the swift-running river froze right over, shore to shore, thick enough that the deer could be seen crossing upon the ice, fearlessly. Mai also ran out eagerly upon the solid surface, uncaring about the cold, unheeding of the icy water rushing two feet below, mindlessly happy to extend her range of mischief. Corlinn was never tempted to such recklessness, himself. He walked— well bundled— along the shore, admiring

the patterns of ice and snow, the many shades of white and gray, the rare blue that was a match for Mai's eyes, till his cheeks burned and his toes ached with cold. Then he turned homeward.

As the season began to wane, the days to lengthen ever so slightly, he tramped with a purpose, seeking signs of the first blossom of the skunk cabbage on the low ground by the river. The plants not only survived the snow — they actually managed to flower through the last drifts, generating heat enough to melt their way into the sunlight. Corlinn made use of that property each year, to succor delicate herbs he had brought from the City, plants unable to bear the disturbance of indoor potting but too tender to withstand the snows they struggled to sprout through. He looked eagerly for the unlovely flowers, anxious to bank his plants with them for a critical few days.

The winter creaked to a close — literally. The river ice began to groan faintly in the morning, the sound waxing as the day and the sunlight grew. The noise abated only a trifle in the night — and suddenly there was a rumble like distant thunder which shook the wizard from his sleep — and he knew the released river was rushing past his house, its water studded with chunks of ice, spilling down the floodplain as it did with every spring thaw. Mai startled at the sound — he gave her a reassuring pat before remembering to forbid her the bed. Corlinn returned peacefully to his slumbers — he had built his home on safe ground, above the water's reach even at this season.

The morning was misty, the air a fog that rose from the warming banks of snow, the sky above overcast and admitting no visible rays of sun, though letting its heat through. Corlinn went out early — with Mai noising eagerly ahead — to see whether damage had been done to the riverbanks. The air smelled faintly of skunk cabbage.

The wraith always appeared in this very early spring, so Corlinn was not surprised to see the pale figure drifting along the far shore, among the gray trees. One day she would linger, two at most, always at the wane of the moon, clutching her bundle to her. Once, he had heard a thin cry come over the water, which told him much — a woman and her baby, both dead in childbirth, wandering until they reached the running water of the river, which no shade could cross. They must have died at this season, unguessably long ago. The woman unwed, the babe fatherless, abandoned and condemned to walk for a short time each year, each spring. Corlinn spared the wraith a touch of pity, but he had no remedy to offer. If only she could once manage to appear before the ice broke up — but always she was too late, often by a week or two, most poignantly by a mere few hours, as this year.

Mai was questing along the water's edge, harking at the floating ice, sniffing at rocks turned over by the flood, digging into any soft spots she managed to find. She began to roll on some small object — she must have found a dead fish, swept along and cast ashore. It would be too fresh and too cold to have ripened fully enough to

suit her, but Mai persisted. Corlinn sighed, and wondered if he could get himself indoors without her noticing, bar the portal so she'd have to remain out in the air a while. Or would she only find more dirt? Had frozen mud begun to thaw?

Halfway to his doorstep, he paused to see whether she was noticing him. Mai was not — she was by the water, on her feet, staring across at the far side. Doubtless she regretted those woodlands now beyond her reach — or would she attempt swimming across? Corlinn hoped she would not—the water still carried a freight of ice, and she would take herself into a danger he could not save her from. Perhaps he should call her to him —

She was watching the wraith, Corlinn realized with a start. He had no notion just what she saw, but her attention was directed rather obviously. She stalked stiff-legged toward the water, her gaze never shifting.

Reaching the cold water, the dog did not halt, but began to trot back and forth, anxiously. Still, she looked across the stream, into the bare woodland. Once she looked back over her shoulder at Corlinn, her blue eyes startling even at a fair distance. He waved to her, and called her name, but Mai stayed by the riverside.

From the shore, Mai watched the white chunks of ice bobbing in the black water, scattering and milling, separated from one another. That was wrong, should not be. She barked at the white shapes, but they did not heed her.

No wayward sheep had ever successfully defied Mai's mother. Mai was —blue eyes or not — her mother's true daughter. She lowered her head, stretched her neck out, and stalked in a half-crouch toward the fractious river. She speared the nearest ice chunk with her winter-blue gaze. She did not growl, nor bare a fang, but with her whole posture she threatened the disordered flock of ice floes.

A small block — which had been sweeping toward the gravelly shore -shuddered to a sudden halt. Another block bumped it, jammed against it, was also halted. In an instant more the whole surface of the river had done likewise, as the reaction spread from one shore to the other. The ice was smooth and flat no longer, and there remained a gap or two, through which running black water could be glimpsed — but most of the flow was covered by piled-up chunks of ice, held in their places by Mai's commanding sheepdog stare.

Corlinn looked wide-eyed at the scene. Mai waved her white-tipped tail once — not at him, but in signal to the opposite shore. And an insubstantial white figure set a hesitant foot upon the nearest block.

Apparently the rough surface was solid enough. The wraith flitted across, quick as a breeze, almost as difficult to make out. It passed within a yard of Mai, who shook her fur and let all the ice go skittering on its way, in a second, smaller flood of released water. Leaping back from the slopping bank, the dog pointed her

long nose toward the nearer woods, a little way downstream.

Corlinn looked that way too — and the hair rose prickling on the nape of his neck. A second pale wraith stood among the bare tree trunks, where he had never seen a sign of one ere this. A thicker white form, with a suggestion — faint and best seen out of the corner of the eye, hard to make out dead-on — of a shield and a sword. A soldier, dead in some long ago battle.

Dead, and unable to wed his sweetheart, or claim his child. Separated from them forever by running water. . .

As Corlinn stared, the slender white form rushed toward the heavier one, was enfolded in it. Just for an instant, the little flock was gathered all together, as it should be. Then, 'twas gone. The sun ate through the fog, and the river water began to sparkle, the white ice became impossible to gaze upon. His eyes watered.

Mai came romping out of the dazzle, unseen, and leaped up to plant her paws on Corlinn's shoulders. She did stink of dead fish — Corlinn found he did not care. He hugged her tight to him. Mai wriggled to be free of his grip, but her warm tongue found his cheek, twice.

“Sometimes a blue-eyed dog is just a blue-eyed dog,” the wizard recalled, grunting as the dog poked her overlong nose into his left armpit, trying to persuade him to lift the arm and put it to use scratching her. “With no herding instinct. And sometimes a wizard is simply wrong.”

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The New York Public Library just placed Susan Dexter's novel, *The Wizard's Shadow*, on their list of 100 recommended books for teens. Her most recent novel, *The Wind-Witch*, just appeared from Del Rey, the company that has published all of her books. *The Wind-Witch* is a sequel to *The Prince of Ill-Luck*, which appeared in March

I have a fondness for wizards and magic spells, but most stories rarely do them justice. “Herding Instinct” is a wonderful exception. This story about a sheepdog also balances the otherwise feline focus of the issue.