

Otherling

by Juliet Marillier

It was a harsh winter, a season of slicing winds and ice-fettered waterways, of hunger and endurance. The days were always short in the shadow season, but this year dark seemed hungry to devour light. Bellies yearned for fresh meat; hearts ached for the sun's blessing. The Songs told of the coming of seals, and sanctioned the killing of three: sufficient for a good feast for every man, woman and child of the Folk. Bard's Singing set out how the hunting must be done. The men went masked, their leader garbed in the hunt cloak, soft and grey, shining and supple as if he himself were a seal. The spearing was prefaced by apologies and words of gratitude. Afterwards there was feasting, and oil for lamps, and the Folk took new heart. Now they might endure until the days began to lengthen again, and the first cautious leaf-swellings appeared on the wind-battered trees.

But Bard felt the rasping in his chest, his cough like a stick drawn over wattles, and he knew he had seen his last spring. He watched his student. She had been apt to learn: she could draw forth the pipe's piercing keen, and conjure the subtle rhythm of the bones. By candlelight she summoned the voice of the small harp strung with the gut of winter hares. Its melody hung bittersweet in air: call and echo, substance and shadow. The girl had endured the days of fasting, the sleepless nights, the necessary trials by water and fire and deep earth. She had heard the Songs; had held within her the voices of the ancestors, a burden precious as an unborn child. All this she had learned. But she was young: perhaps too young.

'Tonight's lesson is grave indeed.' Bard spoke quietly as the harpsong ended. 'You know already that Bard is born only from a twinning; that in the way of things there

will be one such birth amongst the Folk in each generation. This allows time for one Bard to pass on the mysteries to the next, as I have done to you. If the cycle were broken, and Bard died before his student was ready, the Singing would be lost, and without it the Folk would perish. The Songs reveal the great pattern that must be followed. They are our true map and pathway: our balance and our lodestar.'

The girl nodded, saying nothing.

'Our calling cannot be denied. It is a sacred trust. But...' He faltered. How could her mind encompass the desolation of a life spent without human touch? She was but half grown: barely a woman. 'There is a darker side. The Songs must be taken unsullied from their source, and passed on pure and strong to the Folk. Bard must devote every scrap of will, every fibre of spirit, every last corner of mind to that. It will be long; you will bear the burden until your student is ready to take your place. There is no room for other things. So we remain alone; apart. But it is not enough. Bard must be stronger than an ordinary man or woman; strong enough to endure the power of the Singing and not splinter into madness; true enough to form unbreakable link and pure conduit from spirit to man.' His sigh scraped like a blade on ice. 'That is why Bard must be twinborn. That is why we have the Choosing.'

'What is the Choosing?' The girl's small features were frost-white in the dimness of the stone hut, and her eyes had darkened to shadows. Outside, the wind roared across the thatch; the rope-hung weights knocked against the walls.

'If you had lived amongst the Folk, you would know a little of this already,' the old man said wearily. 'I have kept it from you; it is a mystery darker than any you have yet learned. Now you must know it, and begin to harden your will towards it. You may be lucky; for you the Choosing may come late, when you are practised in the disciplines of

the mind. Have you asked yourself what becomes of the twin who is not Bard? How this choice is made?’

She pondered a moment. ‘I suppose one seems more apt. Perhaps the other is sent away. I have seen no likeness of myself amongst the Folk.’

‘Indeed not. Your brother died long ago, when you were no more than babes; mine met the same fate in a time before my memory. We hold their strength as well as our own, and are ourselves doubly strong: two in one. Without this, no man or woman has the endurance, the fortitude, the clear head and unsullied spirit a Bard must possess. You could not hear the Songs, you could not draw the voice of power from the harp, or sway the minds of the Folk, without your Otherling.’

‘My Otherling?’ she breathed.

‘Your twin; the one who was sacrificed so that you could become Bard.’

Her eyes were mirrors of darkness. ‘They killed him?’ she whispered.

The old man nodded, his features calm. He was still Bard; if he felt compassion, he did not let it show. ‘Soon after birth. It is always thus. A choice is made. The stronger, the more suitable, is preserved. The Otherling dies before he sees a second dawn, and his spirit flows into the brother or sister. That way, bard becomes strong enough for the Singing. It is necessary, child.’

‘Bard?’ Her voice was very faint in the half-dark, and not quite steady. ‘Who makes the choice? Who performs the – the sacrifice?’

The old man looked at the girl, and she looked back at him. He needed no words to answer her; she read the truth in his eyes.

It was as well he told her when he did. Next morning when she arose, shivering, to make up the fire and heat some gruel for the old man's breakfast, she found him calm-faced and cold on his bed. She laid white shells on his eyelids, and touched his shaven head with her fingertips. When a boy passed by, trudging to the outer field with a bucket of oats, she called her message from behind closed shutters. Before nightfall the elders came with a board and took the old man away. Now she was Bard. Later, she stood dry-eyed by the pyre as he burned hot and pungent in the freezing air of the solstice.

At her first Singing, she told the old man's life and his passing, and she told a good season to come, for all the harsh winter. Seed could be planted early; mackerel would be plentiful. The sea would take no men this spring, as long as they were careful. When she was done the people made their reverences and departed. Some lived close by in the settlement of Storna, but others had far to travel, across the island to Grimskail, Settersby or distant Frostrim. They boarded their sledges and whipped on wiry dog or sturdy pony; they strapped bone skates to their boots and made their way by frozen stream and lake path. They would return for the great Singings Bard must give at each season's turning. At these times new Songs would be given: new wisdom from ancient voices. The Singings had names: Waking, Ripening, Reaping, Sleeping. But she had her own names for them, which she did not tell. Longing, Knowing, Sacrifice, Silence.

They said she was a good Bard in those days. She kept aloof, as she should. She'd greet them when she must, and withdraw inside her hut like a ghost-woman. Days and nights she waited at the stones, silent in their long shadows, listening. They said if you dared to speak to her at such a time, she would not hear you, though her eyes were open. All that she could hear was the silence of the Song.

One long winter a man brought a load of wood and stayed to chop it for her. She watched him from behind the shutters, marvelling at the strength and speed of it. When he was done, he did not simply go away as he should, but used his fist to play a firm little dance-beat on her door. She opened it the merest crack, looked out with her shadowy eyes, her face pale with knowledge.

‘All finished,’ said the young man, his grin dimpled and generous, his hair standing on end, fair as ripe barley. ‘Stacked in the corner to keep dry for you. Cold up here.’

‘Thank you,’ she whispered, looking into his eyes: merry, kind eyes the colour of rock pools under a summer sky. ‘Thank you.’ The door began slowly to creak shut.

‘Lonely life,’ said the young man.

Bard nodded, and looked again, and closed the door.

After that he would come up from time to time, not often, but perhaps more often than the natural pattern of things would allow. He would mend leaking thatch, or unblock a drain; she would watch him from behind the door, or through the chinks of a shutter, and thank him. There was never more than a word or two in it, but after a while she found she was looking for him in the crowd whenever she ventured into Storna. She found she was peering from her window when folk passed on the road, in case she might see him go by, and turn his head towards her shutters, and smile just for her. She learned his name: Ekka, a warrior’s name, though a man with such a smile was surely no fighter, for all his strong arms that hewed the iron-hard logs as if cleaving through rounds of fresh cheese.

She found her attention wandering, and brought it sharply back. Under the stones, sitting cross-legged in silent pose of readiness, she waited for the Songs, and they did not come. Instead of their powerful voices, their ancient, binding truths, all she could hear

was a faint fragment of melody, a little tinkling thing like the tunes played by the band of travelling folk who went about the island in summer, entertaining the crowds with tricks and dancing. It was the first time the Songs had ever eluded her, and when she came down to her hut, empty of the wisdom whose telling was her life's only purpose, she knew the old man's teaching had been sound. She must shut down those parts of herself that belonged to the spring season: the Longing. Bard must move forward quite alone.

From that time on her door was closed to him. Once or twice he called through fastened shutters, knowing she was there, and she set her jaw and held her silence. She went out hooded, and kept her eyes on the ground. He could not be totally avoided, for he was a leader in the settlement, with a part to play in the gatherings. Bard taught herself to greet him and feel nothing. She taught herself to look at him as she looked at all the others: as if the space between them were as wide and as unbridgeable as the great bowl of the star-studded sky. She watched him withdraw, the blue eyes darkened, the smile quite gone. Later, she watched him fall in love and marry, and she kept her thoughts in perfect order. Sleep was another matter. Even Bard's training cannot teach the mastery of dreams.

Time passed. Ekka's young wife had a tiny daughter. There were bountiful seasons and harsh ones. In times of trouble, the Songs cannot of themselves make things good. They cannot calm stormy seas, or cure sheep of the murrain, or bring sunshine in place of endless drenching rain. But they do bring wisdom. A warning of bad times enables preparation: the mending of thatch, the strengthening of walls, the shepherding of stock into barns and the conservation of supplies. Such a warning makes it possible to get through the hard times. The Folk kept a careful balance, each decision governed by the pattern she gave them, an ancient pattern in which wind and tide, fire and earth, man and

beast were all part of the one great dance. One year the Ripening Song told of raiders in high ships, vessels with names like Dragonflight and Sea Queen and Whalesway. The Folk moved north to Frostrim, driving their stock before them. The raiders came and passed the island by; a shed or two was burned, a boat taken. At Reaping the Folk returned, and Bard sang their safety and a mild winter. Another year the Songs told of death. That season an ague took Storna, and twelve good folk perished, man, woman and babe. Ekka's wife was gravely ill, and Bard performed a Telling by the bedside. In a Telling one did not exactly ask the ancestors a favour. One simply set out a possible course of events, then hoped. Bard told how Sifri would bear more children: fine, bonny girls like her little daughter there, strong sons, blue-eyed and merry. She told the laughter of these children through the narrow ways of Storna and out across the fields, as they chased one another under the sun of an endless summer day. She finished, pulled the hood up over her shaven head, and left. The next morning Sifri was sitting up and drinking barley broth. By springtime her belly was swollen with child again, her small, sweet features flushed and mysterious with inner life.

At Reaping that year, Bard stood beneath the watchstone and heard the Song, and felt her heart grow cold, for all the discipline she laid on herself. One did not ask the ancestors, *Are you sure?* Before the first frost Sifri gave birth to twins, a pair of boys each the image of the other. They were named, though neither would keep his name for long: Halli and Gelli. It was time for the Choosing.

She came down the hill, each step a thudding heartbeat. The Folk watched silent and solemn-eyed as if she herself were the sacrifice. Outside the Choosing place, the elders waited. Sifri and Ekka stood hand in hand, faces ash-white with grief and pride. They would lose both sons today, though one they might keep for a little while. The small

girl stood at Sifri's skirts, thumb in mouth. Bard nodded gravely, acknowledging their courage; and then she went in.

The noise was deafening. Her own hut was always quiet. No hearthside cat or watchful dog disturbed her days, no servant muttered greetings, no child yelled fit to split her head apart as these two did. But wait. Only one babe screamed thus, one lusty child turned his face red with wailing and beat his tiny fists helplessly in air, seeking the comfort of touch, the return to warmth and love. This babe struggled; the other was quiet, so quiet one might have thought him already dead. She moved closer. The crying set her teeth on edge; it made her own eyes water. The children were in rush baskets, the lids set each to the side. Between them a stool had been set, and on it lay a dagger, its hilt an ornate masterpiece of gilded wire and small red gems, its blade sturdy, sharp, purpose-made. The children were naked, washed clean of the residue of birth. Perhaps they were cold. Perhaps that was why one screamed so. Soon one would be warm again, and the other colder still. It would only take a moment. Grasp, thrust, turn the eyes away. It would be over quickly, so quickly. There was no doubt which must be chosen: the stronger, the more fit. The fighter.

She moved forward again. The screams went on. This lad would have a powerful voice for the Singing. As for the other...she looked down. There in the woven basket, still as some small woodland creature discovered by a sudden predator, he lay gazing up at her. His round eyes were the colour of rock pools under a summer sky. His hair was a fuzz of pure gold. He smiled, and a dimple showed in his infant cheek. He was the image of his father. She turned to the other, her heart lurching, her hands shaking so violently she could surely scarcely lift the knife, let alone use it. As if in recognition of the moment, the first twin fell suddenly quiet, though his small chest still heaved from the

effort of his outcry. His face was blotched with crying. His hands clutched the air, eager for life.

Now that the sobbing was hushed, sounds filtered in from outside: the creak of cart wheels, children's voices, the lilt of a whistle. Her mind showed her the travelling folk passing by, motley in their ragged cavalcade, their faces painted in bizarre patterns of red and black and white, their hair knotted and plaited, feathered and ribboned. Even their children looked like a flock of exotic birds. The whistle played a small arch of melody, and ceased abruptly. Someone had told them this was no time for music. And her decision was made. With steady hand, now, Bard reached down and grasped the knife.

There was a form of ritual to be observed, a pattern for the right doing of things. She came out of the small hut, basket in arms. The rush lid now covered the still form that lay within. Atop this lay the knife, its iron blade gaudy with fresh blood. The mother, the father, they did not ask to look or touch. This was not the way of it. The Otherling was gone to shadow; become a part of the great Song which would one day sound from his brother's lips.

'Go to your child,' Bard told them softly. 'Comfort him well. In three years bring him to me, and I will teach him.'

'Thank you,' said Ekka, blue eyes deep and solemn.

'Thank you,' said Sifri, her voice a very thread of grief, and the two of them went into the hut. Their son's voice called them; now that it was over, he had set to yelling again with double vigour.

Bard bore the little basket up to her own hut, where it lay quiet, encircled by candles, until dusk fell. Her hand was bleeding. She tore a strip of linen from an old shift and bound it around palm and fingers, using her teeth to pull the knot tight. Later, the

elders came for the basket and put it on the pyre, and they burned the Otherling with due ceremony. It did not take long, for he was quite small.

It seemed she had chosen well. Halli was apt. He grew sturdy and strong, broad shouldered and fair haired like his father, and with a fierce determination to master all he must know. By day she might show a new pattern on the bones, a more challenging mode of harpsong. At night she would lie awake to the endless repetitions, the long struggle for perfection. She need not use discipline; her student's own discipline was more rigorous than any she might devise.

For him patience was a far harder lesson, and without patience there can be no listening. At twelve he underwent the trials and showed himself strong enough. That did not surprise her; it was what came after that made her belly tighten with unease, her mind cloud with misgiving.

They stood beneath the watchstone in summer dawn, Bard and student.

'You know what must be done,' she said.

There was a shallow depression below the great monolith, a hollow grave-like in its proportions, lined with soft grasses as if to encourage sleep. At summer solstice this place of listening caught the sun, and was a vessel of gold light on the green hill. At midwinter the shadow of the watchstone stretched out across the circle, shrouding the small hollow in profound, mysterious darkness.

Today there were clouds. Halli sat cross-legged, silent. Even so had she waited once, while the old Bard stood by the stones as still and patient as if he were himself one of these guardians of ancient truth; as if the lichens, pyre-red, sun-gold, corn-yellow, might in time grow up across his grey-cloaked form and make a gentle cap for his close-

shaven skull. Even so had she waited, and emptied her mind of thought, and willed her breathing slow and slower. Then the Song had come to her, pure and certain, welling in the heart, sounding in the spirit, flooding the receptive mind with truth. It was the voice of the ancestors, ringing forth from the stones themselves, from the deep earth where they stood rooted firm, from the wind and the light and the unfathomable depth of the sky. She still held it within her somewhere: that first transcendent moment of joy.

Time passed. It could be long, a day and a night, maybe more. She knew the boy's strength. He would sit there immobile as long as he must, to hear it. And yet, as the sky darkened to rose and violet and pigeon grey, she wondered. He was apt, anyone could see that. Clever, quick, dedicated. Why was it so long? Inside her, memory stirred and shivered.

At dawn she spoke softly, breaking into his trance, bidding him cease. Another time, she told him. Next time. Halli was angry: with her, with the ancestors, with himself.

'You must learn patience,' Bard said.

He clamoured to try again. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Not yet, she said. If the ancestors would not speak, it was not time. His eyes narrowed with resentment, his mouth twisted with frustration.

'You must learn calm,' Bard said.

He played the bones like a dance of death. He sounded the pipe in a piercing wail of need. His fingers dragged notes of aching emptiness from the small harp. She made him wait.

The season passed. At Reaping the travelling folk came through Storna with juggling and dances, with coloured streamers and performing dogs. A whistle tune floated up the hill, clean and innocent on the easterly breeze: a tune wrought untutored

and free, yet exquisite in its form and feeling. The melody made its way in at her window and tugged at Bard's memory. Behind a closed door Halli played his own pipe, his music intricate, tangled on itself. She heard the two tunes meet and mingle, and she put her hands over her ears and used a technique long practised to shut out unwelcome thoughts. When she emerged from her trance, all was quiet. At last her student slept, his sturdy form relaxed as a child's, his strong features wan with exhaustion. The pipe had slipped from his fingers to the earthen floor. She laid the blanket over him.

Three Ripenings passed before he began to hear the Songs, and before she let him sing one he was already a man. Halli chafed against her restrictions. Why did she hold him back thus? He could do it, he knew he could. Didn't she trust him?

'You must learn humility,' Bard said. 'We are vessels, no more.' His anger troubled her. Dreams came, and left her weary.

In his eighteenth summer Halli gave the Folk his first Singing. Bard listened as he told of early frost and the coming of whales; of a far shore where green fields and fruitful vines might be discovered; of the building of boats. His Singing was like the call of a war horn, deep and resonant. By the end of it, the young men's eyes were alight with excitement: here was a challenge beyond any yet imagined. Did not the ancestors bid them set forth on a great adventure? In the crowd Sifri stood quiet, her three fair daughters by her. There had been no more sons.

Before the turning of the season they made a fine ship of wattles and skins, tarred for seaworthiness, with oars of larch wood. On the prow they set the great skull of a whale. They called the vessel Seaskimmer, and in her the young men of the island journeyed forth one sparkling dawn in search of the fruitful land to the west, a land where one day they might all live and prosper under a smiling sun. They did not return at

Reaping. The women, the old people, the children cut the barley and stacked the straw. They did not return as the year moved on and the days began to shorten. It was in the shadow time that they came back to the island, those bold venturers of the Folk. A boy and his dog wandered the cold beach of Grimskail, gathering driftwood. Shrouded in weed, cloaked in ribbons of sea wrack, the young men of Storna and Settersby, Grimskail and far Frostrim lay quiet under the winter sky. For seven long days the Folk stood there by the water as the ocean delivered up their sons, each at his own time, each riding his own last wave. Then there was a burning such as the island had not seen in many a long year. The people looked at Bard with doubt in their eyes.

‘This was wrong,’ she told him afterwards.

Halli lifted his fair brows. ‘How can the Singing be wrong? I told only the Song the ancestors gave me.’

‘It was wrong. The Songs help us avoid such acts of foolish waste, such harvests of anguish. It could not be meant thus.’

‘Why not?’ her student said. ‘Who can say what the ancestors intend?’

‘Surely not the wiping out of a full generation of young men. Who will father sons here? Who will fish and hunt? How will the Folk survive this?’

He smiled: his father’s sunny, dimpled smile. ‘Perhaps the ancestors see a short future for us. Perhaps raiders will come and beget children. Who knows? I cannot answer your questions. You said yourself, we are no more than vessels.’

That winter grandmothers and grandfathers swept floors and tended infants and stirred pots of thin gruel, while women cleared snow from thatch and broke ice from fishing holes. The few men of middle years slaughtered stock and hauled up the boats. It was a harsh season, but wisdom was remembered from times past, and they survived. At

Waking, when the air held a deceptive whisper of new season's warmth, she would not let him listen for the Song.

'I am Bard,' she told him, 'and I will do it. You are not yet ready. You must learn something more.'

'What?' Halli demanded fiercely. 'What?'

But Bard gave no answer, for she had none.

The Song was an anthem to the lost ones, and a warning. The Folk must keep the balance or perish. Their children had survived the savage winter. Now all must be watchful. Bard thought the ancestors' message was not without hope. But she was tired, so tired that she stumbled as she went to stand before the Folk in the ritual place; so weak that she could scarcely summon the breath for the Singing. Afterwards her mind felt drained, her thoughts scattered. She could hardly remember what she had told them.

The weariness continued. Maybe she was sick. Maybe she should get a potion from the travelling folk, ever renowned for their elixirs. There was wisdom amongst that colourful, elusive band of wanderers: they had sent no sons voyaging across the ocean to return in a tumble of bleached and broken bone. But she was too tired to seek them out.

Halli was solicitous. He brought her warm infusions. He ensured the fire was made up and the floor swept clean. It was he who performed the Singing at midsummer, telling of fine shoals of fish south of Storna Bay, and favourable winds. Before the season's end deer might be taken and the meat smoked for winter.

The few men left on the island were not over-keen to put to sea, but the Singing removed any choice. They came to her afterwards with questions. How many deer? How many days may we fish in safety? With our young men gone, who will lead the hunt? She

could not answer them. She had not heard this Song, for the stones were far, a weary distance up the hill. It was Halli who answered.

‘Since the Singing did not tell of this, take what you will,’ he said.

There were some men of middle years, too old to sail for new horizons, still young enough for work. They found mackerel in great numbers and, thinking of winter, brought in netful after shining netful. The salting huts were crammed to bursting, and still there were more, a bountiful harvest. They went for deer, and found them in wooded valleys beyond Settersby. They were gone seven days; they returned bearing two great antlered carcasses and the body of a fine, fair haired man. Ekka was dead, slipped from an outcrop as he readied his spear to take the stag cleanly. Bard could hear the sound of Sifri’s grieving all the way up the hill and through the shutters. She looked into her student’s clear blue eyes, reading the iron there, and something shivered deep inside her. This was her doing. This was her Choosing. The boy had killed his own father. A Telling came to her mind as she lay shivering under her thick blankets, a Telling of times to come: of a spring with no mackerel, a spring where the young of puffin and albatross starved on the cliffs for lack of nourishment. In the season after, their numbers were less, and less again next Waking. Then weasel and fox, wolf and bear grew bolder, and neither chicken nor goose, young lamb nor younger babe in cradle was safe. The men grew old and feeble, the women gaunt and weary. Children were few. The Telling turned Bard’s bones to ice. In such a time, all it would take was one hard winter to finish the Folk.

‘You look tired,’ Halli observed. ‘You must rest. Leave everything to me.’ And indeed, there seemed a great urge in her to sleep; to melt into darkness, and let it all slip away. After all, what could she do? She had made her choice long years ago. All stemmed from that, and there was no changing it.

On the edge of slumber she heard again the sweet voice of a whistle, played somewhere out in the night, as deep and subtle, for all its simplicity, as the voices of the ancestors themselves. Bard slid out of bed, careful to make no sound. From Halli's chamber the small harp rang out. Still he drilled his fingers, the patterns ever more complex, as if he would never be satisfied. The sound of it frightened her. He frightened her. Unchecked, he would be the end of them all. But she felt so weak. The Folk no longer trusted her. Ekka was dead. She was alone, all alone...

A long time she knelt there on the earthen floor, shivering in her worn nightrobe. The old learning seemed almost forgotten: how to empty the mind and slow the breath, how to calm the body and control the will, how to listen. Somehow it had almost slipped away from her. She had forgotten she was Bard.

Of course you are alone, she thought fiercely. Bard is always alone. Have you let even that most basic lesson escape you?

‘Not quite. But you have misremembered.’

Her head jerked upwards. For a moment she thought – but no, the harp still sounded from the far chamber, servant of his will. The figure which stood before her was another entirely, and yet as familiar as the image she saw when she bent over the water trough to cup hands and drink. This wraith with hollow eyes and pallid cheeks, with shaven head, with ragged cloak and long hands apt for the making of music, this phantom was...herself. And yet...and yet...

‘You know me,’ said her visitor, moving closer. She reached out a hand to touch, scarcely believing what she saw, and her fingers moved though him, cloak, flesh, bone all nebulous as shadow.

‘You are my brother,’ she whispered, her eyes sliding fearful towards the inner door.

‘He will not hear us.’

‘Why have you come? Why journey from – from death to seek me out?’

‘You are afraid. You see no answers. Yet you hold the key to this yourself, Bard.’

His voice was grave and quiet. ‘The pattern is gone awry; that is your doing. It is for you to weave it straight and even once more.’

‘Why didn’t you come before?’ she asked him urgently. ‘I needed help. Why not come before good folk died, before he did what he did? Where were you?’

‘You have carried me within you all this time, sister. If not for your error, you could have heard my voice, stronger as the years passed. Bard is never truly alone; always she has her Otherling. But you disobeyed the ancestors. Your choice was flawed. Now its influence spreads dark over you.’

Bard stared at him, aware once more of her leaden limbs, her burdened heart.

‘The Folk will perish. Maybe not this year, maybe not next, but in time all will be lost. I’ve seen it.’

The Otherling gazed back. His eyes seemed empty sockets, yet full of light. He was both old and young: an infant in a rush basket, a strong man in his prime, an ancient wise in spirit. ‘You made it so,’ he said quietly. ‘Now unmake it. Do what you could not do, long years ago. One does not lightly disregard the wisdom of the ancestors. Since the day you did so the Folk have walked under a shadow, a darkness that will in time engulf them. You hold their very future at the point of your knife.’

‘But –’

‘The Otherling must die, Bard. There is no avoiding it. He cannot live in the light; he cannot be left to walk the land and whisper his stories in the ear of farmer and fisherwoman, merchant and seamstress. And Bard cannot do her work without him. The two must be one, for they are reality and reflection, light and dark, substance and shadow.’

Bard shivered. ‘You mean the Otherling is – evil? That if he lives he must inevitably work destruction?’

‘Ah, no. It is not so simple. The two are halves of the one whole: complement and completion of each other. Can day exist without night, light without shade, waking without sleeping? Can the Folk survive without the death of the mackerel in the net, the spear in the seal’s heart, the hen’s surrender of her unborn children? The Otherling must stand behind, in darkness, to make the balance. Only then can Bard sing truth. Now go, do what you must do before it is too late.’

‘I’m so tired.’

‘I will help you.’ He moved to embrace her; his encircling arms were as insubstantial as vapour. She felt a shudder like a cool breath through her, and he was gone.

The travellers were encamped by the seafront, children gathering shells under a blood-red dawn, the smoke of campfires rising sluggishly. There was a rumble of approaching storm, its deep music a counterpoint to the whistle’s plangent tone. The young man sat watching the sky, as if his tune might coax the sun to show himself between the rain-heavy clouds. As Bard approached him the melody faltered and ceased.

She had not known how she would speak to him. How can you say, *Come with me, I will tell you whose brother you are, and then you will die?* Ah, those eyes, those fine, merry eyes she had seen gazing up at her once, open and guileless. He had been so quiet. He had been so good. Never a sound from him, as she had borne him forth, basket closed tight, all the way up the hill to her hut. Never a peep out of him, as she bribed the little girls to take him, the little girls with plaited crests to their hair, and faces all painted in spirals and dots of red and white. What was one more infant amongst so many? Who would know, when every one of them wore a guise of rainbow colours, a cloak of dazzling anonymity? She had paid handsomely; the women would feed him and care for him. They were a generous kind, and made their own rules. The rush basket, weighted with the carcass of a fat goose, had burned to nothing. Nobody had known. Nobody but Bard, whose heart shivered every time the travellers came by, whose eyes filled with tears to hear the voice of the whistle, so sad, so pure. What had she done to him? What had she done to them both?

‘Come with me. I want to show you something.’

He had no questions as they walked together under dark skies, up the hill to the place of the stones. She asked his name; he said, Sam.

‘Were you at the last Singing?’ she asked him.

He nodded and said nothing. At the old water trough they halted.

‘Wash your face,’ Bard told him. Washed clean, the two of them, naked and clean.

The young man, Sam, looked at her a moment, eyes wide. His features were daubed with spiral and link, dot and line. His hair stood in rows of hedgehog prickles,

waxed honey-dark. He bent to the water and splashed his face, washing the markings away. The water clouded.

‘Wait,’ Bard said.

The water cleared. The sun pierced the cloud for one bright moment.

‘Now look,’ she said.

The image was murky; specks of coloured clay floated across his mirrored features. But it was plain enough. He glanced up at her.

‘I did wrong,’ Bard said. ‘He is your brother. I saved you, because – because – no matter. Now all is awry because of what I did not do.’ In its way, it was an apology.

There were no desperate denials, no protests.

‘Can I see him?’ Sam asked. ‘I’d like to see him first.’ It was as if he knew.

Clouds rolled across, heavy with rain. The sky growled like a wild beast.

‘Come, then,’ said Bard.

Halli was by the watchstone, hands outstretched, eyes shut in pose of meditation. Often before a storm she had found him thus; the souging of the wind, the uneasy movement of trees, the air’s strange pungent smell excited him. At such times of danger, he said, who knew what powerful voices might speak from the stones?

They stood by the hollow’s rim, Bard and the young man Sam. Under the dark folds of her long cloak, her fingers touched cold iron.

‘He is your brother,’ she said again, and Halli’s blue eyes snapped open. No need for explanations. The two stood frozen, one in astonished wonderment, the other in sudden furious realisation. There was a moment of silence. Then Halli drew ragged breath.

‘You saved him!’ he whispered, accusatory, furious. ‘No wonder I was never good enough, no wonder I could not hear them! You saved the Otherling! Why? Why?’

Because of love, Bard answered, but not aloud. *I did wrong, and now he must die.*

‘Brother, well met indeed!’ Sam’s dimpled smile was generous. Below the bizarre spiked hair his blue eyes spoke a bright welcome. He took a step forward, hand outstretched in friendship. Now she was behind him. Halli’s agonised eyes met hers over his twin’s shoulder, their message starkly clear. *Do it now. Do what you could not do before. Make it right again.* Perhaps it was her own Otherling who spoke these words: the shadow within. She drew out the knife. She saw the dimple appear in Halli’s cheek, the curve of his mouth as he watched her. Sam went very still. He did not turn. Bard raised her hand.

A great blade speared down from above; there was a thunderous crack like the very ending of the world, and a sudden rending. It was not her own small weapon that set the earth shuddering, and came like a wave through the damp air, hurtling her head over heels to land sprawling, gasping, face down in wet grass with her two hands clutching for purchase and her ears ringing, deafened by the immense voice that had spoken. Her heart thudded; her head swam. Slowly she got to her knees. The knife lay on the ground at her feet, its blade clean as a new-washed babe. She looked up. The watchstone was split asunder, its monumental form chiselled in two pieces by the force of the blast. One part still stood tall, reaching its lichen-crusting head to touch the storm-tossed sky. The other part lay prone now, like shadow given substance: dark testament to the sky’s ferocity. This slab would never be lifted, not should all the Folk of the island come with ropes and oxen. It was grave and cradle; ending and beginning. After all, she had not had to choose. The ancestors had spoken, and the choice was made.

‘You’re weeping,’ she said. ‘Bard does not weep.’

‘How can I not weep?’ he asked her. ‘He was my brother.’

‘Come, Halli,’ said Bard gently. ‘There is no more to be done here. And it’s starting to rain.’ She unfastened her cloak and reached to put it around his shoulders.

He stared at her, face ashen with the shock of finding, and losing, and finding again. ‘I have so much to learn,’ he whispered, and she saw that he had recognised her meaning. ‘So much.’

Bard nodded. ‘I am not so old yet that I cannot teach you what you must know. Already you are rich in understanding. Already you hear the Songs and tell them, unaware. He will help you. His fingers know the harp, his lips the pipe. The heart that beats new wisdom into the Songs belongs now to the two of you.’

He bowed his head, looking towards the gentle hollow, now hidden beneath the huge slab of stone. Rain fell like tears on its fresh-hewn surface, making a pattern of spiral and curve, dot and line.

‘Best put that hood up,’ she said, ‘until I attend to that hair of yours. No student of mine goes unshaven. Now come. There’s work to be done.’