

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

LETTER FROM CRISIS

*Preview*



# ❖ Foreword ❖

by

**Rex Richardson**

**M**y father is wealthy in terms of money. My mother grew up very poor. From the moment they met they had nothing in common beyond the fact that they were in love, which sounds romantic but can be inconvenient. My parents live together now, but for most of my life she couldn't deal with his wealth. She lived with me on a private island, protected there by a mercenary navy and visited often by the man she loved. It made sense to them. It was a gift to me. Until I was twenty-three, I lived with no notion of time, no concept of money, no idea that anything existed beyond a mountainous island twenty miles long and eight miles wide at its widest point. My father had named it Atlantica, but I knew it as the Center. It was all there was.

People in the Center have no laws, no taboos, no chains at all upon their minds. Everything is allowed. No one is judged. In your world, a free mind is a dangerous mind, so you live with religious and secular rules and impose them on your children. In my home, the only necessity is unrestricted freedom of mind, and as a result the people in the Center develop considerably enhanced mental powers. I have lived with a developed mind all my life. I don't know what it is to have a mind like yours. My mother

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and my wife tell me that your mind feels like a computer for thinking. Is that right? You can feel no energies at all?

A mind that is developed in freedom is aware of the energies of all living things. It feels something like peripheral seeing, but the energies are within my mind: I am the grass, the bird, the tree. Each living energy is discrete, just as every sound is discrete, so I might choose to focus on one or two kinds of energy and ignore the rest. And always, overriding all else, I have a core connection to a sielrah grid of human emotional energy to which every developed mind is connected, taking and giving, a delicate sizzle. My mother briefly developed her mind, and she says that for her the sielrah connection felt something like being immersed in love.

Perhaps the thing that would most entrance you if you could spend a moment in my mind is that I can feel other people's emotions. Human emotions in your world are harsh! Most Americans, and especially men, give off considerable aggression and fear, which seems to be a reason why you feel so separated from one another. On some level you must be able to feel that those around you are radiating this hostile metallic tang so intense that when I am close to a man whose aggression is especially strong it produces a panicky throb in my head and a bitter taste in my mouth. You must be able to feel it, too. You just don't know what it is you are feeling.

To feel someone's love, on the other hand, is like the most glorious internal music. The melding of minds that occurs between spouses in the act of marital union is such intense pleasure that what you call orgasm happens to your entire body, to your skin and scalp and all your organs, and it takes awhile to subside because it comes from the union of your minds so your minds together sustain it. People in the Center generally make the marital union twice a day, and every time there is that same intense and nourishing whole-body ecstasy. It erupts in you as easily as laughter.



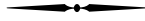
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I have lived in your world now for fourteen years. My discovery of so much outer world that was so different from the Center was a shock to which I have managed to adjust, but from which I have not recovered. It was not cars and smartphones that confounded me. My adjustment to your technology was easy. No, what continues to horrify me is the fact that you must live your lives entirely separated from one another and with no hope of making any more of your minds than the hardware inside your heads. The thought that you have no choice but to suffer such a paltry existence breaks my heart for you.

So for your sake and for the sake of my people I am trying to help you fix your world. My fear is that unless enough of you develop the powers of your minds, inevitably this outer world is going to swamp and destroy my world where human life is perfect. You won't mean to do it. You won't know what you are doing. And so, as hopeless as my quest might seem, I have no choice but to try. In an effort to begin to show you what is possible for your life, about fourteen hundred Americans have moved to my family's Texas ranch. There they plan to spend the rest of their lives living as people in the Center live, and attempting thereby to free their minds.

I have come to love these families. It warms me to see them already growing. One grandmother told me days ago as we chatted over lunch that she felt as if she had been living folded in a box for her entire life, and now she is straightening her back a little. She finds herself able to move an arm. For what she said was the first time, she can feel that she is breathing freely. She said the austerity that freedom of mind requires still felt to her like deprivation, but she thought that sense was being replaced by a feeling that I deeply share. Needing things is another chain. And that woman is only beginning to discover the powers of her mind! As her powers expand, she will find that her mind has so many capabilities of which she never had been aware that just being alive is a grinning pleasure. There is no need to find entertainment for your mind when your mind itself is entertainment.

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My mother spent a lot of time in her village's childhouse. While there, she heard and eventually began to tell my people's stories, to the point where for a time she was considered to be one of the kriolagkit, the storytellers. Early on she was struck by the thought that some of these stories were an oral history. For years that made no sense to someone who had trouble grasping the notion of a past, but now I live in your stream of time. Lately I have begun to see the significance of my people's way of life. So I have joined my mother in trying to understand how the people of the Center long ago learned to give up warfare and live in peace.

She and I have recalled and recorded eighty-nine stories and variations of stories. There are strains of stories among them, the most frequently recounted of which are the fables of our Wise Ones, sharing additional ways for us to care for and support one another. The only small animals in the Center are dogs, cats, and rats off ships, so naturally there is a series of stories about the dog, the kitten, and the wise old rat in which the kitten outfoxes the dog and then the rat reminds us that innocence is the core of wisdom or common sense prevails over force. There are grandparent stories, by which the children are taught to do some basic tasks. There are Teacher stories. The missionary who brought Bibles to the Center arrived just fifty years ago, but his Gospel stories soon became so melded with the island's folklore that I grew up believing that the Teacher was another of the Wise Ones teaching us how to live. He was an ancestral being in a place with no time.

Then there is a strain of thirty-eight stories that are neither animals nor tutorials nor Wise Ones nor Teacher. They have a different feel to them. They are beautifully told but tense and raw, and if you listen beyond the poetry of some of them you can hear violence and pain. "His great love for

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her brings her inside out” seems to have been a way to talk about torture. “Every babe bursts flower-red” was a sentence about smashing the skulls of infants. “Smiles decorating spears” and “Parents dancing amid children alight” are things that we would rather not contemplate. Many of these stories, while pretty to hear when spoken in my native tongue, seem to be describing grotesque horrors. Most teach no lesson beyond a certainty that living in any way other than according to the teachings of our Wise Ones would return us to a cycle of pain.

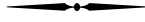
There are few recognizable people in any of these stories beyond a heroine named Rebalagh. The name means “Woman Dedicated to the Sun God,” and in every Rebalagh story she is young. Some have her as a wise child, while in others she is a lithe warrior in a culture in which only men are warriors. She is a Solagh, a “Divine Woman.” In a few of the stories she is Melagh, or “All Mother.” In my culture, Rebalagh carries a primacy for which there is no counterpart in your world, but perhaps she combines George Washington with Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King, Jr. She is our liberator, our defender, our tender mother. And she is little more than a child.

Many of the Center’s children learned from my mother to read in English, although its grammar was so different from ours that conversing in it was difficult. But we would read and get ideas from books. Sometimes people would propose that we import foreign things, perhaps greenhouses or electricity, to which notion someone always would say, “Ask Rebalagh about that.”

Rebalagh. She loomed over my childhood like a bossy sister. Whatever foolish thing I ever did or wanted to do, I should “ask Rebalagh.” To write about the Center’s cultural crisis requires that I bring Rebalagh to life, but to do that feels irreverent. Worse, it seems impossible. How do you erase five hundred years and look at the world through ancient eyes? And how

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do you put all the love and dedication and wisdom of every earthly hero into the mind of a girl who never has stepped beyond her city's walls? In the moments of its greatest need, humanity calls forth its best.



The Center is in the South Atlantic, not remotely close to anything else. Randomly over thousands of years people would be shipwrecked there. Oddly, many of those shipwreck victims seem to have come from Africa, a difficult journey of thousands of miles. Some were Mesoamerican Indians. Some were Europeans. There was one ship of "straight-hairs" that we now surmise was a Ming Dynasty war junk whose aged survivors figure in some of the Rebalagh stories, and whose men were so prolific that many of my people even today have straight hair and somewhat Asian eyes.

For Europeans to arrive at the Center before maybe your year 1200 was not a good experience. Until ships arrived bringing sheep and goats and the horses that shrank to thick-maned ponies, there was little there to eat in winter. One story mentions a benevolent god that kindly sent pale ghosts as food, which we queasily assume must mean that the first Europeans to reach the Center were eaten.

We haven't been able to figure out definitively when Rebalagh lived. My mother saw the piles of golden objects that seem to have arrived around Rebalagh's time, and she speculates that all that gold could have been part of the lost ransom of Atahualpa, an Incan emperor executed by the Spanish in 1533. My parents were married in the Center in what they think was the year 1979, and my mother recalls that by the Solagh's record that was the year 429 Peace. So genealogical record-keeping began on the island in about your year 1550. That might have been while Rebalagh still lived, but who knows? All we know is that shortly before 1550 the civilization on one tiny island had gone as far as it could go. And because she had no other option, a young girl ventured something new.



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I knew there was a problem when I heard no screaming. In all of Samitkan I never could get far enough away to avoid the screams, so even in my hidey-hole near the top of the highest, farthest wall with fingers in my ears and beneath a sheepskin I should have heard screaming. Something. A loving husband's last gift to his wife must be sufficient pain that the god would accept her and not condemn her to wander forever bereft of kin. Every woman and girl must bear witness. If women refused to watch the pains that husbands inflicted upon their wives to cleanse them of their mortal sin, then the sin of bearing an unfit boy might against their will befall them, too.

But there was no screaming.

I was so hot in my dress and trousers beneath my sheepskin that I pushed it aside. Even shaded as I was, sweat was running. We no longer sacrificed to lesser gods because a sacrifice to one god was for all, but sometimes I wondered when the sun was fierce if it were telling us it would prefer its own bounty.

My secret niche in the highest point of the highest wall on the side of the mountain was a hiding place my friend Tistila had made before he accepted the warrior's role. When he grew too big to use it, he gave up his hiding. I had for long been bringing him food, so I knew how to find this

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hidey-hole that was cleverly blocked on all sides by stones. The vision of the god cannot penetrate stone. I was uneasy to have the god's eyes on me for my weakness in avoiding the lesson in the plaza, but I am a Chieftain's Maiden. I had no need to witness that lesson because never in my life would I bear a child.

When I peeked out from my protected place, I could see the roofs of houses below, and beyond them the broad, tall roof of my father's great-house. I knew that the lesson in the plaza continued because there were no women in the walkways below me, but still I heard no sound beyond a wild dog's bark and a scattering of birdsong. From so high up, I was able to see the plain beyond the farthest wall, and very far away the forest's edge. Although I could not see them, I knew there would be men out working in the shade of the wall, cutting and pulling the seedling trees so they could not grow and give the devils shelter.

The danger beyond the wall had become so great that each year our cutting of seedlings was reclaiming less and less of the plain. Until recently, we had been strong enough to clear seedling trees from all the plain. But then, after many years of peace, the devils had returned, fiercer than before, to cut our men down where they had no shelter. Now our men went no farther beyond the gates than the distance they could safely run if the devils should strike them at that moment. Already there were saplings twice the height of a man that were growing on our plain, too close.

The devils did not bother to fight us. They had no need to risk their warriors. In recent years they had been appearing whenever they pleased and cutting off trees at the forest's edge and burning them out while we watched their fires as a row of glowing specks in the night, and then when those trees were hollowed they would make their infernal drums. Once they began to pound those drums, the constant rampant noise would be such that until we gave them tribute, even babies could not sleep. At first we had given them as our tribute the yellow forms that our young men had

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found scattered along the great water's edge when they had been able to forage so far during those many years of peace. We still had yellow forms remaining, but the devils had come to disdain shiny objects for which there was no use. Now the only tribute they would accept was more of our boys to become their slaves.

There was no shelter in the central plaza. Why was I hearing no sounds at all? The direct gaze of the sun god on the couple in their ritual of pain and on the women watching them must be infernal. And the husband in this case was the War Chief, second in Samitkan only to my father.

To be the Chieftain's Maiden was a gift that carried with it a possible thorn. Each man's oldest daughter from his senior wife was his Maiden. Every year at last gleaning a Maiden must be sacrificed to the primary god as a gift to be shared with all the gods. Each Maiden was dedicated to the god at her birth. She belonged to the god, so she was absolved from every duty and all constraints while her people must feed and protect her. In my grandfather's time, he would line up all the Samitkan Maidens before him and choose from among them the most perfect sacrifice. I was very young then, but I recall the fear of those Maidens when their Chieftain summoned them. Then my grandfather had died of a flux of blood. My kindly father had taken the throne, which had meant a new life for the Samitkan Maidens. Now girls and women without the earlobes that would have carried the signs of their marriage wandered Samitkan cheerfully, knowing that my tender father always sacrificed the youngest Maiden. By the time they understood their distinction, they had little fear of it.



From my earliest memory I had used the fact that I was the Chieftain's Maiden to sit in on the assemblies of men. I belonged to the god, and therefore I was required to do just whatever I pleased, and I especially loved my father's council. I would slip into his greathouse quietly after

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his council had begun, with the Headmen in their cross-legged circle and my father on his throne. I would fold to sit beside my father as his second pair of ears. He never acknowledged my presence there, but he had come to value it. Often, following a meeting of his council when no one was nearby to hear us, he would ask me whether I had heard what this or that man had said, and what I thought of it. We knew the men hated having me in their place of power where women were barred, but they dared not defy their Chieftain. Even more, I thought, they dared not risk the evil that could come from angering a Chieftain's Maiden. When my aunt died, I would take her place as Samitkan's Solagh, its spiritual source, so earning my enmity now could mean that once I gained a Solagh's powers I would curse them with defective sons and barren wives.

So it was that I was sitting on the floor beside my father's throne and idly toying with its fringe when Herala begged my father's permission to make of his senior wife a gift to the god. Herala was our War Chief, the man my father trusted above them all. It was known that his senior wife had lately borne and smothered a defective boy, but already Herala had sacrificed two younger wives to save them from the god's wrath. I glanced up at his face across the circle of men, something that I tried never to do because for a girl to look upon the face of a man who was not of her family was forbidden. He was enraged. He had no wish to sacrifice the wife who had married him when he was a boy and had borne him many healthy sons.

My father did not speak at first. I knew how he hated this sacrificing of the mothers who bore defective boys, but the mothers demanded their own demise. There was no clearer sign that a woman had lost the favor of the god than its causing her to bear a son whose limbs were weak and its cry was frail. If we tried to rear those defective boys, they only stole food from their healthy brothers. They were destined to die of no use to their people. That their mothers took their breath was a kindness to all.

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My father said, “She might sacrifice a sheep – ”

“She will not have a sheep! She demands this of me as I love her!”

Herala was standing up, clumsy with his anger, a large and broad man, his long hair moving in woven ropes as he stalked away. His father had been one of the ferocious straight-hairs who in my grandfather’s time had given us the strength to entirely destroy the devils. Herala still wielded his father’s sword, but the straight-hairs’ skills had passed to few of their sons. I thought he meant to leave, but then he turned and pointed his long arm at my father and shouted, “You have the power to end this! You keep from your people the one sacrifice that has the power to save all our women!”

I had been watching his back. His turning surprised me. Before I could lower my eyes, I saw him glaring at my father’s face.

The Chieftain’s Maiden will be the next Solagh. She never is chosen for sacrifice. But since the time of the ancient ones, there had been a few perils so great that to end them a Chieftain’s Maiden had offered herself for her people’s sake. In each of those cases, the fish had returned or the enemy had shriveled or the rains had come. Herala’s words were for me. He would so much rather see me die than have to watch another of the women he loved die in pain at his own hand.

After a breath, my father said coldly to Herala, “When you dishonor me you enrage the god and bring calamity to your people. You may sacrifice your senior wife. You have my consent to give her that gift. And if you ever again challenge me, it will be you whose screams are music to the god.”

My eyes filled to hear him say those words. Herala was my father’s boyhood friend, the man he trusted above them all. But the Chieftain is decreed by the god to be the firstborn son of his father’s first wife in a line that goes back to the ancient ones. For Herala to show his Chieftain anger was the same as spitting in the face of the god. For him to survive having done it once was a shameful thing that risked the god’s rage, but my father was too tender to order his friend’s death. So often, sitting there trying to

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help, I would hear things that made me grieve for my father, that a man so kindly by his nature was required by the god to do others harm. None of his wives had borne a defective boy, but all of them were bearing. Whether my father would be strong enough to do what Herala now must do a third time was a question that I would not consider.



And still there was no screaming.

My hidey-hole would fit me only folded tight. Eventually I needed to move. I looked around at the sentries who were close enough to notice me, but their eyes were pressed to their holes through the wall. The devils could strike us at any moment. In three quick moves I was out of hiding and across toeholds in the jagged wall to a ladder wedged against it, although moving so fast after having been still for so long made my legs cramp. I paused on the ladder to kick each leg and will away those pains. Still no one saw me.

The plaza where people were sacrificed was at the front of my father's greathouse. His throne would have been carried to its edge so he could bless with his presence the woeful event that his daughter feared to witness. Even knowing that the stones of the plaza in front of the greathouse were black because the sun had baked blood into them as people were dying would make me slip around its edge whenever I went inside. Or I would go in through the back. My father's greathouse had a tall, steep roof and large breaks in the walls for passage. It was cooler there than anywhere else. I reached that back entry and looked down through it. My father's throne was a great black shadow in the brightly-lit front passageway. There still was no screaming, but as I moved through the greathouse I thought I was beginning to hear words. I reached my father's throne and slipped down cross-legged beside it.

The scene in the plaza was ghastly. There was a rack to which sacrifices

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were tied, the base of which was poles that could be set into holes in the plaza when it was used. I knew that rack existed, but I never had seen it. There it stood, dark with sacrificial blood, but its restraints were hanging empty. In front of it Herala sat facing my father and barely two man-lengths away, cradling his dying wife in his arms. Blood pooled red and wet on the stones beneath them and lay caked and dark on their clothes and skin. A little of it still trickled from the places where he had used his father's straight-hair sword to open his wife's skin so she might gently die. He was speaking to her as she whispered to him. I heard scattered words. With what were nearly the last breaths she took, she was feebly begging for sufficient pain that she might appease the god and be allowed to join her mother. She knew that without that cleansing pain to offer as a sacrifice for her sin, she was destined to wander in enough light for her to see that it was dark, and with nothing around her but dogs that would be tearing at her flesh forever.

“Go gently to your mother, beloved,” I heard him murmuring to her. “I promise you as I love you that the god will never notice you as you enter the home of the ancient ones for its joy in the greater sacrifice that I shall give to it in place of your pain.”

Herala began to sing softly and rock his wife in his arms as you would rock a child. Beyond them were the distant stark faces of women, fiercely lit by the sun. I could not bear to look up at my father, so I focused on the two in the plaza. I saw now that the fear of seeing blood and death is worse than the reality of it. Herala's first wife was an age-mate of my mother's. I had spent little time with her, so I could watch as her head began to sag back and then rested against her husband's chest. In a little while she drew two short breaths and a long one, and then she breathed no more. Herala ceased his rocking and was still, looking into her peaceful face. I could watch all that, and I felt no emotion other than respect for their courage. This must have been a difficult ordeal for them both. I was

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thinking warmly of them and marveling that they could be so strong, so I did not at first realize what it was that Herala meant to sacrifice in place of her pain.

He set his wife's body down to lie before him. He picked up from beside him his father's sword that was dark in places with her blood, and calmly, carefully, he began to cut deeply in all the places on his arms and legs where his blood ran in strings beneath his skin. The gushes of fresh red blood were so startling to witness that I sat up straighter. Above me on his throne my father stiffened, too.

No man ever is sacrificed. Men die in battle, or else they die in the honor of their great old age. Herala's gift was of unimaginable value, and far beyond the worth of a woman's pain, so at first there vibrated a palpable shock. Then in the crowd of women there began to be wailing as Herala's other wives realized what he was doing. He was gazing on the face of his senior wife, but he seemed to hear those others. He lifted his eyes to my father and said, "My wives and sons are yours. As I have served you, I ask that you care for them."

At first I heard no response. Then above my head I heard my father say, "As I love you I will care for them."

Herala had eyes then only for the wife that he had taken as a boy. He set down his father's sword with the respect that it was due, and he lay down there beside her and took her carefully into his arms.



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**T**here must be a council of warriors to replace the War Chief who had sacrificed himself. It should have been called right after his death, but for two nights and a day my father did not call it. Instead he sat alone on his throne. Without being summoned, not even his first wife, my mother, could approach him. But a Chieftain's Maiden belongs to the god so she is free to come and go, and except when I must leave to eat or pass water, I sat there on the floor beside him. I slept only when I noticed that he had slipped into a sleep that for the most part eluded him.

After two nights and the day between had passed, the light around us again began to pale. He stirred from sleep, and his doing that awakened me. I had been vaguely asleep with my head against his hand as it lay there on the arm of his throne. He murmured, "Are you still here?"

We had not spoken since his throne had been moved back to its usual place following his witnessing of both deaths. He had wandered to it and sunk into it and said, "Leave me." Everyone had left him except his Maiden, who is pledged to the god and beyond his command.

I said, "The god requires that I be where I want to be. It is my wish to be here."

He peered over the arm of his throne then and looked down at me. I

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smiled up at him only a little, since I did not yet know his mood. I said, “You have not eaten, Father.”

He paused. My father always chose his words. He said, “I will continue to fast until I understand what is the will of the god. I may be fasting for a long time.”

“The god does not will that you die. My brother is too young.”

My mother bore my father four sons before she bore his Maiden. My mother tells me they had begun to say that my oldest brother must hurry to produce his Maiden and my aunt must try to live very long, since we could not be without a Solagh. Now my oldest brother had four wives who already had borne him three sons and two daughters. He had the body of a man, but he was careless and quick of temper. He was not ready to become the Chieftain.

My father stirred. He reached down his hand for mine. He said, “How is it that the sun still rises? I have lost my greatest friend. When I convene my council again, they will insist that with my own hand I must sacrifice my Maiden.”

It occurred to me to remind him that no man could command him on pain of death. It was in my mind to tell him that I had thought of another solution. But I said nothing. He said softly, “There are those who consider it a lucky thing to be born a Chieftain.” Another pause. He went on to say, “The next time the devils appear, or the time beyond that, we will have no unblemished boys to give them. Even now, if they guessed our weakness and how few warriors we have left, they would risk an attack. We could not survive.”

This was our core terror. It was a further reason for the sinful mothers to be so quick to sacrifice their lives, and a reason for our War Chief to have atoned at once for the affront to the god that he had committed in challenging his Chieftain. That we were suffering so many calamities was proof that the favor of the gods had left us. No one knew what might have been

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our sin great enough that it had cost us their favor, so no one could guess what sacrifice might be powerful enough to save us.

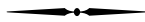
I had had much time to think about this as I sat cross-legged by my father's side. I moved to the front of him and faced him, kneeling, looking up at him with his hand in mine. I said, "Father, have you thought of again attempting to contact Restrakan?"

The world held three cities. Far away was the home of the devils, but nearer to us was the city of our allies with which from the time of the ancient ones we had traded our surplus pelts and gleanings and shared our marriageable girls. It had been with Restrakan's help and with his straight-hairs around him that my grandfather had managed to subdue the devils with such ruthlessness that there had followed many years of peace. For most of the years of my life I had thought that wars were an ancient bane. Then had come the devils again, fiercer than they had been before, and for three years past all our attempts to send envoys to Restrakan had failed. We assumed the devils were patrolling the trails to kill our messengers and prevent an alliance. But two cities together had beaten the devils before, and I knew that we could beat them again if our allies only knew of our need.

I could tell from the look of my father's face that he thought Restrakan had abandoned us too, just as all the gods had abandoned us.

I said, "May I speak of manly things?"

A look crossed his face that I could not read. Then he said with what was almost a smile, "When have you not spoken of manly things?"



There had been a time in my memory when a conference of all the warriors would have crowded my father's greathouse with senior warriors and beyond them junior warriors and a few aged men, and the young men and boys being trained as warriors would have stood outside the broad

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openings in the walls. But now they all could fit inside. Over the past few years we had given in tribute a whole generation of boys nearly men, trying to buy with them sufficient time for younger boys to be trained in their place. So then the gods had decreed that more and more defective boys would be born to live just long enough to feebly fight their need to die in their mothers' arms.

It had taken my father most of a day to convene all the men as a council of warriors that they might choose their new War Chief. He and I had talked the morning long, and then he had wanted to talk with my mother, and he had wanted as well to make sure that Tistila's father and grandfather approved of our scheme. As that day passed, I saw my father's mood lighten. He was beginning to believe that we might survive.

I thought that what most had relieved his mind had been my swearing to him that if my plan failed I would return to my people to be sacrificed as Maidens once were sacrificed, before the black ghost had made us believe that one god must be served above them all. In my grandfather's time there had been a ship of ghosts discovered near Restrakan. Most had fought to the death, but two ghost-boys and a ghost in a long black dress had been taken in and taught how to speak. That black ghost had claimed that we must not sacrifice to each of the gods because only one god was primary, and a sacrifice to the one god was for all. Restrakan had found that when it took his advice, its gleanings were greater and there were born fewer defective boys and there was no sickness. My grandfather then had decided that it was the power of that primary god that had enabled him to destroy the devils. Samitkan, too, had begun to dedicate its Maidens to the primary god. But it occurred to me now that perhaps it was because we had been serving only one god and ignoring our duty to all the others that in the end they all had turned against us.

So I swore to my father that my sacrificial death would be equally to all the gods, and it would be in the pit of fire that was said to simmer deep

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inside our mountain. I did not say, but it was in my thoughts, that if my father were to try to sacrifice his Maiden, my greatest fear even as I was being tied to the rack facing pain and death would have been that he would have lacked the will to use the straight-hair dagger at his belt.

My father put forth as Herala's successor two senior warriors whose loyalty he trusted. One of them was selected by his judgment of which of the two received the loudest shouts. He said then, "I have made a decision that I would have announced only to my council, but you all are here. I think it best that you all hear it."

Tistila moved quietly among the seated warriors and sat down beside me. He and I had been so close as children that if I had not belonged to the god, he would have wanted me to be his first wife. As it was, he lately had become betrothed to one of my father's daughters from a lesser wife. His having been allowed to choose a wife before he had proven himself in battle, and for her to be a Chieftain's daughter, had been a gift from my father to Tistila's grandfather, who was our last living straight-hair.

My father said, "I have decided to send the Chieftain's Maiden by a secret way to reach Restrakan. Her guide will be the near-warrior Tistila, whose grandfather fought beside my father. The great warrior Chingla has taught his grandson how to reach the city of our allies without fear of detection by the evil ones."

My father should have stopped speaking then and dismissed his warriors. Instead, he felt the need to offer an explanation that no strong Chieftain would have given.

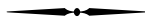
"Even the devils know the significance of the mark that she wears on her forehead. To harm a sacred virgin would bring the greatest evil upon them all. Among us, she is the only one who can go outside our walls and be safe. And she has offered herself upon her return to be sacrificed to all the gods in the manner of our ancestors."

There was so much wrong with his saying these words that my mind

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was floundering. The mark applied to my forehead at birth would protect me only from those who feared it. I had wondered as we talked this through whether the capture of the Samitkan Chieftain's Maiden might actually strike the devils as lucky. And a Chieftain's Maiden is not sacrificed unless she makes the sacrifice herself, but now he had announced my intention. Did his announcement damage the purity of my sacrifice? Would it lessen my value to the gods?

Tistila and I had agreed that we must move quickly. To avoid hearing anything more from my father, I crept back behind his throne and then toward the back of his greathouse. Tistila followed me. He caught my hand once we were outside, and we ran together to the low pavilion where the great warrior Chingla lived with his wives. He could no longer walk, but so much was he revered that he lived sitting on a litter and always tended by two of my father's men. If he wanted to go anywhere, they carried him.



The sun was very low by then. It was dim inside the house that had been built long ago as a reward to Chingla in the manner that he had decreed. His house was large but low. It had a roof of baked mud that was cracking now, and slipping to reveal rotted wood beneath. Each corner of the roof had carved wooden curls pointing upward. Most houses in Samitkan were for men alone, or else they were shared by groups of wives, but Chingla had insisted on a larger house where he could live with all his wives. This arrangement had long struck me as strange and shameful.

The great warrior had been expecting us. He was sitting cheerfully on his litter in the middle of his house, with his leg that could no longer bend set out straight before him and the other neatly folded, and with a pile of sheepskins propped behind him even though I never had seen him sit against anything. He was a small man and very frail, with a long, scant

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beard and wisps of hair, all white but yellow in the firelight. It was hard to believe that in his youth he had fought beside my warrior grandfather and wielded his long-hair sword with such power that no devil could withstand him.

The shutters on Chingla's house were closed. I never had seen them open. The air inside smelled of bodies and breathing and smoke from the cooking his wives were doing beside him. It was no wonder that the two who were assigned to assist him were sitting cross-legged outside his door. We could hear soft talking and murmured laughter as they played at casting pebbles in the dust.

"Come day!" Chingla called as he spotted us. He always spoke strangely, to the point where when I was small I had thought him mad. "Sat back! See journey," he said with a gesture of his hand to the side of his litter that didn't have the cooking fire. He was grinning at us. He had few teeth left. Tistila and I sat down cross-legged side by side. Tistila mumbled something and bowed down deeply so his forehead nearly touched the old man's litter. As he sat up again, Chingla said, "Boy good!" He drew a long breath and added, "First son first son." His wives had been speaking loudly to him, trying to give him his bowl of food. He didn't hear them until one of them touched his arm with the sticks that he used for eating. He turned and accepted what looked like a bowl of grass wilted in water. He took his sticks. He looked at me. He said, "Wife? Wife?"

What struck me then was the realization that this man long since had lost his mind. Yet Tistila and I were betting our lives on the hope that his ramblings earlier today and whatever more he might say now could lead us safely to Restrakan.

I said, "I am the Chieftain's Maiden. I never shall be any man's wife."

He watched my lips as I spoke. His eyes were squinted to slits, but still he looked puzzled so I pulled back the curls that hid my ears so he

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could observe my lack of earlobes. He said, "Ah! God-girl." He lifted his bowl to his chin and used his sticks to begin to shove into his mouth what looked like the product of random grass-pulling. No entrails or marrow. No wonder he was thin.

Tistila and I had decided that we needed to travel in the night and sleep when it was day. We had assembled our cloaks that had been soaked with herbs so dogs could not sniff us out. We had our bags with firestones and small stone knives and our fire-hardened spears and pouches made of the stomachs of sheep to carry water. We were ready to go. And I could see now that this old man had nothing to teach us.

I glanced at Tistila in the gloom that was barely lit by the fading light and the flickers of the cooking fire. I was about to speak, but the old man paused in his eating. He looked at his grandson and said, "Skins. Low."

Tistila bowed his assent and moved to grope beneath the pile of sheepskins against which his grandfather refused to sit. He found something. He drew it out, and when we saw what it was we looked at one another.

The straight-hairs had appeared near Samitkan as my grandfather was coming into his manhood, and while his father still was the Chieftain. Stories were told that my grandfather's father had wanted to destroy the straight-hairs, but they were such fierce fighters and they had such weapons that my grandfather had prevailed upon his father to spare them. They had been willing to be spared. They had no ship in which to leave, and no understanding of how to survive. They had no women. They needed our help. Thus began my warrior grandfather's time, when Samitkan and its ferocious straight-hairs had joined in alliance with Restrakan and taken the war to the devils' stronghold. Our two cities together had invaded their city and left only devil-women alive.

What had won the war for us had been the straight-hairs' weapons,



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their axes that could split a man's skull and their swords to cleave a man in two and their daggers that could slit a throat or lop a hand or disembowel a man so fast that a warrior need not pause. The devils' only weapons had been fire-hardened spears and stone-tipped clubs and small knives chipped from black stones found at the edge of the great water. Against the weapons of the straight-hairs, even the fiercest devils had been helpless. Chingla's sword had passed to his oldest son. Tistila was a son of that oldest son. And what he now held in his hand was a straight-hair dagger in its leather sheath. He looked at his grandfather.

"Kill devils!" the old man said cheerfully. "You now. Kill devils. Go."

Tistila bowed low to his grandfather, this time touching his forehead to the litter. Bowing was a custom from my grandfather's time. The straight-hairs had taught their Chieftain to require that all who approached him must touch their foreheads to the floor. But seeing people bowing made my father uncomfortable, so it was a custom that had not survived.

Tistila straightened and said with a joy that bubbled in his voice, "Thank you, wise one. I will use it in your honor."

We were standing. Chingla returned to the stick-assisted pushing of food into his mouth. As we turned for the door, he called after us, "Skull pony! Rock ship! Die not!"