

Rough-hewn stone, the alcove was ten strides deep and fifteen long, an abandoned room. Her mother slipped in and ran her hands over the shadowed floor and up the walls. Kyrin did not see a crack in it big enough for a rabbit.

Her mother yanked her inside and slid Kyrin's hood around her face, her fingers chill. Kyrin put her arms around her, breathing in the familiar smell of wool cloak and chives and sweet herbs. "Mother . . ."

"Shhh, my little one. Quiet." Lady Willa hugged her with fierce strength, touched her cheek with a feather-light finger, and pushed her back against the wall. Kyrin leaned down and fumbled at chunks of a broken wall-stone that nudged her heels. One piece scraped the other, sharp in her hands. If only she had her bow.

Her mother drew her eating dagger from her girdle with her twisted hand and slid her sword free with the other. She swung the sword, and the blade whispered, severing the gloom. She lifted her hood and shrugged her cloak around her, blotting out the faint shine of her weapons. She stepped to the shadowed side of the door. A foot scuffed without.

Kyrin's mouth dried. *Keep still, keep still. Father!*

Two men walked lightly past, glancing in. They passed from sight beyond the edge of the broken doorway. Six raiders shuffled by after the front guard, several with torches. Light fingered Kyrin. She glimpsed dark hands and eyes and sweating faces.

Some of them wore helmets and some not. Their straight swords were as tall as her mother's waist. Wide daggers with hooked blades were thrust through lengths of bright cloth they wore for belts. Leather and chain mail whispered. Their robes swirled about their feet, wafting sickly sweet perfume, mud-and-sea smell to Kyrin. Then they were past.

She started forward but shrank back at a solitary footfall and the whisper of a dragging step. In the dimness of the retreating torch, a raider stumbled into the doorway with a grunt and braced himself, gripping his bloody ankle.

Squinting in pain, he turned his head. Gripping her stones, Kyrin pressed back as if she could sink into the wall. His eyes widened. He lurched up, pulling his blade from his sash.

Kyrin's mother slid her arms from her cloak. The raider raised his sword. Kyrin drew back her rock, but her mother slid between, her blade up to block his, thrusting with her dagger.

She straightened explosively from her crouch, and the raider fell before her slash-and-thrust with a yell. There were answering yells and thudding feet. Another raider sprang into the doorway. He crumpled with a cough; Kyrin's mother slid her sword loose from his belly. The wide doorway was empty. Voices cried out in rage. The torchlight bathed Kyrin in red-orange.

“Back!” Fear hollowed her mother's face—then it strengthened into stone. Her mother nodded, acknowledging a command from someone who stood at her shoulder—in the sword-brother place that was empty. Then she glanced over her shoulder and her stubborn mouth quirked: as when she had all to gain, stealing out of Cierheld with Kyrin under old Medaen's nose—both of them after woodland flowers with the dew on them.

The raiders rushed. Her mother whipped about with a ringing yell, facing a storm of weapons. Kyrin twitched against the wall, driven by the skirling scream of metal on metal as blades met and parted. Smoke gathered, shadowing stark grimaces and the tangled dart of blades.

Her mother spun, thrust to deflect an overhead blow, and countered, her blade darting in to strike a raider's thigh. She never stopped moving. Kyrin dared not throw at the men struggling to flank her.

Two of them squeezed around their fallen in the doorway. Her mother stabbed the first and slid around him, pulling her dagger across his stomach; and brought her sword up into the belly of a bull-like man behind him. A thin raider pushed through, jumping at her angled back. Kyrin threw a rock with all her might and hit his elbow. His weapon dropped from his slack fingers.

Kyrin's mother lost her dagger in his chest, then her sword was up, guarding. She moved back, reaching under her cloak. Her leg slid, buckled, and her sword arm swung wide. She thudded into the wall beside Kyrin.

Kyrin raised her last stone. With a harsh noise in the back of his throat another raider swung his sword up two-handed. With a hoarse cry, Kyrin threw. Her rock took him in the neck and he staggered but his sword struck her mother. The blade grated free, across the wall, and stopped, tangled in Kyrin's cloak at her throat. Her neck burned.

The raider gurgled, dropped his sword, and grabbed his neck. Kyrin could not move. Her mother sucked in a choked breath and her sword clattered on the floor. She slid toward Kyrin,

her hand twisted in her cloak at her breast, and wrapped an arm around Kyrin, pushing her down. Kyrin's head knocked against the stone floor.

Sweet-metal blood smell filled her nose. She must grab the sword—the long, sharp edge resting a hand-width from her eyes. But she could not think what next.

Her mother's hair fell across her in a smothering curtain. Kyrin groped for her shoulder; she could not breathe.

“Jesu. Jesu . . . Kyrin.” Her mother's breath warmed her cheek like soft summer. Then she sighed and her head dropped against Kyrin. There was pain, and nothing.

Kyrin opened her eyes on light shining dull through diffusing strands of darkness that trapped the warmth of her breath against her face. She tried to lift her head and whimpered. Her neck was afire, her head pounded. Something heavy lay across her. She wriggled away, pushing back handfuls of hair.

Kyrin's fingers brushed cool skin. She struggled free to crouch on the floor. Flames licked a dropped torch near her mother's feet. She lay on her side near the wall, her cloak tangled about her.

Kyrin's hand brushed the front of her tunic, stuck to her in a wide, wet patch. Her fingers came away dark. Her stomach surged. Her mother was not sleeping.

A low cry tore Kyrin. If she had fought for her as a falcon defends its nest, her mother would not lie so pale and still. Kyrin dropped to her knees and clutched her mother's crooked hand. She should have thrown her rock sooner; she should have leaped at the man. Her mother fought for her, then, when the sword fell . . . Kyrin lifted her mother's head onto her knees, smoothing her hair with shaking hands, her heart twisting on itself. The torch flickered, beating at the dark.

A fallen raider's callused feet extended through the doorway. Dust caked the cracks in his heels. Kyrin swallowed, her dry eyes aching. The raiders would come back for the last of their dead. They must not find her.

She laid her mother on the floor and stood. Her legs were full of needles. So Esther and Myrna despised her for hunting in her high valley. It did not matter.

Mother said her bow was useful. And she would be useful—against any man with a weapon. She gritted her teeth on a shudder—part tearless sob, part anger beyond heat or cold. She would shoot until she could hit an ash leaf at a hundred and fifty paces instead of forty. No matter. She would bring down any man who raised a blade to harm. She would get the strength to swing her mother’s sword . . . But the floor was empty—the sword was gone.

She lifted the edge of her mother’s cloak to make sure the blade did not hide beneath. The cloak tightened, pulling at a long slender shape near her mother’s bronze cloak clasp.

Kyrin unfastened the red oak leaf and laid back her mother’s cloak. A sheathed dagger lay on her breast, tangled in her hair. Her mother reached for this when she fell. Kyrin freed the weapon and slid the blade from the leather. She opened her hand, and blinked. The brazen dagger was a cunningly shaped falcon.

Torchlight played over the bronze feathers. Beak open in a defiant scream, the falcon’s eyes penetrated hers; amber lurked in their ebony depths. The falcon’s body and shoulders formed the haft, etched wing-tips brushed the reddish blade. The reaching talons and fanned tail formed the down-swept hand guard on either side. The blade was straight, sharp and clean. Kyrin shivered, drawn again to the falcon’s far-seeing eyes.

They saw her ugly shrinking, her fear. Unfaltering warmth enfolded her: the falcon knew but gently called her to fly higher. Kyrin’s tears came in a rush.

Sometime later, she wiped her face and slid the falcon dagger through her girdle. Faint hope made a nest in a corner of her mind. Maybe Lord Fenwer was beating off the raiders—but he did not know where she was. She had to get away, to get to him, and then to her father. But she could not leave her mother so, twisted on the floor like a downed deer.

Kyrin pulled her straight, coiled her hair into her hood as best she could, and tucked her cloak about her softly. She could not cover her face: somewhere else her mother lived. The torch flickered and went out.

Kyrin sneezed at the bitter smoke. She leaned against the wall, biting her lip against a sudden bloom of pain. “Jesu, help me.”

Clutching the falcon dagger, she staggered toward the door, feeling her way over the dead man. The dark felt full of hands, ready seize her. Her feet on the stone were loud as Aart's. If he was free outside . . . But raiders prized horses. She must find her godfather, anyone.

She stumbled along the silent passage, feeling her way. Mustiness pressed in on her, tainted with blood; everywhere she smelled it. The floor slanted down. At the end, a wood door was rough under her fingers.