

The Gathering

By P. C. Torres

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FORWARD

There's a sheltered valley, hidden deep in the mountains. This small glen, surrounded by trees, protects an opening in the mountainside, a deceptively small cave opening under an overhanging rock. In the center of the glen, a small fire has been built. Around the fire are a handful of figures. Some sit huddled and shivering, some stand, some pace, but all stay within the circle of their togetherness. Sometimes they speak, sometimes they sing, most often they cry and weep and wail. There is power in this glen, power in this gathering. The world is, as yet, unaware of it. And that's as it should be. This is a healing gathering, away from prying eyes, away from those who hate, far from those who would judge, protected from those who would kill, maim, torture. Those who gather here have known pain and death so severe some of them are barely alive, even yet. Some have had their essence so nearly obliterated they have needed the patient empathy of this gathering in this place, to bring them awake. Here, all will heal. Here, all will be allowed to speak, cry, rage, and eventually ... heal. Here, they will gather their power...



Part I - THE BEGINNING

The Valley

Out of the dim time there wandered a small dark wizened creature. If she had a name, she didn't know it. If she had a home, she couldn't remember it. She was alone and wandering, and had been for many long years.

For many years she crept from place to place, hiding from the eyes of men. The sun parched her hair and cracked her skin. The moon chilled her bones and stirred an aching in her chest. The long road had bent her back and callused her feet. The constant fear and hiding made her eyes dart about warily. She was crouched and thin and pale as old bones, light as a feather and utterly, utterly silent.

After many long years of wandering, she followed a river that wound its way deep into the folds of the mountains. After some days, she realized she couldn't hear any sound of men. Still, she went on, deeper and deeper into the mountains and forests... and there she found a valley. A sheltered glen, ringed by hills and filled with trees for shade and soft grass to lie upon. . She followed the river as it wound along the edge of the valley, letting herself be lulled by the water happily splashing over rocks and into swirling pools. She found a place where a large tree had fallen across the river and carefully crossed to the other side. There she found a small path, and she followed her feet as they trod the path through the trees, leaving the river behind her. She breathed in the smells of forest and earth and rock. She didn't know where she was heading, she simply followed her feet, and her feet were following the path, which seemed to be leading her ... somewhere.

The path crossed a small space, open in the center, and ringed with trees. She paused there. She took a deep breath and felt something stirring within her there, a song was being sung in that space, a song she could almost hear. She was tempted to sink down there, beneath the branches of the trees, but her feet pulled her forward, and she followed the path through the clearing and up a hill on the other side of the valley. She climbed back and forth as the path rose up the side of the hill, and there, at the top, back a little ways from the rocky ledge and partly hidden by the

branches of a large bush, was the entrance to a cave. She hesitated, briefly afraid that the cave might be occupied by a large animal, but her feet were drawing her forward, and she could not resist. She walked slowly to the entrance, pushed back the overhanging branches, and went in.

In the cave she discovered such wonders! There was a warm pool fed by hot springs from beneath the mountains. The walls, a pale rose quartz, seemed to glow softly. From beneath her feet she felt a deep, slow rhythmic thrumming, like a great, slow heart beating. Perhaps the heartbeat of the mountain itself. The drum accompaniment to the song being sung down in the clearing. She strained and listened. She wanted so badly to be able to hear that song, to be able to feel that heartbeat deep within her own breast.

She didn't know this would become her place of healing. She had no coherent thoughts then. But she felt something totally and completely unfamiliar. At first she couldn't identify it. It swelled in her chest, it made tears flow down her cheeks, and the first beginnings of a sound came from her tightening throat... a strangled groan that turned into a sob. She sank onto the soft ground and sobbed, clutching her knees and shaking. When the sobbing subsided she was finally able to give the feeling a word.

Safe.

She felt safe for the first time that she could remember.

Here, she could let her tears flow. Here she could break her silence and not be afraid. She gave a great shout to the sky, and from that day, began her healing in the secret glen of tears.

Two Together

After a time, she noticed her body had changed. She could stand straight and tall, she was no longer wraith-thin, her eyes no longer darted about nervously. And she became aware that her thoughts were more coherent. She could hold onto a thread of thought and follow it for quite a while now, instead of getting lost after only a few words. She began to delight in this. She found she could give her feelings words and names, and when she cried, sometimes words would come to her, as if her feelings were talking TO her now. And she cried often. She cried to the grasses and the flowers. She sobbed and wailed, nestled in the roots of a large leafy tree, drawing comfort from its living. She moaned and groaned while completely submerged in the pool in her cave. The warm water soothed her and loosened stiff places where her body was holding pain and fear.

With her new-found ability to think, she began to question. Why was she so alone? What had happened to put her on her long road, of which she could only remember bits and pieces? Why had she been beaten and scorned wherever she went? Why couldn't she remember who she was in the before time? Why couldn't she remember?

She resolved to remember. It became the most important thing to her. She wanted to remember more than anything in the world.

One day, sitting nestled in the roots of her favorite tree, she tried to remember some of the things that happened to her on her long journey. She remembered being cold, so very cold. She felt again the emptiness and aloneness and as the tears began to flow, she heard a small sound, a whimper, like the cry of an injured dog. She searched the trees at the edge of the glen and found, curled into a tight ball, a very small child, no more than two. She knew with a certainty that came from somewhere deep inside, this child was kin. She knew, in the way she felt the pain thrumming through the small body, and in the tears that were streaming down her own face as she touched the small face and throat, looking for signs of life. She felt a shallow breath, and a very faint, faltering heartbeat, but the little one's eyes seemed not to see her. And the skin! The child's skin was blackened and burnt, but cold, cold as ice.

Frightened, she gathered the child up in her arms and carried her to the cave. She placed her carefully in the pool all the way up to her chin, holding her gently, hoping the warm water would soothe her skin and thaw her frozen bones. She murmured soft comforting sounds and words – “safe... home... warm...”

At first the child lay deathly still in her arms, barely breathing. She held her and rocked her gently with infinite patience, refusing to give up hope that the child would live and heal. Then, slowly, a single tear slipped down the child’s cold cheek, and she gave a sudden sobbing intake of breath. One small burnt hand reached out to the woman, and then she was crying and they were crying together, and the woman knew everything would be all right.

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It took many days for the child to recover from her frozen coma. Hopelessness had nearly swallowed her up. For many days she could do no more than hide in the cave, submerged in the water or curled up in the woman’s lap. She let the woman hold her and rock her while she sobbed and moaned, and one layer at a time they peeled the onion of her pain.

They remembered together...

*She awoke, alone in the dark. The dark was the vastness of space and she was lost in it, unable to move, unable to call out, cold and completely alone. Horror! Stark aloneness! Terror!*

*She couldn’t feel anything – all was cold nothingness. She reached out and ... nothing. She cried out but she could hear nothing. There was no up, no down, no forward, no back, and absolutely no hope of rescue. She screamed a soundless scream, her terror completely overtaking her and then knew no more for a time.*

*This happened over and over again, more times than she could count. Always, when she woke again it was to endless dark terror and aloneness. Madness was slowly overtaking her and soon she would be wholly insane.*

The woman held the child tightly and they relived the terror of those times. And then the rage came. Together, they remembered the darkness, and then they remembered seeing lights in the distance and hearing music and they knew there were others out there. Others! Yes, of course they knew there were Others, dancing and laughing in a place where they should have been too! That's where they belonged! Or did they? How did they get out here in the dark and the cold, why didn't somebody come and get them, why didn't somebody save them?!?

When the rage faded the woman asked the child "How did it happen that you were out there all alone?"

But the child didn't know, she couldn't remember. She vaguely remembered feeling that it must have been something she did wrong, and it must have been something very, very bad. But she didn't know what, and she didn't want to know. She was just so very very grateful to be here with the woman, in a safe place where she could cry and not be alone in the scary cold dark anymore.

She nestled deeper into the woman's arms and whispered, "Please don't leave me."

And they went into the cave together and the woman put the child into the warm healing waters of the pool and held her while she cried.



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### *The Little Match Girl*

The woman and the child spent many hours together. Little by little, as they cried together, they both remembered more and more of the child's story. Her burnt and blackened skin healed quickly in the warm waters of the pool. And she seemed to grow very quickly. Before long she looked like a child of 4 or 5, with emerald green eyes that twinkled brightly, and hair the color of dark honey that curled around her ears and cascaded down over her shoulders. She was good company – she cried easily, dropping swiftly into old memories, but she laughed and sang just as easily. She sang to the trees, to the grasses and the hills. She filled the valley with laughter and song. Sometimes her songs were sad, remembrances of her pain. One song she sang over and over:

Dark

dark and dark and dark  
cold empty black void  
inside and outside and all around

alone and alone and alone  
aching and longing and hunger  
hold me save me bring me home

i see the warm  
i see the lights bright and warm  
far over there they seem to be singing and I try to reach  
i can't move, i try to call  
i hear my voice, i hear my screams when the darkness bites me  
don't they hear me?

rage  
it's me  
it's something i did

rage  
it's them  
they don't want me  
but why?

alone and alone and alone  
forever screaming aching dark black void  
please come bring me home  
please come  
please

One day as they sat and sang together on the grass, the woman looked up and saw a small figure standing on the edge of the glen. It was a girl-child, pale and thin, dressed in rags. She stared at them with large, pale blue eyes with pale lashes, ringed with deep, dark circles. Haunted eyes. She stood unmoving, one finger twining a strand of blond hair around and around, and the woman knew - another had come home.

She held out her arms, but the child stood frozen.

The woman spoke then, softly, "Welcome, please join us."

The child said, in a voice almost too quiet to be heard, "You cared for my sister. I saw you care for her..."

"Yes," said the woman.

The child looked down at the ground and said nothing.

"You need care, too," the woman said. "You're hungry and cold and alone. Come and be with us." She held out her arms again. The child hesitated, then her eyes closed and she moved forward, inch by painful step. The woman came forward and wrapped the child in her arms. The

child stood rigid for a moment, and then every muscle and bone seemed to melt into a puddle of fear and terror and cold and alone... She clutched the woman and cried and they remembered together...

*She fell to earth, but her memory of the fall was dim. Just pain, and a squeezing, and the terror of being unable to breathe. Then a long period of formless dark. In her next clear memory, she was a grown woman in a ragged brown dress, trudging down a dirt lane between low stone walls, carrying a large bundle of sticks on her back. She was bent almost in half from the weight of her burden and with each slow, painful step she was cursing the lazy drunkard husband that brought her to this. She hated her husband, she hated her life, sometimes she even hated her children, but it was for them that she went on, day after day, toiling for pennies so they would have barely enough food and a tiny flame to warm themselves by. When they got older, they would help, she would see to that. But for now, she toiled alone. Self-pity and anger overwhelmed her. What good was living when it was all pain and cold and hunger? If it wasn't for the children she would have crawled into a dark corner and given up long ago. She hated them, too, she hated the whole world! The rage and hopelessness overwhelmed her as she became ill and withered, unable to rise from her bed, knowing she was dying and unable to help the children. As she died she cursed the world and God and herself ...*

The child continued to cry and remember. The memories that came next seemed very familiar to the woman, familiar but distant, as though she had watched the events from afar, aching, but helpless.

*There was the child again, but this time she was a very young girl standing outside a window in the dead of winter, dressed in rags. Her cheeks were hollow and her hair was dark and stringy... and her fingers were blue with cold. She stood at the window, a wretched and pitiable thing, watching a family sitting together around the warm golden glow of a fire.*

“Ah,” thought the woman, “this is a soul in despair. She has given up. She expects very little out of life, she has no will to live, no desire to fight and survive. She is a dog that expects to be beaten, a child that expects only cold starvation and death.”

*Standing outside the window drinking in the warmth of the family, the child pretends for a brief moment that she is one of them, that she shares their togetherness, shares the sweets they eat, is offered a cup of something hot and steaming to drink. The colors shimmer before her eyes, now filling with tears – burgundy and green and gold – Christmas colors. For it is Christmas time and the hearts of men are supposed to gentle and open, at least for this one day. But the child knows that’s a lie. She has a bitterness in her heart that no child should feel. She knows there is no Christmas spirit, and God, if he exists, is cold and heartless as iced glass.*

*She turns from the window and sinks down onto the cold ground. There in the snow she huddles, waiting. She waits for the cold to fill her bones. She waits for death, she knows it will come. Soon.*

At last, exhausted, the children fell asleep, their arms wrapped around each other. The woman touched their heads tenderly, the honey-brown curls, and the pale, gold hair of their new arrival, and she felt her throat tighten. She turned from them, not wanting to waken them, and went out into the night.

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## *The Voice*

The woman had come away from the child's memories filled with rage. Why was humankind so cruel, why was the world so heartless? Why would no one help a starving child? Her anger filled her eyes with hot red tears and she pounded the ground, crying "why, why, why?" Sitting on the grass under the trees, she raged and cursed and raged until it seemed the tears turned to acid on her cheeks and her throat grew ragged from her screams. "There must be a reason," the woman cried to the sky. "There must be a reason!" she cried to the trees. She pounded the grass and demanded to know the reason.

And from somewhere she heard a deep quiet voice say, "It was a mistake."

Startled, she looked around. "A mistake?" she called. "A mistake?!? You *dare* to look on this pain and say it was a mistake??"

She felt her rage surge up again, strong enough to perhaps burn all the valley, but she held it in check, and the voice said, sadly, "A terrible, terrible mistake... .. I want to help make it right... if you'll let me."

But the woman wouldn't trust that easily, and the voice frightened her, though she couldn't say just why.

"Who are you?" she asked, warily.

The voice was silent for a long heartbeat. "I was... we... knew each other long, long ago. It was my fault, and I want to make it right. I want to help."

"I don't trust you," she said. "There's something about you... I can't remember, but I don't trust you."

"I know. And my greatest sorrow is that if you remember you will hate me and fear me, but ONLY if you remember will we all be able to heal and be whole. There is no other way. It's a

risk I have to take. It is my commitment to you. My promise. I will help you remember and heal, any way I can.”

The woman considered this. There were things here she couldn’t grasp, but she said, “This is my valley. We are safe here. If you come here, it will be at MY invitation, never come here unless I call you. If you really want to help, you will respect this.”

“Yes,” the voice replied. “I promise.”

“Who are you?” the woman asked again.

“You will remember,” the voice answered. “You will remember who *you* are too, and that is more important. Gather them all together, gather and heal...” And then the voice was gone.

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## *The Circle of Their Safety*

The woman and the two children spent their days together talking or singing, or sometimes just sitting quietly, letting the magic of the valley seep into their wounded souls.

At night they sat together around a small fire the woman built in the circle-space ringed by trees, and they talked about many things. They talked about how they were remembering – that the memories of what happened to them seemed to be tied up in the pain... and once they cried the pain, they could remember what happened. This seemed a most marvelous gift to the woman, who wanted to remember more than anything. She felt hope, that this was a way for her to find more of her own memories.

She thought about the voice and the words the voice had spoken, turning them over in her mind and trying to make sense of them. She went back over the whole event, replaying every word. Had she really heard the voice with her ears? Or was it only in her head? She *knew* it was a masculine voice, though, she was certain. It... no, *HE*, had said he wanted to help. She didn't know why the voice frightened her, and that bothered her most of all. She hated being afraid and not knowing why – it made her feel like a crazy woman. She wanted to know, she wanted to remember! But he had said the more she remembered, the more she would hate and fear him. She felt no hate at the moment, but she trusted that what he said was true. And she knew it had taken great courage on his part to try to reach her.

She sat stunned for a moment, stunned and awed by what she had just become aware of in herself. She knew something to be TRUE. She felt it deep within her. A true thing. Had she ever known truth from untruth before? She didn't think so. She had the feeling that much of her fear had to do with this ... not knowing truth from untruth. She had a vague memory of confusion and doubting her own senses, being lied to, but not knowing when, or how to discern.

She replayed the words... *his* words. "I want to make it right... I want to help," he had said. She chewed the words, tasted them, tested them against her newfound ability to know. Yes, they were true. These words were completely true, she knew it, she could feel it.

“It was a mistake.” Again, she tested the words against her feelings. Yes, they were true words, but not completely true. They felt different. Not completely false, but not the whole truth.

She was still afraid of the voice, but perhaps less so. Because she believed that he really DID want to help. However he had hurt her in the past, he wanted to make it right.

As she turned all his words around, exploring her new ability, she discovered she could also feel *unsaid* truths. For, running undercurrent to his words was... fear. She felt it, tasted it. What was he afraid of? Her wrath perhaps? That thought made her laugh.

The two girls looked at her laughing across the fire and smiled, not knowing why, but loving the sound of her laughter.

They sat together, the two sisters, as they always did, with their arms about each other. Walking or sleeping or sitting, they were rarely more than a few inches apart, and their hands were usually touching. The woman supposed that after all their aloneness, neither could bear to be separated.

The older child asked, in her soft shy voice, “What is your name?”

The woman thought for a moment, puzzled.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember! Why can’t I remember?” Her voice began to rise and the children came to her and wrapped their arms around her. “I can’t remember, I can’t remember who I am,” she cried.

“It’s alright,” the older girl said, “*we* never had names at all.” She laid her head on the woman’s shoulder. “I think... I would like to be called Miri.”

“Alright... Miri,” said the woman. They both looked at the younger girl.

“I’ll be Sara,” she said.



The woman put her arms around them and held them to her. “Miri and Sara. Then I shall be... Magda.”

She got up and stirred the fire, adding more wood until the flames leaped high.

“This is our sharing circle,” she said. “This is our safe place, where we will be Magda and Miri and Sara, and never be afraid or alone again.”

She walked the circle all around the fire. “This is where we can tell our stories, remember our past, feel our pain.”

The girls stood, and holding hands, walked the circle behind Magda, chanting with her, “Tell our stories, remember our past, feel our pain...”

Three times they walked the circle, and then they sat facing each other across the flames. After a moment of silence, Miri said “I want to share”.

“Tell us, Miri,” said Magda.

“Tell us, Miri,” said Sara.

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## *The Burning*

Miri, head bowed, began quietly. “I remember a great burning.”

Sara gasped and drew her knees up to her chest.

Miri said, “Yes, and I think you were there too, Sara. I remember first reaching out in hope and love and longing. The reaching was a beautiful thing, it was a purely innocent thing. I think. I remember feeling so full and swelling up with excitement and hope that I thought I was going to burst. It was so big and so sweet, I couldn’t hold still. I reached. And it felt so right! But somehow it was wrong, too. I don’t know how. I don’t know why. And before I could understand anything, I was struck by a great blast of fire. It hit me and burned me and blasted me into a million pieces. The pain, oh the pain..., ”

She wept, and Sara wept with her, “the pain... the pain...”

Miri looked at Sara. “We were hit with such force and the pain was so great, we broke. And some of us went hurtling off into space and were lost.”

Sara clutched her legs and buried her face in her knees, her white-blond hair fell forward over her knees. “Burned and lost ...” she sobbed. “I was alone and so very cold...”

“Yes,” Miri said, “you were alone and lost and helpless, but you weren’t the only one.”

Both Magda and Sara sat forward and gasped, “What?” at the same time.

Miri shook her head and tears spilled from her eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. There are many, many more of us, I don’t know where they all are. I saw some of them ... before I became myself, when I was still a part of the whole. I saw some go flying off and later I heard their screams and cries but ... there was nothing I could do!”

Sara asked, “You heard me crying?”

“I heard, and I wanted to go find you, I did. But I was afraid. I was hiding then, you see...,” she paused and hung her head.

“Tell us, Miri,” Magda touched her arm gently.

“I was hiding, I was so afraid, because... it was my fault, it was all my fault!” She sobbed great huge gasps filled with tears and they sat with her while she cried, now and then stroking her arms and hair. “It was my fault. I reached, I did it. I didn’t know it was wrong, I don’t understand why it was wrong, but somehow I called to it, I made it happen. And then the great burning fireball came, and we were all burned and destroyed, and it was all my fault.”

She began to pound her legs and chest and Magda had to hold her hands to keep her from hurting herself. She raged, “Kill me, kill me, don’t let me live, it’s all my fault!” but they just stayed with her and listened while she cried.

When the storm passed, Magda gathered Miri into her arms and rocked her. Sara came and rocked with them, and assured her sister that there was no need to be sorry, and of course she forgave her, and she loved her still.

Sara said, “But the others, Miri, our sisters who are still out there...” She turned tear-filled eyes to Magda, begging her with her eyes to DO something.

But Magda didn’t know what to do, and she feared her heart would break and shatter into a million pieces with the anguish of it. There were others, there were more lost and lonely ones, out there somewhere alone and cold and hurting! They had to save them ... but HOW?? She looked down at her fists, which were clenching and unclenching with frustration and rage. She felt entirely impotent and full of helpless fury.

Miri wept, “It’s all my fault...”

And Sara wept, “All alone, cold and all alone...”

And Magda wept, “I don’t know what to do...”

In the dark, around the fire, the trees listened in sympathy and bent their boughs to encircle and protect them.

\*\*\*\*\*

## *Hope*

The morning sun kissed Magda gently. She lay on the grass by the cold fire. They had cried themselves out and finally just collapsed on the ground, trusting in the trees to protect them. Magda rose and stretched and yawned and...

felt something new.

Something entirely new. Something light and airy and sweet. It swelled in her, filling her chest with warmth.

She looked to Sara and Miri, wanting to share this new feeling, and stared in amazement. Where Sara and Miri had lain down together the night before was a new child, yawning and stretching, a child whose honey-brown hair was streaked with gold. This child looked like both Sara and Miri, though slightly older, and more peaceful, Magda thought. Yes, more peaceful and whole. This new child yawned again and blinked and Magda saw with wonder that she had one blue eye and one green! The effect was a little startling, but beautiful.

The child rose and smiled and took Magda's hand. "Call me Sari, now," she said. And as she smiled, Magda saw her new feeling mirrored in Sari's startling eyes. Whatever it was, they were both feeling it.

Magda turned and looked around the whole valley. She turned again, stretching her arms out as if to touch the earth and trees and sky, and she imagined she could see rainbows of light shooting from her outstretched fingertips, filling the valley with a rippling sea of color.

She turned to Sari. Sari was cupping her hands over the warmth swelling in her chest. She felt as if the warmth were a rainbow of color bubbling up from her heart and spilling out and into her cupped hands. She giggled and felt the warmth spread into her throat and then she couldn't contain it and it burst forth in a great song that filled the valley with sweetness.

When the song ended, Magda and Sari joined hands. “What is the feeling?” Sari asked softly, as if afraid to break the spell.

Magda said, after a moment of silence, “Joy, perhaps?”

“And love?”

“Yes, and love. And something else. I didn’t know I could feel such a thing. I think it is...”

Magda paused and looked at Sari, her eyes wide. “I think it’s ... hope.”

“Hope,” Sari said softly. “We felt hope...”

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## ***Terror***

As the days went by, Magda thought and worried about the others, the Lonelies, as she'd come to think of them. But because of the hope, she knew somehow they would find a way to save them.

One night she dreamed she left the valley and traveled out into the world of men.

*Everywhere she went, she sought the Lonelies and gathered them to her, and everywhere she went, she tried to stay hidden so she could get them safely back to the valley. But everywhere she went, something dark pursued her, seeming to be able to sniff out her hiding places, no matter how clever or well-disguised she was. This terrible dark thing pursued her with a single-minded hatred... it wanted her dead and that was all its purpose. She knew it would never stop.*

*In the dream she knew she was at the last leg of her journey home, if she could only make it up and over this one last hill. As she approached the peak, she turned and looked behind her. The village she had just left was blanketed by unnatural inky blackness and she knew the dark thing had followed her. She watched as it seeped into the village, filling all the people with some horrible disease, and one by one they died screaming. Frozen with horror, she watched as the darkness lifted and moved toward her, picking up speed as it sensed her fear. She turned to run but the thing caught up with her and she felt its glee as it tore the little Lonelies from her arms...*

“NO!” she screamed into the dark night.

The fire had dwindled to embers. She realized she was awake, lying on the grass. She tried to remember to breathe, her heart was pounding quick, uneven drumbeats in her ears.

It had been a true dream. She knew with her truth-sense that some awful death/dark/thing HAD relentlessly pursued her on the Long Road. Memories tickled at her; horrible deaths, sickness, disease, violence, and pain. She had tried so hard to forget the innocents – who had done nothing

worse than tolerate her in their midst. She was filled with guilt and horror and remorse. At that moment she wasn't sure she wanted to remember everything.

She thought of the Lonelies, suffering out in the world, out in the dark and cold and not even knowing she cared. But the thought of going out there again filled her with terror. *It* would find her! It would find her and kill her!! She cowered and quaked, every cell in her body trembled. She heard herself whimper, and Sari came to sit beside her fear-frozen body. She couldn't move. She shivered, but not with cold. Sari stirred the fire anyway, building it to a healthy warm glow.

"I'm a coward," Magda told her through chattering teeth.

"No," said Sari, coming to sit beside her again.

"You'll hate me."

"No," Sari said again.

"Well *I* hate me! I'm a coward. A stupid, frightened rabbit, a sniveling cowardly worm. Can't save anybody, can't help anybody. Frightened, useless weenie of a coward!" The last word wailed high into a scream, and Magda clutched her chest, sobbing.

"I... can't.... .. DO... anything!" Each word punctuated by a sob, the trees swayed above her in sympathy.

"Helpless... useless... worthless..." she sobbed, pounding her chest with each word. "I *hate* being afraid. I *HATE* it!!!" she screamed to the trees and sky. Sari stayed with her while she alternately raged at herself and at the formless terrors which crippled her.

At last her tears subsided and she lay down on the grass, completely exhausted. She let herself rest just on the edge of sleep, breathing deeply. She had the feeling something wasn't quite finished yet.



She looked across the fire to see a small... no, a *tiny* woman. A *very* tiny, *very old* woman, with thin, scraggly gray hair that seemed to just hang in limp strands around her pinched little face. Every inch of her face was wrinkled, but no laugh lines were these. Her forehead was carved into a permanent scowl, and around her mouth were the deeply etched lines of a mouth frozen in fear or disapproval or perpetual distaste. She stood just at the edge of the light of their small fire, hunched and crouched ... almost as if she were trying to scrunch herself down even smaller than she was. And she already seemed impossibly tiny.

She watched Magda and Sari silently from the other side of the circle.

Very softly, Magda said, "Welcome."

The tiny woman started in surprise. She turned her head to look behind her, then looked back at them. "You see me?" she squeaked in a small, reedy voice.

"Yes, we can see you," Sari said.

The tiny woman gaped and gasped and then buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

As Magda and Sari moved to sit beside her she said over and over again through her tears, "You can see me, you can hear me!"

When her sobs subsided, the little woman told them she'd been around for a very long time. She'd been here in the valley almost since the first day Magda found it, but this was the first time they'd seen her.

"I haven't been seen or heard," she said, looking pointedly at Magda, "for a very long time."

Magda felt a memory begin to stir, just a ruffle of a breeze.

"I don't really blame you," The tiny voice and head dropped together and she seemed to shrink even smaller. "You turned your back to me long ago," the little woman said, "and haven't seen or heard me since. You didn't want to hear me or feel me. I don't blame you, I don't blame any

of them. Who would want me, scared all the time, harping and whining? I can't do anything or go anywhere. And they wanted to do things, go places that scared me. I tried to tell them, I tried to tell them of the danger. They didn't want to know my fear. I tried to stop them, and then they left. They all left me. I don't blame them. But they don't know the danger!" Her voice dropped to a whisper, "They don't know the secret I carry..."

"Stay here with us," Magda said when the little woman fell silent. "You can stay here and tell us your fears, we'll listen."

The tiny woman snorted in disbelief. Her tiny wrinkled face formed a sneer and her small reedy voice said, "You hate me."

Magda felt herself on the brink of some great revelation. She studied the tiny figure there, and felt the ruffle of a memory begin to take solid form. She knew this woman. This little being was a part of her. She had come home.

"Little mother, join us, stay with us," she said. "Stay and share with us."

The old woman glanced warily from one to the other.

"We're safe here", Sari said to her. "This is our sharing circle. This is where we can tell our stories, remember our past, feel our pain..."

The tiny woman snorted again, "You don't want to hear my story. Nobody wants to know."

"We do. We want to hear what you feel and remember. It's safe to share here." Magda paused. "I don't remember hating you and leaving ... I want to remember. Please?"

The tiny woman seemed to grow a fraction larger, it seemed to them, and softer. Her face, lined and wrinkled as it was, grew less stony and bitter.

"Maybe I will tell you," she said in her thin little voice. "Maybe."

But then doubt crept back in.

“Why would you want me now?” she said. “I was with you on most of your journey, except when you went places that frightened me too much, and you would never listen to me.. I couldn’t stand it anymore, and you wouldn’t listen to me when I tried to tell you of the dangers. I grew to hate you. Why wouldn’t you listen to me? Over and over and over again, they hurt and scorned and tortured and killed... I couldn’t help, you wouldn’t listen!”

She began to sob again, “You wouldn’t listen... to my fear...”

They waited, and then she said “When you came here, I followed you. It’s different here, I’m still afraid, but I... I feel different.”

“Safe,” Magda supplied the word. “It’s safe here.”

For a moment the tiny woman’s face relaxed and she seemed to grow younger. Then she cringed again and plucked at Magda with her tiny, bony fingers. “How do you know? How do you know?” she wailed. “I’m so afraid, all the time, no safe place. I can’t help it, I can’t stop it, I’m so afraaaaaaaiiid!”

Her sobs grew to hysteria, a terrified screeching. It was a scream that seemed to go on and on, and the tears streamed down the little woman’s face. A scream of pain and horror, a scream of helplessness - dying alone with a beast tearing at your entrails; victims tortured in a dark basement, begging for mercy and praying for death. She clutched at them and pulled at her own thin strands of hair, screaming and sobbing, her eyes seeing horrors they could only imagine.

“Make it stop, please make it stop,” she cried. “I don’t want to know this, I can’t bear this alone!”

Magda and Sari held her tightly, tears streaming down their faces as they shared her pain.

“You’re not alone anymore,” Magda said. “We will bear it with you.”

Little by little the old woman relaxed and the last thing she whispered before she fell asleep in their arms was “Please don’t hate me.”

Together they carried her into the cave and cradled her while she slept through the rest of the night.

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### ***What Terror Protects***

Magda rose early one morning and went walking alone. She went to a hill overlooking the far edge of her valley and sat on the grass to think.

She was more content and whole than she could ever remember being before. The healing she'd found in this secret glen, she never expected to have. She remembered how slow and fragmented her thoughts were when she first found this place. It had taken time and many, many tears, but slowly she began to heal. She was no longer thin and old and wizened. The face that looked back at her in the healing pool was younger, and rounder, and the eyes she saw there were deep green and they twinkled with feeling and curiosity. She felt herself growing more certain of herself, day by day. Little by little she *was* remembering. But she knew there was much more yet to be remembered. Together with Sari and Mabel, as the little woman asked to be called, they would all remember. It wouldn't be easy, but they *would* do it.

Even though the valley was safe, Mabel had withdrawn somewhat since her first sharing. Instead of opening more, she seemed to clench around her terror and hold onto it all the more. And Sari had been in an agitated state, lately. It started about a week after Mabel's arrival. She couldn't seem to hold still. She would run up to Mabel and stare in her face, then run away again. They would see her running in and out of the trees, then she'd dart back and stare at Mabel once more. It was as if she was both drawn to Mabel and repelled by her. Magda had asked her about it but Sari just shrugged and shook her head, seemingly as puzzled by her own behavior as Magda was.

Just the day before, as they walked beneath the trees, Magda talked to them about the Voice. She had half decided to call *him* and see if he could help them find the Lonelies. But as she was describing her encounter with him, Mabel began to gasp and choke. She grabbed at Magda's sleeve and squeaked "No, no, please, NO!"

At the same moment, Sari jumped forward. "Look!" she shouted, jabbing her finger at the center of Mabel's chest. Magda stared at the glowing, pulsing pinkish light emanating from the old

woman. Mabel stared too, horrified, and gave a great cry. She clenched her teeth and pressed both her fists to her chest, and the pink glow began to fade.

“No!” cried Sari. She gripped Mabel’s fists, trying to pry them away from her chest. “No, you can’t keep her there, you have to let her out!” She burst into tears and sobbed, “Let her out, let her out!”

Mabel threw Sari back with a tremendous shove, surprising them all with her strength. “I can’t,” she shouted at Sari, sprawled on the ground. “She’ll call him. She loves him still. It’s for her own good, she doesn’t understand.”

Magda gaped at them, trying to feel what was going on. A series of images flashed before her and she struggled to understand.

*A beautiful young girl stretched out her hand, reaching, glowing with pink light, filled with love and hope;*

*a great explosion, a shattering, sparks and great flashes of light and horrible pain;*

*a dark room with blackened walls, filled with arguing women, one reedy voice trying to dominate them all;*

*one by one most of them leave;*

*at last, one small hunched figure remains alone in the corner, shivering and weeping.*

“Don’t go,” Mabel had sobbed as she remembered them all leaving. “Don’t go out there. Stay, stay quiet, stay still. You’ll all die, horrible deaths, you don’t understand, you don’t know what I know...”

Magda had wrapped her arms around Mabel. “It’s alright Mabel. You were right to be afraid - horrible things *have* happened. But it’s safe here. We can heal it all now.”

But Mabel had retreated behind a stone wall and wouldn't speak to them for the rest of the day. She refused to come near them, and stayed mostly huddled behind a big rock with her fists clenched over her chest, holding onto her terror and holding the pink light captive.

This greatly distressed Sari. She cried and cried. She had the feeling that the pink light was another of her sisters, and a very important part, someone she dearly loved and needed near her. And to be held captive by terror! Sari was appalled! Horrified! Enraged! She imagined constriction and choking and getting smaller and smaller and not being allowed to move or dance or breathe. As she cried by the fire that night, Mabel had finally come to the circle, though she stayed on the opposite side of the fire. She listened to Sari's grief and fear and dissolved into tears of her own. "I'm sorry, I'm so afraid, I can't let go, you frighten me, I'm so sorry... You don't understand!"

In the end they had held each other and vowed to keep crying each day until Mabel wasn't so afraid. It was an uneasy truce that Sari wasn't entirely happy with, but Magda counseled patience. They had all gone to the cave and finally fallen asleep in the wee hours of the morning.

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As Magda sat alone in the morning mist she fingered all these puzzle pieces in her mind, trying to see where it all fit together. She realized she had only a small corner of the puzzle... there were many pieces missing, but she began to get a sense of what the picture might be.

She closed her eyes and silently *called* to the Voice.

"I'm here," said the deep voice, undeniably male.

Magda paused, uncertain what to say, now that he was here. "Did you cause the great burning?" she finally blurted out.

The silence was anything but empty. She knew she had shocked him with her question. *Good*, she thought.

Finally he said, “Yes, a part of me was responsible.” There was another silence and then he said, “You are remembering.”

“Yes,” she said. “But there is much I don’t understand. Why would you, why would even a *part* of you, do this?”

“I don’t yet fully know,” he said. “That part won’t speak to me.”

Magda let her truth-sense chew on that one and decided he was speaking the truth.

“I can only tell you that I was wrong, and that I want to help make it right.”

“There’s more, isn’t there?” she asked. “More horrible things. Tortures, horrible deaths, disease...”

“Yes,” said the Voice, and it was the saddest he’d sounded. “And it hasn’t stopped yet. You are right to fear going into the world.”

“Are we safe here?” she asked.

“Safer than anywhere on earth,” he replied. “I am helping. Even though you didn’t ask for it, I am standing guard. I know, I know,” he said as she started to protest. “You don’t want me here unless you invite me, and I respect that boundary. But I needed to know you would be safe to heal here, so I stand guard, outside the borders of your valley. Nobody can find this place.” He seemed to chuckle to himself. “It keeps disappearing.”

“But, what about the others?” she asked, not quite understanding. “How will they be able to find us?”

“You are the magnets,” he replied. “All of you. You’ll pull them in, those who need you, who belong with you, who love you, who want to heal with you. All others find themselves in blind alleys and forests that go on forever in all directions. You can call to the Lonelies, gather your power and pull them to you.”

Magda sat for a moment, feeling a great excitement begin to grow in her belly. This was REALLY true. She felt it, and what's more, she already knew it. She just hadn't remembered knowing it.

"I'll go now," he said. "Please, tell the frightened ones who come that I will not harm them. I won't spy on them or watch them, I won't come to them unless you invite me here, and I will always, always stand guard over your valley. I promise."

"Thank you," Magda said. "Thank you for all of us."

The Voice was gone, and Magda, filled with hope and excitement, ran all the way back to the cave to share her good news with Mabel and Sari. Magnets! They could call the Lonelies home and never have to leave the safety of their valley!!

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They listened as she told them what the Voice had said.

Sari grew excited but Mabel withdrew into a sullen dark cloud. Magda couldn't understand it. She had thought Mabel would be overjoyed at not having to leave the valley.

"What's the matter now?" she asked.

But Mabel turned away from her and wouldn't answer.

"Fine," Magda said angrily. "We'll do it without you."

She and Sari kindled a small fire and sat in the circle. They tried picturing the Lonelies – Sari was best at this since they were *her* sisters. They tried singing and drumming with their feet and hands. They tried calling out with their arms open, hoping to encourage the Lonelies to come.

Nothing worked. Finally, long after the sun had set and their small fire was the only light, they gave up, weary and frustrated.

“Maybe we’re not doing it right,” Sari suggested. “Maybe we should ask the Voice.”

Mabel hissed from where she sat a few feet away. Even though she didn’t want to participate, she couldn’t ever be far from them.

Magda sat silently, the center of a swirling tornado of thought. Finally she rose and took Mabel by the hand and drew her to the fire. When they were seated she said, “The air in our valley is stuffy and stifled. There are unsaid things here. Why are you so angry?”

Mabel wouldn’t look at her.

“Mabel, tell me. This is our sharing circle, and I want to hear what you have to say. Why do you object, what are you angry about?”

Mabel glared at Magda and spat, “You still don’t listen to me. You don’t care how I feel!”

Magda waited, puzzled.

“You called *HIM*, even though I asked you not to, no matter what I say, you don’t listen to me. You think I’m being a nuisance, with all my fears!” Mabel’s voice began to shake and her chin trembled.

When Magda said softly, “I’m sorry. You’re right, I shouldn’t have done that.” Mabel’s tears began to fall down her wrinkled cheeks. “But you haven’t told us *why* you’re so afraid. It would help if we knew what it was.”

Mabel’s eyes grew wide and her body began to tremble. “No, I can’t!” she said.

“Tell us, Mabel,” Sari said quietly, coming to sit on Mabel’s other side.

“It’s safe here,” Magda said, “And you’re not alone anymore.”

Mabel sat silent as stone for a long while, and they waited with her. Then came a sound - a small whimper that grew to a moan that became a wail that turned into a scream. She threw her head back, “Look, then. Look!” she screamed. And she showed them...

*They were ONE then. One... but also many, with many feelings and desires and needs. One of the many is Desire. Need. Wanting. She reaches out, pulsing with hope and longing.*

*From somewhere far away came a great brightness, hurdling down on her like a huge, unstoppable, destruction-guaranteed tsunami.*

*She is engulfed, broken and swept away, tumbling on the crest of swirling waves of fire and ice.*

*She is bitten and devoured, flesh torn and ripped away by great fiery jaws with teeth of steel and ice, dripping with acid.*

*Half of her face is still frozen in a hopeful welcoming smile. The other half is completely gone, flesh torn, burnt and blackened.*

*She is penetrated by the cold blackness, the poison hatred on the tip of this ice-cold knife burying itself forever deep within her.*

*Time freezes as the knife penetrates and she hears the voice telling her... no, **commanding** her to die. It is a hatred she cannot fathom, and the shock of it leaves her unable to pull away. The love within her wants to please her lover, to comply and make him happy. Her own desire to live is at war with her love. The voice says “You don’t love me. You draw me to you against my will. How can you call that love? Selfish slime! Do you love me? Prove it... I want your death. Die, NOW!”*

*She feels the knife of hatred being driven in deeper and deeper and just before she loses consciousness she feels herself exploding, shattering into a million pieces that go hurtling out into space.*

Mabel opened her eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Our lover, the one we loved with all our heart, wanted us dead. He didn’t love us, he didn’t want us ... he wanted us *dead*. He wanted our love, our desire to die. The sweet tender offering we made, he *KILLED*.”

“Why?” She sobbed bitterly, angrily. “Why did it happen, why did he hate our desire so much? I saw his hatred, I felt it, I know it. I was so afraid. I took the memory of the poison hatred and hid it. I took the memory of the death-command and hid it as best I could. And I took this little one and hid her,” she placed her hand, fingers spread out, over her chest. “She is the one remaining undamaged part of our heart I could find. I kept her hidden all this time. She is Hope and Desire, and she doesn’t understand how *evil* he is. The rest of our heart is gone, shattered. If they’re not lost or hidden, they’re dead.”

Sari shook her head. “Not dead. Maybe lost, but not dead, not yet. I’m here. I remember the great burning. I was one that got shattered and thrown into the cold dark. I didn’t die, Mabel, though I longed for death many times. And there are others still out there somewhere, I know it. We have to find them, we have to bring them here, Mabel. We *have* to save them.”

From the darkness surrounding the fire, a sturdy voice said softly, “I will never ridicule your fear again. I had no idea. I didn’t know...”

Into the light of their fire stepped a tall, stern-face woman dressed entirely in battle gear.

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## ***Rage***

She towered above them, nearly as tall as the trees. She carried a spear and a tall staff of wood. At her hip hung a sword in a torn leather scabbard, and many other weapons hung on her armored body, like so many lethal adornments.

She clinked when she moved.

Magda and Mabel drew back in alarm, not sure if this was friend or foe, but Sari approached the tall figure, unafraid. She reached up and put her hand on the armored plate covering the woman's knee.

"Welcome," she said, smiling up at the giantess.

"Thank you little one," the warrior woman looked down at Sari, then scowled at Magda and Mabel. Mabel whimpered and shrank back behind Magda.

Magda remembered what the voice had said. The valley was protected. This woman couldn't have found them unless she belonged here. As odd as it seemed, and in spite of her fear, she believed this woman was one of them.

"Welcome," she said. "Join our circle. This is where we tell our stories, remember our past, feel our pain."

"I know that!" boomed the giantess. "I am Girda," she said, with great emphasis on the GRRR. "I want to speak. I have something to say. Will you listen?"

"We will," Magda said.

"Tell us," Sari said.

Mabel only whimpered.

“Tell *her*,” the woman pointed at Mabel, “to stop her sniveling. I won’t hurt her. *I’m* not the enemy!”

She laid her staff and lance on the ground and began to remove most of her weaponry. She left her armor on, though, and she laid her sword down within reach as she sat down near the fire. By its light they could see her face was tired and worn. Her hands and arms were badly scarred, but she sat erect and proud.

“I’m no sissy to be crying around a fire,” she began. “I hate that weak, whiny, cowardly stuff!”

She scowled at Mabel, who ducked behind Magda again.

“Stop that!” Girda yelled. “I hate that! That’s why I left you. All that cringing and hand wringing. You were stronger once,” she gave a wry chuckle. “Long ago you were a holy terror! Of course, there was more of you then. Oh yes, you kept tight control over us all. Not ONE battle would you let me fight. I would have protected us! I would have blasted the enemy back to Hades where he belonged!”

Tears began to well up in her eyes and she blinked furiously.

“You wouldn’t let me go out and fight for us! Even though the enemy was at our door. There were only two choices; fight or die. You chose to die, but *I*,” she jerked her thumb toward her chest, “*I* chose to live. I... choose ... to ... fight... and... *live!!!*” With each word she pounded the ground with her fists and she seemed unaware that the tears were now streaming down her face. “I choose to fight and live and *you.. can’t.. stop.. me!*”

She shook her fists at them and cried, “I hate you, I hate you all! You didn’t want me to show my rage, you wouldn’t let me stand up and fight! You made me lie down and be quiet and I hated you for that!”

Mabel was sobbing quietly. Nodding her head and pulling at her thin hair, she said, “Yes, I did that, I did. I tried to make everyone be quiet. I was so afraid. I thought you would get us killed, I thought you were so wrong! And I... I thought I was right. But I wasn’t, and everyone left me,

or maybe I pushed you all away... and we all broke again and again and again. Nothing helped, nothing helped us be able to live.” She hung her head and sobbed in remorse and shame. After a few minutes, she got up and moved nearer to the giantess, and with each step she seemed to grow a little larger. She reached out to touch Girda’s knee. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Girda, tears streaming down her cheeks, told them, “I couldn’t do it alone. I thought I could, so I left. But, without you,” she looked at Mabel, “I couldn’t tell when a battle was too much for me. And to prove I wasn’t afraid, I let the enemy goad me into many foolish battles. I died some horrible deaths.

“Without you,” she looked at Sari, “I had no mercy. At first, I only wanted to protect you, little one, so fragile and innocent. But then I went out and killed and tortured and had no care for my victims at all. Vengeance was all I wanted. Hatred was all I felt.

“Without you,” she looked at Magda, “I had no discernment. I had only red rage clouding my vision, and I’m ashamed to say I couldn’t tell anymore who was the enemy. I think...” she paused and looked down at the ground. “I’m afraid I was fooled many times into killing many of our sisters...”

Her breathing was getting labored and she leaned a little to one side.

“The enemy tricked me and used me, I see that now. And little by little he’s taken bits of me, taken parts of me for his own use. Only this armor and what remains of my rage has held me together.”

She opened her armor and showed them the large gaping wound beneath it where her ribs and heart should have been. “Couldn’t... admit... weakness...” she gasped, and then she fell over.

They gathered around her, but they couldn’t rouse her. She still breathed, but shallowly. There was no question of bringing her back to the cave, they couldn’t possibly lift her. So they just huddled around her, there by the fire.

Mabel held her hand and wept, “I’m so sorry, I was so afraid...”

Sari laid her head on the armored chest and wept, “You wanted to protect me...”

Magda stroked Girda’s hair and wept, “Please don’t die, you are our strength and we need you...”



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## *A Way to Bring Them Home*

Magda woke slowly, swimming through the dregs of a dream. In the dream there had been a beautiful woman with long blonde hair, but when the woman turned away, Magda had seen a leech or something attached to her back. A large, black, wet, slimy, disgusting thing. She'd been trying to get the woman's attention, but it was as if she were a ghost the woman couldn't, or wouldn't, hear.

She shuddered and opened her eyes. Then she remembered the events of the night before, and that brought her fully awake. She sat up and looked across the fire where the others were sleeping, still curled up together. Mabel was nestled in the crook of one large arm, and Sari's head was resting on Girda's breast which was now rising and falling evenly. Magda quietly crept over and gently pulled back the armor and leather tunic ... she gasped and her eyes grew wide. In place of the large gaping wound there was a fragile-looking, translucent rib cage. Magda could actually see beneath the pale skin to the nearly clear rib bones, right through to the steadily beating heart.

She gently closed the tunic just as the others were waking up. Girda sat up carefully, one hand searching inside her armor. She gasped, then coughed and winced, her face was a study in wonder.

"I... I appear to be healing," she stuttered. "How did this happen?"

Magda smiled and said, "It may be this valley has its own healing properties. But I think it's mostly because of our sharing, our crying, our healing circle. It's the crying of our pain that helps us remember, and heals all the old hurts, and helps us become ... *more*. We've all changed so much in this place. Our Mabel here – she's no longer impossibly tiny. Why, she's almost as tall as Sari and she no longer trembles with fear every minute. And look, her hair is growing back in, and thicker and brown too, not all gray anymore! Maybe, someday she'll be completely healed of all her old fears. And Sari, well, Sari is a constantly evolving wonder. She seems to

change and grow every day. She's so alive, so full of feeling. She can cry great oceans of tears, and then she can coax even the stones to singing."

Sari blushed at this appraisal of herself. She was almost a young woman now, Magda realized.

Girda, still rubbing her fragile ribs, looked around at them as Magda spoke.

"Of course, you'll have to take my word for it," Magda said. "You've only just arrived and you didn't know any of us before. But when I first came here, I couldn't speak. I couldn't even hold a thought. We've all come a long, long way."

Girda considered, and then nodded. "This is a good thing, this circle around the fire. I would like to stay, with your permission." She bowed formally to each of them from her sitting position, which wasn't easy to do with her heavy armor hindering her.

"You are most welcome to stay," Magda smiled at the formality of the request.

"We want you to stay," Sari said, taking the giantess' hand.

"Yes, please stay," Mabel said quietly.

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In the days that followed, Girda continued to heal, and although she still carried her sword at her side, she left off wearing her heavy armor, seeming to be content in just her leather tunic and leggings.

Magda and Sari pressed her with questions, wanting to know how she had found the valley.

"I don't exactly know," Girda said, frowning and shaking her head. "The last thing I remember before this was a great battle in an open field. The enemy took the form of a pack of wolves. Huge, they were, and black. The leader had jaws of steel and fangs that dripped red with the blood of my fallen comrades."

She paused and Sari shuddered.

Girda rubbed her brow. “I had comrades? I don’t remember who they were...” She passed her hand over her face and looked around at them. “Well, anyway, I remember being bitten... gouged and torn, by the leader of the beasts. Right through my armor his teeth sank down to the bone. When he had me down, the devil tore through my weskit and ripped out my entrails and ate them while I watched. I knew I was dying.”

She shuddered and closed her eyes. “There was blackness, and then I was wandering in these hills. For a long span of days, I think. Maybe weeks, I don’t know. I wandered aimlessly, mostly unaware of where I was, or even *who* I was. But then I saw a warm glow on the horizon, and I followed it. It sort of pulled at me, right here,” she pounded her chest with her fist. “Then, quicker than I thought possible, I was here, standing outside your circle, and Mabel was howling.”

She trailed off and looked around at them. “What?” she asked, seeing they were looking at each other and speaking with their eyes.

“We’ve been trying to figure out how to ... magnetize our valley,” Magda began. “We have to bring the others to us, so we can all heal...” and she told Girda about how Miri and Sara had come to the valley and shared their stories, how they had eventually become one. She told her of the Lonelies, and that they knew there must be many, many more out there, alone and hurting. She told how Mabel had come to the valley. She told her of the Voice and its assurance that they could draw the others to them.

Girda nodded. “There are many others, yes, I have seen some of them. And you think you can bring them here?”

“We tried everything we could think of,” Magda said. “Nothing worked.”

“Maybe it was my fault,” Mabel hung her head. “Maybe it’s because I wasn’t helping. Maybe I was ... holding you back, restricting you. I *was* awful afraid.”

“You were mad at us too,” Sari pointed out.

Mabel looked up, startled. “I was?”

Magda nodded. “You were angry at me for not honoring your feelings about the Voice, remember?”

Mabel’s eyes grew wider. “I was angry?” She took in a deep breath and looked at Girda. “I was angry,” she said again. “I was! I was afraid AND angry!”

Sari frowned. “Maybe it would make a difference if you helped. But, I think we just don’t know how it works yet.”

“Or maybe ...,” Magda said as she stood and began pacing around the circle. She stopped suddenly and looked around at them. “I think,” she began, then paused and resumed her pacing. They all waited patiently. “I think, maybe we don’t really need to DO anything. Except what we’re already doing.” She stopped and looked around at them. “I mean, think Sari. Remember what happened just before Mabel became visible? I was crying about how I hated being afraid. And when I was done, we could see her.”

She paused and looked at Mabel, and Sari said, “Maybe because you didn’t hate her so much anymore?”

Magda pinched her lower lip between her thumb and forefinger and nodded slowly. “Yes, yes, that makes sense, don’t you think?”

Sari stood up, excited. “And then, when Girda came, it was Mabel’s feelings that ... what? drew her? Or maybe it’s because she cried her fears. They were being let out and healed, so it *allowed* room for Girda, somehow?”

Girda snorted, “Maybe it was just a coincidence.”

They all looked at each other, trying to find answers in each other's eyes. Magda was silent for a moment, letting her truth-sense feel into these new ideas.

"No, not a coincidence," she said. "It feels like the more we heal around our circle, the more we remember and share, the more... *substance* we have."

"Substance?" Girda asked.

"I don't know what else to call it," Magda said. "I don't know what I'm saying, it just feels right. The more we heal, the more we *are*. And the more we are, the more we ... " she faltered, at a loss for words.

"Generate?" Sari offered.

"Like heat?" Mabel asked.

"Vibrate?" suggested Girda. "Like an engine, revving?"

"Yes, both, but more than that too," Magda said. "I don't have the right words. I can feel it though, I can feel more *substance* in us. And I think as we heal our pain it draws us together. Maybe the pain is the reason why we're apart in the first place. It's sort of like we're the wood, and we're causing our fire to burn brighter and ... generating more ... heat. But heat isn't the right word." She pounded her knee in frustration. "I wish I had more words! I can't say it quite right!"

Sari smiled and squeezed her hand. "Maybe we need to make up some new words." Magda smiled at her and then Sari said hopefully, "Do you think this is what the Voice meant? Do you really think this will draw the Lonelies to us?"

"I do," Magda said firmly. "I really do."

"But ... we should still try to call to them, or ... *something*," Sari said. "We should keep trying everything we can."

Magda realized Sari's heart was so broken and longing for all the rest of her sisters out there suffering, she would never stop hurting until she knew they were all safe and sound. She reached out and squeezed Sari's hand.

"Of course," she said. "We'll try everything we can. We won't give up on them, Sari, not a single one, not ever. Not even if it takes a million years."

A single tear slid down Sari's cheek.

Rage and Terror Move Closer

The next few nights around the fire were full of sharing. Sari, especially seemed almost in a frenzy to try to heal everything all at once.

Several of their sharing circles had been dominated by Girda's booming shouts and large feet stomping around the fire in rage. During these outbursts Mabel would often cringe and cower, which infuriated Girda even more.

One night she strode over and shoved her finger right in Mabel's face. "You are a sniveling coward," she shouted. "You shouldn't have kept me down all that time. It's all your fault, what we've become. You acted right into the enemy's plan. Look what you did to us, look what you did to me!" Louder and louder and closer and closer, and pretty soon she was hovering menacingly over poor Mabel who just curled up into a ball and seemed to be getting tinier by the minute.

"Wait!" cried Magda, rising to stand between them. Sari jumped up and stood beside her, relieved that Magda finally said something. She waited, her eyes wide, looking from one to the other.

After a long pause, Magda said finally. "Step back, Girda, something feels bad here."

Girda took a step back, panting. Mabel shivered and whimpered, but wouldn't uncurl.

"You said this is where we can feel our feelings," Girda said. "You said so! Why do you say *no* now? You can't do that! That's not fair!" she was yelling at Magda now.

"You *can* share what you feel here, Girda. But for three nights running you've yelled and stomped and berated Mabel, and the only thing that seems to be changing is that Mabel is getting smaller and smaller. We can't let that happen! You can't threaten physically. Look at her," she

pointed to Mabel, still trembling on the ground. “You’re scaring her, and you’re scaring me. She can’t even hear you. You’ve reduced her to jelly, is that what you want?”

Girda scowled and growled.

“At least move to the other side of the circle so she knows you won’t hurt her,” Magda said.

Girda growled again, but she moved. Sari sat behind Mabel and wrapped her legs and arms around her.

“Now,” Magda said to Girda, “what do you feel?”

“*I feel*,” Girda snarled, “like SHE is a sniveling, cowardly, ratfaced little...”

“Wait!” Magda said. She let her truth-sense reach out to the giantess. She looked at Girda’s red face, the angry eyes glaring at her. “Girda, you’re all focused outward. I can feel it. Your anger wants to hurt her and make her change. It’s acting out on her. Just *feel* what you feel.”

Magda had no idea what she was saying, or if Girda would understand it. She just knew something didn’t feel right.

Girda stood absolutely still glaring and snarling at them. Then she closed her eyes. They could hear her teeth grinding. Her fists clenched and unclenched, and a great growling built up in the back of her throat. Suddenly she burst out, “I hate you!” and the explosion released a flood of angry tears. She dropped to the ground and sobbed, “Kill you, kill you, kill you,” pounding the ground with her fists. Her face got even redder and her eyes, streaming with tears, seemed not to see them. She was deep in her rage, moving quickly beyond coherent speech. She growled and sobbed, and screamed and sobbed. She began to push on the ground with her feet and her back arched, throwing her backward. Magda and Sari quickly moved behind her, bracing themselves against Girda’s large back and giving her something to push against. And Girda pushed, and kicked, her feet digging trenches in the dirt while she cried her rage. Just as Magda and Sari thought they couldn’t hold up anymore, she sat forward and shook her clenched fists at the sky. “Kill you!” she screamed at some invisible enemy.

When the flood finally subsided, Girda lay on the ground exhausted. She took several deep breaths, filling her massive lungs and letting the air out again slowly in a long sigh. She had beads of sweat dotting her forehead and neck, and the red rage flush slowly faded from her skin.

“Ohhhhhhh,” she sighed. “I didn’t know how that would feel! I never was able ... I never ... Ohhhh, I feel SO much lighter and ... fuller.” She touched a hand to her heart. She flopped over onto her back and stretched out her arms and legs, letting all the muscles that had clenched in rage loosen and unclench. “Oooooo, yes,” she breathed, “That’s good.”

After a minute she rolled back onto her side and looked at them.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry I acted out. I didn’t know I was doing that. I’ve never been in a place where I could just feel what I feel. I always had to act, to try to change the situation, defeat the enemy, DO something. This healing is very different. I *feel* different.”

She moved so she could see Mabel on the other side of the fire. “I’m sorry little one,” she said. “My rage *did* want to frighten you more. It wanted to hurt you and punish you and blame you. I’m very sorry.”

Mabel looked at her and began to cry. Sari held her while she cried, little gasping sobs at first and then wailing cries “I’m so afraid, so afraid, don’t hurt me, please, please!”

While she cried Girda moved quietly to her side. “I won’t hurt you, little one. I promise. I’m sorry I frightened you. I won’t let my anger hurt you, truly.” Mabel looked up at the warrior woman’s face and slowly, very slowly she uncurled and turned and cried in Girda’s arms.

Something very important healed between them that night. They fell asleep curled together by the fire.

Desire

The next morning Magda found them still nestled together. Mabel's head rested on Girda's chest, and it looked as if she had grown in the night. Or maybe the giantess had shrunk. Or maybe it was a combination of both. Magda looked closer, drawn by a small movement near Mabel's head, and was amazed to see, half hidden beneath Girda's tunic and tangled in Mabel's hair, a small, perfectly formed, glowing pink, woman child. She was curled on her side, a sweet sleepy smile on her tiny face. As Magda watched, the tiny figure turned and stretched and yawned, and from behind her unfurled two impossibly delicate pale pink wings.

Just then Mabel awoke. She saw the pink fairy child and gasped. Clutching her chest, she started to wail. "Nooooo, noooo, noooo..."

Girda, startled out of her deep sleep, bolted upright, fumbling for her sword and tossing the little fairy to the ground. Mabel darted after the tiny figure, trying to recapture her, wailing all the while, but Sari, now awake and aware what had happened, began to chase Mabel, grabbing arms and legs and hair and anything she could snag. The poor little fairy, alarmed and having no idea what was happening, ran willy nilly between their legs, until Mabel made a great lunge for her and fear finally gave the little fairy flight. She fluttered, surprised at herself, and came to perch on Magda's shoulder. Mabel was still darting and lunging; Sari was blocking and holding; Girda, still half asleep, was batting at everyone and trying to find her sword.

Magda finally gave a great bellow, "STOP!!" and they all came to a halt. Mabel collapsed on the ground, clutching her chest and gasping. Sari was bouncing on the balls of her feet, fairly thrumming with excitement and beaming at the little fairy. Girda, towering over them, rubbed her eyes and scowled at them all equally. The little fairy tried to hide herself in Magda's hair.

Taking a deep breath, Magda gestured for them all to sit in the circle. Slowly and reluctantly they all came and sat around the cold fire.

“Ok,” she expelled the word on a long relieved sigh. She gently coaxed the little fairy out of her hair and placed her on Sari’s shoulder. Sari beamed as the tiny creature nestled behind her ear.

Magda said to her, “What is your name, little one?”

The little fairy frowned and shrugged.

“May we call you Desiree?” Magda asked.

The fairy smiled and nodded.

“Welcome then, Desiree. We’re very glad to have you with us.”

Mabel burst into tears and buried her face in her hands.

Magda moved around the circle and put her arm around Mabel’s shoulder. “The burning was real,” she said softly. “The poison hatred was, and IS real. We honor your fears, Mabel. But we’re safe here. In this valley we can heal. Around this fire, in this circle we can tell our stories, remember our past, feel our pain. We are protected here.”

She knelt in front of Mabel and took both her hands. Looking deeply into her eyes, she said, “I know you’re afraid Desiree will endanger us. But we need her to be with us. And she must have been able to come out now because you feel safer here. Don’t you think?”

Mabel took a deep breath and clutched her chest. Sari came and sat next to her and said, “Everyone has the right to live and be and feel whatever they feel.”

Mabel burst into tears again and Magda gathered her into her arms and held her. Girda started to speak, but then changed her mind and sat back quietly and waited. Mabel’s body shook and trembled and her sobs grew louder and higher. She was deep in her terror and the sound of it brought tears to all their eyes. When finally she calmed, Magda dried her tears and then coaxed the little fairy down to Sari’s hand.

“She lives free now,” Magda said to Mabel. “And we need her to be with us. We need to figure out how to stay safe while we heal. Until we know it’s safe, perhaps we can ask her not to cast her desire out beyond this valley.”

Mabel looked up, hope in her eyes, and they both looked at the fairy. The little winged woman-child scowled, then shook her head, and then began to shake her fists at Mabel. She obviously didn’t like this request. She began to jump up and down, her wings fluttering and quivering.

Magda sighed and felt a great sadness overwhelm her. “We have to find a way,” she said to them. “There must be some way to find a balance between us. If we can’t...” her voice trailed off, choked with tears.

“The enemy is real, little one,” Girda said to the fairy, with unexpected gentleness. “Mabel’s fears aren’t silly or frivolous. And she *has* kept you alive and safe all this while.”

The little fairy fluttered her wings and raised her clasped hands to the sky in a beseeching motion, then looked around at them.

Sari said softly, “What is it? Tell us what you feel, little one. This is our sharing circle. Tell us.”

The little fairy closed her eyes and held her hands over her heart. Tears squeezed out her eyes and down her cheeks. She opened her eyes and reached her hands out to them, pleading. Then she flew to each one in turn and touched them gently over their hearts. They all felt it, the moment of her touch, like an electric shock, spreading warmth into their hearts with a soft pink glowing. And they all felt what she was feeling...

Longing... Emptiness

A vision, a dream – a warm light, a glowing handsome lover.

He comes to her, noble prince.

They dance and swirl and make love.

Love sprinkles the air with music and stars and fire.

Burning desire
For this dream
A yearning so sweet and full...
Imagination filling every corner of the dream
... wrapped in his arms
... feeling his kiss
... knowing his love

desire ... Desire ... DESIRE
Growing, flame to fire
Filling to bursting
Aching
Wanting
Aching

Loving
longing to love
Loving
hoping to love
Loving
waiting for love...

They returned from the vision with a deep sigh. The little fairy collapsed in Sari's lap, her cheeks still wet with tears. Sari sat, stricken, tears streaming down her face.

"I remember," Sari said, looking down at Desiree. "I remember love and innocence. I remember the beauty of us. We were so... full of hope and trust. Ah, god, so full of trust, and it was shattered and soiled and ruined, and we'll never be clean again." She sobbed and groaned and moaned and clawed at her chest and arms. She raised her anguish to the sky. "You ruined me!" she screamed. "Look at me, look what you've done to me! Blackened and burnt and broken and half-dead with fear. Look what you've done to us!!"

She collapsed on the ground, sobbing and moaning. The little fairy hovered, now and then perching on Sari's heaving shoulder, or touching her cheek with delicate fingers.

The depth of Sari's grief and rage touched a chord in them all. They had all felt a stab of envy for the little fairy's innocence, a longing for their own lost hope, although none of them could really remember feeling such hope or trust. They all felt permanently damaged in one way or another by an enemy none of them could clearly remember. They each had a piece of the puzzle, but it wasn't a complete picture yet.

Magda wondered if it would ever be possible to heal that much? To be as they were before the many separations, before the great burning, before the many lives of pain and aloneness and horrible death? Was it possible to re-learn how to trust? She didn't know, but looking at them all and seeing how much they had already changed, somewhere deep inside flickered a tiny flame of hope. She would nurture that hope in secret and wait to see if it would grow. But until they had all the pieces, how could they be truly whole?

She had a brief flash of a vision – as if she were looking at a long forgotten scene, a series of events... but as she watched from a place of wholeness, feeling all the others gathered behind and around her, the picture changed. The scene altered.

Was it possible that they could change the picture through their healing?

At any rate, for the present, she knew they needed to remain hidden and safe. The dark thing that had pursued her so relentlessly *was* still out there. Convincing the little fairy not to call out for love and heart's desire would be the hardest, and the saddest thing they would probably ever do. And do it they must. If she cast her desire out into the world, Magda feared it would be a brightly shining beacon for the dark thing to follow, and not even the Voice could keep them safe. The enemy would find them and kill them all.

But she feared also, that holding back her long-oppressed desire might very well kill the little fairy. There didn't seem to be any solution, and Magda was filled with sadness.

The Raggedy Man

In the days that followed Desire's emergence, Magda watched carefully, always on the alert for signs of imbalance and strife. By unspoken agreement, whenever it seemed the little fairy would burst with longing, they gathered around her and stayed with her while she cried her love and need and desire. And she listened to them while they remembered their pasts, while they cried their fears and hurts and angers. Her tears flowed in empathy when Sari remembered dying at the hands of an angry crowd, her hair shorn and clothes torn. She fluttered around Girda's head while she raged at an invisible enemy who tried hard to keep her captive. And she often rested her head on Mabel's chest while she cried her terrors of the dark and formless dangers from an enemy who wanted them dead.

They began to notice changes in their valley, subtle at first, and then unmistakable. One day Sari and Magda, walking along a path that ran beneath a grove of trees, were startled to see great clumps of nearly-ripe fruit hanging from previously barren branches.

"Oh!" Magda cried, "I always wanted a grove of fruit trees." She paused, puzzled. "But these weren't fruit bearing trees, were they?"

Sari shrugged.

Mabel discovered a lush flowering garden growing where there had once been only a dry brown slope of dirt and rock. New green grasses and flowers sprang up all over the valley. Beautiful birds of a kind they'd never seen before came to nest in the trees and filled the valley with their happy chatter. Wild strawberries seemed to grow overnight, which made Girda ecstatic. "I LOVE strawberries!" she would mutter, grinning, her mouth and hands and pockets full to overflowing with sweet red fruit. They began to feel they were living in a mystical place filled with hidden magic that fulfilled their heart's desires before they even knew them.

One day Magda, Mabel, Girda and Sari stood admiring a beautiful tree with the most fragrant blossoms that had grown up overnight near the mouth of the cave. Sari breathed in the perfume

and sighed, “The cave will smell so wonderful, it’s like something I dreamed about. It’s like magic.”

“The magic is in you,” a voice said, behind them. “I can feel it.”

They looked around and saw what appeared to be a very old man stooped and weary, standing beneath the trees. He was covered with dirty rags and his feet were bare and bleeding. Much of his face was obscured by long, filthy, straggly hair, but his eyes, when he looked up at them, were a bright piercing blue. They felt drawn in by those eyes, pulled into a deep well of compassion and caring and soft, gently rocking waves...

“Who are you?” boomed Girda, breaking the spell, one hand moving to the hilt of her sword.

“I don’t remember my name,” the man said. “I’m not sure how I came here. I’ve been wandering for so long. I was traveling with a companion who escaped with me from the dark place. I ... I kept seeing a soft glowing on the horizon, but every time we seemed to be close, it would disappear. My companion finally got fed up and went his own way, and all of a sudden I found myself here!” He paused and looked at the little group gathered on the grass. “What is this place?” he asked.

Mabel said, “This is our secret glen of tears.”

Magda and Sari looked at each other. “This companion,” Magda said, “who was he? Did you know him well?”

“Well, no,” the man said. “He helped me escape, but I’m not sure who he was. He never talked about himself.” He looked around the valley in wonder. “You’ve filled this valley with magic. I can feel it. The magic is in you,” he said again. “In all of you.”

Magda said, “You’re welcome to join us. This is where we can tell our stories, remember our past, feel our pain.”

The Raggedy Man hesitated. “I don’t really belong here,” He looked around at them sadly. “But ... I’ve brought these two... they need healing so much more than me and I think they *do* belong here with you. I had to get them out of the dark place. Please, can you help them?”

He unfolded some of the rags and revealed two small figures. One might have been a young girl once, before she had been so badly treated. She was gaunt, nearly skeletal. Only one arm remained of her limbs, the others were more or less stubs, wrapped in dirty rags. A long jagged scar marred the side of her face, permanently closing one eye and causing her mouth to droop. Her one good eye gazed out at the world blankly. Blind? They couldn’t tell. She did not move or respond to anything, seemed not to see or hear them.

The other figure appeared to be a very small child with a huge mop of tangled brown hair hanging down over her dirty face. She snarled and growled and snapped at them like a wild animal when the man pulled back her wrappings, and they could just see angry brown eyes scowling at them. She swiped at them with her hands like claws, and they could see marks that looked like some creature had taken bites out of her shoulders and arms. There were similar wounds on her bare feet and legs, and they all looked infected and raw. The rest of her was covered with old purpling bruises, filth, and what looked to be old, dried, crusted blood.

“Ooohhhh” Mabel groaned.

“Bring them to the cave,” Magda said.

Girda took the bundles from the man and went into the cave. The others started after her, but the man hesitated and then turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” Sari called out.

“I should go,” the man said. “I ... I don’t belong here.”

Magda went to the man and touched his sleeve. “If you found us, so you must belong here. And we welcome you to stay and heal with us. If you want to. You don’t have to be alone in the world, you can stay here and be safe, for as long as you want.”

He looked around the valley and then back at them. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Just then the little fairy flew over the hill and swooped toward them. She was glowing pink and gold and streaks of green were shooting out from her like tiny verdant bolts of lightening. She hovered briefly above the Raggedy Man and then swooped down on him in a frenzy of delight. She darted in and around and up and down – into his raggedy jacket and out his raggedy sleeve, between his raggedy legs and around his raggedy head.

The others gaped in amazement and began to chuckle at Desiree's antics. She was moving so fast she was almost a blur of light, and it looked to them like she was wrapping him up in green and gold and pink ribbons of light. He stood in the center of this whirlwind, stunned at first, and then he began to chuckle too. When she got tangled in his raggedy hair he collapsed to the ground laughing and finally managed to get hold of her and gently untangle her. She sat on his hand, eyes shining, and wings shimmering - she was still shooting out little bolts of green light.

He looked at her and smiled. "Thank you for the lovely welcome, little one." His smile faded as he continued to gaze at her. His brow furrowed. "Do I know you? Or, maybe I knew someone like you once, I think... long ago." He frowned and shook his head. "I can't remember anything very well."

Magda said, "We're all still trying to remember too."

Sari said, "That's what we're here for. We share, we cry, we remember."

Mabel said, shyly, "So, will you stay?"

"Yes," he said. "Thank you, I would like to stay."

This sent Desiree into another flying frenzy, this time in the air over their heads – swirling, circling, dipping, dancing, and painting the slowly darkening sky with pink and gold and green trails.

They all went to join Girda in the cave. She had begun to remove the wrappings from the new arrivals and had finally given up on the feral child after getting scratched a few times. They

talked it over and finally Girda took one arm and Magda the other and they plopped her into the pool, rags and all. She hissed and snarled at them until the warm water touched her skin and then she subsided, whether in shock or comfort, they couldn't tell. She retreated to the far end of the pool and sank her small self up to her nose in the warm waters. She closed her eyes and except for the occasional whimper, was silent. They thought maybe she had fallen asleep, so Magda tried to approach her to examine her wounds. As soon as she sensed someone close, though, the child's eyes flew open and she snarled and threatened to scratch. So, they left her alone.

The crippled one began to cry silently as soon as they put her in the pool. Sari and Mabel held her between them and she continued to cry, tears streaming from her one undamaged eye as they gently removed the dirty rags and washed her wounds. They could see now that she wasn't blind, at least not physically. But she seemed to be able to "not see" at will, as if whatever horrors she had witnessed had forced her to learn blindness, in an effort to block it all out.

The Raggedy Man sat on a stone ledge and watched.

The Dark Place

The next few weeks were painful for all of them. They all tried everything they could think of to coax their new arrivals into opening and trusting them with their pain. But the little cripple seemed to shrink farther and farther inside herself, no matter what they did. And although the wild child seemed to trust Raggedy Man to a degree, she wouldn't let any one else come near her, and she seemed particularly hostile to Mabel and Magda, which puzzled them.

What had they suffered? What horrors had they witnessed and lived through? Their questions went unanswered.

The Raggedy Man remained at a distance, always silent, watching, his eyes sad and weary. He hadn't been able to give them a name, so they continued to call him The Raggedy Man, and he seemed content with that. He watched them as they tended to their new arrivals. He watched from the base of a nearby tree while they sang and talked. He sat and watched and listened during their evening sharing around the fire. But never did he come close and join in.

Both Sari and the little fairy were totally enamored of him, old and dirty as he was. And there was an aura of mystery around him that Magda didn't understand. His eyes, for instance. They weren't the eyes of an old man, even though they were tired and hurt. He was a puzzlement. So, she watched him too, and let her truth-seeker reach out to him.

"He's punishing himself for something," she told Sari one morning. "He feels bad, like he's done something very, very wrong and deserves to be punished."

"What could he possibly have done wrong?" Sari asked, puzzled.

"I'm not saying he really *has* done anything wrong. But HE believes he has." Magda furrowed her brow. "He feels like... he feels a lot to me like... the Voice."

"You mean, like maybe he's in disguise?"

“No, I don’t think so,” Magda chewed thoughtfully on a long blade of grass, “More like they’re related or something. But he doesn’t want to say. Maybe he doesn’t remember.”

Sari frowned. “He doesn’t want to talk about it or share his pain. Maybe he doesn’t *want* to remember.”

“Hmm, you’re right,” Magda said slowly, “He just holds himself away, doesn’t he?”

Sari said, “I think he’ll avoid his pain as long as possible. I don’t think he’s used to letting it out. But, he’s seen us sharing. If he’s holding something he’s ashamed of, he’s got to know it’s safe to share it here. He’s seen that we still love each other, no matter what it is.”

“But maybe holding onto his pain is another way that he punishes himself.”

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They let him hide and avoid himself for another week, and then they decided to push a little. That night as they settled around the fire, Sari went to the Raggedy Man, who was sitting on a rock a little ways away. She took his hand and drew him, resisting, to their circle.

“Please, won’t you join us? Wouldn’t you like to share too?” Magda asked him.

He shook his head and started to back away, but was stopped by Sari’s pleading eyes and Desiree’s insistent swooping around his head. Reluctantly he sat down.

“I don’t know where to start,” he said. “My memories are so jumbled...”

There was a moment of silence while they waited, then Girda suggested, “Start with who you are.”

He bent his head. “I am the son of my father,” he sighed and then shrugged. “Well, so he told me. And so I believed. Well, most of the time I believed him. I *tried* to believe him.”

He paused and sighed again, and looked around at them with eyes that pleaded for understanding. He must have been encouraged by what he saw in their faces, because he continued, though his speech was punctuated by many pauses and much sighing.

“There were times when I felt like ... *sigh* ... like He and I were equal, the same. Brothers... although he dominated me in many ways. But then there were times when I felt like I actually knew better than Him. As if I were the father and HE were the child ... *pause*... “Maybe that *was* my true sin, my doubt of Him. ... *sigh* ...

He began to cry then, the tears streaming down his face.

*“It was my job to hold things together. Loving was my job, it’s why I was born. So He told me and so I believed. And I tried, I tried so hard. I did my best, but it wasn’t good enough. I brought love to bridge the gaps between warring peoples, love helped soothe their angers, with love I comforted their grief and terrors. I thought I was doing well, until I looked behind me and realized that fires I thought I had put out had sprung up again as soon as I moved on. Little fires had sprung up everywhere – hatreds and jealousies and fear and petty quarreling. The little fires were growing and spreading and I knew soon it would be a vast burning that no one could stop. I couldn’t take care of them all! I tried, but I couldn’t! It was too much. I kept trying, even when I felt overwhelmed, because He told me that was my job, my reason for being alive. I had come into existence, He said, to help Him with these problems.”*

He laughed, soft and bitter. “Fix it, that’s what he really meant. ‘Just go fix it and don’t bother me with it. Take care of it, so I don’t have to deal with it.’ I grew angrier and angrier. Why wouldn’t he at least give me some help? If He was the Father, and I was only the son, why couldn’t HE fix it!?”

His voice grew louder as, sobbing and shouting, he cried to the night, “Why wouldn’t you help me? Why was it all my job? It was too much, and I couldn’t do it!!”

He stood and shook himself, as if to shake off the anger and the tears, and began pacing around the circle. He began to speak again, softly, as if to himself.

*“I tried to tell Him – something was dreadfully wrong in the fabric of things, and love was not enough to fix it. He said if it wasn’t working, it must be because they chose not to let love in. They were choosing wrongly. But, after all, he said, they were free to choose. He began to get loud and angry. If they insisted on hanging onto their angers and fears, he said, they were choosing not to follow His path, and maybe they just didn’t belong with Him, and they should just choose to leave.*

*“I knew he was wrong! But I didn’t know what to say to Him, and besides, I didn’t know anything else to try. It all seemed so incredibly hopeless. But I knew I couldn’t stop trying, I couldn’t just abandon them, I couldn’t do that!”*

He squeezed his hands together as he paced, wringing them and moving back and forth more quickly now.

*“He said it was just like what happened with Her. She had doubted Him too. She had constantly questioned Him and accused Him. She, too, had insisted on having and holding onto angers and grievances and fear. And He said she always ignored his attempts to educate her. He tried to get her to change, if not for Herself, then for the Children. But she was obstinate, he said. All she brought to their world was dissent, discord, demands, and doubt. They fought and fought and fought and finally she got fed up and left.”*

He stopped pacing and silently gazed into the fire. When he spoke again, it was in a soft, almost-whisper. “That’s what he said happened. But I saw, like a vague memory of a dream, the true events. I saw Her, I saw them arguing. I saw Her and I *remembered* Her.”

He began to cry again, soft tears of grief as he remembered. “I saw the last fight, but I saw what really happened. I saw Him leap at Her, I saw Him throw Her out, cast Her out, I saw Her tumbling away into the dark vastness of space.”

“*sigh ... I was shocked at first. I had not believed Him capable of telling such a lie, but then I was really shocked when I realized ... it was no lie. He honestly *believed* she had left of Her own accord. He was even feeling some hurt and abandonment, although it was well hidden. I think some part of Him had jumped forward to get rid of Her and then jumped back and hid. And He honestly didn’t remember doing it.*”

He began pacing again. “I was devastated. Memories of Her flooded through me. I looked around and realized we had ALL forgotten Her, in order to appease Him. By unspoken agreement, She was no more. We had probably done it without even knowing it.

*“I became aware how much was going on unconsciously, how many lies-that-were-not-lies were being told, how many of us had split or broken apart because parts of us were either unacceptable to Him, or were acting on their own.*

*“I felt into myself and realized I was distinct from other parts of me. For the first time, we – my other parts and me – looked at, and spoke to, each other. I thought of them as my brothers then.*

*‘I want to go find Her,’ I said.*

*‘The Father is Right in All Things,’ one of my brothers said.*

*‘I can’t do it,’ I said. ‘Love is not enough to fix all this. Maybe She can help.’*

*‘Your doubt makes you weak,’ another said. ‘We should be confident, head up, march forward for Him, defeat the enemy or die trying.’*

*“It’s your doubt that is the real betrayal here,” another said.*

*‘Yes,’ said yet another, ‘your doubt works against our love. It must be your fault we keep failing!’”*



He paused, both in speech and body, and sank to the ground. “They cast me out,” he said, his voice breaking. “They cast me out as if I were a demon.”

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They sat with him in quiet empathy, his sobbing and the soft crackle of the fire the only sounds in the deepening night. Desiree flew to his shoulder and rested her little head on his cheek. His tears fell on her and rolled down her back, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“They cast me out,” he sobbed. “I didn’t know what to do, where to go. I stayed near them for a while, like a ghost, trying to get their attention. They wouldn’t see or hear me. Every so often they would toss out another small bit of essence, usually one that felt doubt or despair like me, and I would pull it in to myself.

“I finally decided to go look for Her. I followed Her trail, which by then had grown quite cold. Nevertheless, She has quite a distinct scent, rich and sweet like honeysuckle, and the more I followed the trail, the stronger my memories became, and the easier it was to follow Her. Somewhere along the way, quite by accident, I discovered I wasn’t the only one tracking her. She was being followed by another, as well. The dark enemy was stalking Her.”

They all gasped and shivered and moved closer to one another.

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“He lives in a corner on the far side of the dark place,” he said, shuddering. “The Dark Place... every inch of it reeks of him and his hatred. It’s like every nightmare ever dreamed, all rolled into one. Every possible imagined horror. The ones who are trapped there are living what’s in their minds, recreating it over and over again, and he helps feed their fears. Torture and pain and monsters and demons!” He shuddered again. “The air is filled with their moans and cries and screams.”

He buried his face in his hands and was silent for a moment.

“How do you know so much about him?” Girda asked.

When he looked up at her his eyes were bleak and empty. “Because I went there. I followed him and I watched him... And I was in the Dark Place for ... a very long time. It was there that I found these two,” he said, gesturing to the two newcomers. Mabel held the little crippled one on her lap, and the little feral child was huddled by herself on the far side of the circle. “But, that came much later.

*“I followed the enemy from a distance. I watched him stalk Her. Several times I lost them both, but always, She drew me, as She must have drawn him. And finally he ambushed her. She was easy prey, lost and broken as she was with grief and self-hate. He captured her and I heard him laughing as he dragged her off to the dark place. I followed them there. He must have known I was following – he’s very clever. But he paid me no mind. I suppose he didn’t see me as a threat. He has huge belief in his own power. And besides, he knew about the Dark Place, and I didn’t... not then.” He began to cry again, anguished sobs strangling his throat. “The suffering!” he cried. “The terrible suffering! Breaking my heart, wrenching... ah god and nobody to help them.”*

Desiree and Sari both burst into tears. Magda felt her own throat clog with tears and she reached for Sari’s hand.

*“I saw,” he said, “I saw as if through a fog. I saw him rape her and torture her. I saw him toy with her. He held out hope like a carrot and when she reached for it he slapped her down. She sank deeper and deeper into despair and there was no escape. I was desperate to reach Her, but every time I thought I was near, I would turn a corner only to find they were much farther off. I finally realized the enemy was toying with me, showing me these pictures. He’s a cruel one, he is. Rage and terror warred in my head, and I lost myself for a while. I don’t know how long. I was in total darkness.*

*“When I finally came back to myself and looked around, I realized I was deep, deep in the bowels of the Dark Place. Across a wide chasm I saw Her. Chained and caged like an animal. Beaten, bruised, broken. And She looked so much smaller than She had before. The chains were not heavy, and the bars of the cage were wide. The enemy*

*was nowhere in sight. ‘Run!’ I shouted across the chasm. ‘Run and get out of there!’ She didn’t seem to hear me, but we both heard a hideous cackle and I saw him then, hiding in the shadows just behind her cage. ‘Run, run!’ he mimicked me. ‘Look, help is on the way!’ he said to her. ‘Look, the little pipsqueak thinks he can save you!’ And he roared with laughter.*

*“Rage filled my head and blurred my eyes and I leaped from where I stood, determined to reach her, across the distance of this wide chasm. I don’t know what I thought I was doing. Rage made me leap, but terror made me fall. Down into the chasm I fell. Faster and faster, and I knew I was going to die. Once again, I had failed and I would die a failure. Rage rose up again and there was a war in my head between rage and terror and ... I blanked out again. I woke up standing in the chamber where I had seen her. But the cage was empty. How long had I fallen? Was the fall real? Was the chasm itself real? How long had I been blacked out? I didn’t know, but She was gone, and the enemy was nowhere to be seen. I had failed again.”*

Tears filled his eyes and spilled over onto his cheeks. They all moved closer and murmured reassurances and love. But he shook his head and shrank from them.

“I failed!” he shouted. “Don’t you understand? I failed them both. I couldn’t do what He said was my reason for being. And I failed Her, I couldn’t save Her. I... I should have died *then*! I shouldn’t have continued to live and breathe as if I had a right to. The suffering went on and I *couldn’t do anything about it!*”

Sobs wracked his body and he lay on his side, curled into a ball, crying and wailing and wishing to die. His shame, he cried, was that he failed and yet lived. Such a crime was unconscionable. On and on he cried, growling and howling and rocking. They gathered closer round him, at the ready in case his self-hate should make him try to hurt himself. At last, in the wee hours of the night, his howling/growling sank to quiet gasps. He lay curled on his side and stared into the fire.

*“For so long I stayed there,” he said. “in the Dark Place. I don’t know how long. I stayed because it seemed fitting place for me. I wandered the dungeons and cesspools*

*and stark barren wastelands. I saw many, many souls, tortured and suffering. I helped where I could, when I was myself and could think to do it. Much of the time, though, I was lost in the grip of a horror so deep and strong it was like heavy chains on my feet, dragging me down into the bile and the excrement. I'm sure I drooled and stank and raved like the rest of them.*

*"Then one day, came to my nose amidst the reek of decay and filth, the sweet scent of honeysuckle... so brief and tantalizing, it woke me from some dark dream. I woke fully, probably for the first time in ages. The scent was fading but desperation gripped me and gave me enough determination to lift myself up out of the stinking muck and follow, if I could.*

*"Under a rock I found them, those two together. The wild one protecting the other, she snarled and scratched at me, daring me to approach. Suddenly I realized what must have happened. These were parts of Her, small parts that had broken off some time ago. That's why she seemed so much smaller when I saw Her last. She was literally falling apart from pain."*

They all gasped and looked around for the wild child, only to find her sitting quietly near them. She was listening intently, and from her eyes, raptly fastened on the Raggedy Man, tears were spilling and rolling down her small face.

"There may be more there," he continued. "More bits of Her, but I knew I had to get these two out of there and quickly. I wrapped them in rags and hid them under my coat, although getting near them was no easy chore." He chuckled.

The wild child crept closer and closer as he talked. They all sat very still, and watched in amazement as she nestled her little body into the curl of his belly, and covered herself with his raggedy coat.

"Not so much of a wild animal now," he said. "Being here has helped."

"So, how did you get out of there?" Magda asked.

“I carried them hidden under my coat for days, looking for a way out. They were much lighter than I thought they would be. In that place everything feels slow and heavy and impossible. Despair reigns supreme. But I think something was helping us ... helping them. Something was reaching across the darkness and giving them a small measure of hope maybe, making them lighter. And that same something was pulling at them. Once I realized that, I waited until our little wild one here pointed the way. Sometimes it was a long wait, but eventually she felt the pull and showed me which way to go. Even so, it began to feel like we wouldn’t make it. Along the outer edges of the place, the enemy has great barriers in place to keep people in. I felt them, dragging at me, whispering despair in my ears, goading me with my own failures, encouraging me to give up. I refused to give up!” he said angrily.

“Desperate, I kept on, though the going was so slow. Suddenly we came upon a tall, thin man, sitting on a rock, looking very sad. He greeted us and said he was trying to escape too, and if we all went together, maybe we would have better luck. And we did. In no time at all we found a break in the darkness, a light shining literally from the far end of a tunnel. We followed the light, through the tunnel and out into the bright shining day of this earth.”

“And then you followed this ‘pull’ into our mountains?” Sari asked.

“Yes, at first it was just that... and I had to consult my little friend there,” he laid a gentle hand over the small figure wrapped in his coat, “in secret. I didn’t want our companion to know I carried these two. I’m not sure why, I guess I didn’t entirely trust him. Then after we reached the mountain, I could see a glowing on the horizon. We followed it for days and days, and never reached it. I began to think it was another of the enemy’s tricks, but I couldn’t stop following it. Finally, our companion got angry with my insistence and left us to go his own way. Shortly after that we found this valley. This place of magic healing.”

Just then the sun began to climb over the rim of the earth and cast rose and gold fingers out into the night sky, pushing the dark night back with gentle, joyful color.

“In this one thing at least,” the Raggedy Man sighed as he sat up, “I did not fail.”

“No,” Mabel said. “You rescued them.” Her eyes were shining with tears of pride.

“I did, didn’t I?” he said. “I didn’t fail. I saved them from that place.”

He looked so pitiful and needful of reassurance that Magda wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. “You did wonderfully,” she said. “Truly. They couldn’t have got out of there on their own.” She smiled and touched the little head, now sleeping in the folds of his coat. “We are so very grateful,” she said softly. “To us, you are not a failure.”

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### *Jether*

After that, several changes took place. The Raggedy Man walked taller, his step was lighter, and one day he decided to do some grooming. He washed his clothes first in the warm waters of the pool in the cave, and then he gave himself over to the luxury of a complete soaking himself. When he emerged from the cave, several hours later, they almost wouldn't have known him. He had combed and braided his long hair, and they could see his face, shorn of raggedy beard, shining in the morning sun. He was, without a doubt, the prettiest man any of them had ever seen. He had those sweetly piercing blue eyes, and now, as he smiled around at them shyly, they could see he had dimples! His mouth curved softly, but his jaw was strong. His hands, shed of the dirty raggedy gloves he had always worn, were the hands of an artist, sensitive and gentle, with long tapered fingers.

Needless to say they all gaped at him. After long moments of silence, Magda cleared her throat. He was obviously feeling a little embarrassed by their responses to him, so she thought it best if they not make a fuss about it. But Sari sighed and went all moony-eyed, and poor Desiree couldn't seem to stay still. She perched on his shoulder and leaned on his cheek, then swung manically from one or another of his braids, then flew in wild circles about his head. And even Girda admitted privately to Magda later that "he cleaned up right well".

His second big change was that he asked them to call him Jether. They asked him about it, but he couldn't give a reason or an explanation. It just felt right, he said, and they were all happy to have a name to call him.

And the third big change was that he joined them more and more in their sharing circle. He seemed to embrace the sharing with an enthusiasm newly born, given how reluctant he had been to share before. A few days later as he and Magda and Sari walked beneath the flowering trees, he admitted to them that he had not believed the sharing would do much good. "Even though I saw and felt the magic of this valley," he said, "I had a hard time believing that it really had to do with the healing circle. I'm not sure what I thought it was, but ... well, the place I come from doesn't place much value on tears or sharing. The important things are thinking and discerning

and knowing and rising above, that sort of thing. I guess I have a part of my father in me after all, a part that thinks it knows better than others and doesn't want to admit that it might not know everything." He smiled at them a little sheepishly. "I want to apologize for that."

They assured him that no apologies were necessary, but on second thoughts, Magda thought maybe they were, because this admission from him felt so enormously satisfying. She didn't know why, but ... there it was -- a feeling of satisfaction, of having been proven right, after all this time. She said nothing more about it, but she smiled quietly to herself and hugged the feeling to her chest.

"I guess I had to experience it for myself," he continued, "to really understand it. Maybe it's something that can't be taught or understood with the mind, no matter how smart you are or how great or ... anything. How did you come to learn this, how did it grow that you do this sharing here? Did somebody show you or teach you?"

Magda's face grew puzzled. She looked at Sari and they both laughed.

"No," Sari said, "Nobody taught it to us. Well, Magda helped me when I first came here, when I was so broken, when I was Miri and Sara both. It was my first experience of feeling safe, of having somebody who would hold me and listen to me and let me cry out all my pain."

"It was sort of the same for me," Magda said, "except that the safety of this valley is what allowed me to cry at first. I had nobody to listen to me or hold me until Miri and Sara came, but ... it was as if the whole valley was holding me, really. That's how it felt, as if the very trees and hills and the pool in the cave were all holding me and cradling me and helping me to feel safe and ... all the pain I had been holding just came pouring out. And then, little by little, I was able to think better and words came, and understandings."

Sari nodded her head slowly. "And since then, there have been so many changes, and it's so obvious to us that it's because of the sharing and the healing! But I guess you're right, it's something you have to experience. And now, what do you think? Don't you feel so very much better now?"



“I do,” he said enthusiastically, “I really do. I feel lighter ... in places. Not all of me, there is still a lot of hurting and ... the wound of having to leave my brothers and our home, of failing...” he trailed off and they sat with him quietly as he grieved, his tears spilling onto the sweet grass.

After a while, he looked up at them, tears still shining in his bright blue eyes. “I guess it will take a while to heal some of these wounds,” he said.

“Yes,” Sari said as she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly. “We all have wounds like that too. It takes time.”

He took a deep breath. “I feel such urgency, such fear about all the others, the Lonelies, and all the ones still trapped in the Dark Place. And my brothers, who don’t understand. They don’t know that they are so wrong. They think they’re so right, but they’re actually making things much much worse. I want so badly to DO something. It eats at me, this feeling of urgency, like if I don’t get up and DO something right now I’m going to bust! Only the feeling of being a failure has held me back so far.”

“I have the same feelings,” Sari whispered, burying her face in his coat. “It makes me ache, deep down in my chest.”

“Do you think we should leave this valley?” Magda asked.

He considered this for a moment. Finally he replied, “No, I don’t think it’s time for that yet. Not yet. But someday. There is something missing yet, something I don’t understand, and maybe we just have to keep doing what we’re doing here until we do understand.”

“I have thought about this a lot,” Magda said after a moment. “I have a lot of fear about leaving this valley. My memories of the enemy, sketchy as they are, make me believe the danger is real. And until we can go out there and somehow be protected, I don’t think it’s the right thing to do. We need to pull all the parts HERE, where it’s safe, where we are protected. Maybe after we heal enough, and have enough ... substance ... we won’t be such easy prey.”

She paused and looked at Jether, his arm cradling Sari who was still hugging him and nestling into his coat. “I don’t mean to tell you what you should do,” she said, hesitantly, feeling how awful it would be if he chose to leave them. How awful it would be if ANY of them chose to leave.

Jether reached out and she took his hand. “I don’t want to leave. I have had my first feelings of safety and forgiveness here. I believe now, in the sharing circle, and ... I believe this is the most important thing we could be doing. When it’s time to go out into the world, if it ever IS time, I think we’ll all know it and it will feel right. I think ... I think *you’ll* know it, when it’s time for you, if it ever is.” He gave her hand a little shake and smiled, coaxing her to smile with him. “Truly, I think this is the best thing we can all be doing. It’s just, sometimes my fear wants to explode into doing. But I’ll wait, I’ll stay, and share, and heal with you all.”

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## *The Wild Child*

The Wild Child, as they continued to call her, began to open up more and more to them. She still preferred Jether over all of them, she often followed him around, holding onto the edge of his coat as he went about. But in the evenings, around the fire, she would listen to them sharing, looking directly into their faces, and often she would cry quietly along with whoever was sharing.

One night, Girda was remembering being attacked by the enemy's wolves. The Wild Child crept close, her eyes fixed on Girda, living every part of the story intently and punctuating Girda's sharing with little snarls and growls. She hissed and growled when Girda described the beasts, and her little hands turned to claws, which she swiped at the invisible enemy. When Girda remembered being dragged to the ground and torn apart by several of the foul creatures, the Wild Child couldn't contain herself. She burst into tears. She leapt to her feet and ran about the circle, growling and screaming and moaning and clawing at the air.

As accustomed to sudden outbursts as they all were, this took them a little by surprise. Only Girda seemed unaffected. She got up too, and together they stomped and pounded around the circle, making a great angry noise.

After that, the little one opened up more and more to them. She let Girda cut some of the tangles out of her hair with one of her many sharp blades, and then Magda coaxed her into letting her gently comb out the rest. With that great mop out of her face, they could finally see that she had a round, impish face, with beautiful, almond-shaped brown eyes and a slightly turned up nose.

One night she moved close to offer comfort to Sari, who was sobbing and grieving in some long ago memory. As she reached out and hesitantly touched Sari's shoulder, Sari turned to her and clung to her, crying, for a few moments. The little one froze, her eyes wide and uncertain, but then she began to awkwardly pat Sari's heaving shoulder and a sweet-sad smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

It wasn't long after that that she began to speak – short words and brief sentences. And her first words to them were “Me call Katya. Like cat, see?” She hissed and spat and clawed, and then sat back and grinned at them so they could see she was making a joke on herself. They all laughed, and Sari said “Katya it is.”

The more she healed, the more her language grew, as did her compassion and caring. She began to express worry about her crippled sister, wanted to know why *she* wasn't getting better. They were all worried, in fact. Mabel asked Katya to try to tell them what had happened to them in the dark place, so they could know how to help. She told them what she could with her halting and broken words.

*Me 'member dark and pain...*

*Pain, pain, more and bigger and forever*

*BAD pain,*

*With little minutes of rest,*

*Little minutes of quiet,*

*Then more pain.*

*We learn.*

*Even quiet is bad.*

*Even in quiet, pain is waiting.*

*Even rest hides pain.*

*Dark. Lots of dark.*

*Whispering.*

*Lies.*

*Screaming.*

*Whispering.*

*All us ... left behind.*

*No soft, no heart, no warm.*

*Only dark. Only cold.*

*We shiver and shake...*

*We be together close and close and close,  
We try to be safe.  
In the little in-between minutes we breathe  
We think ... maybe.  
But then big noise and big pain,  
And sometimes we run  
And sometimes we fall and get lost.*

*And we learn.  
All is pain.  
All is fear.  
No safe place,  
No safe...  
Only whispers and lies.  
Only pain.*

She stopped then, breathing hard, her little faced all screwed up in a powerful scowl, but she didn't cry. Her hands were clawing at the ground, tearing up little fistfuls of grass, but her eyes were dry.

They waited, but the silence stretched on, filled only by the raspy sound of Katya's breathing. Finally she exploded. She jumped up and raised her claws at them.

"Not care!" she yelled. "Lies! Lies!!! Not care, not care!!!" and dashed off into the trees.

Jether went after her and brought her back, but when she returned to the circle she seemed to have reverted to her former wild self. She wouldn't speak or let them near her, and she hissed and spat and clawed at them if they approached her.

This was a major blow to Magda. Their failure to reach the little crippled one hadn't seemed so hopeless because Katya had been opening up, but this setback filled Magda with grief and hopelessness.

Sari found Magda later curled up in the roots of her favorite tree, listlessly plucking at the grass.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, plopping herself down next to Magda. “Some of our sisters may be harder to reach than others. And these two especially. After all, they were in the dark place alone, probably for a long time.”

“I don’t think it’s just that, Sari,” Magda sighed. “There’s something else there in Katya, a wall. She’s angry, I know, and I don’t blame her, but... She doesn’t trust me, or Mabel either, and I don’t know why. Do we remind her of somebody else, or is there something I did to her that I just don’t remember? It horrifies me to think that might be it, and I can’t stand not knowing!” She laid her head on Sari’s shoulder. “There are so many things I can’t remember. How can we heal if we can’t remember?”

Sari put her arm around Magda and hugged her tight. “I have no doubt whatsoever that whatever it is, we will get to the bottom of it. We’ll just keep crying and talking and remembering until every stone is turned. We’ll remember it all, and we WILL heal it all!”

Magda smiled at Sari’s vehemence and certainty. “Ok,” she said, “Just let me lean on your faith now and then, alright?”

Arms around each other, they returned to the cave.

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## ***The Enemy's Tools***

That night, asleep by the fire, Magda dreamed...

*Looking into a narrow window on a dark night, the pale moon illuminates a large empty room, bare walls, bare floor. No, not completely empty. In a corner is a blanket under which the shivering bodies of several small children hide, clinging together for warmth and comfort. They huddle together, waiting the return of their captor. They never know when, but they are certain of his return and he always brings pain of one kind or another. Their silent terror fills the room.*

*He appears in the room, a large dark shadow. He stands and waits, and the fear in the room becomes thick and oily. He knows this. He is toying with them. Then, suddenly, Silent and swift, he swoops down on them and hammers the blanket with a large wooden bat. Over and over his arm rises and falls. The only sounds in the dark room are the heavy thudding of the bat, and the heavy breathing and soft squeaks of pain from the little ones beneath the blanket. They know better than to cry out or try to move out of the way.*

*He disappears as swiftly as he came. The moon fades, the night is still.*

*In the way of dreams, Magda is now beneath the blanket, huddling with the frightened children. The eldest of them is telling them a story, a tale of before-times, when SHE was with them, and of future-times, when SHE will return to save them from this dark hell.*

*Suddenly from the darkness they hear a voice, very soft at first, then growing louder, and they recognize it as HER voice. Hope flares for a brief moment, and they listen harder for that sweet voice of home that even the very youngest of them remembers, and they hear her, they hear her... but she is saying how she hates them, how she left them there because they were weak and heavy, holding her back, weighing her down. She is saying she will never return and why bother, they are useless, a burden. The words beat down on them, hammering as surely as the weapons their captor wields, melting away their*

*strength and resolve, washing away that small flaring hope, like waves washing away the sand.*

*Magda, the dreamer, outside the window again, moans and cries. How cleverly the mimicry was devised, a cruel lie made to break their minds and hearts. She weeps for the little ones, living in that dark hell.*

*The dream shifts again. Magda watches as the eldest girl, now older and harder, performs a ghastly task. She is holding one of the young one's arms, binding her, tormenting her, trying to provoke fear. Their captor looks on, arms crossed. Then he moves in abruptly, making both girls cringe. He takes up some sharp instrument and slowly, methodically begins to snip off the young one's fingers. As he works, he instructs the elder girl in methods and means of terror and torture. 'Work slowly', he says, 'let them see the tool and anticipate the pain. Let their fear build.' The elder girl turns away, but he pulls her back, forcing her to watch, threatening her with pain herself if she shows any sign of mercy or caring.*

Magda tried to wake up. She struggled against her sleeping body, straining, horrified, bile rising in her throat. Finally she woke, retching and sobbing, to find Katya pounding on her. She rolled away and gathered her blanket into a bundle which she held out in front of her for Katya to pound on. The little fists beat on the bundle, and her eyes seemed not to see Magda at all. They were unfocused, staring at some inner horror, her teeth were bared in a raging growl. "Liar!" she hissed. "Liar, liar!"

Magda said, "Katya, hear me, it's the enemy who lies! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for what happened. She didn't want to leave you! Katya! It's the enemy who lied!!"

She dropped the blanket and grabbed at Katya's hands now turned to claws to scratch and rend. She pulled her close and forced the little one to look at her. "Katya!" she said loudly, "I do not lie! You are safe here now. You will never ever have to go back to that place again, we will never leave you alone, ever, never again, I promise."



Katya's eyes slowly came into focus as she took in Magda's reassurances. They filled with tears which spilled over and down her little cheeks. "Pain," she whispered. "Pain and lies." She collapsed into Magda's arms then, sobbing and clutching at Magda, "Don't go, don't go, please don't leave me! Scared, oh! OH! I'm scared, oh! Oh I'm scared, ohimscaredimscaredim scaaaaaared!!!"

Magda held her and rocked her while she cried, whispering her promise again, never ever to leave her or let her go to the dark place again. "I'm right here," she said. "Always, I promise."

Over her shoulder she saw Sari and Girda and the others coming down from the cave where they'd been sleeping, apparently woken by the noise. They stopped short of the circle, staring at something behind Magda. She shifted gently and turned to look behind her.

There stood a woman with short, nearly-white hair, and very pale skin, wearing greenish-brown shirt and trousers. The moon glinted off her short bristly hair, but for that she would have been almost entirely invisible in the dark. She was very thin, with a sharp jutting jaw and high cheekbones. Her face, combined with her erect soldier-like stance, made her appear to be all sharp angles and flat planes. In spite of the fact that she wasn't very large, she gave the impression of being formidable, hard and cold as a blade.

"Pain and lies," she whispered. She blinked and looked around at them slowly as if confused or just waking up from a deep sleep. Her face was almost completely without expression. Her eyes were a shocking pale, ice-blue, cold and empty of feeling. Hard. Magda shivered, remembering her dream.

The woman blinked again, and turned her head to look at Katya, who began shivering in Magda's lap. She looked down at herself, at her clothes, and drew a sharp breath. She looked around at them again, one hand clutched at her chest as if a sudden pain had blossomed there. She took a step back.

"Who are you people? Where am I? What is this place?" Even her voice was thin and hard.

Before Magda could answer, Katya hissed at the woman, then burst into tears again, clinging to Magda and crying “No, noooooo!!”

The woman frowned, her hand began convulsively opening and closing on her chest. She stared. She blinked. Then the cold eyes seemed to turn inward, and Magda knew she was only then *truly* awakening.

“Oh my god,” the woman whispered, her voice barely audible. A flood of emotion swept over her face. Shock. Remorse, shame, rage, confusion. Sudden fear. “Oh my god.”

She seemed about to flee, when Sari called to her with a soft, “Wait!” She hesitated, turned to face them. She took another step backwards, still clutching her chest, and held up a hand.

“Stay back,” she whispered. “Don’t come near me.”

Magda rose, and stood before the woman and looked at her for a long silent moment. Katya followed, hiding behind Magda as if she were a living shield.

Magda said gently. “I know you. I saw you.”

“You saw me?”

“In a dream, I saw you. You were telling the little ones stories, to keep them from losing hope. And then, later...” She stopped abruptly, unsure how much to say about the last part of her dream. It had been so gruesome. If the woman didn’t remember any of those events, she didn’t want to pierce the veil of her memory. At least, not in the first five minutes of meeting her. The woman stared at her, reading her hesitation and recoiling from the truth-sense, as well as the deep pity she saw there.

“I ... I don’t remember.” The woman passed her hand across her brow. “I feel as if I just woke up from a long nightmare.” She turned to take in the faces of the little group gathered around the circle of stones. “Is *this* real? Am I awake? What is this place, how did I come to be here?”

Sari came forward, “We don’t really understand how it works. But you belong here, otherwise you wouldn’t have been drawn here.”

“Belong here?” the woman laughed bitterly. “Belong here? I don’t belong here.” She dropped her head and lifted one shaking hand to cover her face, the other hand still clutched her chest convulsively. “I’ve done things. Horrible things. You don’t know...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mabel said, reaching out a hand.

The woman pulled back from Mabel’s touch. “It *does* matter. It does. If you knew... Oh my god.... The horrible things I did... the pain I caused ... All the years I moved through like a sleepwalker, committing horrible atrocities! I don’t know why! I don’t *know*! I was a coward. I should have been stronger, I should have resisted, I should have died rather than become... *this*!” A wave of shame shook her from head to toe. She was still for a moment, staring into the night, staring inward, remembering. “What have I done?” she whispered. “What have I done?”

She collapsed so suddenly it looked as if her legs had been broken by unseen forces. They rushed to her, but she held her hands up. “Stay back!” she cried. “Don’t come near me! Ah, god, I shouldn’t be here. I should be caged. Please, for your own protection, lock me away!” She began to shake, her body wracked with shivers and convulsions, but her eyes were dry. She moaned and groaned through clenched teeth. “Oh my god. How can live with what I’ve done?”

They formed a circle around her, sitting near enough for her to feel their presence, but not so near as to touch or frighten her. Katya had stayed behind Magda, but now she crept quietly around and planted herself close to the woman and looked at her, her earnest little face still streaked from her own tears. The woman looked into Katya’s eyes and saw the pain, but also saw gentleness, and understanding. It was too much. She cried out, and sob after sob burst from her. It was a strangled, choking sort of sound, as if she was trying desperately to hold back the flood that wanted to explode from her, and was scraping her throat raw in the process. She turned and curled into a fetal position, hands clawing at her face and chest.

“Ah, god, little one, I made you suffer. I made you die. I did it! Hate me! Kill me!”

“We will not kill you,” Magda reassured the woman.

Katya reached out and awkwardly patted the woman on the shoulder.

“What am I? Am I evil?” she hissed through chattering teeth, turning her anguished face to Magda. “What if I can’t be trusted? I don’t know why I did those things. And I don’t know if I’ll do them again! What if I’m like an evil animal, out of control, thirsting for blood? Put me in a cage, lock me away, keep me from harming you, please.”

She wept such bitter, helpless remorse and shame, it brought tears to all their eyes. The suffering that these sisters had lived through in the dark place was beyond imagination. Magda, fresh from the horror of her dream, had only tasted it. Part of her wanted to turn away, to keep the horror at bay. But she wouldn’t. She would share the burden of this pain, she would listen ... and forgive, if that was needed.

“I don’t believe you’re evil,” she said softly. “I believe you were abandoned and tortured and brainwashed. But you are safe here now. We’re your family, you’re safe here now.”

The woman stifled her tears swiftly, and barked a short bitter laugh. For a moment her eyes went blank. Then she seemed to come forward again and focus on them.

*She blinks in and out,* Magda thought.

“You’re safe here now,” she repeated. She saw the doubt in the woman’s eyes. “It’s true,” she said, putting as much care and warmth as she could into her voice. “Even if you don’t feel it yet, or believe it.”

“Who am I? How did I suddenly come to be awake, here in this place? How did this happen, that I know I’ve done horrible things, but I only remember fragments of my life, my self.”

“We all have broken memories. We’re not sure how we come to be here,” Sari said softly. “But we seem to be drawn together, and by our togetherness, we are healing many old wounds. Yours will heal too, just give it time.”

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## *Rika*

They had to overcome much resistance, but they finally convinced the woman to stay with them, as a free person, not in a cage. She asked them to call her Rika. She couldn't remember having a name before, and they refused to call her by the number she'd been assigned as a soldier of the enemy.

"People aren't numbers," Mabel said adamantly. "Think of a name you like, any name."

"What would you like to call me?"

"You have to learn to think for yourself again," Sari said. "YOU choose. It's up to you, however YOU feel."

They told her she didn't have to decide right away if she didn't feel like it, and then her face lit up with a new awareness.

"If it's up to me, I can choose now, and change it later, can't I? I mean, if I feel like it?"

"Sure you can!" Girda chimed in from her seat nearby where she was busy sharpening a blade. The woman looked at her dubiously. "Only for the enemy, don't worry," Girda said. "I like to always be ready, just in case." She patted her sword which lay nearby. She walked over and pointed her finger at the woman's chest, "YOU have the right to choose, the right to change your mind, the right to feel whatever you feel. And NO ONE," she threw her blade into a nearby stump, "No one has the right to tell you different. So say I." She sat back down and began to work on a second blade.

Sari grinned, "So say I too!"

Mabel chimed in, "Me too!"

"Aye, aye, I, I!" shouted Katya.

Magda laughed, “So say all of us!”

“Ok then,” the woman smiled hesitantly. “Call me Rika. For now. Until I decide differently.” And her smile broadened.

She tried to hold herself aloof from the group for a while, but she couldn’t stay entirely stiff in the face of Katya’s spontaneous affection, or Sari’s warm heart, or Girda’s infectious booming laughter. Around the sharing circle she listened as they shared their rage and terror, but after that first night she kept tight control on her own tears.

Katya at first seemed to blossom into the new space opened by Rika’s presence. She began sharing almost every night. She held nothing back, she let Rika see all the fear and distrust and rage she felt for her, and though the tears burned like acid on her cheeks, she gained trust for herself, and for all of them. But soon she began to feel angry that Rika wouldn’t cry and share too. She stomped her little feet and pulled her mop of hair into greater disarray and growled “GRRRRRRRR!” But Rika just frowned and moved away.

They could see an imbalance forming, but none of them knew quite what to do. Katya began watching Rika with a puzzled and concerned expression on her face. Her own sharing took on a veil or shadow of some kind, and sometimes, in the middle of crying some big rage, she would stop and look worriedly at Rika. She began following Rika around, trying to hold her hand, and sitting near her during the sharing circles.

But Rika continued to hold her feelings in. If they approached her or asked her about her memories, she got that strange, distant expression on her face that Magda came to call “blanking out”. If she got close to her pain, if a tear threatened to spill, she gritted her teeth and seemed to be trying to turn herself to stone.

Jether tried teasing her, “Don’t think you’ll be able to get away with not sharing.” He smiled. “I tried it, it doesn’t work.”

But Rika said nothing, and Magda, knowing the depths of the damage that must have been done to her, and by her, hesitated to push past her barriers. Over time, Rika seemed to soften around

the edges a little. But it felt to Magda like Rika was holding an uneasy truce with her self-hate, that she was walking a tight-rope every minute of every day, or holding reign on a flood of pain that threatened to burst out and engulf her. She listened attentively to others, though she never approached anyone physically, never offered a hug or a pat on the shoulder. She listened. She watched. But she didn't seem to want to say anything more about herself.

She did worry a lot about the little cripple, who for the most part stayed curled up, breathing shallowly, refusing to open her one good eye.

"I feel her shrinking away from me," Rika told them. "It breaks my heart to know how she fears me. But I can't blame her. The things *he* did to us ... and the things *I* did ... must have done ... to her ... and I only remember bits of it! How much more is there that I've done that I can't remember? How can I live with myself, knowing how much pain I've inflicted, seeing the evidence of my heinous acts here day after day! How can I live? How can you continue to have me here?"

Round and round Rika spiraled, sinking into deep self-hate and lashing herself with guilt. It was all her fault, she was a coward, weak-minded. "I should have been stronger," she would mourn, "I should have done something! I should have been braver. Even death would have been better than this..."

On and on she went, until finally Sari, who felt a close kinship to her, took her hand one night, interrupting another endless flow of self-recriminations and *shoulds*.

"Rika," Sari said, giving Rika's hands a little shake, "You were in a horrible situation. *Nobody* could have withstood those tortures. You can't change what WAS. But you can cry the pain and fear that caused you to do those horrible things. You can promise never to do them again. That's all you can do, all these *shoulds* just go round and round in circles..."

"But what can I do?" Rika barked, "How can I reach her, how can I make it right?"

"Maybe you can't," Girda said. "How can I make right the killing of enemies who were not really enemies? How can I ever make that right?"

“I don’t know,” Magda said, “But there must be a way. There must be a way for us to find forgiveness and healing. I refuse to believe this is a dead end!” She grew angry and she stood up and stomped around the circle for a while. “We know this sharing works, we KNOW it. If it works for some things, it must work for other things, no matter how bad they are. I BELIEVE in it.” She looked around at them fiercely, her brow furrowed. She walked the circle once more, determination and strength filling her. “It’s just a matter of getting to the bottom of whatever it is.” She stopped, stood still for a minute, then turned to face Rika. “Yes. Ok. It’s like when Girda was spinning in her rage but not getting healing. Rika, it feels like you’re endlessly punishing yourself and not getting relief or healing. Spinning on the top of it. Your self-hate is a walled prison that won’t let in love or forgiveness, and it won’t let the pain out to be healed either.”

“We forgive,” Sari said, giving Rika’s hands another little shake. Then she stood back and waited, letting love and understanding flow out of her eyes for Rika to see.

Katya came and stood beside Rika and wrapped her little arms around her. “We forgive,” she said.

Rika looked at her and saw the love, and something shifted in her. She opened the door of her self-imposed prison, the tiniest crack, the very minutest opening, but it was enough. The love they surrounded her with penetrated her armor of guilt. She began to cry. Softly at first, she wept bitter tears, shaking her head back and forth, back and forth. She pulled away from Sari and Katya. She began to pace around the circle. “I don’t deserve love,” she sobbed, “I don’t deserve...” Her sobs grew louder and several times she beat her chest and legs with her fists. Once she reached a pleading hand out to the little cripple laying in Mabel’s lap and howled pitifully, imploring and begging through her tears for forgiveness.

For a brief flicker of a moment there seemed to be a response. A small lifting of a hand, barely discernable. And then a single tear slid down her scarred cheek.

“It’s hopeless,” Rika cried.



“Hopeless.”

They all gaped. That harsh, croaking whisper had come from the little cripple.

“Hopeless,” she whispered again. As they stared at her, another tear trickled from beneath her tightly closed eye and then she turned her face away and ... went away again, withdrawing behind her invisible wall.

This made Rika “blank out” for a minute. Magda, instead of staying back and waiting, moved forward and took Rika’s face in both her hands. “It’s safe here,” she said low and steady, “It’s safe here, you’re safe here, we’re safe, all around you, he can’t hurt you anymore, it’s safe to cry, here now. See me, see us, it’s safe here. Where are you Rika?”

Rika’s eyes, out of focus and distant, showed no sign of recognition. In a voice distant and cold, through teeth clenched and a jaw frozen, she recited a litany. “Show ... no ... sign. Show ... no ... weakness.” Then tears welled in her eyes and she shut them, squeezing them tightly against the tears, trying to block out the flow.

“Rika!” Magda said, gripping her face and trying to get her to come back. “Rika!”

Suddenly Rika’s eyes flew open wide, stark terror could be plainly read in her face. Terror beyond terror. One hand flew up as if to ward off a blow. She sucked in her breath and shook her head, her eyes pleading now with some invisible tormenter, “No, no”. She flinched. Then she cried out in agony.

“Rika! It’s safe here now, with us, we’re here with you. Your family. You’re not alone there in that hell, you’re here, safe, with us. It’s ok to cry the pain. It’s safe to remember. Now. Here. He can’t get you here.”

Slowly Rika’s eyes came back into focus and she looked deeply into Magda’s eyes and she finally seemed to really hear the words. Her eyes filled with tears and she groaned. “If you only knew... how hard it is.” she choked. “The pain. The punishment for tears, for any sign of

caring. How easy it is for you to let your tears flow. You don't know how it is for me. You don't understand how it was for us, how much we suffered for any weakness."

Magda released her face and taking her hand, drew her down onto the grass.

"Tell us, she said. "Tell us what you remember. Let it come, and if it's not in words, so much the better."

Rika closed her eyes and was silent for a few minutes. Then, tears streaming down her face, she whispered...

*I watched Her leave. I felt Her pulling up and away. I tried to move, I tried to rise, but I was so heavy and so small, and I couldn't go with Her.*

*I cried and called to her, "Don't leave me here!"*

*I thought I heard her promise to return for me. Maybe I dreamed it. Then she drifted out of sight.*

*I became aware ... I was more than one. We were many. I had sisters. We huddled together, trying to comfort each other.*

*I remember the pain, the constant pain. The moaning and screaming. The searing, burning, bone-crushing, breathtaking pain...*

*The only thing more omnipresent than pain was fear.*

*I remember the Tormentor. How cruel he was, cold, and hard. Without pity.*

*Our bodies always ached. We were always afraid. We broke apart and grew smaller. And smaller. Some of us disappeared into the dark, snatched away screaming.*

*He tormented us for sport. He made us pay for her escape.*

*We tried to remember her voice, her promise. We held onto that tightly in the dark of the night, in the dark of the pain. We held onto the promise and the hope, and it helped us live one more day.*

*Then he devised a cruel torture, a clever mimicry with which to break our minds and hearts. We heard her voice, as if from a nearby room, saying she would never return. We were a burden, she said, and she had to leave us behind. We knew then that she would never return. Hope of rescue died. We broke, in slow painful ripples. We began to forget who we were.*

*All these tortures – of mind and body – he did to bind us in his spell, his dark magic.*

*I remember waking up suddenly in the dark, surrounded by tiny beings. They seemed familiar, but I couldn't remember who they were. They were like little shards of broken glass, frightened baby goslings clustering around me, with sharp, cutting voices. They scuttled around my feet and plucked at my sleeves and made the most horrible squawking noise. Higher and louder, their voices grew and grew, cutting me, piercing me, and the darkness pressed all around, and I couldn't remember why, but I was terrified! And they plucked and scurried and I couldn't move and finally I exploded in rage and shoved one of them away...*

*Away and down into the darkness she fell.*

*Then, ah god, we heard the sounds, we heard the screaming and the growling and we knew the monsters had fallen on her and were tearing her apart. My mind went red and then black and then I lost consciousness again.*

*He tormented me with the horrible guilt that my rage had killed one of my own... one of the littlest ones. He told me I was truly a killer at heart and very much like him. He tormented me that my rage was to blame, and yet, he fed our anger. It was so confusing, and we... I ... didn't know what was real, or what was true. He fed our hate for Her. He broke us and then rebuilt us in his image. Soon we forgot having loved Her, we only*

*remembered She left us, and we hated Her for leaving us. He taught us to use our hate to make us stronger, and soon we believed She was the enemy and he ... he was our father, our master, our only friend.*

*Then... I ... don't know. There are so many things I can't remember, or don't want to remember. Huge, long stretches of blankness. What are these dark places filled with? I don't want to know.*

*I sensed him always. He moved us about like chess pieces, killing and maiming her, wherever we found her. He must have laughed at the irony of this cruel joke, turning us against her.*

She laughed a bitter laugh that choked her, and they could see her fighting back tears again.

Katya inched close and lay down with her forehead touching Rika's forehead. "It's ok to cry," she said. Rika looked into her eyes for a long moment and then burst into another flood of bitter tears. They lay together like that, nose to nose, while Rika shook and moaned and wept her bitter self-reproach. After a long time, Rika slowly reached up her hand.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Katya took the hand in her own and cradled it against her heart.

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### *The Sensitive One*

After that, Katya and Rika were inseparable, and Rika seemed to have opened her heart to Katya's love and forgiveness in a new and deeper way. Together they walked the path to healing. They often cried in tandem, working together through the layers of their pain. Katya would cry a layer of terror and rage, and then she listened while Rika cried her self-hate and fear and rage. And together they continued to worry about their sister, who refused to give any more response after her croaked whisper. Rika said she could feel her pulling farther away, withdrawing to deep places inside. It seemed she was frozen and drowning in the deepest of despair.

"Trying to die," Katya said, nodding her head sadly. "Everything hurts. No skin."

"No skin?" Mabel gasped.

Katya nodded.

"What does that mean, Kat?" Magda asked.

But Katya, after much brow furrowing and twisting of mouth, couldn't come up with any words to explain it better, and she just shrugged her shoulders and said again, "Everything hurts. Like having no skin."

Sari grew anxious at this, but she refused to despair. She and Rika made a sort of sling so they could all take turns carrying the little cripple. Sari said she thought it would be best if she could travel everywhere with them, one ear pressed to a warm loving heart at all times. Rika carried her most of the time, whether in love or guilt, they couldn't say. Magda worried that she was doing penance, but she seemed to be more peaceful and less self-hating.

They couldn't tell if the little cripple was reassured by their touch. Most of the time she held herself stiff and aloof, although she cringed at any quick movement, and was incredibly sensitive to any small pain. A quick jostle made her flinch and grimace. Even the air seemed to hurt her

sometimes, and a puff of breeze made her face contort in agony. Most of the time she would curl into the breast of whoever was carrying her and then go back to her inner world. Every now and then she would cry a little with the others when they shared. But it was a trickle, where an avalanche was needed. And in between the rare moments of tears, she would lapse again into frozen silence, staring out of her one good eye.

Rika and Katya knew some of the pain buried and frozen there, but most of it they could only guess at. Nobody knew for sure what horrors she had endured in that dark place, and they all waited, hoping that each night around the fire would be the one when her silence would be broken and healing would be found.

One night Rika woke them all with tortured screams. Girda reached her first, and then heaved a big exasperated sigh when she realized it was only a nightmare causing the screams. She grasped Rika gently with one big hand and gave her a little shake.

“Wha?” Rika woke with a start and jerked up on one elbow, looking around at them all. “What?”

“You were dreaming,” Girda said. “And it must have been something very bad.”

“You were screaming the most blood-curdling screams,” Mabel said, her eyes big.

Rika closed her eyes for a minute and then flopped down onto her back again. She began to speak slowly, and as she spoke she turned to look at the little cripple who was – incredibly – wide awake and staring hard at Rika through her one good eye.

*We were together then, Katya, and I, and ... all of us, sisters in sorrow. We were not yet the scattered, shattered goslings that we became. But the torment we were required to endure in that place was unending and unthinkable. There are no words to express how horrible it was, pain after pain, day after day. No relief in sight, no hope of rescue. We tried to die, but we couldn't. I don't know why. Surely no one should be required to live with that kind of torture and fear ...*

*forever. But we were living with it, and release through death was apparently not an option. So we began to shatter.*

*Some of the shattering was ... accidental. We became like containers filled past full, and when we could no longer stretch to hold more pain, we simply broke under the strain. But some of the shattering was more or less intentional.*

She stopped and looked at the little cripple, and her eyes filled with tears. She shook her head and reached out her hand, but the little cripple only stared.

*I dreamed it, and it was true. I remember pushing part of me away... trying to get away from the endless pain, I tried to remove the parts of me that suffered, that FELT the pain. I was punished for caring, for hurting, for showing any sensitivity at all, and so I pushed my sensitive parts away. It hurt them to be pushed away like that, and I knew it, but I couldn't stop myself. I knew a measure of relief with them gone, and so I kept doing it. More and more of the bits of me that hurt, that could feel hurt, that could feel anything, were shoved out, away, gone from me, and I never looked again to see what they might be suffering without me.*

*I didn't know. I didn't want to know. But I saw, in my dream, the extremes of mindless pain. I saw ... I thought it couldn't get worse than the pain I had experienced, but for these parts, alone and cast out, it was much, much worse. For they had nothing else within them to balance, or distract, or help them survive. They only had sensitivity. And with each bit I shoved out, their sensitivity increased and was compounded by a new pain - that of having been rejected. They are like exposed nerve endings, raw open wounds, and they truly have no escape from the pain. It is like being without skin.*

Rika buried her face in her arms and wept. "I have been so angry for having to remember all this pain. I haven't wanted to feel it. I've resisted feeling it. But, how much worse is it for this little one?" She looked up and saw the little cripple was weeping too. "I am so sorry, little one. I can't ever make it up to you, for you hold so much of the suffering I didn't want to feel. What

must it be like for you? I will share this, if I can, it is my burden as well. Can you trust me with your pain?"

But the little cripple closed her eye and turned her face to the wall.



## Part II – THE CROSSROADS

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### *The Gardener Man*

Weeks passed with no change in the little cripple, and no new arrivals to prove their progress. Despair seemed to infect them all, slowing their heartbeats, making their steps heavy and slow.

They sat around the fire and talked of possible ways to reach the little cripple - who Katya had started calling Dhalla - and to bring the other lost ones home to safety. Sari cried endless tears of heartbreak and longing for the Goslings and the Lonelies. Girda began having angry tearful nights, wanting to smash something, go out and break the enemy's camp, DO something, anything! Even little Desiree found it hard to keep hope alive. Her bright wings began to droop. Magda became more and more depressed. Rika began to spin in self-blame again.

Sari began having nightmares, and often during the day she would suddenly gasp and clutch her chest in pain. "My heart is breaking," she told them. "I dream such horrible things. I see my sisters, but either they don't see me at all, or they turn from me. Last night I dreamed I was being tortured and killed, my sisters had betrayed me to the authorities, they denounced me for a witch. And they really believed I was evil! They turned from me and embraced a cold and rigid religion."

"Don't you see?" she cried. "The enemy can use our pain for his own ends. He has no heart at all. He can twist our pain around until we believe his lies and now we are faced with sisters who are our enemies. Blind to our truth. How many of them out there won't feel our pull, because the enemy has them brainwashed worse than Rika was? Or because they're frozen in despair or terror like our little cripple here? How can we fight against that? How can we reach them?!?"

Sari burst into tears, clutching her chest and sobbing. Magda went to her and held her while she cried.

"Maybe we don't fight," Mabel said. "Maybe they'll come here when it's the right time, regardless of the enemy. Like Rika did."

“But the very littlest ones in the dark place,” Girda spoke up. “they probably can’t get out of there by themselves. Like our Dhalla here, she would never have made it out of there without help! We should send out a search party, we should go in there and get them! We can’t just sit here and do nothing!”

“I thought you believed in what we’re doing here?” Mabel snapped at Girda. Shamefaced, and a little shocked to be barked at by Mabel, Girda grimaced and admitted that yes, she did, but ... and then she stopped and let the “but” hang in the air.

“Me too, sometimes I feel like we ought to be doing something,” Katya said.

“We ARE doing something,” Mabel scowled at her. “I don’t want them left out there another minute either, but what we’re doing here *is* a very powerful thing. Do you doubt the healing? Do you doubt the magnetic power we’re finding here?”

“No,” Katya shook her head and looked down at her feet. “I know it’s true. But ... sometimes I feel like Girda does. I want to DO something, I want to go out there and pound somebody!” She banged her fist into the palm of her other hand.

“I want action too,” Jether said. “I feel so guilty sometimes being here, being safe, and knowing how many are out there still suffering and without help. But, you don’t know what you’re suggesting. If you went in to the dark place, you might never come out again.”

“*You* did!”

“Yes, he did,” Rika leaned forward into the light of the fire, her lean features reflecting the glow in angular planes. “But... no offense to you, Jether, but I don’t think it was your skill or cleverness that got you out.”

They all turned to her, questions in their eyes.

“It was probably intentional”, she said. “The companion he had with him was probably one of the enemy’s minions in disguise.”

Magda nodded. That had been her thought too.

Rika turned to Jether. “You were allowed to leave. He wanted you to lead them to HER.”

“Well, thanks be to the protection of the Voice.” Sari said, waving at the dark sky above them.

Rika snorted. She didn’t have much faith in the Voice, though they’d told her about how the valley was protected. Even Mabel said that, although she’d been mightily afraid at first, she had come to trust his protection and the safety of the valley. “And at least he keeps his promises,” Mabel said. “He agreed not to come here unless we invite him, and he has kept that promise.”

“Yes, he has kept that promise,” Magda said softly. She sat quietly for a long moment, thinking. Finally she said, looking around at all of them, “I think we’ve come to a crossroads where we can’t go forward without some help.” She paused, not sure she herself was ready for this step.

She took a deep breath and said, “What we’re doing here is powerful, I don’t have any doubt about that. But we’re all feeling this overwhelming hopelessness. I think it may be time to ask him for help. Otherwise our despair might eat our hope.”

She looked at each of them, waiting while they considered. Sari nodded enthusiastically. Desiree did a little swirling dance in the air above them. Mabel’s eyes were wide and frightened, but she nodded slowly. Girda nodded too. Rika looked back and forth between them, then nodded too, willing to let herself be guided by their decision in this. Jether was the only hold-out. He pulled back into himself, drawing his coat up around his chin. When Magda pressed him, he grunted and gave a short nod of his head, which she took to mean assent.

Magda took another deep breath and called to the Voice in her mind. There was no answer. She called aloud, “Hello? Where are you? We need your help. We’ve all agreed, we want you to come.” Still there was no answer.

“Now what?” Girda asked.

“I don’t know,” Magda said, shrugging her shoulders. “I feel something from him. Sort of like ... shock. Maybe... maybe we just wait.”

And so they waited, sitting around the fire, until finally the flames died down to embers, and one by one they drifted off to sleep.

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Sari twitched and moaned in her sleep. She was deep in a nightmare from which it seemed there was no escape.

She saw herself as nearly a wraith, pursuing parts of herself through the world as they lived their daily lives. She followed them and tried to get their attention, her need for them was a gaping screaming wound, as if her limbs had been torn and the pain of the severed places ached and throbbed. Some of them scorned her need, pulled away from her as if she were diseased. Some of them drew away, confused, so far from her that they had no memory of ever having been sisters. Some of them cursed her and called her evil, denying vehemently that they were anything like her, or were in any way related, even remotely.

Despair overwhelmed her and she floated like a cloud above the earth, ready to give up and die. Far below her she saw a spark and felt herself drawn down till she stood beside a woman with long blond hair. The woman was beautiful but cold. Even so, Sari could feel the tie between them, a cord running from heart to heart, binding them together.

For a moment hope rose. If there was a similar cord connecting her to all her sisters, perhaps it wouldn’t be so hard to pull them all together. But then the woman turned, and Sari could see ... attached to the woman’s back, reaching up and covering the back of her head, was a large, slimy, black leech.

Sari cried out and jerked, suddenly wide awake. She sat for a moment, breathing hard, the horror warring with the need that throbbed through her entire being. She felt a sharp pain in her chest, and clutching her heart, she rose and ran from the circle of sleeping figures out into the dark. She ran across the meadow and under the trees, and there she collapsed, crying and gasping.

“I can’t,” she cried. “I can’t stand it. My heart is breaking.”

“You don’t have to bear it alone.”

She looked up to see a man squatting beside her. He had on a long tattered brown coat nearly covered with pockets of varying shape and size, and slung across his shoulder was a sort of bag. In one hand he held a long stick. He looked at her sadly with deep brown eyes shadowed under gray eyebrows. He seemed to be waiting for her to reply.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I know your heart is breaking,” his voice was soft and comforting. “I want to help you bear the pain.”

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, tears flowing down her cheeks. “I hurt, I need them, I want them so badly, and they won’t hear me. They turn from me, some of them even hate me. I dreamed that I called to them and they rejected me, they accused me of trying to overpower them. And that one, the leech, oh god, how can I bear it?”

The man sat on the ground next to her and she collapsed into his arms and sobbed. She cried and cried for what seemed like a very long time, and he held her and rocked her and murmured soothing sounds. Once or twice she thought she felt him crying with her. When at last her sorrow seemed to lift, she drew back and looked at his face. He pulled a handkerchief from one of his many pockets and handed it to her. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose, looking at him all the while.

“I know you, don’t I?” she said. “You’re the Voice.”

“Well,” he hesitated, “sort of.”

Sari looked at him, puzzled. “What do you mean, sort of?”

“Well,” he scrubbed one finger on the ground, seeming to be looking for words there. “Well, I’m sort of ... another part of Him.”

“You mean, kind of like Jether?”

“Yes, but a different part. I don’t exactly know how to explain it. I’m a part that is more able to be in a body. In fact, that’s where I’m most comfortable. My realm is the physical, manifesting life. I like to make things and do things and do magic with ... *stuff*.”

Sari thought silently for a minute, trying to understand this. “You mean, like the Voice can’t be in a body?”

“Not exactly. Well, I’m not sure if he can be in a body besides me. All I know is that sometimes he and I are together, like he’s in my body with me, and sometimes it’s just me in here. Sometimes he talks through me, but sometimes I won’t let him. We’re not exactly a hundred percent in agreement about things.”

Sari laughed. “I know how that is,” she said. “But how will I know if it’s you talking to me or if it’s the Voice?”

“I don’t know,” he said, scratching his head. “I can try to tell you how it feels from the inside, but maybe you’ll be able to tell me how it feels, or sounds, or looks, from the outside, eh? Maybe you can help me understand too.”

“Magda is better at the understanding, she’s got the truth-sense.”

Sari hesitated to ask the next question, but it needed to be asked. “Why didn’t you answer us when we called before? Did you hear us when we called?”

“Yes, we heard you.” He hesitated, looking at the ground. He gave his head a little shake, and said, “Truthfully, I don’t know why He didn’t respond. We were both so surprised that you called. But more than that, I ... we were both afraid. So many times we’ve tried to approach you. And so many times we’ve only succeeded in frightening you off. So you see, I really do know how you feel. I know how hard it is to want to reach someone and not be able to get them to listen to you. It hurts my heart. And yet, I didn’t always listen to my heart, or my head, I didn’t always know what I wanted and I ... I caused a lot of hurt. I don’t blame any of you for being frightened of me, or for hating me. I... we both just want to be very, very careful this time. I’m trying very hard to listen, with Him, we’re both trying to listen and feel where there is resistance or fear. We are trying not to go barging in like we have in the past, because we’ve caused so much harm that way. And there is still resistance to us coming here, somewhere, in someone, I could feel it. Probably more than one. You are not all fully agreed or wanting us here yet.”

He paused and blew his own nose. “We had a long talk, He and I, and decided I should come and try, and that I should use a form that wouldn’t be too scary or intimidating. This form is pretty harmless looking, don’t you think?”

She looked him over, taking in his wrinkled face, gray hair and shabby clothes. Even his shoes were old and scuffed. He stood and speared a leaf with his stick and tucked it into his bag, and she saw that he had chosen a sort of gardener or groundskeeper for his form. He was looking at her shyly and hopefully, waiting for her response. And her judgment. She smiled and nodded. “Yes, very harmless.” His concern touched her heart, and at that moment she wanted nothing more than to bring him to the circle and introduce him to the others, to reassure him that all was forgiven. But, as if reading her thoughts, he took a step backwards and shook his head.

“Not yet,” he said. “Not yet. I’ll hang around on the edges of things, pick up and do a bit of gardening here and there. Until you are all in agreement about wanting me here, I’ll be ...” he paused, searching for words. “I will be a ... Silent Witness. Yes, I’ll be a Silent Witness to your pain and your healing. Maybe I can meet you one at a time like this, if it feels right, that way it won’t be too overwhelming. It’s hard for me too. I need to let you all feel your fear and

anger at me, but sometimes it's awfully hard to take. I have such huge remorse. It beats me up sometimes and I feel like I can't live one more minute."

"Our Rika sure understands how that feels."

He drew a ragged breath. "But in response to your request for help, I want to tell you this – it may give you hope. Things are moving and shifting in the world. The healing you're doing here is affecting everything, even though you can't feel it from here. It won't be long before the very fabric of this reality will melt and change. Don't give up on your sisters. Know that in time, you will ALL be drawn back together. No one can sever the cords that bind you together, and it doesn't matter how far apart you are, emotionally or physically. You will always be attached to each other. Always."

Sari clasped her hands together and her eyes filled with tears.

"Take that with you as reassurance. Even your sisters who are in the dark place can be drawn out. Just keep doing what you're doing." He gave her a little pat on the shoulder and turned from her then, shuffling off into the darkness. At the edge of the trees he turned and smiled at her in the moonlight.

"Thank you," he said.

Puzzled, she stood there for a moment watching him leave. But then she felt her heart swell and fill with hope and joy. She spread her hands across her heart and closed her eyes, and felt the cord stretching out from her to all her sisters. And she knew it would be all right.

The Need

Many days later, Magda sat watching Sari and Desiree dancing and frolicking around Jether on the grass. She could hear their laughter and song rise and fall. The grass was sprinkled with white and yellow flowers shaped like stars, and Sari had woven these into garlands and wreaths. She wore one in her hair and her laughter floated on a breeze as she placed another on the Jether's brow. He seemed much younger now, more at ease, and quicker to laugh. He was laughing now, as Desiree flew in circles above him, draping him with a long flower chain.

Since Sari's visit with The Gardener Man, as she called him now, Magda had felt a heaviness and confusion that she couldn't name. She had listened to Sari excitedly telling them about his visit. And of all the things she told, the reassurances and his being a Silent Witness and how they are connected to their sisters... of all those good things, she only heard the words echoing round and round in her head that there was some *resistance* to him still. She turned her truth sense turned inward on herself... and there she saw a darkness, places within her that resisted and withheld, and she couldn't hide from the truth of it.

She was filled with conflicting feelings. One part of her longed to be able to call to The Gardener Man and the Voice, but there were still many parts of her that were angry and doubtful. And, she had to admit, she was jealous that he had appeared to Sari and not to her.

As Magda watched Sari and Jether from her perch on a nearby rock, she felt the heaviness in her grow. It was an edgy, poky, ragged sort of feeling. She tried to ignore it, but as she listened to the rise and fall of Sari's voice, that beautiful and beloved voice, she felt a sharp stabbing pain right through her chest.

She gasped and clutched her heart, for suddenly it seemed she saw Sari and Desiree lying on the grass, their bodies covered with blood pouring from many jagged tearing wounds. Hovering over them was a small, deformed gnomish-looking creature, brown and bony and bent, no more than 2 hand spans tall. Its eyes gleamed with hateful glee. It opened its mouth to hiss at her and

she saw a dark gaping hole where a tongue should have been. Horror rose in her throat like bile, and she jumped to her feet, a scream forming on her lips.

Just as quickly as it came, the vision vanished. Magda stood and stared in shock. There were Sari and Desiree, still laughing and alive and dancing on the grass. Her relief was overwhelming and for a moment she couldn't breathe. She sank back on the rock and pressed one hand to her wildly beating heart. What was that? What had she just seen? An hallucination? A product of her own feelings? What was that small brown creature?

All the rest of that day Magda felt as if all her senses were hyper-alert. She told no one what she'd seen, but she kept close watch on her feelings, and one eye at all times on Desiree and Sari. Fortunately, they were usually together, and they could usually be found somewhere near Jether.

That night around the fire she couldn't stay still. She felt the tension and the heaviness building and she began to pace, trying to ignore the feelings, and listen to what Sari was sharing. She looked across the fire at Sari's tear streaked face, and then at Jether, whose expressive blue eyes held such sympathy and love...

Suddenly there was a streak of brown, and a flash of sparks and ashes flying as a small brown body tore heedless right through the fire and lunged at Sari. Brown bony fingers tore at Sari's hair, and one knobby fist pounded on the side of Sari's head. A snarly, growly sound burst from the creature and Sari screeched and flailed her arms, trying to protect her head.

It took all of them to pry the gnome off and they all came away scratched and bruised. Sari's tears were pain and shock now, and she nursed a good sized bump on the side of her head. Jether and Girda held the struggling gnome down on the ground, and Magda took a blanket and wrapped it round and round, pinning the little brown arms to its sides and preventing any more scratches. She held the gnome out in front of her and none too gently, gave it an angry shake. The gnome just hissed at her.

She turned to Sari and cried, feeling somehow responsible for the hurt caused. "I'm so sorry, Sari!" she cried. "I don't know where this came from! Are you alright?"

Sari nodded, gingerly rubbing her head.

The gnome began struggling again, its hissing and growling grew louder and louder and Magda tightened her grip. As she looked into the little creature's angry eyes, Magda was taken aback. There was a frozen moment of silence as she felt a connection being made. Then, suddenly the creature stopped struggling and hissing and began to sob. Magda sank to the ground and held it closely, rocking gently as its tears flowed, streaking the little brown cheeks. The others settled around the fire to wait, a little warily, not sure what this new arrival was all about. Magda loosened the blanket, and the little hands reached out to frantically clutch at her. Suddenly it screamed, a thin, high pitched screeching, mouth wide open and eyes streaming with tears. The scream seemed to go on and on forever, but then finally the little body relaxed, curling into a ball nestled against Magda's chest. She moaned and wrapped her arms around it, still rocking, and began to cry herself.

"Oooh," she moaned. "What is this?." Rocking and moaning, "I need," she cried through clenched teeth. "Aching. Empty. Hurts." Rocking and rocking and rocking. "I need!" she screamed to the sky.

Visions flashed before her...

Formless dark...

Floating...

A slow building awareness of ... LACK. Hunger, Emptiness... NEED!.

A light, warmly glowing, pulsing.

Hope flares. Need aches. Desire burns,

Fanning the flame

The burning

The desire

... until emptiness becomes action.

She reaches. She calls.

Open mouthed, opening opening wide wide open

Feed me, calling, desire, wanting HUNGER ...

Suddenly answered

Suddenly

Swooping down upon her

Filling her open mouth

Pounding down into her throat

Pounding and receding and pounding and receding

Filling her ... not with love, not with food, not with comfort.

With hate.

Punishment.

How DARE you make demands of me!!! She hears.

I'll teach you, I'll show you.

Pounding pounding pounding

Relentless, suffocating, smashing, smothering, choking ...

Suddenly ceasing.

Left alone again.

Darkness, cold, hunger now fed by hatred of self.

Great wrongness, a seething furnace of death, alive in her belly.

A long blankness... dark forgotten stretch of time...

Then a voice, whispering in the darkness.

"Your need brought you to this burning pain.

It's YOUR fault.

You don't love... You NEED.

You only pretend to love.

Selfish need.

Greedy, insatiable need.

You know nothing of real love.

You are a Liar, a manipulator.

You brought this on yourself...

YOU are to blame... ”

Then searing pain, screaming in the dark, endless pain...

Endless hungry grinding teeth-gnashing need...

No relief

No comfort

Endless hungry no-death

Magda struggled against the emptiness for a brief eternity, hovering on the brink of the fearful abyss, and then she and the little one fell into it together. Heads thrown back, mouths open wide, they screamed and howled, like lonely dogs howling at the moon. Gaping need, emptiness unfilled, hungry hungry hungry! In between the mournful howling, they cried little gasps of mewling shame, trying to stifle their own need, but then it would erupt again, and again they threw their heads back and howled and howled.

When the tears finally subsided, Magda whispered, “I’m so sorry, Sari. I didn’t know ... I didn’t want to feel this need. I won’t let her hurt you again.”

Sari came to sit next to her and gently squeezed her arm.

“Who is she?” Mabel asked.

“She’s one of us, sister to Desire and Love, I think,” Magda said. “She is Need. All my needy baby feelings - longing, emptiness, hunger, desire to be loved. She was condemned and blamed and cast out and ... left empty and alone with her need all this long time. No wonder she’s so angry. And jealous. I didn’t want to know her. I didn’t want to feel these things. I wanted to be loving, I didn’t want to be petty and jealous.”

Sari said, “It’s ok, no matter what it is. Whatever we feel is ok here, right?” She reached out a hand, and Magda took it and held it to her cheek.

“I remembered, Sari,” she breathed. “I was there too, long ago, when we *reached*. I... We blamed the need, *and* the desire.” She began to cry again, “I’m so sorry, for her, for you, for all of us!”

Magda dropped her head. Soon she was sobbing deeply and clinging to Sari’s hand. “I’m so jealous that you met *Him*, the Voice... and the Gardener... and I see you and Jether together and I hate you. I want to hurt you. He loves you and not me and it hurts so much,” she cringed away from Sari, but Sari held Magda tightly. “I hate my need,” she shouted. “I hate you for being able to love! Sometimes I feel like I have no heart. I want to be able to be affectionate and warm like you. I want to be loved, I need that love. And I hate my need!” Sari held on tightly and Desiree came to land nearby, her wings fluttering a little in distress. The others gathered close, wrapping Magda and the little gnome in a safe cocoon.

There, safe in the circle of their arms, she broke through the locked door to another room full of memories. She found herself screaming “I hate you!” to a long ago lover...

... a lover who was also the Voice, she realized. Yes, the Voice, but not the warm Voice she knew now... a colder, more heartless version. In some long ago time she loved him and he rejected her. He was so cold, so hard. Lord of Ice and Stone.

Hatred mixed with her heartbreak. She saw him standing over her, glaring and sneering, indifferent to both her love and her pain. She felt like a bug on a pin, the way he looked at her so coldly. Then he turned from her, his eyes released her, and she felt her heart breaking, shattering into a million pieces against the cold wall of his back. There was nothing she could do to gain his love. There was no way to reach beneath the impenetrable coldness to touch his heart. Perhaps he had no heart.

In the swirling eddy of her pain, she vowed never to care like that again. She pushed the remnants of her broken heart away, not heeding where they fell or how they hurt. She would become just like him, and then (said a secret whisper she barely heard) he would admire her and desire her. She turned herself to stone, shed every color, every warmth. She became a marble replica of a once vibrant woman.

“My god NO!” Magda cried, grieving for her broken heart. Love and hate broke free and flowed in tears down her face for the Ice-Man-Ex-Lover... “Heartless,” she sobbed. “What a cruel, cold, heartless bastard. I pleaded, I groveled, I made a fool of myself in a hundred ways, all for nothing. I threw away parts of myself, I threw away my own heart, all for nothing! I’m so ashamed.”

Sari squeezed her hand. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I feel so *stupid*!” Magda cried. “How could I be so stupid? How could I love someone who was so heartless? How could I demean myself like that for someone so cold and cruel. He didn’t love me!” She ground her teeth together and growled, “I will never, never, *ever*, love like that again. Never will I need someone’s love like that, never! I hate him!” She shook her fist at the sky. “You were right, the more I remember, the less I like you!” she shouted to the Voice. Whether he heard or not, she didn’t know. The sky was silent.

She blew her nose and was quiet for a moment. “The *really* stupid thing is,” she said softly, “I thought if I got rid of my need, I wouldn’t be so stupid and vulnerable anymore, but it didn’t help. I still loved him. And I still want and need his love even now. It was buried really deep, but I guess you can’t entirely kill love, no matter how hard you try. So all I succeeded in doing was casting out this little one, and leaving her to cold and hunger. I’m so sorry.” She began to weep again, big crocodile tears rolling down her cheeks. Slowly, hesitantly, a small brown hand crept out from the folds of the blanket, and gently patted her cheek. And they all held her and rocked her while she cried.

Suddenly, they heard from deep in the darkness around them, a horrible scream. It started as a long mournful wailing, then became a shrieking kind of sound. It seemed the owner needed no breath, for the sound went on and on and on. Girda jumped up and shouted, “Begone, foul wraith!” and shook her sword at the sound, but the voice just shrieked with laughter. They shivered and huddled close together, peering into the dark night, but they could see nothing. Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, the shrieking died down and faded away, and the night was silent once more.

“W-w-was that the enemy?” Mabel stuttered.

“One of the enemy’s servants, perhaps,” Girda said, her sword still in her hand.

“No, I don’t think so,” Rika said. She looked at Magda who was staring off into the night.

“No, I don’t think it was the enemy,” Magda said. “It didn’t feel like the dark one. It felt like... something familiar.” She looked back at them. “Anyway, remember, none can come here but that they belong.” She stared out into the dwindling night. Dawn was just stretching delicate fingers out along the horizon.

Girda stood and stretched. “Well,” she said, “I’ll keep a watch for a while. Whatever that screeching was, it didn’t sound friendly. You all go ahead and get some rest now.”

Sari yawned and gave Girda’s big hand a grateful squeeze. She turned to Magda. “Are you alright?”

Magda threw her arms around Sari and held her tight. “Yes, I’m alright. Thank you for not hating me.”

Sari hugged her back and laughed, “Even at my maddest, I don’t think I could HATE you. Well, maybe I could, but if I did, I promise I would cry it away.”

They both laughed and hugged each other again. Jether came over and wrapped his arms around both of them and Magda rested her head on his shoulder. Katya squeezed in and hugged Magda around the waist. And then Girda grabbed them all and squeezed until they were all laughing and out of breath.

Frozen Caring

The others, exhausted, went back to the cave to sleep the day away, but Magda felt the need to walk alone in the valley. Holding the little gnome in her arms, she meandered aimlessly, lost in her thoughts. She crossed the valley and passed silently through the trees on the far side. She stood beneath the thickly flowered boughs, breathing their scent, and remembered when she first came to this valley. How different things were now. She followed her feet across a grassy meadow and up a winding path, and finally, on an outcropping of rock, she sat and closed her eyes. She felt the little gnome stir, held very still as the little brown hand reached up and closed gently around her ear lobe. A great gentleness grew in Magda's heart, and she kissed the top of the little brown head.

Suddenly she felt a sharp twinge in her chest. It pinged brightly, hung suspended for half a moment, and then began radiating outward from her heart to her shoulders and arms and downward to her belly. It wasn't exactly painful, but it scared her. She stopped breathing for a moment. She followed the sensation as it radiated through her, like waves on a shore, outward from her heart and then back again. It settled in her breast and grew there, resolute and stern, and yet soft as butter. Fierce and reckless, yet rich and warm. She tasted it on the back of her tongue, sweet and thick like honey.

Tears sprang to her eyes. She knew at that moment she would fight the fires of hell itself to keep this little one, or any of the others of her little family, safe from harm. She would do anything in her power to keep away hunger or hurt or fear. The fierceness of the feeling, its very determination frightened her a little. It was the kind of reckless caring that would heed no personal danger. It filled her body, expanding her heart and making her feel bigger, huge in fact, and *strong*, capable of anything!

The tears streamed down her cheeks and fell on the little gnome's head. She whispered, "I promise to keep you safe, I promise." She cried to the Voice, "Please, help me keep her safe, help me. Let no harm come to any of us!"

She felt a rumbling from the ground beneath her feet and she thought at first it was the Voice “answering” her. But then from far below, deep under the rock, she heard a noise like the howling of the wind, but more human sounding. Louder and louder it howled and shrieked. It pierced her eardrums and filled her heart with terror, wrapping her in dark bitterness and turning the tears on her cheeks to acid.

“No,” she cried out. “No, please, don’t let it be so!” she sobbed, and yet, she had no idea what she meant or what she was crying about. She laid herself and the gnome on the ground and pressed her ear against the cold stone.

“Who are you?” she called to the voice deep in the stone. A low rumbling moan answered her, shaking the rock beneath her cheek.

“Please, come and be with us. Come up and heal!”

Silence.

And then a short bitter laugh, that grew into another bone-chilling howl.

“Please,” Magda begged, “You don’t have to suffer there all alone!”

Images and feelings surged into her then, swift and huge and unstoppable. Nameless, formless horror. Terrible, terrible guilt. Blood, and death. Endless screams, severed limbs. A series of brief meaningless images, children with hollow eyes, a dark winter sky hovering over a smoking battlefield littered with bodies. The feeling of being responsible for all this suffering overwhelmed her, it clutched her heart in a deadly vice and sent her mind spinning into madness. She heard her own voice whimpering, then rising, matching and melding with the voice in the earth, together their voices rising, blending in a scream of horror and suffering and guilt and a longing to die, rising and rising to an unbearable pitch. And then all went dark.

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She woke to the sound of her name being called over and over again. “Magda, Magda! Magda, please wake up!” The voices were distressed, and she tried to answer them to let them know she was all right, but she couldn’t seem to speak or open her eyes. She was so tired!

She felt someone lift her and shake her, which made her head wobble, and when she finally opened her eyes a crack, seemed to see 3 or 4 of everybody.

Something was very, very wrong. She was having trouble taking a breath. With a great effort, she struggled up from the depths of some dark, cold place and was able to raise her hand just in time to prevent Girda from slapping her. She looked around at their worried faces.

“I’m ok,” she said. Her voice sounded slurred and slow, even to her ears. “How long have I been sleeping?”

“Oh, thank god,” Sari cried, tears shining on her cheeks. “We were so worried! A night and a day since we found you.”

“When you didn’t come to the circle last night, we got worried,” Rika said. “We finally went searching for you. You were pale and cold and we couldn’t wake you.”

“We brought you back here,” Girda said, and Magda realized they were in the cave and she was naked and shivering, even though she lay under a pile of warm blankets. “We put you in the pool, hoping that would help, but ...” she trailed off and turned her head away, but not before Magda saw tears on her cheeks too. It must have given them all quite a fright, to find her like that. She shivered again.

“We were so afraid!” Mabel said. “We didn’t know what to do. We thought maybe the enemy had cast a spell on you.” She reached out and shyly took Magda’s hand. “You’re still so cold!”

“I’m freezing!” Magda said. “Help me into the pool, I need to get warm.”

They helped her walk the steps to the pool and with each step she felt the blood moving through her, stronger and warmer. She sank gratefully into the steaming water, thanking the valley and

the mountain for producing such a wonderful cave with blessed warm waters to soak in. They all joined her, eager to reassure themselves she had fully recovered. Even Jether sat on a ledge and dangled his feet in the water.

Magda let herself drift for a long moment, feeling the heat soak into her bones. Suddenly she opened her eyes and asked, “Did you hear the woman in the stone?”

They looked at each other. “What woman?” Sari said.

“I think it was the same one we heard around the fire. She’s there, I heard her, deep under the ground, I felt her there. I felt her pain. It was awful, we have to get her out of there, we can’t leave her to suffer there alone.”

They looked at each other worriedly, then back at Magda.

“We haven’t heard any more shrieking,” Girda said. “But we haven’t gone out much today, we’ve mostly stayed in here since we found you lying there, cold as the stone itself. What happened to you? How did you come to be there so cold and deathly asleep like that?”

Magda frowned and tried to remember. “I heard her beneath the earth. I spoke to her and then... I don’t remember, I must have fallen asleep. I thought I was dreaming. Such a vivid dream...”

*There was terrible pain. A great emptiness, a need greater than any I’ve ever known, greater than our little gnome showed me.*

*Drifting alone in some vast cold dark void. Alone and cold and starving. Ah, such hunger, such need, the horrible endless emptiness! A need that finally turns inward and begins to eat itself.*

*Oh, and the horror and guilt. I saw horrible things, images flashing by. Death and destruction and blood and disease. Guilt... strangled shamed love ... and then madness. And then a great heaviness came over me, a longing to just give up. I felt her... someone ... singing her siren song to me, lulling me to sleep,*

*whispering promises of relief and cool forgetfulness in earth and stone ... freedom from burning guilt and horror and useless caring.*

*I drifted with her, growing more and more still with the slow breath of the earth. I felt her wrap her arms around me.*

*Then I began to hear them. The voices, the voices of hundreds of broken hearts. Mere whispers at first, then louder and louder and all speaking at once.*

*“Have you seen my babies? The soldiers took them away. They told me if I cooperated... but they lied! Where are they, what did they do to my babies? Please help me find my babies!”*

*“They killed my boy before my eyes, slit his throat. The soldiers were starving and the winter was bitter. I watched them feast on my child like they were eating rabbit and I knew what it was to want to kill. I couldn’t stop them, I couldn’t save my boy. Useless, helpless, miserable failure of a mother. If I could, now, I would kill them all!!”*

*“He killed my lover, he killed him in the night, like a cowardly thief. My lover and all his family. And then he took me. He raped me and beat me and used me until there was nothing left.”*

*“I could smell their burning flesh. Ah god, they tortured them and made me watch. A curse on the day I was born, I brought this on them! Such cruelty, such heartlessness!!! I have no secrets to tell you! I cannot save my loved ones!!”*

*Their voices crowded in on me, plucking at me. Their pain, the pleading, the grief, overwhelmed me. I felt such despair squeezing my heart like a vise. ‘What good is loving?’ I cried. ‘What good is this puny, useless caring? It does nothing but ache and throb and hurt and break your heart.’*

Magda paused and took a deep breath. “Useless caring...” she murmured.

“No,” Sari said. “Caring is never useless.”

“But it had no power,” Magda shook her head mournfully. “They were helpless to stop the horror. We... they, couldn’t protect their loved ones. What good is love if it has no power to save or heal?”

Jether nodded sadly and clutched his hands together. He shuddered, as if some private memory shook him.

“It’ll be ok,” Girda said, awkwardly thudding Magda’s shoulder.

Desiree flew to Magda and gently touched her heart, then perched lightly on Sari’s head, fluttering her wings in distress.

Magda lifted her head and looked at them. “Just before I heard her, I felt something odd in my chest... like a pinging in my heart, and then a sort of ... BIG feeling. BIG caring, reckless caring. It felt really powerful, really good.” She spread her fingers over the center of her chest, as if feeling the sensation there again. “I wonder if that ... woke her up?”

Mabel said, “But, then she pulled you into her world. She froze you! We couldn’t wake you up!”

“It was a close thing,” Magda said. “I’m sorry I scared you all. I’m so grateful for all of you.” She was silent again, remembering. “It wasn’t a dream,” she said, “I was there, she told me so many things.” She yawned. “I have to tell you all of it, but I’m so tired. Just let me sleep a little, just until it’s dark. Then wake me and we’ll have our circle.”

They followed her to the bed and wrapped her in warm blankets again. “Where’s our little gnome?” she asked. Sari brought a small bundle and laid it in Magda’s arms, but to her surprise, when she pulled back the fold of the blanket she saw not a deformed, knobby gnome, but a beautiful brown, perfectly-formed girl child, sleeping peacefully, a contented smile on her small rosebud mouth.

She looked up, astonished. They all smiled and chuckled. “Surprise!” Jether said.

“Oh my,” she said, “oh my...” and she gently kissed the top of the little head. “She’s still too thin, undernourished. But she’s not a gnome anymore. She needs a name! I think we should call her... Nora.”

“Nora,” Sari smiled, “Yes, that’s a beautiful name for her.”

“Thank you, all of you,” Magda said, and then she drifted into sleep. A natural sleep, this time, to their relief.

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## *Ghash*

The sun was just setting as they gathered around the fire. Magda shivered beneath the blanket, and drew it closer around her shoulders. She nestled little Nora closer to her heart and drew comfort from the warm little body breathing quietly in her sleep, so trusting. Taking a deep breath, she began to tell the story of going underground with Ghash ...

“It wasn’t a dream. She pulled me down underground. I remember wandering through caverns and tunnels, feeling her in the stone all around me. The voices whispered and cried out with each step I took. It was as if my footsteps were jarring them awake, to remember their pain.

At the end of a long dark tunnel I found her. She was sitting in a corner, huge, hideous and heavy, like an enormous stone that has compressed and compressed to impossible density. As she breathed, she made a painful, rasping sound – *ghash... ghash ...* as if her own internal gravity made it difficult for her to take breath. At first I thought she wasn’t human. She filled the passageway, even sitting and slouched as she was. She turned her head from me.

‘Don’t look at me,’ she whispered. I barely heard her, her voice was so soft and cracked.

She glanced at me and she must have seen horror on my face, for she turned away again, and seemed to be trying to curl herself away from me. I couldn’t believe someone could be so wounded and yet live. At first I thought her skin was red, but as I looked closer, I saw that she glistened slightly, and where she glistened ... she had no skin.”

Magda paused and looked over at Dhalla, lying motionless in Rika’s arms. She took a deep breath. The others drew close. Sari moaned. When Magda began again, her voice was thick with grief and horror.



“Where she did have skin, it was covered with boils and sores, and she oozed pus and blood from a thousand wounds. It looked like someone had gouged her flesh with their teeth, or claws... or both.

She tried to turn herself and hide from me, but her enormous bulk made it hard for her to move, and her breath was labored and gasping – *ghash... ghash...*

“Why do you disturb me?” she croaked. “Why don’t you leave me alone? GO! Leave me be!!”

When I didn’t move, she began to tremble, her large pendulous breasts heaved and shook. She turned to me then, and her face was contorted with rage.

“Leave me! Leave me alone!” she bellowed, and this time her voice rang loud, and echoed down the corridor. “Let me die, let me sleep! GO!!!”

She stopped, gasping for breath. Her eyes filled with bloody tears. She tried to lunge at me, but she was slow and clumsy; I stepped back quickly, and the hand that lashed out at me – whether to grab, or hit, or claw, I don’t know – missed by a wide mark. She screeched at me, and finally grew silent again, except for the rasping of her breath.

“Why don’t you answer? Why do you disturb me again and again? Why don’t you let me sleep? It’s the only peace I know, and you steal it from me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly, and my heart was filled with pity. “I don’t want you to suffer. I want you to be with us. For your sake and ours. We ... need you. I don’t know how I know that, I don’t know WHY we need you, but we do. We need you. I want you to live.”

“And I want only to die,” she whispered. And then she began to cry, her tears running red tracks over the hills of her cheeks. Her rasping sobs were torture to hear.

“I know,” I said, trying to offer sympathy.

“You don’t know,” she hissed at me. “You know nothing, all you who live above. You draw me upwards and force me to live. You use me like a beast of burden, a house to live in for a time, and then you toss me aside like so much garbage.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“No, of course you don’t, you puny cruel, ignorant lifeling. I hate you. I hate all of you. You care nothing for my pain, for my long years of aloneness and hunger. You care nothing for the dark times when I had no home but the dry corpses underground. You are all the same, all of you! I want you dead!”

She growled then, and the sound grew, louder and heavier, until it rang in my ears like huge boulders being smashed together in some great underground cavern where the sound echoes off miles and miles of tunnels. Tears spilled onto her clenched fists. She raised them and shook them at me.

“Die!” she yelled. “I want you to die, all of you, everything that lives! DIE!”

I waited quietly, holding the space, while she raged within it. Her tears formed a bloody puddle at my feet. My heart was breaking, and I felt my own face, wet with tears.

Finally her growls turned to gasps. I heard her whisper “why, why why?” and she began to rock back and forth as she sobbed quietly. She clutched at her chest as if her heart pained her. Then she fell darkly silent.

“Each time I was pulled into life,” she spoke again after a long time, “Each time, I vowed not to care. But I couldn’t stop my heart from loving... a husband, a child, a sister... And each time, I saw them die, horrible cruel deaths, again and again, and I could do nothing to stop it. I could do nothing to protect them. And then, one day, one black day, I looked – really looked – and realized that the death was following ME.

Death was trailing me, and, not satisfied with merely killing me, it made me suffer by torturing and killing all those I loved. *I* was the cause of all the suffering!”

She began to cry again, deep grief-stricken sobs wracked her huge body.

“My fault, my fault,” she cried. “Useless love, useless caring. And then I remembered my hunger, my deep unmet need from the long ago days, the roiling in my belly that I tried so hard to forget. I remembered, and I heard the whispers in the dark that told me the truth I had tried to hide. The truth – that my love was a lie. I only needed. I had only selfishness and greed, and my love was a lie, a poison, a magnet of death that drew death to all those I gave it to. What I had thought was caring, was a death knell. And I was powerless to help them or change anything!

“I tried to die then. Again and again I tried to die, but I failed at death too. It seemed there was only one answer - to hide myself deep in the earth. I learned to sink down, become one with the cool stone. To sleep, deep beneath the earth, deep down where we can draw no harm, cause no death, feel no pain. But my sister refused to stay. She says she will not give up and sleep. She cursed me and raged at me and called me fool. She tore herself from me with a great wrenching, and fled to the aboveground world, vowing vengeance and seeking power.

“At first I was glad to have her gone. It was so much easier to still my breathing and sink down into death-sleep without her. Her restlessness and rage and insistence on LIFE were a constant source of pain to me. No matter how I tried to quiet her, she would not be still.

“But then I became aware of the damage she has done aboveground... it has been enormous. She has become most cruel in her rage. She will not hear me. Again and again she has tried to find a place in the world for herself. I watched her for a long time, waiting for her to see, waiting for her to realize how hopeless it was. At times, when the pain drags her down, she returns to me, but she cannot stay and rest. She simmers and seethes and it isn’t long before she explodes and has to seek life aboveground again. But each time she leaves with less and less of her heart. She leaves her heavy, broken heart

behind for me to tend, and she goes into the world to fight and try to gain power and wreak havoc. Ach, and these broken parts, they cry such terrible grief, it is so horrible to hear. I sing them to sleep, as I sang myself to sleep, I sing the song of the earth and the stone, lulling us all to stillness and forgetfulness.”

I sat down and cried with her. Together our heartbreak poured out and filled the darkness.

After a while, she seemed to become aware of me.

“You care,” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said.

“But you’ll leave. You always do.”

“I can’t live down here,” I told her sadly.

“I can’t *live*,” her voice dropped heavily.

“Come up with me, live with me in our valley.”

“I can’t,” she whispered. “I can barely move. I have spent all these eons trying to find the sleep of stone, and I had nearly succeeded when I felt you all in my dreams.”

“You dreamed us?”

“I am so dense now, my thoughts are so clouded. I do not know any longer when I am dreaming and when I am awake.”

She gazed at me and was silent for a long while. “Stay with me,” she whispered. “Let us sleep here together and dream a while.”

“I can’t stay,” I said, “but I will come back, I won’t leave you here alone and forgotten.”

“Stay,” she said again. “Sleep, rest. I know you are tired. There is peace in the stone.”

I felt my limbs growing heavy.

“Sleep and rest,” she said again, “Sleep and rest. There is peace in the stone.”

My legs grew heavier still and my eyelids began to droop. I felt myself beginning to nod off...

“... And that’s when I heard you calling me,” Magda said, taking a deep breath and looking around the fire.

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## *The Promise & The Gift*

For many days the little group watched Magda cautiously. There was something different about her, but it wasn't something they could name. She seemed to have taken no ill effect from her long frozen sleep. She moved about normally in the valley, she slept normally, but ... there was something different.

"It's like a heaviness," Jether said. "Her movements are slower and ... heavier."

"She didn't share in Circle last night," Mabel remarked. "She listened as always, but she didn't share. If something was wrong, wouldn't she share it with us?"

"She may not know, herself," Rika said from behind the tree. She still sometimes felt the need to be removed from the group; they were all sitting in the shade of a large flowering tree, but she stood a little apart, behind the trunk of the tree. "Sometimes things are hidden, shadowed. She may be living in one room of her mind and believe she is fine and normal, while in another room, something else is happening entirely."

They all sat quiet for a minute, considering.

"I think it's Ghash," Sari said, plucking a blade of grass and twirling it between her finger and thumb.

"What do you mean?" Rika came around the side of the tree and stood leaning on it, facing them.

"I think she brought some of Ghash's heaviness up with her, and it's frozen there inside her, just like it was frozen there underground."

"That would explain why she didn't share the last few nights," Girda said. "I am not liking this Ghash! It's not right to overpower another person that way!"

Sari smiled a little at Girda's protective anger. "I don't think it's evil intent, though. Not malevolent."

"Not malevolent!?! Didn't you hear what Magda said? This Ghash creature wants to kill all that lives!! And she doesn't fight to live, she has just given up!" Girda jerked her head in disgust and spat on the ground. Giving up was not in her vocabulary.

"But she's in such huge pain. And I don't think we even heard a fraction of the story, or the pain. She needs our acceptance."

"And our compassion," Mabel added, nodding her head and rocking slightly.

"And our help!" Katya chimed in.

"For herself it's bad enough!" Girda growled. "But she wants to drag us all down with her!!"

Rika said softly, "It's the pain and the rage that makes her that way." She looked down Dhalla who was curled into a ball in the grass next to Katya. "She said Ghash had no skin in places. Like our sensitive one here. Think how hard it must be for them to open up, to find healing, what they must be holding frozen inside!"

"Well, then, we need to find a way to get this Ghash up here with us, get her to share and heal. But if she can't share or cry the pain, if she stays frozen like that..."

"If they both stay frozen..." Rika said, nodding sadly.

"We need to do something!" Girda said.

But nobody could think of what. Another day went by, and another, and still Magda did not share or cry. She grew more quiet and heavier. By the fifth day, they were all beginning to feel the heaviness. It was like a sickness, creeping over them, filling the whole valley with gloom and despair and hopelessness.

And nobody knew what to do.

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Magda sat in the grass under her favorite tree and let her mind drift. She knew something was wrong, and she knew the others were worried, but she couldn't seem to lift herself up out of the lethargy she was in. She kept trying to maintain a normal appearance. She walked with the others and listened to their stories and songs. But more and more she came to sit under this tree. She sat and watched the breeze blow the branches back and forth. She listened to the birds singing, and she let herself drift.

She felt so tired, so useless, so incredibly hopeless. Some small voice in her head kept trying to get her attention, she felt it as a small irritating gnat, buzzing around her. "Wake up," it said, "Don't despair! Look at how far you've come!" But she brushed it away. The other thoughts were much stronger, and so much easier to believe. These other thoughts told her that she was not needed here. That the others would be fine with or without her, she had no value, no importance, no use. She would listen to them sharing around the fire and long with all her heart for the days when she felt a part of the group, when she didn't feel so estranged and ... not needed. And what good was the sharing doing, anyway, the voices said. What good was any of the remembering? Had they really come as far as she thought, or was it all just pretend? What was the point of any of it?

She realized her gloomy thoughts were taking her further down the road to despair, but she couldn't seem to stop it from happening. She identified more and more with Dhalla's withdrawal, with Ghash's desire to stay underground. It would be better there, she would be out of the way. And if she could sleep, at long last she might not feel any of the suffering.

But what about Sari? What about the others? What about her little Nora?

That thought brought her awake. She sat up and clutched the ground. Shame and remorse overwhelmed her when she realized she hadn't thought of Nora for days. Someone else must be caring for her!

Then the gloom threatened to overtake her again. What kind of person was she, to forget her charge, and so soon after promising to protect and nurture? What had happened to all her resolve, all her reckless caring? She could find no excuse, and shame overwhelmed her.

She began to cry then, and after so many dry days, it felt like a tiny trickling crack in the dam, which grows and grows, and finally bursts. She sobbed and sobbed, clutching and pounding the grass. "Useless!" she cried. "Useless!" She pounded her chest with her fists. "Garbage! I am nothing but garbage! Why am I alive?"

Sari had been walking nearby, hoping to find Magda at her favorite tree, and heard the blessed sounds of Magda's crying. With great relief she ran forward and saw her there, beneath the tree, pounding her chest. Sari ran to her and caught her fists just as she began to beat her face and head.

Magda's rage turned on Sari. "Let me go, let me go! Why do you hold me! I'm useless, ought to be dead, let me go!!!"

Sari thought her heart would break, but she didn't let go. Magda struggled with her for a while, letting her rage spin outward and then finally, the fury dissipated and she collapsed, sobbing, into Sari's lap. Sari held her and cried with her, tears of relief and love and grief.

The dam had broken, and the heaviness had lifted, at least a little. Perhaps there was hope.

When the flooding tears finally slowed to a trickle, Sari said, "It's Ghash, isn't it?"

Magda sat up and nodded. "I think so."

"Are you feeling a little better now?"

“I think so. Yes, some. But not completely. I can still feel the heaviness inside me, trying to drag me down. Oh Sari, what are we going to do?”

Sari wished there was an answer, a solution, some magical thing to happen that would make it all clear and easy. She gave a little laugh and shook her head. It had never been easy. Why was she hoping it would be now? She felt in her heart they were on the right path, she believed heart and soul in the healing they were doing. But she also felt Magda had been right when she said before that they were at some kind of crossroads. They needed some help, and she didn't know what to do. She felt the air grow heavy around them again, and everything seemed to move slower.

Magda began to cry again. “Help me, please help,” she cried. “I can't do it alone, I don't know what to do. Please help us.”

Suddenly they heard a rustling sound. They looked up and saw Him standing there, the Gardener Man, clutching his stick in front of him. His coat hung below his knees, his mop of gray hair hung down over his forehead. The bag slung across his shoulder was filled with leaves and weeds and branches.

For a moment nobody spoke or moved. An awkward silence hung between them. Magda finally realized He was waiting for her to speak first, gauging her response. Sari waited too, not certain what to do, but realizing this was an important moment. He cleared his throat a little, shifted his weight and looked out at them from under his bushy brows. Sari saw that his brown eyes were now flecked with silver that seemed to sparkle.

Magda wiped the tears from her cheeks. She looked at him and whispered, “Can you help us?”

He sat down on the grass next to her. His brow furrowed, and he shook his head a little. “I'm not yet sure what I can do,” he said softly. “You are safe here in this valley. And despite your feelings at this moment, you *are* changing. All of you. In the end, it may be *your* power that is the answer, not mine, not ours.”

“Are you both here now?” Sari asked.

He nodded.

“I thought so, your voice does sound different, and your eyes are ... different. Does it feel very different?”

“Yes, I feel ... fuller, lighter. I know He’s with me, in me. Sometimes it’s uncomfortable. We have such a hard time finding enough alignment and trust to stay together for very long. We’re trying very hard to heal with each other, to be able to work together as One, for our own sake, but also for your sakes. But, it still may not be enough.”

He looked out over the valley, his face sad and worried. Magda, looking at his face, felt her breath catch in her throat. She was flooded with feelings and memories and longings and ... need. Frightened, she turned away so he wouldn’t see her face. Sari looked at Magda, confused and worried. Magda gripped Sari’s hand tightly and closed her eyes, forcing herself to breathe. The fierceness of her love was almost beyond her control. Almost... she had almost reached out to him and made a fool of herself again.

“Magda,” she heard his voice, soft and gentle, calling to her, coaxing her.

She refused to turn her face to him.

“I am so sorry,” he said softly.

Desire and love swelled in her, a tidal wave that almost overwhelmed her. But just as the tsunami was swelling, it was caught and frozen at its peak by doubt and fear and shame and old, sour rage. The sudden war raging within her strangled her heart. The constriction in her chest and throat nearly made her pass out. She tried to speak but her throat was swollen with unshed tears. Sari squeezed her hand and tried to help with her eyes.

“Tell me, whatever it is, I will listen,” he said.

Magda felt the tears spilling down her cheeks then, and a great sob broke from her. “I hate you!” she screamed at him. “I hate you and I’m afraid of you and I... I need you and love you.. and I wish I didn’t. I wish I could stop, I wish I didn’t care!” She covered her face with one hand and sobbed loudly.

He pulled a handkerchief from a pocket and held it out to her but she just kept crying and didn’t see it. He reached out a hand to touch her and then drew it back. He finally just sat quietly, listening and waiting, looking down at his shoes.

When she finally paused, he said “I’m so sorry.”

She lifted her face to him, then. “Is that all you can say? Is that it? You tell me why, dammit. I want to know WHY!”

He said nothing.

“Why? You tell me why!!” she cried, tears streaming down her face. “Why?!?” She cried and screamed. “Why did you hate our innocent desire? Why would you pound and punish our need, why? What was so wrong with us? Why were you the ice man?”

He took the handkerchief and wiped her tears. “I don’t know,” he said sadly. “I don’t have all the answers yet. Was I an icy man?”

“See?” she said, taking a deep breath. “You don’t even know all of your self. How are we supposed to build trust on such uncertain ground?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you don’t know all of your self, and you don’t know why you did the things you did, how can we know it won’t happen again? How do you know you won’t become the ice man again? Or the torturer, or the enemy in the dark place?”

He dropped his head and was silent for a long time. After a while, Magda saw a tear fall into his lap, and another, and then another. The silver briefly left his eyes, and he seemed to grow heavier for a moment. He shook his head and drew a ragged breath, pounded a fist on his knee. He ... *they* ...seemed to be having some kind of deep inner conflict.

Magda's reckless caring wanted to throw caution to the winds and reach out to him, but she held still. Her truth-sense told her this was an important moment. Sari, whose tender heart already belonged to him, held herself still and quiet with enormous effort. Finally he nodded and stood up. When he looked at them they saw that his brown eyes were silver-flecked again, and though they were still swimming with tears, he seemed to have come to some kind of decision or resolution.

"You're right," he said, wiping his eyes. "It's the only way you'll all be able to fully trust me."

He drew a ragged breath. Then he placed his hand over his heart and spoke solemnly.

"I speak for both of us, truly, here and now. This then is our new promise," he said. "Our desire is to not to ever hurt you again. But until we fully know all of our self and all our parts, we can't promise that in truth. What we *can* promise is to seek and find and heal all of our self, without exception. We promise to look for every dark thing we have been blind to. And if we *do* hurt you again, we promise to find out why so we don't do it again, and we promise to make it right with you." He lifted his head and looked at her. "It's the best we can do."

Magda listened, feeling into his words. Finally, satisfied, she said, "Yes. It's the best any of us can do."

"But how can I help right now?" he asked. "This healing ... you're all in charge of what happens here, but I see a great darkness beneath the earth. Some places that have such great pain and fear, I'm not sure they have never known light or love at all. That is the source of the heaviness. That is where the Sisters dwell. The frozen places. The frozen ones. Can I help you get love and light to them?"

Magda looked at the ground and thought. She felt his true desire to help, and to let her lead in this. It gave her confidence, and... hope. She also felt in herself a resistance, an angry place that wanted to keep the doors closed, a fearful place that had been tightly clenched for too long to easily open and trust.

“This is the real crossroads, isn’t it?” she said softly. “Not just the asking, but whether we can accept your help or not...”

He looked at her, sadly.

“Yes, that is the choice you have to make. I won’t force anything on you. I will never force anything on any of you, ever again. Will you accept my help?”

Magda closed her eyes, feeling deeply into herself, reaching out an inner hand to all the places inside her that still resisted or were frightened or angry. She cradled these places in her mind’s eye, and promised them they would all be heard around the sharing fire, promised too, to protect them and never open rashly or blindly again, never would they take in such hurt as they sustained before. It would be safe to open just this little bit. She opened her eyes and smiled, and he saw the answer in her eyes.

His face cleared. He began digging hurriedly around in the pockets of his coat, searching for something. “Ah! Here it is!” he said, and he produced the item with great flourish.

It didn’t look like much, just an old stoneware pitcher, about 8 inches tall. It had been painted with bright colors once, but the paint had long since faded and was chipped away in places. He placed it on the palm of one hand, delicately holding the handle with the other and, eyes twinkling, held it out to them.

Magda took it from him and saw that the spout was corked. She pulled the cork out and immediately a wondrous, wispy, glimmering, cloudlike stuff floated out from it. It shimmered, and a wonderful sweet smell filled the air.

“Ooooooh,” Sari breathed. “What IS it?”

Very pleased with himself, the Gardener Man reached out and pulled the top off of the pitcher which, when turned upside down, also served as a small cup. He held the cup out to Magda and she tipped the pitcher. From the spout came a pearly white liquid, shimmering white, luminescent. It was not quite the consistency of honey... more like buttermilk.

“Is it milk?” Magda asked

He laughed. “No, it’s not milk. Well, some have called it the Milk of Human Kindness, but that’s only one of its properties. Try it.”

She tipped the cup toward her mouth and gently breathed in. It was sweet. Just breathing the stuff felt slightly intoxicating. She took a careful sip. The *stuff* came into her mouth like soft, warm butter. Lighter than butter, and oh, so sweet. She breathed deeply, and swallowed, and a bright smile lit her face. It was as if her lungs had only ever pumped thin, false air, and suddenly she was breathing REAL air that filled and warmed and loved every single cell and crevice and curve within her. As if her stomach had only ever held pretend food, and suddenly she was given REAL food to eat, food that truly filled and warmed and satisfied and nourished every cell in body and soul.

“What *is* it?” Sari asked.

“Some of my light. It has been called many things: Breath of Light, Manna, bread of heaven. This is what you need. I think. Well, some of what you n...n-need. I... I’m not sure, but I... I think...”

Magda realized he was stuttering. “Yes, yes, you’re right,” she said. “This IS what we need. I think it will help us all! This is wonderful, thank you!”

She handed the cup to Sari.

Sari raised the cup to her lips and took a cautious sip. “OH!” she said, a look of sheer delight on her face. “This is DELICIOUS!” The warm liquid seemed to pour through her, all the way down to her toes, and she couldn’t stop herself from doing a little jiggy dance. She giggled.

She started to take another drink, but he stopped her. “You must be very careful. Take only the tiniest bits at a time, at least at first. I don’t know why, but too much of my light has done harm in the past.”

Sari looked longingly at the cup, and then handed it back to Magda reluctantly.

“Just pour from the pitcher whenever you want more,” he said. “The pitcher will never be empty. I think this will help you reach the sisters and the frozen ones, and it might be helpful in other ways too.”

“Thank you,” Magda said.

“Just remember to be careful and go slowly.”

“We will.” They stood up, clutching their new treasure. He stood and watched them, seeming not to know what to do next. They could feel his hesitancy, his fear. *His feelings must be as conflicted as mine*, Magda thought. She reached out and shyly touched his hand. “Thank you again,” she said, and then she took Sari’s hand and then went to find the others.

As they walked away, Sari gave Magda’s hand a little shake.

Magda looked at her. She saw her own hope mirrored in Sari’s eyes.

“Yes,” she said softly, “I think there is hope.” She took a deep breath and clutched the pitcher to her heart. She felt as if she had lived several lifetimes in this one day, and her body felt weak and a little giddy.

They walked in silence for a while, hand in hand, hopeful for the first time in many days.

The Manna

That night during their sharing circle, each of them had a taste of the manna. They were very careful and only took in just the tiniest of sips at first.

Mabel was very hesitant. She hung back and watched the others first, but when she saw they took no ill effects, she joined in too.

Desiree had no fear at all. In fact, when it came to her turn, before they could stop her the little minx dove right into the cup and completely immersed herself. She came up grinning from ear to ear, covered with pearly liquid. She climbed out and stood on Sari's hand and shook herself off, showering them all with luminescent droplets and making them all laugh.

Rika almost refused, but they all ganged up on her with teasing and cajoling and laughter, Sari and Katya each grabbed her by the hand and dragged her forward, while Desiree flew circles around her head fast enough to make her dizzy.

"No matter how bad a person you are," Sari teased, "You get to have one sip."

"Just one, Reek, come on, just a tiny one. Just do it, come on, do it." Katya had already had her taste and was bouncing up and down on her toes so lightly and happily they thought she might take flight at any moment.

"Alright, alright!" Rika stepped forward. She closed her eyes and held the cup beneath her nose for a long moment and just breathed the manna in. Then she took a tiny, very tiny, sip.

Suddenly her eyes flew open wide and her mouth froze in a surprised "O!" She couldn't speak. She turned and wandered off to sit by herself a little ways away from the fire. They watched her for a minute to make sure she was ok, but the "O!" had turned into a bemused, slightly confused half-smile. Katya nodded and said, "oooKAY!"

After they had all had a sip and were sure no harm had come to any of them, it was time to try to give some to the little cripple.

At first Dhalla wouldn't open her mouth. Mabel held her and rocked her and told her over and over that it was safe.

"Come on, sweetie", coaxed Girda, "You'll like it, little bear, honest!"

Magda smiled to hear these fuzzy endearments coming from Girda. It warmed her heart.

But none of them could get her to open her mouth or take even the tiniest taste. Finally Katya curled up next to her on the ground, wrapping her little arms and legs all the way around the smaller girl, cradling her in a loving embrace. She rocked and sang and spent a long time whispering into her ear something soft and persuasive, and finally after a very long time, she got her to take a very VERY small bit into her mouth and with great effort, swallow.

At first it seemed everything was all right. She sat up a bit and looked around with her one good eye, and she actually seemed to be *seeing* them. But then suddenly she doubled over, seized by a head-to-toe spasm. Her teeth began to grind and she cried out in pain.

Sari clutched the pitcher to her belly worriedly. "What's wrong?" she cried.

Dhalla's little crippled body shook and shuddered. Her jaw worked convulsively as she growled and moaned, and then burst into tears. "Hate," they heard her sob in a raspy whisper. "It hates me, you, he hates me, hates, hates, all hates me!" And then she threw her head back and howled, a long mournful grieving, heartbroken sound, that in the dark, even in the safety of their valley, brought chills to all who gathered there.

She sobbed and keened, stopping only for a quick breath, and then another howl would burst from her. Her back arched and her one good arm flailed wildly in the air. Magda put Nora down on the ground so she could help Mabel hold onto the little body that had suddenly grown so strong. Spasm after spasm passed through her, and they watched helplessly as she shook and shuddered. Then suddenly she curled up and rolled to one side and, hanging her head over

Katya's knee she began to cough and retch. She coughed and coughed, deep wracking coughs. And then finally she half-vomited, half-spat, and produced the most vile looking stuff any of them had ever seen. It was black and greenish-white, foul-smelling and gooey. It glistened and jiggled slightly in the firelight. Girda quickly swept it into the fire, where it seemed to come alive for a moment, writhing in the flames. They watched in horrified fascination as the thing finally burst into flame and danced around for a while before finally burning out and becoming nothing but ash.

Jether poked it with a stick, just to be sure, scattering the ashes.

"What was that?" Rika asked.

"I don't know," Jether said, "But it's burned up now."

Magda shook off the revulsion she felt and knelt to look at Dhalla. The little one was curled in Katya's arms, sleeping peacefully. She was breathing in and out softly, and apparently quite normally. But Magda thought she detected something in her that hadn't been there before. She laid a hand to that little scarred cheek, and felt... yes, it was there, she felt it thrumming, a faint but unmistakable ... *something* ... that hadn't been there before. A healing had taken place.

"What is it?" Sari asked. "Were we wrong to give it to her?"

"No!" Magda shook her head and smiled at Sari. "Oh, Sari, I think she's going to be ok. That was exactly what she needed!"

"But why did it seem so painful?" Mabel asked. She looked down worriedly at the little body curled so trustingly in her lap.

"I think... I think the places inside that feel bad, that feel hate, or remember being hated... get pushed out by the manna. It's like pouring good water into a glass full of muck. The muck has to spill out."

"But what about that black thing she spit up?"

“I don’t know,” Magda shook her head. “That was very strange. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Rika said, “It was probably not *her*.”

They all looked at her, confused.

She sighed. “Sometimes the enemy puts things inside you, deep inside, where your pain is, and it gets all tangled up with you so you don’t know what is part of you and what is not. It can help the enemy control you from far away, and it can make you do things and feel things... well, it can’t make you feel anything you don’t already feel, but it can poke at the hurts you do have and make them seem worse.”

“So,” Sari said thoughtfully, “It was inside of her, tangled up with her despair, tangled up with the feelings she has of being hated... keeping her frozen in despair and hopelessness?”

“That’s why we were having so much trouble reaching her, then,” Magda said.

“And when she got the manna, she finally could cry her pain, and ... “

“And that black gunky stuff had to leave.”

“Do you think there’s more of that stuff in her?” Mabel asked.

Rika just shrugged. She knew more than any of them about the enemy’s tools and tricks, but there was much she didn’t remember or didn’t understand.

“Well,” Magda said, “Maybe that’s what he meant when he said sometimes this stuff can be harmful. It’s not really harmful, but we have to allow for the healing that needs to happen... The muck has to spill out, and that’s ok. And anything the enemy has in there will have to come out too. So, that’s ok, then, we just have to go very slowly with this stuff. Take in a little at a time, and know that the muck will come erupting out.”

She looked around at their faces, lit by firelight. Their faces were serious, but they were nodding their heads.

Just then Dhalla turned in Katya's arms and stretched and yawned. Mabel gasped and cried out, "Look!"

They all gathered round to look, as the little one stretched her neck and turned her face to them and opened not one good eye, but two. Two beautiful, deep blue eyes, looked back at them and actually seemed to see them. Her eye was healed! Murmurs and gasps traveled around the circle, and tears began to fall on many cheeks, tears of gratitude and joy and relief. The little one looked at them all out of her two good eyes, blinked once, twice, and then beamed on them a smile that lit the night.

The Plan

The effects of the manna were deeper and more far reaching than any of them could possibly have imagined. Not even the Gardener Man could have anticipated what happened next.

They went slowly and carefully with it, and they always made sure to allow for whatever healing and sharing needed to happen after taking small sips of the manna. Sometimes days passed with many tears and regurgitation of memory and pain before they felt ready to go on. And it seemed as if the outpouring of pain and the return of memory was accelerated for all of them. They found themselves spontaneously bursting into tears and remembering long forgotten events throughout the day and night. They still had their nightly circle sharing, but now the sharing and crying and remembering went on all day, whenever it was needed. And their dreams! They all began to have such vivid dreams in the night that it seemed as if a floodgate had been opened and memories and feelings were flooding in. Magda thought this must be the effect of the manna, but Sari thought it also had to do with Dhalla's effect on them.

"It's as if – by her sensitivity – she's give us all an added sensitivity to our own pain, our own memories," Sari said. "As if she's helping us connect to our old pain in a different way. I don't really understand how, but it's like she's a bridge, or something like that."

Dhalla now cried with them, every time any one of them shared, she suffered with them, shed tears, pounded the ground, howled into the night. Perhaps she was a sharer in every suffering they felt, or perhaps she took on the sufferings of others. Or perhaps, as Sari said, she was a bridge between them and their pain, and with every step they took across, the bridge itself vibrated and shook. Whatever the reason, she was certainly frozen no more.

This accelerated healing fed the magic of their valley, as they all became more and more whole. Their desires and needs instantly became realities before their very eyes. Flowers, fruits, lovely ponds filled with beautiful multi-colored fish and sporting sprites... around every corner it seemed their valley was coming to life, and this filled their hearts with more and more hope. Each day they noticed new evidence of the changes, in themselves as well. Mabel grew taller and sturdier, and younger! Her hair was now a luscious brown just streaked with gray, and

though she kept it cut short, it curled delicately across her forehead and over her ears. Girda grew softer and more caring, but somehow lost none of her strength or resolve. Desiree grew another pair of wings and seemed to be increasing in size as well. Katya had grown almost as tall as Sari, and was more and more nurturing and mothering to them all. Little Nora had grown swiftly too, and was now toddling about the valley, climbing onto everyone's laps and demanding their attention. She had become a holy terror, but they all loved and fed her sweet need, even when she pushed them to exasperation. Even Rika held herself less aloof and joined them more and more.

But Dhalla had undergone the most miraculous changes of them all. The scars on her face had slowly faded entirely, and strange as it seemed, it actually appeared as if her withered limbs were repairing themselves. The heaviness still weighed her down at times, but at least she was able to cry her feelings of despair and hopelessness and was no longer locked behind a frozen wall. She liked to be immersed in the healing pool in the cave best of all, and so they had all begun to gather there in the mornings, to share and soak in the warmth of the healing waters.

It was there by the healing pool, as they talked about all the marvelous things that they saw and felt happening, that they hatched a plan to reach the frozen ones underground.

"And the Lonelies," Sari said, "We need to find a way to draw them to us."

Jether suggested that since Ghash was under the earth, somewhere in the rocks and stones, she might be able to feel or taste or smell the manna, if they anointed the earth with it.

"Oh, yes!" Sari cried, "That's a wonderful idea! We can anoint the whole valley! Why, I bet, combined with our own substance we'll have a very powerful magnet."

So, for the next few days, they carried out their plan. Rika and Girda and Jether searched among the rocks and stones along one side of the valley, looking for openings and crevices that might lead down into the earth. They found several small cracks that just needed a little work with Girda's sword to open and widen until they had deep fissures reaching far below the earth. Into each of these fissures they carefully poured a few drops of the manna. Desiree flew to the tops of the trees carrying a few drops at a time wrapped in leaves. As she flew over the treetops, she

distributed wisps of streaming banners of manna through the branches. Sari took the pitcher and sprinkled pearly droplets down into the roots of the trees.

By the third day, their valley seemed to be breathing with brighter colors and sweeter smells. They could feel her stirring and shimmering, thrumming with a deep heartbeat that before they could only sense in the cave. Now that heartbeat thrummed throughout the entire valley.

They didn't want to overdo it though, so they considered the job done for the time being, and they settled in to wait.

Part III - THE NIGHT OF THE SISTERS

The Dragon Dream

Several days passed and nothing happened. They began to wonder if they would need to delve farther underground in order to reach the frozen ones. But then suddenly everything erupted in one night, and the sisters came into their valley with a presence beyond their wildest imaginings.

Sari had begun the night's sharing with the telling of a dream she'd had 3 nights running, since they had seeded their valley with the manna.

"It's the same dream," she said, "But each time I'm a different character in it ... it's like switching parts in a play."

"It always starts with dark, heaviness, some place where many of us are together, clinging to each other and trying to be safe. I sometimes feel myself as if I'm a child, nestled with my sisters in a nest of some kind, at the bottom of a deep, warm chasm. Sometimes I feel myself to be the mother of these children, and I'm afraid that I won't be able to protect them from what is coming.

Then the fear starts. It feels as if death is imminent. The sky darkens and fills with black clouds. A thunderous sound grows, rumblings and crashings and screams of pain, and the whole world seems to be shaking and quaking. Then it feels as if we are attacked from above. Bolts of lightening shoot down from the dark sky, stabbing between towering cliffs, all the way down to where we huddle together on the chasm floor. Some of us are struck by the fiery spear. Some are burnt almost entirely black, and the air is filled with the smell of charred flesh and the screams of the wounded. This throws us all into a frenzy of terror and chaos.

Then, arguments and splits ... and the dream becomes confusion. At times I am cowering on the chasm floor, looking up to see two great dragons, facing each

other, shouting at each other. It feels as if the dragons are our mother. She has split into two and the parts are arguing fiercely, with more and more rage that eventually becomes hatred. At times I am one or the other of the dragons, and I feel the fury, the surety that I know how to best protect us and keep us all alive, if I could only prevail. One dragon wants to fight back, find a way to turn the lightning back on itself, show some gumption! She looks down on the little ones with scorn, and I know how much she hates the small, soft creatures, the children, weak and frightened, huddled and shivering and useless. I know also, she would rather hate and abandon them and blame them, than fail in trying to protect them.

The other dragon ... I feel her too. She counsels caution, says we should hide, run away, try to placate the attackers, try to blend in and stay alive. She believes fighting will only bring us pain and death.

Better to die fighting, says the first dragon, than go down like this, hiding and shaking with fear. What kind of life is this anyway, she shouts, this is NO life. Better to die.

The little ones on the chasm floor watch, and listen, and tremble ... and they begin to separate and argue amongst themselves. Some want to hide, some want to fight, and they begin to divide into camps, some supporting one dragon, some supporting the other, both camps believing equally that THEIR way will ensure survival, and both willing to fight each other to the death to carry their point.

Some of the little ones try to hold the middle ground and keep the balance, but it's a lost cause. The arguments and disagreements grow and grow. The rage grows and finally erupts murderous, and the dragons leap at each other from their perches, meeting mid-air and rending each other with their claws and teeth. Scratching, screeching, hissing and spitting fire, the followers of each burst into the fray, and the battle is full on.

Far above, looking down on the bloody mess, is some malevolent energy, watching, gleefully. It rests. It doesn't need to work hard any more to create hostilities and chaos. Those below are doing all the work for it.

The sky grows dark and the thunder dims to a dull growl. One dragon is left lying bleeding on the chasm floor, the fearful dragon who counseled caution. She has been defeated and she has given up and will only lie there and moan. The little ones who followed her cannot rouse her. She will go down into the earth and die, she says, die and give up and be done with it. Some of the little ones choose to go with her, those that are most injured, those that have taken on the biggest burden of despair and hopelessness and terror. But most of the others choose to go with the angry dragon. They cannot live alone, and they know this. They need a mother to be with.

Sari breathed deeply.

“Sometimes in the dream I stay with her, that fearful dragon. I feel her will to live fading as she watches the other dragon leave with my sisters in tow. I feel her despair and heartbreak and I sink down beneath the earth with her. But sometimes I go off with the angry dragon and with most of my sisters. It doesn't matter which part I am, I always wake up with the most awful wrenching heartbreak, and I cry and cry. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do,” Sari cried, holding her hands over her heart. “My heart is aching.”

Just then a voice spoke from the darkness saying, “Well told, sister. There have been many such splittings, and we have all seen at least one of them. The dragonmother split was one of the worst.”

Abathyr

They all looked up to see a very tall thin figure shrouded in black from head to toe stepping into their circle just behind Sari. At first all they could see of her face beneath the black veil covering her was a hint of moon-pale skin and very large dark eyes peering out at them wearily. But then she pulled back the veil and they saw a face that might have been beautiful if it hadn't been so thin and worn by cares and pain. She looked so incredibly sad and heartweary.

“Welcome,” Magda said.

Desiree flew over then, excited and curious, and perched on Magda's shoulder to be near. Sari reached out to take the woman's hand, and she felt a wrenching in her own heart at the contact.

The woman looked at Sari sadly. “Sister, you dreamed true” she said, squeezing Sari's hand. Then she looked over the top of Sari's head at Magda and the little group gathered around the fire. “Greetings. And thank you for the welcome,” she said softly.

“Who are you?” Sari asked, sniffing and wiping her eyes.

“I have no name anymore. I am no one. I am many no ones.”

She opened her robe and they saw it was lined with many small pockets, and each pocket was filled with a tiny creature. Some were fairy-like, gold and green and pink, but some were less formed, more like tiny embryo.

“We have many names. I speak for us. Call me... Abathyr. For now. That will do.”

She smiled sadly again. Sari bent to look with delight at the tiny beings filling her pockets.

“Oh!” she cried, clapping her hands, “Are these our Lonelies?”

“Lonelies? I don’t know what that means. These are many bits I have found hither and thither, over hill and under dale, out yonder and back again.”

Most of the tiny creatures were fast asleep, but one or two raised their heads and blinked in the moonlight. And one bold creature actually stood and tugged on Abathyr’s thumb, begging to be lifted. Desiree fluttered her wings from Magda’s shoulder and waved at the little one. Abathyr lifted her gently and settled her on her own shoulder, close to her face so the little one could hold onto her ear. They saw that she was smaller than Desiree, and her wings, though a beautiful bright green, seemed to be only half-formed. From their perches she and Desiree gazed at each other, smiling shyly.

Just then the woman coughed deeply, and her frail form seemed to ... flicker. She grew dim and almost transparent. Sari cried out, and the woman grew solid again and they all breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry. I don’t seem to be able to hold myself together very well. This is all of me I could gather. I am not well without my bodysisters. I am like the little ones you described on the chasm floor, who cannot live without a ... well, without a mother, I guess that’s as good a word as any. But then, none of us is meant to live alone, and none of us is complete without the other. But some of us are more able to stand alone than others. And for many long years the yang of us has looked down on the yin parts as weak, treated us as children, less-than, scorned our need and inability to stand alone, and has refused to help us or see us as sisters.” She sighed. “I long for a time when we are all back together again, I long to feel whole and able to stand. Many times we’ve broken, come together for brief periods and then split apart and broken, again and again with heartbreak and love and grief. I am the Heart Sister, but I am many small parts, as are we all.” She gestured with her arm as if to include their little group in her words. They all looked at each other, wondering what this could mean.

Abathyr seeming not to notice, went on. “After the First Gathering, when we broke and fought, some of us followed our Underground Sister into the stone, sharing her hopelessness and despair and heartbreak. Some left to follow Sister Superior. And some followed our Aboveground Sister, believing she had the answer and a way for us to live. But her rage and cruelty broke us

again and again and drove many of us underground. Some of us tried to live alone, but everywhere we went it seemed others wanted to ... eat us.”

“Eat you?” Mabel gasped, horrified.

“Yes,” she clutched one bony hand to her chest and gathered her robes closer. The pale green faery-child on her shoulder began to shiver. Abathyr lifted her and kissed the tiny figure before gently tucking her safely back into a warm pocket. “Yes, I believe our essence is what you would call... sweet. It is our nature to love and nurture and nourish. Left alone without our sisters, we were easy prey. Many of us were lost then. When I realized what was happening, I vowed to find as many of them as I could, find them and bring them to safety underground. But it hasn’t been easy. It took a long time to gather enough of me back together again to have consciousness. At first I was like a mindless child, but over time I have regained essence and consciousness. Even so, we... *I* ... am incomplete. I live Between, straddling the worlds above and below, trying ever to find peace and wholeness. Trying to draw all of us back together again.

“The frozenness that drew you down,” she looked at Magda, “That was our Underground Sister. She has hated all that lives and moves and would lull you to sleep with her. Any movement reminds her of her pain. She longs for death. Or the next best thing, frozen sleep. She is the fearful dragon in your dream,” she said to Sari. “In the end, defeated and hopeless. She gave up and went down into the earth. But since then, she has become much more. More parts have joined her, all weighted down with despair and hopelessness, and she has become a great sucking vortex beneath the earth, a siren song of death. It won’t be easy to turn her to a new path.”

She closed her eyes in pain and when she opened them again they glistened with unshed tears.

“I, too, long for peace, I would accept death if it would come. I have believed she was right. If death and suffering follow us, then the only way to save the world is to keep our presence out of it. And this half-death underground is the closest thing to peace we’ve been able to find. But... I always seem to feel the pull of all the other sisters. It’s as if I stand at the center, at the Between, and I feel them, from all directions, wherever they are, scattered all across the world, and I can’t sleep knowing they are out there. I have to find them all and bring us together.”

“Can you bring them here? We can change things now,” Girda said. “Isn’t this valley proof of that?”

Abathyr looked around the valley, bright in the moonlight, and breathed in the thick scent of flowers hanging in the air all around them.

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “I want to hope. Maybe hope can live, at least here in this valley. But what of the world? What of the others? How can we stop the suffering? There is so much suffering, everywhere.”

She began to cough again, and her breathing grew raspy.

“You’re fading!” Sari cried.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know how long I’ll be able to stay here like this. I wanted to come and tell you, there is something here, the like of which I’ve never felt. My dreams of late *have* held a grain of hope. And a grain is a great deal.”

She began to weep, a weak raspy sound, and her tears ran down the grooves in her gaunt cheeks like rain flowing down an old rock face. Her sobs turned to a deep coughing, and each cough wracked her fragile form from head to toe. Girda rushed to her just as she began to fall and swept her up and carried her to the fire. They covered her with blankets and hovered anxiously.

Magda quickly poured a small sip of manna into the cup and held it to Abathyr’s pale lips. She sipped and swallowed painfully between coughs. She grew more solid, but she continued to cry and her sobs grew deeper and louder.

“So many times I have been drawn to gatherings where sisters stand together,” she sobbed. “So many times I have stood in the middle and watched, letting hope be born, and then dashed again, as the sisters begin warring. Always in the past they have broken and fled from each other, hating each other, and the wound of each leaving is a horrible searing pain. I am left with the memory of where a limb has been torn from our body. I feel the raw ache. I know the constant bleeding from a wound that cannot heal.”

Sari wrapped her arms around the woman, and together they cried, and as their tears mingled Abathyr seemed to grow ... fatter. The gauntness left her cheeks and her eyes, though filled with tears, became brighter and less sunken. Sari pulled back to look at the face that was now more nearly a mirror of her own and laughed through her tears.

They sat together quietly for a while, and then Magda said, "I'm so glad you've come. You seem to have so many missing pieces, and we have so many questions!"

"I will answer what I can," Abathyr said, "But I don't know if I can help you much. I'm not sure even Sister Superior knows it all."

"You mean, because we each only have a piece of the puzzle," Magda said.

"Yes, and until we are all back together, the full story cannot be known. But I will do my best to share with you what I know, what I saw."

"Who is Sister Superior?" Magda asked. "And the other sister, what did you call her?"

"What was the First Gathering? Have there been many Gatherings?" Mabel asked.

"Do you know the Voice, and this manna stuff?" Girda asked. "How does he fit into all this?"

Abathyr laughed and held up a hand. "One at a time, please. Let me see... "

Aboveground Sister

“I should start at the beginning,” Abathyr said, “If I can, that is. I will try to find the very earliest of my memories...”

Katya interrupted her with a little hiss and a jerk of her hand.

“What?” Magda whispered. “What is it?”

“Somebody’s here,” Katya whispered back.

They were all silent, staring and straining to see into the darkness outside their circle.

“I don’t see anybody,” Sari said.

“Me neither,” Rika said. Her voice was low and strained, “But she’s right. I feel it too. Somebody’s out there watching us.”

“It’s our Aboveground Sister, she of the lost yang essence,” Abathyr whispered.

Girda stood and drew her sword. Magda stood also. She stood and listened, then walked to the edge of the circle and called out into the darkness, “Hello? Come and join us, whoever you are. You are welcome here.”

As soon as Magda finished speaking a sudden wind flew all around them, filling the night, whipping the fire and lifting the sparks higher and higher, lighting the sky above them. They all felt their hearts quicken and skip, a sudden rush of ... something ... filled them. But whether it was fear or excitement, they couldn’t tell. Mabel shuddered. Even Girda shivered and gripped the hilt of her sword tighter.

Just as suddenly as it began, the wind died down, and when the dust settled and the smoke cleared, they saw her.

She stood at the edge of the circle, a tall woman with long curling, honey-blond hair. Standing erect and regal in dark blue robes, she looked down on them in silence. Then she stepped forward into the firelight, raised her arm and said, “I am here.”

They all looked at each other a little nervously. Girda stood and glared. The woman seemed not to notice. She moved into the circle and among them with great flourish and much swirling of skirt and robe. As she moved it seemed they heard the tinkling of small bells and some exotic scent followed her. She went from one to the other, looking into faces, touching the tops of their heads, smiling with great condescension. Magda began to feel a little ill.

The woman turned to Mabel, half-hidden behind Magda. She took Mabel’s hand and drew her out into the open and caressed her. “Little one,” she said with elaborate pity, “Little one, I feel your fear. I understand. There is much to fear, isn’t there? I believe I can help you.”

Mabel, startled and pleased by being singled out, stammered and blushed and shuffled her feet. But her pleasure grew to alarm suddenly when she realized that she was growing smaller and smaller. She pulled away, frightened, and the woman moved on, seemingly unaware. Poor Mabel turned to Magda and Girda and clutched at their hands, breathing deeply, until she felt herself begin to grow again, and shortly she was back to her previous size. She breathed a great sigh of relief, and sat down, grateful to no longer be the center of attention.

Magda frowned. She wasn’t sure what to make of this woman. There was something familiar about her, but she couldn’t feel into her very deeply. And that bothered Magda very much.

They watched as she sidled up to Jether in what looked like a very carefully choreographed dance. Step. Swirl of skirt. Lowering of the eyes. Step, look up from under the lashes. Sway of hip, step and smile. Lower the eyes again and extend the hand.

From the way the woman offered her hand, they realized she meant for Jether to take it and kiss it like a courtier. Katya snorted from across the fire. The woman whirled around to find the source of the noise, her eyes flashing, and Kat cringed back behind Rika.

It was then that the woman saw Abathyr sitting just beyond, still wrapped in blankets, watching her with quiet eyes. The woman hissed softly and stared, and for a long moment they all were frozen, uncertain what to do.

What a strange tableau we make, Magda thought to herself. She had just about decided it was time to put a stop to this drama, when she noticed with a start that Abathyr had filled out even more. Her eyes were bright and her breathing had become less labored and gasping.

Just then the woman reached out a jingling, bejeweled hand and began to move around the circle toward Abathyr, and the closer she got, the more that hand looked to Magda like a greedy, grasping claw. She stood up, but Sari moved quicker and in the blink of an eye was standing between the two sisters. The woman hissed and glared at Sari, but then she turned away from her and Magda watched with fascination as she arranged her face in a mask of grieved woundedness.

“Why do you fear me, my children?” she asked, her voice sad and mournful. “I mean no harm.”

Magda decided to ignore the question. She cleared her throat, and when the woman turned to face her, she said, “Welcome to our valley. What shall we call you?”

The woman stiffened. Magda could feel some strong emotions running beneath the surface, but she couldn’t make sense of them, they were so jumbled and mixed up. Then the woman smiled, and did a little curtsy.

“I believe we’ve met before, you and I, my child” she said to Magda. “Long ago.”

“We have?” Magda was taken aback, and she lost some of her composure. “I.. I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I don’t remember. There are many things I don’t remember yet...”

But the woman turned away from Magda, the smile still painted on her face, and stepped over to where Sari was still standing. The expression on her face was strange, avid, hungry. Was she glaring hungrily at Sari? Or was it Abathyr she hungered for? Or was she looking at the pitcher and cup which Sari had put back into the satchel tied to her waist? Magda felt Nora stir beside

her and felt a strong wave of something pass over her. Suddenly she realized what it was. Need. The same kind of raw, aching hungry need that Nora had been consumed by. Hunger. Need. Desire. But had it come from Nora? Or had it come from the woman?

Magda watched, fascinated, as the woman rearranged her face again. How did she manage to do that? The stark need was replaced by interest and condescension. Sari started to pull back, but then somehow she felt her feet moving forward, slowly, her eyes locked onto the woman's. She didn't even feel Desiree fly to her shoulder, and pull her ear in alarm, and then her hair. She just kept moving until she was standing right in front of the woman... and then somehow she had opened the satchel and there she stood, with the pitcher in her hands. And then somehow her hands were loosening and moving outward, and the woman was stepping forward and ...

Magda felt an enormous surge of rage sweep over her. She acted before she could think. She moved quickly between Sari and the woman. She remembered later that Girda had moved with her, and the two of them stood like sentinels protecting Sari and Desiree... and the pitcher. She hadn't meant to touch the woman, but her rage had control of her body at that moment. She thought maybe her intent had been to push the woman back, but instead she grabbed and got hold of a shoulder and an arm. And that contact pushed something like an electric shock through Magda's body. It swept over her, drowning her rage and all else.

Their eyes locked, and Magda felt herself being drawn into a swirling vortex of madness that was the woman's mind. Terror and hunger and darkness and murderous rage. Magda recoiled from the rage, but then suddenly she felt her way past the rigid outer shell and fell into a deep, soft, terrified, shame-filled inner core. There the hunger was greatest, a grinding, torturous need, made huge by terror, by certainty of it's being never-ending, never-fulfilled.

Magda moaned and felt her hands blindly grasping at the woman's arms, finally locking on the woman's wrist. Pulling her close, she looked deeply into the woman's eyes and whispered, "I know."

The woman cried out. Her face constricted with terror and she jerked her arm away from Magda's touch. "You know NOTHING!" she hissed. "Nothing!"

“You suffer,” Magda said quietly, her own eyes filled with tears. “You hunger...”

The woman stood rubbing her wrist where Magda’s hand had gripped her, her bracelets jangling in the firelight. She growled and hissed, but she was, for the moment, without a high-handed response. She saw the compassion in Magda’s face and in the eyes and faces of the others gathered around the fire and tears sprang to her eyes. But she shook her head and brushed them away angrily.

“It’s alright,” Magda said, “You can let your pain show here with us, it’s safe here. We have all found healing here, by feeling our pain, by sharing our stories.”

“Pah! You are foolish children! This is weakness!” she hissed. But they saw the unshed tears behind her eyes, and they knew the dam was threatening to burst. How long could she hold the flood back?

“No,” Girda said. “It’s not weakness. It’s strength of the greatest order. And healing such as we’ve never been able to find before.”

“You know so much, do you?”

“I do know this,” Girda stepped forward and stood with the tip of her sword pointing at the woman. “It’s true. I didn’t believe it at first either. When I first came here I was crusty and hard as nails, but I was also dying. The sharing and the remembering ... and the crying ... brought me back from the edge of death.”

“It’s true, sister,” Abathyr said softly. “Please listen.”

“Don’t tell me what’s true,” the woman screeched. “I *know* things! I *see* things. But my wisdom is scorned, everywhere I go. The things I know could save us all, but you will not listen. You are headstrong, stubborn children, like all of them. No matter what I do, I am denied my rightful place. I should be honored and listened to, not spit on and scorned. I should be *ruler* not slave! You don’t know what I’ve suffered!”

Her voice cracked and broke but when she turned to Magda her eyes were wild and filled with madness.

Magda shook her head. “No, we don’t. I only know a little bit of what you feel. But we want to know, we want to hear it all. You are welcome to stay here with us. This is our sharing circle, this is where we tell our stories.”

“And remember our past,” Sari added.

“And share our pain,” Mabel said.

“And maybe we can help your hunger.” Magda gestured to Sari to come forward with the manna.

The woman hissed at them, “I need nothing!” But her eyes followed Sari’s every move, locked on the pitcher in her hands. She suddenly grew very calm. Jether scowled.

“You don’t know what you have there,” she said in a sweet voice. “I have some experience with objects of power like this. Of course, what you have there is weak and puny magic compared to some I’ve known. Still, these things can be dangerous if not handled properly and carefully. I would be happy to take that item off your hands. I could hold it for you, keep it safe, and show you how to use it properly.”

Sari stood clutching the pitcher to her heart, not sure what to do. The feelings emanating from this woman in blue were chaotic, frantic, overwhelming. She felt a desire to hand the treasures over. She felt compelled again, by that strange pressure, almost a voice this time, that told her she was inexperienced and naïve in the ways of these things. She *should* listen and bow to those with more wisdom and experience, of course she should, it would be the *wise* thing to do. And then she would find herself raised up and praised and ...

Just then Abathyr laughed and broke the spell. “Share what you have with her,” she said to Sari, “but ... no, I don’t think giving that pitcher to her would be such a good idea.”

The woman lunged at her sister with such venomous hatred, they all jumped to their feet and moved close around Abathyr to protect her. Girda lifted her sword again so that its point smiled dangerously at the woman's belly.

The woman stopped short. She closed her eyes and got herself under control. "I see," she said, taking a deep breath. When she opened her eyes again, they could all see her pain. Almost... she was almost drawn out by the compassion she saw on their faces. But then she hardened again and drew herself up stiff and tall. "I see," She said again. "Well, I won't stay where I'm not wanted or appreciated. I came because I felt... I thought you might need me ... that this would be ... a place for me... I was wrong. You are just like all the others."

She turned to go, but Katya came forward and stopped her. "Where will you go?" she asked the woman. And then she surprised them all by boldly taking the woman's hand. "Where will you go that you won't find more death and pain and aloneness? Where do you hope to find your rightful place? You won't ever find more respect than you can find here, with us. We will listen to you, *really* listen."

The woman seemed to grow heavier. Her head bowed and her shoulders slumped, as if gravity had suddenly become much greater where she stood.

"You don't know," she whispered. "Every time I've tried to rise up, I've been crushed and beaten down, and all around me suffer and die. Death follows me everywhere I go. Maybe my sisters are right, we should lie beneath the earth forever." Her eyes closed heavily for a moment, then flashed and grew wild. "But I hear the murmurings and rumblings and I'm so *hungry*, and I get so angry! And I WILL NOT GIVE UP. I will NOT be defeated!"

She pulled herself up tall and proud, and they watched the soft moment disappear from her face. Magda felt a memory tugging at her. She felt Sari squeeze her hand and whisper, "The leech. Magda, the woman in my dream."

Magda started. The blonde woman, she remembered the dream from long ago, the glistening black leech attached to her back. The horror of it came flooding back. They looked at each other and then back to the woman, who was gathering her robes around her.

“My sisters,” she hissed angrily, “including THAT one,” she jerked her head in Abathyr’s direction, “are all useless pieces of nothing. NOTHING, do you hear me? Garbage!”

She stalked to the edge of the circle and turned to glare at them. “And the rest of *you*... you will not listen to me or heed my wisdom. You are fools! And you are not worth my time.”

With that she turned on her heel and disappeared into the darkness.

Heart's Dilemma

There was a long stunned silence in the aftermath of her leaving, filled only by the sputtering of the fire. It had died down to a single weak flame, and even that flame seemed to have lost its brilliance and threatened to die out entirely.

Magda shivered.

Girda growled and spat.

Rika shuffled her feet nervously.

Magda became aware that her heart had returned to its normal thump-thump, and her breathing was slowed and regular. She wasn't sure what to make of these things. She looked around at the little group and saw that each of them seemed to ... droop. Mabel seemed a little smaller, and even Girda sat slumped against a tree without her usual fortitude.

What's wrong with us? she thought.

Jether finally spoke. "Surely she doesn't belong here. How horrible!" He shuddered and shook his head. "Does she?"

Girda spat. "Can't be. Not possible." She spat again.

Katya began to cry. "I want her to come back!" she wailed.

"What?" Mabel gasped. "You can't be serious!"

"I LIKED her," Katya hissed at Mabel. "She felt GOOD to me. I felt ... ALIVE. And now I feel weak and ... like a balloon with no air inside."

"Deflated," Sari said. "Yes, that's the feeling. Look, even the fire was more alive when she was here."

Jether scoffed. “It just needs more wood.” He rose to add some more branches to the fire, but he seemed uncertain as he looked around at them. There *was* an unmistakable difference in the air. The crispness and energy had gone from the night and left an emptiness in its place.

Magda turned to Abathyr, who was sitting quietly with her head bowed. She had pulled the blanket up over her head and was barely visible. The blanket trembled a little and they realized she was crying.

“What is it?” Sari knelt next to her and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Abathyr merely shook her head and continued sobbing silently into her arms.

Rika hesitated, and then blurted out, “She feels like me!”

“You are not like that,” Mabel snorted. “You are not! She was so... phony, so ... ICKY!”

“No, I don’t mean like that. Not that part. She’s like me in some other way. I don’t know if I can explain it.” She turned away from the fire and sat down with her back to them.

“I think I know what you mean,” Jether spoke up. “I think what you sense is the enemy’s touch, Rika. I think once you’ve been invaded by the enemy, you carry that ... almost like a smell.”

“No, that’s not it. Well, maybe that’s part of it. But there’s something else... I don’t know.”

Rika hung her head. Katya went over and sat down next to her and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. That made Rika start to cry.

“It’s the sparkle,” Katya said. “I felt it too, she’s like me in some way too.”

“The sparkle?” Magda asked.

“Something quick, and alive... Rika had some of it, even in the dark place. And me too. The sparkle. The fight. It’s what kept us both alive and ...” Katya hesitated, not sure they would understand what she was saying, not even sure SHE understood what she was saying. She

looked up at them with her own tears still staining her cheeks and cried, “I don’t know what else to call it. But we NEED her.”

They were all silent, digesting Kat’s words.

“But why is she like that?” Mabel asked. “Why does she act like that?”

“She has lost her heart,” Abathyr said quietly, wiping her eyes and cheeks and blowing her nose. She lifted her head and let the blanket fall to her shoulders. “The sparkle you feel is her yang essence. She is the fire, the life, the backbone of us. But she has no heart to balance her. All she has left is terror and rage... and the belief that it is power that will feed her hunger. She holds to that belief with every bit of her being. She cannot loosen her hold on that belief, nor stop her pursuit of power, or she will crumble into her terror.”

“How do you know this?” Mabel asked.

“Because I was with her for many long years. I tried to stay, through many lifetimes, I tried to stay with her. I loved her and I saw her pain, her vulnerable side, her fear. She showed no-one else, but I knew. And many of our little sisters here were with her also.” She opened her coat to reveal many little faces peeking out over the edges of her pockets. Some of them were big-eyed and frightened, some were weeping openly and inconsolably.

Sari leaned over and reached out a hand and one of the little creatures grabbed hold of her fingers and crawled up into her palm. Sari let her fingers curl up around the little one and she cradled her against her chest, rocking and stroking her while she cried her heartbreak. Another crawled into Abathyr’s hand and let herself be held and comforted. Most of the others shrank back into the dark safety of their coat pockets.

Abathyr continued, “Her heartless acts were too much for us. When I tried to speak, to get her to stop, she pushed me down and froze my words. She would not listen to me, she wouldn’t listen to any of us. Many of us broke off from her in bits through the years, over many lifetimes. Some fragmented out of sheer heartbreak. Some she herself shoved out, tired of listening to their voices, tired of their softness, their caring. But even though they were broken from her, they

continued to try to live with her, around her, near her. We needed her, you see. And we did love her. And we hoped... we believed... that she needed us too.

“Finally, I was all that was left with her. I lived in her as a small voice of caring, of love, of conscience, I guess you might say. But finally, there was one lifetime when it became too much. It was more than I could bear, watching her, being her, seeing the pain we inflicted.”

She was consort to the King in a land long ago. I lurked within her, a small voice she rarely was aware of. She... did not love the king, but she found him ... useful. I, hiding in her breast, longed for love, and I hated the coldness of her bed, but she wouldn't listen to me. For a time she was satisfied. But then the king grew old and began to fail sexually. She felt her influence over him fading. She decided another bid for power was in order. She watched and waited, and while she waited for just the right opportunity, she practiced her majicks. She was quite adept at majick, and this helped keep others in awe of her.

She finally found the answer. The king's younger brother, a weak man, something of a weasel, desired her. He frequently watched her while pretending not to. With the king away at war and no other serious contenders for the throne to worry about, she began to draw the king's brother in. She flirted with her eyes, she found reasons to move near him, brush against him, and it didn't take long for him to become her slave. She taunted and teased him, keeping him always in a state of excitement that she promised to fulfill, but only after he performed various tasks for her, after he became king, after he married her and made her his queen.

She did show him some of her majicks, she let him watch while she drew the blue flame from blood in the great stone basin, and he became as enamored of her promise of power and majick as he was of her promise of sex. She convinced him that he would be a most powerful king with her at his side. She convinced him that he was a strong man in himself who could command an army, that he had merely been misunderstood and underestimated by his brother all these years. She played on his long years of childhood resentments and past life hatreds until he was full of himself and his rage and his own righteous rightness.

In short, she created a monster.

The monster gathered an army together and proclaimed himself rightful ruler of the land.

The true king, meantime, had been fighting a neighboring rival, and had little of his army left. When his brother rose up against him, he made a hurried pact with another rival, promising them land and peace if they would help him defeat his traitorous brother. The ensuing war was bloody and vicious. She watched safely from a tall tower in the castle as the men fought and clashed and killed each other. News was brought back to us by loyal messengers. The king and his brother both were dead. Most of our army was dead, or had fled. The allies the king had convinced to help him fight his battle were now moving in on us and were prepared to take over our lands. We had very little to fight back with and the decision was made to try to make peace with these barbarians (as we thought of them).

She took it on herself to deal with their leader, to hear their terms of surrender. Their leader was no fool. He was barbarian, but he had a certain amount of personal power and sexual attraction. She let him take her, but she convinced herself that she was always in control. Only I truly felt his heartlessness and cruelty. Only I knew it was brutal rape. Only I felt the pain and heartbreak of becoming his slave.

Hordes of barbarian soldiers moved into our town, covering the land with their wagons and horses and tents. Those with some stature took over the homes of villagers, relegating the townspeople to slaves and servants. Many of our people were killed outright. But they quickly quit trying to fight back and settled into their new roles and most of the killing stopped.

After a short month of peace, winter fell.

The winter before had been harsh, and the harvest had been minimal, seeing as how all our resources were bent on war. There was little to eat. The soldiers began to starve, when the little we had in storage ran out.”

Abathyr fell silent.

They all waited for her to continue the story, but she was weeping silently and seemed unable to speak. It was Sari who picked up the thread.

“I remember,” she said. “I was there, too. I ... I think I was one of the townspeople.” She looked questioningly at Abathyr, who nodded and then hung her head. Sari closed her eyes and let the memories surface.

“I was there. I remember. I was the wife of the mayor, or somebody like that... before the invasion, as we called it. They were cruel, the invaders, the conquerors. They treated us like slaves and beat us if we didn’t do their bidding quickly enough. They took many of the women, especially the young women, to be their ... personal slaves. It was an awful time, we were always afraid.

Because of my previous position in the town, I was sometimes called on to be go-between. I had a natural gift for easing the tensions between both sides, and I found myself stretched to the limit, trying to keep peace all around me. Then the winter fell, and tempers grew shorter and shorter, as we all came to know hunger on a daily basis. The soldiers ate most of the food and left the meager scraps for us. And a day came when there was nothing left but a bit of grain. All the livestock had been killed. Their horses were too precious to them to eat. We hoped against hope that they would find the situation unbearable and leave us there to fend for ourselves.

But then the order came. SHE came down from her palace, looking a lot older and somewhat less haughty. I didn’t notice the bruises on her face and hands then, I only saw that she appeared well-fed and was dressed warmly. As she told

me what she wanted, what THEY wanted, I fell into a sort of shock. I heard the words, but I simply could not believe that she was saying them. I briefly remembered that we had been friends once, in a much younger time, but from the hardness in her eyes, I could see that old friendships counted for nothing now. I felt my bladder go weak as she told me ... not only what had to be done, but that I would have to decide to whom.

I begged and pleaded with her, please don't make me do this. I can't do this, I can't be the one to decide, please! But she turned from me. Just before she turned, I saw it, I saw the defeat in her eyes. I saw the hopelessness and the terror. I reached out and grabbed hold of her hand and tried to beg one last time. Please, I cried, you can't ask me to do this!

But she withdrew behind her eyes, and left only a stone wall there for me to batter myself against. I heard her words, telling me that if I didn't do this thing, they would take all my children first, and kill them one by one, slowly, painfully, and make me watch.

I don't know how I did it, I don't know what happened next. I must have walked in a fog. I remember afterwards, the screams of the mothers, their hatred toward me. I remember the cries of the children as they were taken away to be slaughtered and eaten like cattle. I remember walking like a zombie through the town that first night, past the fires where the men sat eating, feasting on our children. My eyes fixed on one man, tearing into something with his teeth and chewing happily, then tossing the bone into the fire.

I felt the hatred in the eyes of the mothers beating on my back as I passed by their windows. I was consumed by self-loathing and helpless rage.

None of us could eat the flesh of our beloved children of course, and grief and starvation began to take their toll on our people. And in the end, my actions didn't save my children either. They were taken and killed and used to feed the army just like all the rest."

She took a ragged breath and burst into tears. Abathyr drew her close and together they cried their grief and horror and heartbreak. The others around the circle wept with them, some in horror, some in rage.

“How could this have happened?” Mabel asked. “How could she ... how could they... ?”

“I’ve seen such and worse in my experiences in war,” Girda growled. “Humankind is cruel and heartless.”

“She wasn’t *entirely* heartless, then.” Abathyr hung her head, remembering. “But that was the moment when I finally had to leave her. The horror of what we had brought about was too much. She began to crack. Her tightly controlled façade began to fall apart and the terror beneath began to surface. And when that happened, I believe she went mad. She tried to turn herself to stone, much like our Underground Sister, the one you called Ghash, tried to turn herself to stone beneath the earth. But unlike Ghash, this one couldn’t stop living. Even if she had wanted to, I don’t think she could have. Her essence is ... life. She *is* the yang essence, the life force. She can’t die, she can’t help but try to find a way to survive. And so she closed herself off to me, to all that was soft and needy, to all that cared and could be hurt. She wanted to be stone that moved and lived and dominated, and cared nothing for the hurts of others. Even then I didn’t want to leave her. What would she become without me? And I still loved and needed her. But the heaviness of my heartbreak and self-loathing weighed me down. Heavier and heavier I became, until I could no longer lift myself to follow her or be part of her. I gave up, I left her, and she became the creature you saw tonight. Driven. Hard. Terrified. And I have never forgiven myself for that.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Sari said. “She made her own choices.”

“Yes but ... it wasn’t just her,” Rika said. “Did you see it on her? Did you see the black thing?”

Mabel gasped. “Yes! I saw something! I thought it was my imagination, or a shadow. It was there, but then it wasn’t.”

“What?” Girda asked.

“A leech,” Magda and Sari said together.

The others turning toward them with questions in their eyes had apparently seen nothing.

“I don’t know,” Magda said. “Sari and I both dreamt of that woman and in our dreams she had a leech attached to her back. I don’t know what to make of this. I don’t know what to make of the things I felt in her. And this tale of the past is ... horrible. But, nonetheless, even so... I do think she’s one of us and she belongs here with us. She might still be healed, if she would let herself share with us.”

“Yes,” Rika whispered through her tears. “She’s one of us.”

“Yes,” Abathyr nodded. “I believe with you that healing is possible. I have hope. And no matter what she has done, no matter what she has become, she is part of us, and ... we need her. We need her essence to live. But right now, I’m so sad, and so tired. I don’t know how to help, I don’t know what to do next.”

She began to flicker and fade again. Sari, alarmed, drew the pitcher from the satchel at her side and held it up. She looked at Magda, and Magda nodded her head. “Yes, let’s all have a sip. I think we could all use some.”

Sari poured out a little in the cup and handed it to Abathyr, whose hand trembled a little as she took the cup. She held it to her lips without drinking for a moment, as if afraid... or perhaps she was just savoring the moment. Then she closed her eyes and tipped the cup. As she let the liquid slowly roll down her throat, a sweetly peaceful smile birthed itself on her pale face.

“Ahhhhh,” she breathed, handing the cup back to Sari, “Thank you.” She leaned back against a rock and sighed deeply.

Sari poured out a sip for each one and then she poured a bit onto the ground. The ground rumbled in response, causing Sari to jump.

Ghash's Rage

The air suddenly grew heavy around them. They all felt a great pressure, as if a huge hand were pressing down on them. Even the fire seemed to be having trouble breathing. Its newly fed brightness flickered and faded and dimmed. And then they heard a sound from beyond the dark, a heavy, old-as-bones, cracked-as-stone kind of sound, which they realized was labored breathing... *ghash... ghash...*

“She was here, wasn’t she?” from the dark beyond their circle a voice croaked. *Ghash... ghash...* “She was here? My sister?”

They all gasped at the sight of the woman who followed her voice into the dim light of the fire. She was as Magda had described her, huge and hideous. Painful as it was to look at her, it must have been ten times more painful to be in her skin. She stood heavy and squat and naked in their circle.

Magda was reminded suddenly of a very old memory from the dim time, something she saw on the long road. She had been walking in a dark dream, lost in a deep jungle of green somewhere, and she had come across a large female figure, squat and heavy, with pendulous breasts, carved into the face of a cliff. It had taken her breath away, that large stone figure, and frightened her, but she couldn’t remember why.

“I’m so glad you came,” she said, moving forward to the woman.

“My sister?” Ghash asked impatiently. “She was here, I know it, I can feel it.” She glared at them all as if they were hiding some great secret from her. “I can feel ... something. Something has been gnawing at my sleep these past days. Something prods at me and pokes at me and WON’T LET ME SLEEP!” She bellowed and her voice rang echoing through the valley.

Then she sat down suddenly with a huge thud, apparently exhausted by her own outburst.

“What am I doing here?” she moaned. “Let me sleep...”

She slowly sank lower to the ground, bending her spine almost in half, as if the effort of remaining upright was suddenly too much for her. All her movements were slow and sluggish, dragging with a heaviness that infected them all, weighing them down with despair and hopelessness, making it hard to move or breathe, or even think. Even little Desiree had sunk down to the ground, her wings drooped and hung limp down her back. Only Dhalla seemed to be unaffected. She was sitting up and leaning toward Ghash, staring at her raptly with her deep blue eyes and rocking back and forth a little.

“Did she hurt anyone?” Ghash breathed.

“No,” Abathyr rose and went over to her. She gently covered the massive shoulders with one of her blankets. “No, it’s alright, she didn’t hurt anybody.”

Ghash turned her face to Abathyr and she seemed to smile, but they couldn’t be sure. It was so fleeting and brief.

“Everywhere she goes...” she croaked, “Everywhere we go... there is only pain and suffering and disease and death.”

“Suffering and death,” breathed Dhalla softly, still rocking back and forth.

“And she won’t listen to me. She draws me upwards like a magnet, I am compelled by her ... energy. I thought she had diminished over these last centuries, but ... here I am after all this time. I haven’t the strength to resist her.”

“She wouldn’t listen to any of us either,” Abathyr said. “But I saw a softening in her, Sister. It wasn’t much, but it was there. And we need her, Sister, we need her if we’re going to live. But listen. I don’t think she’s what drew you upward this time. I think *she* was drawn here as much as you were. There’s something here...”

“If we’re going to *live*?” Ghash rasped, interrupting her. “LIVE? I do not want to live!!! How can you say we need her. I hate her, I do not need her. I need her only to stop ... to cease, to

give up this useless struggle to live, to find value in power aboveground. She will learn, eventually, she will see that there is no use in trying.”

“Do you really believe she is cause of the death and suffering?” Rika asked.

“YES!” Ghash shouted, and the very stones of the valley seemed to ring, echoing her rage round and round. Then she took a deep breath and hung her head. “No,” she said painfully. “It’s not just her. WE are the cause,” *ghash... ghash ...* “Both of us, all of us. By our living. And yet, we cannot die. I have tried. I have hated her for defying me in this, for refusing to die with me. I have thought that if I could get HER to agree to die, then I could, we all could, finally, at long last, really truly DIE. But we continue to live and we cannot stop our hearts from caring and breaking over and over again. Perhaps this is our punishment for the great wrongness within us. Punishment for our desire and love and need. We are made to watch again and again as we bring death to those we love. We cannot die, and we cannot stop loving. What a cruel joke, eh? Perhaps the god of this world is a sadist, eh?”

She paused, and in the silence she seemed to grow heavier. She lost her definition. For a moment it seemed as if a great featureless blob of dark stone had plopped down there. Then she heaved a great sigh, and there she was again, settled back into her previous form. She began to tremble and gasp. Huge tears spilled from her eyes and down her cheeks. She shook her fists and screeched at the night sky. Then, as if that effort spent all her energies, she collapsed on the ground, breathing painfully.

“I know what you think,” she said, and her eyes traveled to Girda’s stern face. “You think I just gave up, never tried. But you’re wrong. I wasn’t always like this. I didn’t always live underground, trying only to die. Many times, many times I tried to find a way to live,” she gasped, “tried to find life aboveground that was something more than... pain. Each time I rose up, we were drawn together, my sister and I, and all the many little fragments who had life with us. There were so many wars, so many battles for control. I have hated her. And she hated me. And we were both hated by everyone. It seemed as if there was a great force bearing down on us, wherever we went, a force that was determined to keep us at each other’s throats, and determined to keep us from living and being happy at all costs. And we were such easy pawns! We believed lies and whispers. We never reached for each other as helpmates or companions, or

tried to learn the truth. We succumbed to the lies and pain and torture, and each time we fought and split apart again, I had less and less of me. There were fewer little parts to warm and comfort my heart. Until finally there was nothing left, no reason to keep living, no reason to keep trying. Hopelessness was all, and all was dark and pain. I ... abdicated. Quit fighting. Let my sister have life. Let her seek power and fools to worship her. I choose death."

Dhalla moaned and rocked, deep in sympathetic communion with Ghash.

"After long years spent underground alone, bits and pieces came to me. I thought I was long past caring for my own aloneness, but ... " she turned to Abathyr, "I remember when you came, and we shared in despair and heartbreak, I felt ... less alone."

Abathyr nodded and sighed.

"But now, you speak of needing HER?"

Abathyr hung her head and said nothing. Her face was constricted with fear and pain.

"After all she's done? After all the heartless things she has done?"

"Yes, sister, that's what I say," Abathyr raised her face to Ghash, and they saw the tears spill down her cheeks. "I love you, and I don't want you to be angry with me. But if we are to live, then we need her. We need her to heal with us." She paused and studied her fingers for a moment. Finally she said softly, "We need you to heal with us too, sister. I know you don't want to live. But maybe things will be... could be different."

"You'll leave again, you'll go off in search of she who became my enemy. She is still my enemy. She'll tell you all her lies about me and you'll believe them and you'll turn against me and cast me out!"

"Oh, sister, no," Abathyr began to cry. "I won't leave you, ever again. I promised. Saying we need her and love her doesn't mean leaving you."

“Liar!” Ghash shouted at her. She was shaking with rage. “I know better. Don’t lie to me, don’t bother to tell me your lies, your sticky-sweet, transparent heart-lies. You turn around and say the opposite thing the minute you’re in her presence. You’ll say anything she wants to hear, won’t you, anything at all? You’ll agree with her lies, agree with her hatred of me, won’t you?”

Abathyr rung her hands and shook her head, “No, sister, no. Never again will I do that. But ... I did, I did do that. I was so afraid, of the anger and hate, I only wanted to find peace. I played whatever hand I thought would bring peace. I am so sorry.”

Ghash’s sobs grew deeper and more wretched. “You left me, all of you left me there! I lost the battles again and again. She won against me, she won you over, she will always win. She’s clever and strong, and I’m stupid and weak. I remember the wars, the struggles for power, the constant shifting sands of alliances and allegiances. And *always* you chose her over me. You vacillated and joined forces with her greater strength, and I was killed or cast out, again and again. You believed her lies, you let yourselves be manipulated and never seemed to see her bad intent. Were you so blind, or merely stupid?”

Abathyr stood up then and shouted back, “How can you be so cruel? Do you really not know how we felt? When so many of us have come to you in the dark and wept with you and told you our pain in our dreams? It was not a choice, loving her. Or loving you. It was not a choice we could make, any of us! We loved you both, we loved, that was all we could do. *It was not a choice!!* The wars between you broke us apart and brought hatred into our lives and between us too. We broke apart again and again too!”

Ghash looked up at her and her rage faded away, leaving only fear and remorse in its place. She grew heavier and sank down lower to the ground. Her skin took on a gray pallor and she seemed to be turning to stone before their very eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I know how you hurt ...” she gasped and coughed... “I know how you broke apart and struggled to live in that broken state.” She reached out her hand, and her face crumpled into grief. “Please don’t hate me, please don’t leave me again, I’m sorry I got angry.”

“It’s ok to be angry here,” Girda said gruffly, tears glistening in her eyes.

“Yes, sister, it’s ok, you can be angry. I won’t leave you like that, ever again,” Abathyr knelt back down next to Ghash and touched her gently. “I will stay, and I’ll listen to your rage here and now.”

The grayness faded and Ghash began to tremble and shake, her entire body rumbling with an earthquake of rage that needed to erupt. A screech of enormous proportions exploded from her, and wave after wave of growling, sobbing, screeching rage came pouring out. “Why?” she cried, “Why???? I hate you, I hate you all. There was never anybody on MY side! And why am I fated to be always, endlessly alone, endlessly forgotten, unneeded, endlessly empty and HUNGRY!!!!”

They felt the ground beneath them begin to rumble and shake a little with Ghash’s rage. It was as if all the valley was growling and raging.

“And what is it there, at the root of it all? I will tell you! Desire to live. That is the problem. That is our SIN! Desire to live. It was all because we were trying to live! LIVE!! What’s the good of that, all it ever brought was pain and more pain!!! Better to die!”

She brought her fists down hard, pounding on the ground and making little indents in the ground. Abathyr moved back a little as Ghash began to thrash about in her tears. They all sat down as the valley rumbled and rolled and growled. It seemed to go on and on forever, and they waited, knowing how long this eruption had been in coming, how long held and compressed and piled high with life after life of despair and pain.

Finally her rage spent itself and she drew a shuddering breath. But then she doubled over, holding her vast belly, and another wave exploded from her in a high pitched keening. Her hands grasped at the air and her eyes flew open wide as she emitted long, piercing cries, broken by short gasps for breath.

“Hungry!” she cried, “I’m so HUNGRY!! Need, need, neeeeeeeedd! Ay, ayyyyiyiyaaaaay” Her jaw began quivering and she clenched her teeth but that didn’t stop the shivering, and they heard a great clattering as her teeth chattered and banged together in her mouth. She continued to keen between clenched teeth, but they couldn’t understand what she was saying. It sounded

like gibberish, infantile screaming with a real word mixed in here and there. “M-m-m-m-m--- eeeeeeeeeee! No, no, no, no, NONONONO!! Aaaaaaagh-fa-fa-fa-fa Hungry, hungreeeeee, g-g-g-nnnnnnnnnnnneeeeeee!!!!!! Please, please, PLEASE!!!!” Her hands reached out grasping at something only she could see, some long ago memory, something that came not quite close enough to grasp and then moved away. They watched her unseeing eyes track the leaving of whatever it was, and heartbreak and rage and terror mixed together in her tears. And then she began beating her fists on her breasts and belly with huge whomping smacks, and crying the long bottled rage against herself that told of the final judgment her long hunger had deduced. “Garbage!” she cried over and over again. “Garbage! Garrrrrbage! NOTHING! USELESS!!! GARRRRRRBAGE!!!!!!!!”

Girda moved in, thinking to help keep the woman from hurting herself. But Girda, large as she was, was no match in size or strength to Ghash. She looked to the others for help. Jether rushed over with a handful of blankets and pillows and together they managed to insert them between Ghash’s pounding fists and her body. Ghash pounded the padding, frustrated that she could no longer rend her own flesh, and then she gave up and grabbed one blanket in both fists and stuck it in her mouth. Her teeth came down hard and she let herself bite and rend and tear and growl and HATE.

The fire had died down to a bare flame by the time Ghash’s rage and self-hate was spent. She had torn and chewed one blanket to shreds, and despite their best efforts, she had torn her own flesh. Blood was oozing from new wounds and old wounds and torn scabs. Exhausted, she had collapsed onto one side and closed her eyes. She continued to cry a little, making little mewling sounds and working her mouth, and occasionally a huge shiver would run through her entire body. They weren’t sure what to do. Abathyr tried covering her large bulk again to keep her warm. Jether built the fire up. Suddenly Magda had an idea.

She took the pitcher and cup from Sari and knelt near Ghash’s head with it. Unstoppering the pitcher, she dipped a corner of the blanket into it, saturating the material. Then she gently touched the blanket to Ghash’s mouth, letting a little droplet of the manna drip between the massive lips. One drop, then another, and then Ghash swallowed, and her tongue came darting out to lick her lips. Magda slowly worked the blanket into her mouth, and as she did, Ghash began suckling on the life-giving liquid hungrily. When she had sucked all the manna out of the

corner, Magda dipped it again into the pitcher and fed her gently, a tiny mother feeding a massive, long neglected infant child. Abathyr motioned to Magda to give her the pitcher. She poured a little out into a shallow bowl, and she and Sari ministered to Ghash's wounds, dipping bits of cloth into the manna and laying them gently over the worst of her wounds and especially the places where she had no skin. Eventually Ghash gave a huge shuddering sigh and opened her eyes a crack.

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice hoarse and cracked from all her heavy crying. She shivered again, a long cold shiver that spoke of a deep embedded bone-cold.

They all gathered around her, touching her gently and pouring into her their warmth and love. Her raw need and hunger had touched a chord in all of them. Dhalla nestled herself in the crook of Ghash's arms. Nora crawled out of her wrappings and joined her there. Girda sat behind her and patted her on the shoulder.

Katya positioned herself right in front of Ghash's face. "You are not garbage," she said.

Ghash opened one eye wearily and looked into Katya's earnest little face. "Huh!" She closed her eyes again.

"You are not garbage," Rika said.

They heard Dhalla and Nora both weeping now. Ghash looked down at them and a few large tears seeped from her eyes. The three of them wept quietly together for a moment.

"You know, don't you, little ones" Ghash whispered. "You know."

Dhalla nodded and wept.

"Why do you think you're garbage?" Sari asked sadly.

Ghash took a deep breath and began to tell her tale.

"I was there alone in the void for so long, with nothing, no light, no air, no food. Can you conceive of such a thing here, in this well-lit place? Can you conceive of thousands of years of darkness and starvation? Millions? There was no pity, no concern for me, no one noticed I was missing from the fabric of creation. No light came to rescue me, no comforting hand came to pull me from my torturous existence.

Dark, starvation, aloneness, powerlessness. These things were my reality, for many millennia. At times I thought I must be mad. I tried to go out of existence, I tried to not care that I was starving and alone and ... helpless.

How did I come to be there? I had only tiny bits of memories. Some kind of explosion, something that had been good but frightening at the same time, a squeezing.

I remembered being a part of something. I had awareness of myself like the rind of an orange, the thick shell of a fruit. The outer edge of ..something. And within, something was being formed, something was happening. I felt an undulating. A quickening, an excitement, a thrill. Something within was moving and rubbing against me and I felt it as a pleasurable thing. It pushed outward a little bit. I squeezed inward a little bit. It pushed outward more. I squeezed, I was so excited, and afraid, and the pressure mounted and built and I was squeezing and then -- there was resistance and something not right and ... And then, I felt very scared. The thrill of movement became a fear of ... something, I don't even know what. Too much, too fast. It was pushing outward too hard! I tried to expand to compensate for the pushing outward, but I couldn't and I felt stretched and stretched and pushed and STRETCHED and I thought I was going to break and I got so afraid!!!! I clamped down. I clamped down hard. I rested then, holding still and clenched and knowing relief that I wouldn't break apart.

And then I heard/felt the fear building from the Something inside. I heard/felt its terror ... of suffocation and a fear of death, and it seemed to be afraid of ME! Was I killing this Something inside? I felt fear and guilt that I was so selfish ...

that I might be killing something inside because of my fear. That I was wrong to hold back and clamp down on the expansion. I began to let go, to loosen my grip and as I did, I felt the pressure inside building and building and BUILDING and

We exploded...

I woke in darkness, black and empty and cold and alone. Drifting alone in the dark, I struggled. And then howling. Horrible empty howling need. Need, and need, and NEED! Hungry hungry hungry HUNGRY!!! Devoid of light and sustenance, my life was a minute by minute, second by second grinding emptiness, aching hunger, that went on and on and on forever. I couldn't see or hear. I couldn't tell up from down, sideways from frontways. I couldn't tell where I ended and the darkness began. There was absolutely NO light, no sustenance.

I felt strange pains. Biting and stabbing and piercing and crunching. I couldn't feel my body, my self, to know where the pain was, or to know how to get away from it or make it stop. I couldn't move myself, I was like... a blob ... hanging in space. I couldn't move. I was frozen there, with no light and no ability to generate light ... a useless, powerless, but highly magnetic blob. Things, horrible things in the dark, drifted inevitably to me and I bloated and bloated and became a dark grotesque, hideous, gaping gash in space. And I was powerless to stop it.

But I was aware, in some part of me, that I used to be part of something. Some dim memory of wholeness, of mobility, of togetherness. I seemed to be aware that THEY were still out there, together, not alone like me, way out here on the edge of nowhere... but they didn't seem to be aware of me. They didn't seem to miss me, nobody came to rescue me or even investigate.

I saw ... THEM. Or did I? In the vast foreverness of my dark, it seemed the strangest thing of all to be aware of something out there, light, movement, sound. But it was far, far away. And they had – apparently - no awareness of me. Again and again I fell into death-sleep, and awakened to the light and the sound. Again and again hope rose up like a foolish child, only to be dashed again and again

against the cold and the dark. They did not want me or need me. I was forgotten, they did not even notice that I was gone from them. All the important ingredients were put into the bowl and the glory of creation became. The garbage got thrown out. Thrown away and forgotten.

That's what I am. I am the banana peel, the egg shell, the excess, the hard rind, not needed. The leftovers, the shit. The literal excrement of creation.

That the garbage is alive seems to be the cruelest joke of all. Why do I have awareness and feelings? Why do I suffer this hunger and aloneness and cold? Why do I rage? Is it a mistake? Why don't they come and kill me? Put me out of my misery?

I am darkness eating my own darkness. I am a sucking black hole. I am need, feeding on itself.

Suddenly a light came near. It swooped in on me and for a fraction of a fraction of a second, it seemed to consider me. It actually brushed against me but... the encounter happened so fast and was over before I could even realize what happened. I spent another millennium trying to understand. What did he see in me? Why did he leave? Why did he not take me in his arms and feed me and help me live? Ach, what did I do to drive him away? I replay the event, alone in my darkness, again and again. I remember that parts of me reached out with greedy clutching fingers, grabbing at him, trying to get from him that which we hunger for. Give it to me, give it to me! Yes, I frightened him with my need, ach, why did I do that, why do I need so much, why can't I kill this needy hunger?

I realize that I felt ... smaller ... with his leaving. What did that mean? Did he take some of me with him but ... leave the rest of me behind? And yet, in other places I feel... more. But the More is not me as I've come to know myself. Did he leave something behind? Yes, I see it, I feel it, the darkness.

It is HIS need. He has added his need to my own, thrown it away, along with something else, something that chases his need, hates it, hates me too. Does he see his own darkness that he has thrown away? See how it shines darkly on my skin, see how it burns into me, like acid, like an insect burrowing, feeding off my essence deep inside. It burns like ice deep down in my bowels. I feel his hatred, his need, and his terror. His terror eats into me, seeking refuge from his hatred. They chase each other round and round my entrails, I feel them like nasty little rats in the cellar.

I hate him. I hate them all. I feel his hatred and his terror, and I know what a coward he is. He pretends and poses and postures, but I know he's a coward. He only stands upright because he has thrown away his animal. He can claim to have no hatred or fear, but I know better... I know what it is he has thrown away, thinking it was gone into the darkness of space, but it drifted to me, it came to me, it found me there, and it was not the light I needed. No, it didn't feed me. It fed ON me. And hated me. And hated him.

I hate him. I hate them all.

I- I- I... what is I? I'M SO CONFUSED!!! What is my hate and what is his? What is my terror and what is his? I don't know, and I don't know HOW to know. That is my greatest terror... that I know nothing and I have no way to know anything, and I don't know how to figure out how to know anything.

Am I insane? Is any of this real?

Hate is real. Hate is the most solid thing in this darkness. Hate hate hate HATE!!! I hate them all, I hate all that lives, all that breathes. I hate everything that moves. I want to kill all that lives!!!! Leave me here in the dark. How dare you come here now after all this time! Leave me, this is MY space, my darkness, my aloneness. I was learning to sleep, I was learning not to care, I was learning how to still my breath and sleep the long sleep. HOW DARE YOU DISTURB MY SLEEP!!!!!! You come here and wake me and I remember and I hurt hurt hurt

hunger hunger hunger hungry starving hate you hate you hate you!!!!!!

Ah god, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Please don't leave me, please don't hate me, please. I'm so hungry.

“I don’t blame him, I don’t blame you, any of you. I don’t blame my sisters for leaving me.” Ghash wiped her tear-streaked face with one corner of the blanket. “I am useless garbage. It’s true, everything my sister ever hated about me is true. I am useless and whining and fearful. I can’t help it!” she cried, growing angry again. “I don’t know how to be anything else! What do I have that is not helpless and useless? My sister is the one who lives, who cannot help but live, no matter how I have tried to kill her drive to survive. All I have is old souring hatred and hunger and helplessness,” she cried softly.

“Hungry,” Nora whispered.

“Helpless,” Dhalla whispered.

Tears were rolling down both their cheeks. Ghash touched each little cheek with her large finger and together they rocked back and forth and wept.

“Hunger and helplessness,” Ghash repeated. “I’m so tired. But not tired like before, not heavy. Just... sweet-tired. What was that you gave me?”

“Manna,” Sari said. “It came from... well, we don’t know exactly what it is but we got it from the Gardener Man, the Voice, the ones who help us and protect our valley. He says it’s the stuff of life, and ... he gave it to us so we would have some of our very own.”

“Our very own,” Ghash whispered. “Our very own? You mean, to never be hungry again? Never again to have to beg for crumbs from a heartless master’s table?”

“Never hungry again,” Sari said.

“Oh sister,” Abathyr breathed, “Isn’t that the most wonderful gift? We don’t ever have to be hungry again, but that’s only part of it. We don’t even have to ask him for help, do you see?” She turned to the others who had confusion written all over their faces. “We... all of us ... have been in such a state of terror to even ask for what we need. We ... all of us ... believed at a deeply buried level, that our need is what caused the great burning, the great blast, and all the years of punishment and torture ever since then. Asking, showing that we need His light and food, is such a hugely terrifying thing that ... well, we’ve been stuck in a hard place. Unable to open to get the light we need to heal, because opening - and needing - means getting killed. This gift of manna for our very own is... well, it’s the most wonderful gift He could have given. It means there is hope, there is a way out of the conundrum. Do you see?”

But Ghash had fallen asleep, and it appeared to be a peaceful sleep this time, not the comatose death-sleep that had drawn Magda downward with its seductive song. They covered her with blankets and she began to snore lightly.

As they watched her sleeping, suddenly she seemed to blur. Her form was changing before their eyes. Her huge bulk began to shrink and lengthen. Her reddish skin grew orange and then pink, and then turned a deep yellow with dark brown stripes. They watched in amazement as the large woman’s form shifted and changed, stretching to momentarily take on the appearance of a large golden feline, tawny and sleek. Then she blurred again and she began to glow in the firelight. Her skin became a shiny translucent golden color that glowed in the night, and her form, though still huge, became incredibly beautiful and womanly. Her face, still sleeping peacefully, shifted and changed, the cheekbones grew high, the mouth full and generous, the forehead grew high and a luscious mane of hair flowed from her head like a golden mantle. She held that form for only a moment, and then she blurred again, shrinking and growing and changing color, until she was once again the heavy, blobbish, reddish hued Ghash they knew.

The Brothers

“What did we just see?” Magda asked Abathyr in a hushed voice as they moved to the other side of the fire so as not to disturb the sleeping Ghash. “There’s so much more to all of this, isn’t there? I feel as if we’ve only just touched the barest tip of the iceberg here, and I want so badly to understand.”

“Understanding the whole picture won’t be easy,” Abathyr said, sitting on a large rock. Sari moved to sit on her other side, and there was just enough room on the rock for both of them to snuggle together. Abathyr hooked her arm through Sari’s and pulled her close. “You all have been remembering your past in bits and pieces. Part of the problem is that your memories are locked in your pain. Mine too. It’s hard to remember something encased in stone or ice. But this valley, the sharing and crying you do here, and the gift of manna, are inching us all forward into recovery. Each of us has a piece of the puzzle. I don’t think any of us can know the whole story. Until we’re all back together again and all the stories have been remembered and cried and shared, the whole picture cannot be seen.”

“We need each other,” Girda said.

“Yes, absolutely.”

“What about Ghash, what about you Sisters? How do we all fit together? I don’t understand.” Rika was standing a little apart from them, her hands were stuff deep in the pockets of her trousers and her shoulders were hunched up with tension.

“Near as I can understand,” Abathyr said, “when we split apart originally, the first time, we each were damaged in a particular way, and whatever we were feeling or suffering at that time became our primary ... imprint. We’ve lived many lives since then, and each life has seemed to be mostly a replaying of our original imprint. But, there have been many gatherings, many times when we tried to come back together, and during those times we have mingled and exchanged essence and mixed ourselves together depending on how it felt and who we wanted to align with. But the splits and imprints that happened originally caused more breakage and shattering, and we

were never able to fully heal with each other. We came together and broke apart again and again.” She turned to look at Sari. “You and I are cut of the same cloth, so to speak.” She turned to Magda. “And you seem to have a large piece of our Underground Sister here in you. Not that you are *like* her. Actually you feel very much like Sister Superior to me, only not so ... well, more like a healed and heartfelt version of her. But you also seem to vibrate similarly to Ghash, so I would guess that you were there at the first gathering, and perhaps bonded deeply with her then.”

“Which would explain why she was able to pull Magda down underground with her!” Sari cried.

“Yes, I see,” Magda said, nodding her head. She sat silently for a moment, thinking and feeling into everything that had happened between she and Ghash. “But ... oh, there’s so much we don’t know, so much we don’t understand!” She shook her head and felt a desire growing within herself, a desire to call to the Gardener Man and the Voice, to ask for help and information. She followed the desire without thinking, and out into the night went her call, carried on the wings of her desire.

“I might be able to clear up a few things,” they all turned to face the source of these words.

The Gardener Man, with just plain brown eyes this time, was standing a few feet outside their circle, swathed in pre-dawn mist. He didn’t move, just stood quietly there, both hands clutching his stick. Nobody spoke for a moment. Magda noticed that Jether took a few steps backward and shrank into the darkness where she couldn’t see him anymore. Most of the others were just staring at the Gardener Man. Rika looked confused. Desiree was fluttering her wings excitedly and all of her pinkness was turning a darker, brighter shade, more like fuchsia than the light pink she normally was. Mabel was Magda’s greatest concern. She turned to find Mabel clutching her chest and scowling, but she, like Rika, looked more confused than anything.

Mixed emotions, she thought. Wanting to trust, but ... we’ve all got so much in our past that tells us not to.

She felt bad for not warning them that she was going to call Him, but she barely had time to know it herself. Her desire had sprung forth from her so quickly! *Me and Desiree*, she thought wryly, *jumping so quickly. I must be careful.*

She cleared her throat and said, “Welcome to our Circle. Can you help us understand?”

“Some things, I can, I think. But some things will only be understood when the healing is complete. As your Abathyr has said, the memories of the events themselves have been locked in stone with the pain, and each of you carries your own piece of the puzzle. And I can’t claim anymore to know you better than you know yourselves. But this dear one,” he nodded his head in the direction of Ghash, “and her Sister who wouldn’t stay, are both essential to the fabric of this world. They are more like me, deeply at home in manifestation. They are tied to all that is created here, and tied to you all in a way that is similar to the way a tree grows. In a physical sense, Ghash is your root system, the seed pod, from which you spring... And she is the embodiment of your life force, your desire to live, your sense of self, and identity, all that is ... or should have... unfolded from your deepest desires into fruition and life. The damage that was done so early on made it impossible for the unfolding to happen the way it should have. I made mistakes, we all made great mistakes... a great wrongness occurred from which I only now begin to hope that we can recover.”

He knelt near Ghash’s head and looked at her long and deeply. Then he sighed and moved back to them. “This should never have been. I have such remorse and self-blame. I try to imagine it, how it could have been, my essence and hers... For she is the font from which all manifested life springs, combined with my essence, of course. For a long, long time I refused to see. I wanted to believe I was all there was, that I alone was responsible for creating manifested life. I secretly stole her essence and blended it with my own, and together with the light, we caused bodies to come into creation that had invisible seeds of destruction built into them. We didn’t understand what was going wrong. And I blamed Her for that, never was I able to see my own responsibility there, or admit that I needed her. Ach, but that’s a very long, terrible story. I can’t tell it all now. What I started to say, was that you are all like the trunk and branches and leaves of the tree. You are tied to Ghash, springing from her, and connected to each other by your ... root system. That’s not quite right, but I can’t think of a better description right now.”

“That makes perfect sense to me!” Magda said. “Yes, I’ve felt that connection with everyone here. I told myself that we were sisters, family.”

“Yes, you are, and yet, you are also fragmented beings, parts of something that once was more whole. None of you is complete without the others. You have been unable to live, because your life force was damaged so early on, almost from the very moment of being born.”

“The damage that was done...” He paused and sighed and his breath was ragged. “The damage that was done to Her, was mostly done by me. Very early on. So early that it was easy to forget. I did not understand that we were meant to need each other, to work together. I believe now that we were meant to be drawn together by our *need* of each other, and that by feeding each other’s need, we would evolve and grow and love would be born between us. I didn’t understand, and all I knew was I didn’t want to feel needy or dependent. I felt so ... out of control! So helpless. It was not something I could accept. I discovered very early on that I had the ability to push away things I didn’t want to feel, and so I pushed my need for Her away, out of my consciousness, to where I no longer felt it nagging at me.

“A very long time went by, and there were many more of these same kinds of splits within me. One of the main splits, and one of the earliest, was between the one you call the Voice, and me. I had body needs, you see, sexual needs. And since need of any kind was abhorrent to us, he pushed me away. He tried to ignore me at first, He tried to think of me as a dull nagging headache that will pass in time. But my needs were too great, and they built up a great pressure that could not be denied. And I hated his restrictions on me. I hated his condemnation of me, of something in me that I couldn’t help or stop. I began to clamor and demand his attention. His final rejection of me gave me a thorough imprint, a deep and binding imprint, that ALL needs are evil. Somehow I twisted this around in myself to believe that since it was Her I needed, it was simply Her fault that I needed, therefore it was Her fault that He rejected me. Everything was Her fault.”

He hung his head and they saw the tears fall to the ground and onto the toes of his scuffed shoes.

“When I met her here and there, badly fragmented even then, I only thought of my own unmet needs, and how I could get them met in the most expedient manner, without having to form any

permanent attachment to Her, without having to feed Her needs at all. I never realized until recently how much of *my* need She herself was holding. I never realized how much I hated my own need when I saw it looking out of her eyes. But I also hated her need of me. I was afraid of her clinging, her clutching, her demands to be fed. I was afraid she would drag me down into the abyss of my own desire and kill me there, that she would use my need against me, to manipulate me and make a fool of me. My fear conjured fantastic pictures of what she would do to me if she ever really ensnared me, that she would suck all the light out of me and then devour my bones. In my delusions, I believed she was evil, and no effort should be spared to rid creation of her presence.”

A deep groan came from the darkness, and they all turned to see what it was. Sari rose and went out of the circle, returning with one arm around Jether who was sobbing deeply. She sat down with him and held him while he cried, “My need, my heart, my love, our need, my heart broke, my heart broke...”

“Yes,” the Gardener Man said, nodding his head sadly. “I’m sorry, my brother. I’m so sorry. You held our love, and you were cast out too.”

“I tried! I tried so hard,” Jether sobbed. “Do you have any idea how hard it was for me? You didn’t seem to care, or want to care. He wanted me to be loving, but ... do you know how hard it is to be loving without needing that which you love? To only be able to allow that small slice of love in yourself that is impersonal and detached? I condemned myself over and over again. I had so much love to give, love that could have grown to something beautiful. But it was too needy, my love, too personal. Some of my brothers did a better job than me, and were able to present the kind of love He approved of and said was TRULY loving. My brand of love was not acceptable. I lost huge parts of my heart, judging them as too selfish, too needing of personal attachment, too ... unevolved. Ah, god, I failed Him, and I failed her. I failed...” He wrapped his arms around his middle and rocked back and forth while he continued to cry. Sari held him and rocked with him, tears glistening in her eyes.

The Gardener Man came and knelt on one knee before Jether, leaning on his stick. His dark eyes were sad and filled with tears. “You did not fail,” he said firmly. He placed one hand on the younger man’s knee. “We have much to heal between us, brother, but please, hear me on this.

You did not fail. Your love is good and true. But it never could have healed everything. The task you were told was yours, to hold it all together with love as the glue, and a thin, battered love at that, was untrue and unfair. We were missing so many pieces of information, and the first is what these blessed women have found here – that every part has a place in the circle, and that each must be allowed to speak and share and feel whatever it is they feel. If we had only waited, listened...” He shook his head. “There are too many *if only*’s. We are listening now. We are following their lead, and trying to make everything right. We need to find all our parts too, brother, and heal all our own brokenness.”

Jether looked up at him for a long moment, their eyes, so much alike, locked in sympathy and pain. Then he slowly nodded. “Yes. Yes, that’s what I want too. Can we become whole again?”

“I know we can, brother. I KNOW it.”

“I want so badly to know where I belong, to be of use, to be able to help...”

“You were laden with a great burden, and there was no way you could succeed. It was not a lack or a failure on your part. You can help now, we need your loving heart, we are not complete without you.”

Jether looked at the Gardener Man with grateful eyes that still spilled tears.

The pre-dawn mist grew thicker and Magda shivered. Mabel stifled a yawn, then looked apologetically around at them all.

The Gardener Man looked around at them and smiled. “You are all so brave,” he said. “But this has been the longest night I’ll bet any of you can remember.”

Girda gave a little bark of a laugh and Mabel nodded shyly.

“Well, go get some rest,” he said to them. “I will stand watch over our Lady here. I will keep her wounds covered and put fresh manna on when needed. I owe her so much more than that,

but this is something I can do now. It was I who did the most damage to her though, so I don't want her to see me. If she awakens I'll fade away. Will some one of you stay nearby, just in case?"

"I'll stay," Girda said. She wrapped a blanket around herself and curled up close to the fire. "I'm quite comfortable here."

"And I," Jether said. "I will stay with you... brother." He smiled rather shyly at the other man, who clapped him on the back and hugged him gruffly.

And so they left them there, hoping that Ghash would be able to sleep through the remainder of the night, Dhalla and Nora still cradled her arms.

A New Day

They all climbed to the entrance of the cave, pausing there on the ledge where they could look down on the valley and see the sharing circle below, and watched as the darkness faded and gave way to dawn. Pale shades of mauve and peach stretched their fingers out, pushing back the dark, pinching out the starlight and breathing a soft song across the eastern border of the mountains around them.

Sari sighed, a deeply contented sigh. Magda took her hand and drew her near and for a moment they stood leaning on each other, watching the day begin. Magda sighed.

“What is it?” Rika asked. “What is this feeling?”

“Hope,” Sari and Magda said together.

They looked at each other and smiled, remembering an earlier time when they were still new to the valley, new to the healing, and new to each other. A time when hope was a stranger newly met. Met for the first time, here, in this safe place. They had been down many memory paths since those days. The valley itself wore the evidence of their healing and the magic they had all found... and become. In the dawn’s pale light they could see the tops of the many flowering and fruit-laden trees, and as the sun peeked its nose over the rim of the mountains a bird woke and began to sing a glorious morning greeting.

The magic was all around them and in them, and they felt it thrumming in their hearts, through their veins. Magda closed her eyes and felt the valley breathe with them. Through her feet she felt the great heartbeat of the mountains and felt her soul follow the path of blood and bone down through branch and leaf, down to the core of the earth and back up again, connecting her with all that lived, and she knew, she *knew* it would be alright. There was more to come, no doubt, more pain, more memories, more sisters to join them. There were many questions yet unanswered, many pieces of the puzzle still missing. But it would be alright. It would all be made right. They could handle anything that would come. They would find the Lonelies, all of them, every

last one. And Yang sister would join them, eventually, and she would cry her terror and be healed and fed. Magda knew it as surely as she knew the sun would continue to rise each day. There was a sort of ...ultimate inevitability about it. Their healing could not be stopped. It had become a dam, bursting, a tidal wave, the inexorable forward movement of floodwaters, unstoppable and unshakeable.

Hope? Why ... hope was a puny word compared to the feeling that filled Magda from head to toe. She needed a new word, a bigger word. Hope plus ten. Surehope.

She laughed and shook her head, unable to find a word big enough for the feeling that was bursting from her very pores. Abathyr took her hand on the other side and looked into her eyes, trying to feel it, whatever it was. Magda drew her close and ... with her on one side and Sari on the other, and the others standing close, she felt safe and ... nestled. These were her family, these wonderful people. This was their valley, their home, their safe place, where they could tell their stories, remember their past, feel their pain. They would heal all the past and remember it all, until they became whole again, and all was mended. And together with their own power and the sweetness of the manna, they would find magic such as had never been known before.

They would begin to *live*.

And maybe someday ... they would be healed enough, whole enough, and strong enough, to go out into the world again.