

A preview of...

BEYOND SEASIDE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS AND THE SEA

Will awoke to a pain in his shoulder. He'd been dreaming about a forest—a forest of tall, twisted trees like ancient men, whose ragged hair hung mossy and unkempt to the ground. He was alone among the trees. Their mossy tendrils swayed in a breeze. They whispered to each other, words at the edge of his hearing, as if quietly girding for something about to happen...something they knew about and he didn't. Or maybe the thing had happened already, and now an uneasy calm settled back over the woodlands. Either way, something was amiss.

He wanted to leave the forest. He wanted to run; but the trees in all directions looked equally dense, and equally restless. In his sleep, he pondered what to do. As he did, he rolled onto a stone. It dug into his shoulder.

'A dream,' he realized. 'It was just a dream.' For at least a moment, he felt relief. His shoulder smarted, but that was all right. He was just glad to have left the forest.

And then he opened his eyes. Startled—disbelieving—he sat. Before him was the trunk of a gnarled tree. It looked to be about a thousand years old. He had slept among its exposed roots, with a cloth pack for a pillow. The tree was so massive that he could make out neither its upper branches nor the sky. All about him hung a canopy of swaying mosses...of mosses that brushed the ground.

"Hullo?" He spoke tentatively. The wind murmured. Birds sang in the high branches. Cool, slanting rays of light filtered through the green, suggesting it was early morning. He heard the babble of river water. But the thing he wanted most to hear—an answer to his 'hullo'—didn't come.

He jumped up, pack in hand, and stepped outside the canopy. The river was several paces off. He stood on a mountain slope amongst venerable old trees, with trunks wider than a man is tall, and tops towering to dizzying heights. They looked exactly as they had in his dream.

Will shivered in the morning chill, mystified. Why was he alone? Why had he slept under a tree, rather than in a bed? Why couldn't he remember having come to this place? He waited for the rush of memories that would answer these questions. His mind, muddled as it was with sleep and dreams, refused to cooperate. He shook his head to clear it.

Slowly, reluctantly, the realization came. He hadn't only forgotten the previous night. He didn't remember the day preceding it, or the one before that. He didn't remember much of anything.

Maybe he'd spent a single night alone on the mountain. Or maybe, he thought, he'd been there for weeks...months...an entire lifetime. He tried to recall a house, a place other than this one. He tried to recall a familiar face. He got nothing.

It was impossible. Or it was a dream—one of those clever dreams that convinces a person he's up and about when he's really still in bed. He pinched himself. It hurt.

'It's not possible.' Again and again the thought revolved in his head. 'I had a family. I know I did. This can't have happened. My family can't have been wiped from my memory. They must be here...somewhere.'

A wash of desperation swept him. He attempted to quell it. He did practical things, like going through the contents of his pack, which didn't take long. On an outer hook hung a fishing net. Inside were three apples, a loaf of partially-eaten bread, and a tinderbox. The final (and most interesting) item in the pack was a musical instrument. It was flute-like, made of a smooth dark wood and highly polished. It fit into a soft leather case. He turned it in his hands,

remembering that it was called a lyret, that it was his, and that he played it rather well. Who had taught it to him, he wondered? Whom had he ever played it for?

He had also a dark green cloak, breeches and a shirt, leather boots, a small knife, and a water skin. These were enough to convince him he hadn't spent his whole life alone on a mountain.

He searched the area next, looking for anything that might spark a memory. There were no old campfire sites, no remnants of a meal, no signs at all of human habitation. His single discovery consisted of tracks left by a horse in the mud along the stream. Hopefully he whistled and called for the animal. It did not appear.

'Get moving.' The thought came with such sudden authority that it seemed not to have originated with him at all. 'Don't linger. Move.'

He glanced around in alarm. Hoisting his pack to his shoulders, he looked upstream, wondering which way to go.

'No. Not that way.'

This time, the clarity of the command frightened him. Whether or not he'd heard an actual voice was difficult to decide. It was more as if instructions had been deposited in his head.

"Who's here?" he demanded loudly.

The trees whispered. The water babbled. No one gave an answer.

Will set off downriver at a sturdy pace, glancing sometimes over his shoulder. But the sky was cloudless, and the sun warmed him pleasantly. After awhile, he forgot to look behind. The forest changed its character before noontime, becoming younger and friendlier. Early spring flowers burgeoned bright along the river. Clusters of berries hung in the bushes. Will realized

he knew a great deal about the natural world, and that despite the way his day began, he was comfortable in it. He tried to focus on his surroundings, to fill his mind with something he actually knew. He identified plants and trees and tracks and birds. He recalled the usefulness of various herbs, mosses and mushrooms.

A voice inside said that none of that mattered, not really...not relative to what he'd lost. He tried to ignore it.

He walked for hours. Sometimes he sang, because it was good to hear a voice, even if it was his own. Once, when he stopped to fill his water skin, he studied his reflection in a quiet pool. It was familiar enough, except that leaves clung to his brown hair, which was tangled and only partially pulled back. His face was smudged. Streams of tears had left trails among its dirt. He refused to wonder why. What good would it do? Thoroughly he washed, as if someone stood over him reminding him not to miss a spot. This, he knew, had been trained into him.

Lunch consisted of the apples, the bread, and fish from the river. He ate beside a small fire. Wistfully, he thought of hearths and homes. So far, he'd seen no hint of civilization. The nearest home might be hundreds of leagues away—or thousands, if he happened to walk in the wrong direction. He might even pass close by it without knowing.

He did not want to be alone indefinitely. Even if everyone in the world was a stranger to him, he at least wanted to see some of their faces.

Shortly after noon, he arrived at a high ledge. Here the river roared and plunged, tumbling hundreds of feet in foam and mist to the valley below. The view was boundless. The hills rolled away in ever-lowering elevations. Beyond the hills sparkled an immense body of water, extending to the eastern horizon. Will had never seen the sea. He felt sure of this,

because his knowledge of it was limited mostly to the fact that it existed. He marveled at its vastness and its vivid blue.

And then he spotted something better. Although the mountains very nearly dipped their feet into salt water, a narrow strip of land lay pressed between the mountains and the sea. Upon this strip nestled a village. He could make out its thatched roofs and cobblestone lanes. Closest to the mountains, at the village outskirts, farmhouses stood amidst trees and barren fields. Farther out, boats bobbed in a sunny cove. Bright banners and painted sails splashed the shoreline with color.

Hills obscured the land to the south. To the north, thick woods followed the curve of the coast. Among them and at the water's edge stood a lone stone tower, with smoke curling from its chimney.

Will's hopes soared. With fresh energy, he searched for a route to the foot of the waterfall. Maybe, if he hurried and stopped for nothing, he could reach the village before dark.

He'd just found a manageable path when the croak of a raven gave him pause. The bird perched within arm's length, and nearly at eye level. Boldly it surveyed him. Its black eyes wore such an oddly knowing expression that Will couldn't help giving it a second glance, and a third. He began his descent, glancing back yet again.

The raven, in turn, watched him intently. In fact, it decided to follow. It flew from branch to branch, keeping him always in view. He began to get annoyed.

"Go away," he told it. It croaked once and didn't go away.

He reached the valley floor. Still, the bird shadowed him. He pretended not to notice.

"If you're hoping I've got food," he said finally, "then you're out of luck. Besides, you don't look as if you've missed many meals."

The day drew on. Will walked as fast as the slopes allowed. He grew tired and hungry. The bird, meanwhile, floated easily between perches.

“Showoff,” he muttered; but his annoyance was giving way to a vague unease. Now that night approached, he really wanted to be rid of the strange creature. The sensation he’d had in his dream—that something was about to happen and he ought to get out of the forest—returned forcibly.

He reasoned with himself. ‘I can handle another night in the forest. I’ll get some rest, and reach the village in the morning. And the bird is only a bird. What else could it be? It’s mad, maybe, but harmless.’

Another thought followed close on these sensible ones. ‘Why should anything make sense on this day? Except that the river runs downhill, not much has. The bird could be just about anything. Or it could be nothing. It could be an illusion. For that matter, maybe the village is an illusion.’

Murky grays slid among the trees. From somewhere off to the right, a wolf howled. The raven cocked its head with interest. It rose on black wings and flew towards the sound.

Will was not glad to be rid of it. He knew a bit about the relationship between ravens and wolves; and he didn’t much like what he knew, at least under his present circumstances. Ravens, he recalled, sometimes take it upon themselves to lead a pack to prey. The wolves in gratitude then allow the birds to pick at the leavings.

He quickened his pace, keeping a look-out for likely climbing trees, if it should come to that. The low branches were scarce and mostly too young to support his weight.

A flurry of wings announced the bird's return. It fluttered just overhead, squawking boisterously. A wolf voice answered. Will's heart lurched; the wolf was practically upon him. He ran.

Howling filled his ears. It came from beside and behind him. Twice he stumbled over roots. Once, his left boot sank into something wet and oozy. He tried to tug it free and lost the boot. He made a quick decision: he didn't need that boot.

The bird hurled itself at his face. Its blackness filled his vision. He lost his footing on a rocky slope and tumbled. When he regained his feet, he stood on flat ground.

It was tilled ground; and he saw lights.

He'd reached the edge of the village. Not two hundreds yards away stood a farmhouse, with smoke rising from several of its chimneys, and candles glowing warm in its windows. Someone stood silhouetted on the porch. In his hands he held a bow. He drew an arrow from a quiver, leveling it at Will.

The farmhouse nearest the river and the mountain was large and had plenty of chimneys, one for nearly every room. It had once been the nicest farm in the entire sea valley; but those days were past. The people who lived there did their best with it. It was just that, now, there weren't enough of them to get the work done.

Once, the house had also been one of the happiest in the valley. It'd been built by a man and his wife and their five sons, and if ever a family knew how to laugh together, they were it. The boys were each handsome, decent, and well thought of in the village. The best of the five (nearly everyone agreed, and they didn't mind saying so) was the second born, Jarrett. Jarrett possessed all sorts of virtues, like honor, strength, and kindness. His mind was keen and his

temperament agreeable. He showed not the slightest inclination towards conceit. And he worked hard, which was by village standards more important than all the rest combined.

It turned out, quite conveniently, that four of the brothers loved the sea better than they did the land. These four became fishermen. Jarrett loved the earth. He tilled fields while his brothers harvested the sea.

But his parents made a mistake that cost him dearly. In accordance with local tradition, they arranged their five boys' marriages. This they did long before the boys were old enough to understand or care. They meant well. Unfortunately for Jarrett, good intentions yielded lousy results. At 18, he married a girl from a near village named Marna. They'd been promised to each other for 17 years. Marna was pretty, hard-working, and an uncommonly good cook. Jarrett would have sacrificed any of these attributes—or all of them—for a bit of kindness. She came into the marriage already bitter, for she'd heard many times the comments of the villagers: Jarrett had been poorly matched. He deserved better.

Jarrett never said such a thing himself, not even in the solitude of his thoughts. Nonetheless, Marna punished him. At first, she focused her bitterness on the reading of books. Did people think him superior because he was so bright and well-read? She decided the opposite was true. When he sat down in the evenings to read, her resentment flared; and she convinced herself that reading was both escapism and a waste of time. To her way of thinking, Jarrett could never work so hard that he earned the right to waste time in a book. She herself worked constantly. He owed it to her to do the same. Always she could think of something he ought to be doing, and always she let him know it.

Jarrett willed himself to treat her with decency. She tested his will daily. He passed the tests...sometimes just barely.

Eventually, they had three children. The first was a son named Jornan. Jornan took after his dad in almost every way. He even looked like his dad, which was a good deal for him, because Jarrett was tall and handsome, with dark hair, hazel eyes, and freckles across the nose. Jornan learned to read very young. Once he grew old enough for formal lessons, he liked them at least as much as his dad had.

The second child was two years younger and sickly. He had a pale, pinched look about him. He whined too much (mostly about his health), imagining he was ill even when he wasn't. His mother paid him extra attention at such times. And there was something more—something even better than the attention. When he was ill, he didn't have to do chores.

In time, he learned to fake it.

The townsfolk were not sympathetic. Naturally they compared the two brothers, arriving at an unanimous preference. Marna tried to make it up to her younger son. She understood what it meant to be forever in the shadow of a village favorite. Brenner therefore became hers, in the same way she regarded Jornan as his father's.

It was, she thought, a fair arrangement—a son for him, a son for her—but Jarrett refused to honor it. He treated the two boys with a maddening equality, reading to them, teasing them, and instructing them. He even corrected them...not only Jornan, but Bren, too. Marna sabotaged his attempts with Bren. Bren she left alone. Bren, as a rule, received little of her attention.

Three years after Brenner came a daughter. Lanie took it upon herself from the beginning to attempt bridging the divide between her family's two halves. It wouldn't be bridged. Lanie was an optimist, though. She kept trying.

Each year, Jarrett spent five days at sea, fishing with friends. He looked forward to the expedition immensely. The boat sailed to distant reefs, always returning on the fifth day with holds overflowing and with six cheerful, sunburned men calling greetings from the deck.

It returned, that is, until the late summer of Jorran's thirteenth year. The boat had been three days at sea when a storm burst violently from water and sky. It spun landward, monstrous in size, slamming into the coastal villages. It destroyed boats, houses, and lives. Sixteen local fishermen were lost. Jarrett and his friends were among them.

Jorran sat on the shore for days afterwards. He stared at an empty horizon, oblivious to clean-up efforts all around him. Marna attempted to break through his reverie. She directed him to 'snap out of it' and 'toughen up.' Her words didn't register. He noticed only the exasperation and weariness in her face—and, most of all, the absence of grief. It staggered him that she could carry on so normally.

Finally, through a haze of anguish, he comprehended her words. She kept them short and simple: "Get to work." She handed him an axe. Jorran got to work; and he discovered it helped to keep occupied. Still, he struggled daily with his father's death. And he struggled with his mother's apparent indifference to it. Her one regret, he thought bitterly, was that Jarrett wouldn't be around to push a plow and bring in the harvest. Her coldness gnawed at him, and his father's death broke him down, and he rarely made it to lessons anymore because he was needed on the farm. He stopped swimming and kayaking with his friends. People began using words like 'melancholy' to describe him. He was tougher, though, than his mom gave him credit for. He worked hard and well, and he didn't complain...not once. With the passing of time, Marna gained a grudging respect for him.

His dad had been gone more than two years on the night Will burst from the forest. Jornan had stepped out after dinner to empty the wash basin. The night sounds distracted him. He stood motionless on the porch, listening. The horses, who ought to have been content in their stalls, whinnied and stamped nervously. He'd shut the barn up tight before dinner, as usual...or had he?

Maybe he'd shut it without noticing some sly intruder. He'd done it once before. The horses had alerted him then, too, and it was a good thing; the intruder was a badger. With a sigh, Jornan retrieved his bow from just inside the door. He slung his quiver over a shoulder.

The moon had risen full and orange. It hovered low over the barn. Sea-fog crept along the ground, snaking up the lower porch steps. It slid shivering across the fields and into the near mountain valleys.

From those valleys rose an abrupt chorus of wolf voices.

Jornan stopped worrying about the horses. They had sensed the wolves, or heard them, before he did. He watched the forest as the sound drew closer. Then he blinked, rubbing his eyes. He looked hard into the nearest valley, where the trees thinned and the ground fell rapidly. For an instant he thought he'd seen something—someone—running upright.

It reappeared, unmistakable now, sprinting past a final grove of trees. The figure swerved sharply towards the farmhouse. Jornan raised his bow. Humans did not emerge from those trees after dark. They avoided them even in daylight. He shouted out, "Who are you?" and a voice called back:

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

Jornan neither shot nor lowered his bow. The runner flew across the fields, his cloak billowing, the mist concealing his feet. ‘He runs like the wind,’ thought Jornan with amazement. The boys in the village loved to race each other, and he’d never seen anyone move so fast.

A dark, low form loped from the trees. Another followed, and another, and another. Wolves poured from the hills like rushing water. Jornan stood transfixed, still holding the bow at the ready.

The lead wolf drew nearly even with the runner. It snapped at him. The runner staggered but kept his feet.

The animal crouched. As it sprang, Jornan released the arrow. He was very accurate. He’d practiced plenty since his dad disappeared into the sea, leaving him the designated ‘protector of the family.’ The wolf tumbled lifeless to the ground.

Behind him, the front door opened. “What the...?” His mother didn’t finish her sentence. The runner darted up the steps and through the open door. Jornan and Marna followed, slamming it behind them.

The stranger collapsed to the floor. He gulped air and clutched at his side. His hood was thrown back, allowing the other two a look at his face. He was, thought Jornan, a year or two younger than himself—Brenner’s age, maybe.

“I don’t know you.” Marna said it like an accusation. The villagers of Seaside had little affection for strangers. “I assumed in the dark that you were someone we knew.”

Jornan said, “He came out of the hills.”

“Out of the hills!” Brenner and Lanie had arrived from the kitchen, realizing they missed some excitement in the front room. They stared at Will in amazement, as if ‘out of the hills’

meant the exact same thing as ‘from another planet.’ Strangers, as a rule, came to the village by way of the sea.

Lanie said quietly, “We heard wolves.”

“That you did,” agreed Marna. She demanded of the newcomer: “What were you doing in those hills? Where are you from? Are you out of your mind?” And then, before he’d responded to any of these, she asked the question Jornan had earlier. “Who are you?”

“Will. My name’s Will.” He looked at Jornan. “You saved my life.”

“And you’re lucky he did,” retorted Marna, briskly. “Anyone fool enough to be in those woods after dark nearly deserves an untimely end.” She issued quick orders to her children. Will was bleeding. She needed a disinfecting salve, which required steeping dried herbs in the kettle. They all knew how to make this salve; they’d done it dozens of times. Will, she said, should be provided a cool drink. Drops of blood had to be scrubbed from her otherwise clean floor, and fast.

Jornan, Brenner and Lanie did as they were told. The three of them gathered supplies in the kitchen.

“This couldn’t be much weirder,” muttered Bren, who ladled water into a tin cup. “If he were from the sea valley—*anywhere* in the sea valley—we’d recognize him. No one lives in the forest. No one even goes into it.”

“After he’s been bandaged and Mom’s floor is clean, we’ll probably get some answers,” said Jornan.

“What answers can he give? I can’t think of a one that’s not disturbing. You know what I think?” He cast a sly glance at Lanie. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I’ll bet he’s not what he appears to be.”

Lanie took the bait. She was puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“He’s a shape-shifter, or a werewolf. He has to be.”

Brenner, Jornan knew, believed in neither of these things. He was too practical for superstition. He only wanted to frighten Lanie. For a moment, her face suggested he’d succeeded; but then she rallied.

“He can’t be a werewolf,” she said, matter-of-factly, “because the moon is full tonight. He *is* what he appears to be; I’m sure of it. He’s got a nice face. I like it.”

“You’re so vulnerable, Lanie. You’re exactly what these creatures look for—someone trusting, who relies far too much on appearances.”

“Cut it out, Bren,” said Jornan. “The salve is ready. Let’s get back in there.”

In the front room, Marna carefully washed Will’s leg. The wolf had sunk fangs into the back of it, just above his knee. His leather breeches were cleanly punctured and blood-stained. While Marna did the cleaning and bandaging, Jornan and Lanie wiped blood off the floor. They worked meticulously. Nothing short of spotless would satisfy their mom.

No one said much as they worked. Lanie started to, but Marna hushed her with a reminder: “First things first.” Lanie exchanged impatient glances with her brothers. Finally, Will was directed to a chair by the fireside, where the lighting was good, conversation could be comfortably held, and answers could be got.

Jornan had seen several foreigners who looked every bit as strange as the word ‘stranger’ suggests. Once, on the docks, he’d seen a brown, barrel-chested man wearing nothing but striped baggy pants, a scimitar, piles of gold chains, and an orange scarf about his head. Another time, a ship unloaded for the afternoon a group of quiet, solemn-looking men with shaven heads and long white robes. But Will did not look foreign. His clothes were like those worn by the

boys of Seaside—plain breeches and a blousy shirt belted at the waist. He had only one boot, and he'd gotten into dirt and mud, and his cloak was ripped in places, but this just gave him the look of a kid who's been doing something he shouldn't. His hair, like Jorran's, nearly reached his shoulders. Only the look in his green eyes—hunted, distant—struck Jorran as out-of-the-ordinary.

“So.” Marna sat facing him, folding her hands in her lap in a no-nonsense sort of way. “I’m Marna. This is Jorran, Brenner, and Lanie. There’s no husband; he was swallowed by the sea. Better the sea than wolves, don’t you think?” Will obviously didn’t know what to think. Jorran didn’t like the comment. It almost sounded facetious. She shot him a quick look, as if daring him to call her on it. Jorran returned her look evenly and said nothing.

She spoke again to the newcomer. “And you’re Will; you came to us from the woods. Tell us more. We’re all very curious.”

“I—I don’t know much more. This morning I woke up on the mountainside, near a river, and I followed it here. I know it sounds crazy; but everything before that is blank.”

Marna looked at him expectantly, as if waiting for a punch line.

“No one just forgets their whole life,” spoke Brenner. “It isn’t possible.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing, all day.”

Bren said, “There’s your answer then, Jorrie. The answer is that there is no answer. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to give it to us.”

Lanie opened her mouth to protest. Will beat her to it. “I’ve told you all I know. I wish there were more—believe me. If I were hiding something, I’d have made up a better story.”

Brenner was skeptical. Jornan watched him, feeling a mix of sympathy and frustration. Here was someone his brother's age who knew nothing of him and might actually like him, given a chance; but Bren wouldn't give it. He didn't expect to be liked.

A clear, piercing wail cut the air. Others joined it. The sound came from everywhere—from all around. It seemed to leap from the very walls.

Marna jumped up. "Jornan." She peered out the window, her voice frightened. "Come see this."

Wolves filled the yard. They sat in a wide semi-circle. They stared fixedly at the window, and moonbeams slanted into some of the yellowish eyes, lighting them eerily. Marna backed away from the sight, nearly tripping over her sewing basket. She collapsed weakly into a chair.

This was nearly the strangest thing Jornan had witnessed all evening. He didn't remember ever having seen his mother frightened before...not of anything. She was practically invincible.

Brenner joined him at the window. He was paler than usual.

"Wolves don't usually act like this, do they?"

"I don't know," said Jornan. "I don't think so."

"There's something sitting on the shoulder of the one in front. What is it?"

Jornan squinted into the yard. "It's a bird. It's a raven."

Will's head came up so quickly that everyone noticed the movement. Jornan saw it in his peripheral vision. They all looked at him.

"It's the biggest raven I've ever seen," commented Brenner.

Lanie said in a small voice, "I don't like ravens."

“Shut the curtains, Jornan,” ordered Marna. “Shut them now.”

He cooperated. “We’re okay,” he said, as much to himself as to anyone else. “The wolves can’t get in. They’ll be gone before morning. We’re fine.”

Lanie hugged herself, shivering. “I wish they’d stop howling.” She moved closer to Jornan. He was the only family member likely to lend her any comfort.

“They will. They’ll get tired of it.” He said it as if he knew what he was talking about. He didn’t, but Lanie took him at his word.

“It’s weird, though,” murmured Brenner, peeking through the curtains. “You have to admit it’s weird.”

“Yeah. But it doesn’t matter. It’s just one night, and everyone’s safe.”

Marna finally spoke. She’d had time to compose herself, and she was strong and in charge again. “Bren. Leave the curtains alone. Will. Are you really asking us to believe that you remember nothing—*nothing*—that happened to you before this morning? You’re saying that you’re—what?—13 or 14, and you have no memories, no past, no nothing?”

Will said quietly, a little desperately, “I can’t get hold of a thing. There’s no shred of memory. It’s emptiness.”

“That must be scary.” Lanie was sympathetic. Her mother ignored the comment.

“Odd, though,” she said to Will. “You remember your name. How is that?”

“I don’t know.”

Lanie piped up again. “He’s probably under an enchantment.”

Brenner snorted. “Yeah, right. If he is, we’re in for all sorts of trouble. I mean, is it really a good idea to have enchanted people sitting in our front room?”

“It depends on the enchantment,” said Lanie, in a knowledgeable sort of way. “I think that this time, it’s fine. And besides, he’s tired, and he’s been hurt. We ought to see if he’s hungry and find him a bed.”

“If you were in charge, Lanie, that’s just what we’d do.” Marna spoke rather sharply. “Now. Stand up, Will, if you can, and let me get a good look at you.”

He stood. If the bite hurt he didn’t let on. Marna walked all around him, inspecting him like she did a bolt of cloth in the marketplace. She paused, her eyes on the clasp that fastened his cloak at the neck. Jornan noticed it for the first time. It was a gem, amber in color and shaped like a crescent moon. In the firelight it glowed warm and rich. The light appeared to come from its luminous depths rather than from a fireside reflection. Marna couldn’t help but touch it. It was beautiful.

“What is this stone?”

He undid the clasp and looked at it. “I don’t know.”

“Take off the cloak.”

Slowly he removed it, laying it on the chair. She snatched it up. She turned out all its pockets and found them empty.

“Mom.” Lanie’s eyes were on the drawn curtains. “What if the wolves want Jorne? What if they know he killed their leader and—and they won’t go away ‘till they get him?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” sighed Marna. “Enchantments and vengeful wolves. They’re just animals, Lanie. Maybe they’re *grateful* he killed their leader. Maybe he was a tyrant. This might very well be a thankful howl—a bedtime serenade in your brother’s honor.” Lanie flushed. “Your pack, Will,” said Marna, beckoning for it. “Maybe it has a few answers.”

“It doesn’t. I’ve looked.”

She opened it anyway, pulling out the contents one by one. They consisted of a cloth wrap, a tinderbox, and a delicately-carved musical pipe.

“Can you play it?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Let’s hear it, then. Please.”

He took the instrument and raised it tentatively to his lips. But when he played, the notes rang so clear and fair, and with such aching depth, that they were nearly an enchantment in themselves.

A long silence followed. Brenner realized, “The wolves are quiet now.”

“Yes,” said Marna. “I guess they appreciate good music. That was very nice.” For Marna this was an unusual comment. She regarded compliments as silly and generally insincere, and she didn’t like to give or receive them. Plainly the music had had quite an effect.

She shifted into business mode. “Well. We can’t very well turn you out tonight, can we, Will? If you’re hungry, as Lanie thinks you may be, I can find you a bite. Jornan will find you a place to sleep. And then, surely, someone will come looking for you.” Will said nothing. “If they don’t,” she continued, “you’ve got two choices. You can leave here in the morning and continue wandering, or I can put you to work. There’s plenty to do. If you’re willing to work for it, I’ll give you a corner in the barn and enough to eat.”

Will made his choice quickly. “I’ll work. At least—until I know more.”

“Fair enough. We in Seaside work hard. You’ll be expected to do the same.”

“I’ll work hard.”

“I daresay you will. You look strong enough. A bit skinny, maybe. But we take what we can get.”

“Is Seaside the name of the village?” queried Will.

“Seaside...yes. Of course. We’re by the sea, and so we’re Seaside.”

“I saw the sea from the hills. It’s beautiful.”

Lanie asked in wonder, “Had you never seen it before today?”

“How would he know that, Lanie?” said Bren, rolling his eyes at his mom and at Jornan.

“I suppose you’ve already forgotten the ‘enchantment’?”

Will pretended not to hear this. He spoke to Lanie as if there’d been no intervening comment. “I never had. I know the forest and the hills—the plants and animals and all—but almost nothing about the sea.”

She looked at him gratefully. Bren looked annoyed. Jornan was annoyed, too, except for a different reason; and he knew how to put an end to it.

“I’ll find Will something to eat, Mom. You’ve got other things to do.”

“That I do. Take over, Jornie. Oh...and if tomorrow is a lesson day—and I think it is—you can go. I can spare you tomorrow.”

“Okay.” It’d been three weeks since he’d been to lessons. “Come on then, Will.”

Will looked relieved. He followed Jornan to the kitchen.

“Do you think there’s such a thing as an enchantment?”

Will and Jornan were in Jornan’s room, tucked beneath the steeply sloping roof on the second floor. It had wood floors and its own fireplace. The furniture was plain and functional: a bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe, and a chair. Parchment and piles of books cluttered a small table. It was a comfortable place.

“Dunno.” Jornan answered Will’s question, but barely. He piled blankets on a deep pallet on the floor. “Do you?”

Will shrugged. Jornan finished with the spare bed. “I’ll sleep here,” he said. “You might as well spend a night in a real bed before Mom sends you to the barn.”

“I don’t care where I sleep, so long as there are walls around it.” He’d washed up and eaten plenty, and he suspected he could sleep where he stood.

“Take the bed,” repeated Jornan.

Will hung his pack on a hook and sat on the bed. He rather liked the idea of an enchantment. At least, he liked it better than the possibility that he’d taken a beating around the head, or—as Lanie had suggested while he ate—that he’d experienced something so traumatic that his mind blocked out his entire past.

Jornan was at the window, looking down into the yard. “The wolves haven’t made a sound since you played the music. I think you mesmerized them. Maybe you could play something rousing, and they’d leave.” He added, “What’s with the raven?”

Will recounted his brief experience with the bird.

“People around here are afraid of the woods,” admitted Jornan. “They’re not scared of much—sharks and hurricanes, they can handle. But almost no one goes in among the trees. There are too many strange tales.”

“It seemed all right to me.”

“Except that you lost your memories in there; and afterwards, a bewitched bird stalked you, and meant to offer you for dinner.”

Will had to grin. He realized his words had sounded foolish. “Right. It was fine, except for those things.”

Jornan continued to watch the wolves. “It’s odd that they won’t leave.” He said it quietly, mostly to himself. He turned then from the window, put out the lantern, and climbed into the bed on the floor. “I guess I should warn you. Tomorrow will be pretty rough.”

“I can do the work,” protested Will.

“I don’t doubt it. It’s just...Mom’ll want to see what you’re made of. She won’t make it easy. And Bren will be around, too.”

“Bren doesn’t go to lessons?”

“He does sometimes. When he doesn’t want to, he says he’s sick. He doesn’t want to tomorrow.”

“Is he really sick?” asked Will.

“Maybe sometimes. Not usually. He um...he likes to play mind games with people. But if you don’t get angry, he’ll probably leave you alone.”

Will didn’t like the sound of this. However, he had lain down beneath the blankets, and the nighttime chill had seeped into the room. A low fire flickered in the grate, his stomach was full, and he was exhausted. He doubted he’d ever been so comfortable in his life (although, of course, he couldn’t be sure). He was too comfortable to do much worrying. Instead, he fell asleep.