

Tower in the Crooked Wood

**A novel by
Paula Johanson**

 **Bundoran Press**

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For Bernie and the twins, who brought me magic.

Chapter One

There. If that wasn't the cursed mountain that she'd left bloody footprints on, Jenia didn't know where else under the two moons it could possibly be.

It looked familiar, at least: the cone shape slumped so the top third jutted to one side, making a shoulder. And maybe if this light rain ever let up completely, she'd see other familiar signs: the dead-white trees twisted in spirals, or the small, contorted pines, or the one truly frightening hemlock which rose out of a bog like a giant's pitchfork of bone. She would know them if she ever saw them again. Her luck was turning at last - Jenia hadn't seen the soldiers following her since she crossed the strait and came to this island. And since she awoke, there had been no sound or sign of wild beasts uncomfortably near.

Stepping out from under the canopy of tall trees, Jenia pushed her way through the thick brush and rough sawgrass along the shoreline. A flying insect whined at her ear, and she brushed it away. Around her the sounds changed from hushed quiet under the trees, where only a raven's call broke the souging of wind in the branches; now Jenia felt the open space around her, where an osprey wheeled, screaming, and gulls fought over a dead

fish. Waves pounded along the length of the beach, in a bay that curved between two points of land, one low and one higher. The calm, deep water was gray, reflecting the leaden clouds that closed in, giving off mist and a warm rain.

Jenia's oiled leather cloak and boots were still keeping out most of the rain, but under them her brown woolen shirt and trousers were damp. Pushing back her hood, Jenia ran her fingers through her sandy hair, cropped short for her brother's funeral, and stretched to relieve aches in places she hadn't expected to hurt until she was an old woman.

Nineteen summers is too young to ache after hiking and sleeping on rough ground, even though it has been three months, she told herself, and pulled her hood forward again, keeping most of the light rain off her round face. At this point she didn't care whether it was sweat or rain soaking her clothes. The sun was getting low over the Western Sea, and if she didn't find a place to shelter soon, she was in for another uncomfortable night. Another whining insect landed on her hand and bit. She flicked it away.

More than the damp and the coming night's chill, Jenia worried about last night's unseen beast that had crashed through the prickly bushes only a few yards from her. She had huddled, barely breathing, in the dry nest she made for herself under a fallen log. Several times during the day she had wondered whether this beast was the one that had howled somewhere nearby as she was falling asleep, or the one whose wild cat-like scream had awak-

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ened her hours later. Neither cry was any nearer than the next hill-top, Jenia was sure, but she had fallen asleep with her good bronze knife ready in her hand. It had been an unnerving night.

At least this coming evening wouldn't be a hungry one, she realized. The bushes along the shoreline were loaded with berries, deep purple dusted with blue, among the shiny oval leaves as big as the palm of her hand. A small bird, speckled brown, darted among the branches and fled with a berry held in its beak. "Thank you, little one. No thorns," she said aloud. "What did I do to deserve this good luck? ... Though it is too early in the year for bramble berries. I wonder what these are called?" Jenia pulled a wooden bowl from her pack and picked the unfamiliar berries until it was full, keeping one eye on the sun as it dipped below the drizzling cloud cover. The berries that the birds ate were usually suitable food for humans as well, and purple ones were always good here on the coast. She'd learned that from the friendly traders who brought her to this island with their boat. So that would be dinner, supplemented with a few bites of smoked fish from her pack. Now where could she get out of the rain? Maybe there was a thicket nearby, or she'd have to hole up under a fallen tree again.

A rustling almost underfoot made her leap backwards, one hand on the bronze knife at her hip. Out from the bushes and through the green-gray sawgrass pushed a small white dog, head down and watching her. It growled softly, as if it were unsure who she was or whether to trust her. "Good dog," Jenia said automatically. "Good boy.

Where did you come from?" She offered her hand to the dog.

It didn't want to approach her yet, and knowing something of dogs, Jenia didn't blame it. She probably smelled different from anyone it had ever known. "Good dog. Who gave you a good combing? You look neat and clean, way out here on the edge of nowhere." Taking a packet of smoked fish from her pocket, Jenia threw it a morsel, which was sniffed and then accepted in one swallow.

"Well, that's one more good sign," she said aloud as she wrapped up the rest of the packet in its linen cloth and put it away. "Where did you come from, you greedy rascal?" She took up the bowl full of berries in one hand again, and turned to look along the curve of the gray beach, the brush and the tall trees growing close and dense as a field of grain, looking for some sign of people living here.

A voice calling from the bay behind her almost startled Jenia into dropping her bowl. People were coming ashore in narrow, open boats that looked as if they had been carved from tall trees. The dog pounded past her, barking happily, running down the beach to meet the strangers as they came out of their boats. Jenia waited where she stood, unsure of what to do with her hands, and wished suddenly that her boots did not look so badly scuffed with travelling on hard roads and cross-country.

It was not long before someone came up the beach to meet her. "Instead of waiting to meet you as you come to us, we have to come ashore to meet with you," said one of the bare-chested men, his dark hair shot with gray. He

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carried a hat plaited of reeds or roots in one hand. "I am Talas, and our village is called Tlakwa. You are a stranger here," he added, looking over her travelling clothes of wool and leather. "Very strange. Are you welcome here? Where is your boat?"

"I'd like to be welcome here. I have no boat." She added, "I came across from the mainland to Copper Island in a trader's boat at Musky Creek." The dog ran back to her, panting, with damp sand flying from its small feet. It skidded to a stop and sniffed curiously at her hands and boots.

"Then you didn't come round the shore by boat? You walked through the highlands in the mountains?" Talas called the dog to him with a short whistle and a quick gesture, and it came to lean against his calf-length leather pants, then sit at his feet.

"Yes, through a river valley, over a ridge and down another river valley," Jenia told him, glancing past him at the other people pulling their boats high above the tide line. "I had no idea Copper Island had such high mountains. It was a very hard journey. How do you get through them? I'm sure you have a better pass than the one I found."

"We don't," he said, and the friendly tone that had seemed natural to him was gone suddenly. "We don't travel there. It's forbidden. Poison ground. Strange beasts live there, that can follow you and kill you if you're not lucky. We don't go there," he said again. "You ought to travel in a boat, like a decent person." The offshore wind that blew his hair into a wild halo around his head was

suddenly cooler, as if in response to his words.

“I didn’t know.” Rainwater dripped off her hood into the bowl of berries. “I’m sorry I offended you.” The dog’s ears came up, and it ran to meet someone coming from the boats, which were all now pulled high on the beach.

“Is she welcome, Talas?” asked the approaching young person, putting out a hand to stop the dog from jumping up, then rumpling the soft, neat fur. It wriggled, and turned round for more petting. Plainly they were well acquainted.

“I don’t know yet, Tsusiat. We’ll have to find out.” The rain was almost gone, only a faint mist falling in the late afternoon light. “We’ll go indoors and ask questions around the hearth. I don’t think we’ll need to go to the questioning place.”

Jenia was surprised to see from this position on the beach that there were four large, wooden houses farther along the curve of the bay. If she’d climbed the headland or walked along the shore as they were doing now, she’d have seen the village and worried less about finding a thicket for the night. The low point of land receded behind them. The near headland, an arm enclosing the bay, had a bare space above the cliff. There’d be a good view of the whole shoreline from so high above the water, but also a nasty drop to the water pounding on rocks below.

Now the smell of wood smoke was coming to her, and children’s voices. “Come to my home,” Talas said, calling her attention back to the people on the beach, waiting expectantly. “I hope to be able to call you guest and friend, when you have named yourself to us. Tell us the

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story of your travels, how you came here.”

“I am Jenia don Dela don Tared,” she said easily, but that didn’t seem to be all he wanted to hear. They moved together towards the wooden houses with great beams and posts high enough to catch the last amber sunlight that had already left the shore. “You already know how I came across Copper Island, and came here in a trader’s boat.” It was frustrating to walk on the loose gray sand that slipped under Jenia’s boots. “The roads and rivers I came by on the mainland wouldn’t be familiar to you – I was told your people trade up and down the coast in your boats, not inland where I came from.”

While the rest of the people had left their boats and reached the houses already, Jenia walked along slowly, feeling she was losing half a stride with each step in the loose gray sand until she copied Tsusiat’s way of walking along the logs washed up high on the beach by winter storms. These logs weathered silver by sun and rain were from the tall trees she had been walking under, Jenia could tell by the smell and grain of the wood.

Cedar, the traders called those trees, she remembered, before I left their boat on the other side of Copper Island and walked over the island’s backbone ridge under those trees. The smells were so much stronger here: the cedar, pine and hemlock resins mixing with the salty air. She was learning about cedar now, as seasoned logs thudding under her feet, as well as trees standing tall on hillsides or rotting on the ground under the canopy of branches. Now that she had seen it as seasoned wood that had long been exposed to sun and rain, it was familiar to her in the same

way as the peak she had glimpsed before the clouds closed over the low mountains, drizzling rain.

The white dog trotted beside them along a great weathered log, keeping pace with the man's longer stride. "You should tell us how you came here so we know who you are," Talas said patiently. "Are you a hero or a spy? Are you a trader or a thief?"

She was shocked that he could take her for any of those things. "I'm a, a, an arborist!" she stammered in protest. "A tree-shaper." Stumbling from the end of one log to another that rocked underfoot, she struggled to regain her balance. "I'm not used to travelling or adventures or any of that. You think I'm interested in spying on rain and gorse bushes?"

Talas went on speaking, watching her closely. "Is it a vision you follow or revenge? Is there a family lonely for you at your own hearth, or are you outcast? Unless you tell your story properly, we cannot know who you are." His bare feet moved confidently along the logs and between them on the loose sand, without him seeming to look where he walked. Jenia guessed his callused feet must be tough enough that he did not worry about splinters or the odd stone in the sand. Tsusiat's sandals tapped along the logs, lightly as Jenia's scuffed boots.

They paused near the largest of the wooden houses, which stood as long as the great forest grew tall on the hillsides. "Unless we know who you are, we do not know how to receive you," said Tsusiat, standing quietly beside Talas with the dog underfoot like a white shadow. "How shall I put your name in a song?"

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The idea of becoming part of a song was strangely appealing to her. What would Tsusiat find to tell about me in a song? Would it be a melody, or a chant? She shook the thoughts out of her mind, and brushed away another insect whining around her face. "I'm not here looking for you, anyway, I'm—"

"It will soon be dark and raining hard again. Come to our fire and evening meal," Talas invited her warmly. He bent to rub the dog's ears, scattering mist drops and the pungent smell of wet dog. "Tell us of your journey so we know whether you are our honoured guest or an enemy. If we don't like your story, Lema needs another slave woman to prepare hides," Talas said cheerfully. Talas straightened and walked forward up the steep slope from the beach, to put one hand on the great wooden doors of the largest of the four houses. Faces and abstract designs were carved into the doors, and the marks of chisels were softened by the touch of many hands. Clearly this house had stood here for ten years and more, the doors swinging open to let in light as well as friends and family. "If we think you're lying," Talas added as the carved doors swung open under his broad hand, "we'll take you back up onto the headland and throw you off the cliff." The white dog slipped indoors, out of sight.

Jenia stared after him, startled. He had seemed so friendly - and as natural as the forest and sea around him. Why would he make such a threat? She had not learned, even yet, to be less than trusting among strangers.

"After all, you came over the poisoned land," Tsusiat said reasonably, as the dog peered around the door jamb.

“You might be one of those beasts.”

“I’m no beast!” The dog disappeared again into the house like a child’s puppet.

“You know that, I know that. But Talas wants to learn it for himself,” Tsusiat said, brown eyes sparkling with humour. “I’ve tried to tell him that beasts from the poisoned land have fangs and many legs. But he still has his suspicions.”

“Won’t he be angry at you teasing him in front of a stranger?” It seemed likely. Jenia had already learned during her travels that some people who spoke for their villages did not take criticism well.

“I’m not worried,” said Tsusiat as frankly as if they were sisters. “Whenever he tries to tell me what to say or not to say, I put his name in a song that the whole village sings for a week.” Tsusiat moved to open the door. Cooking smells were drifting out invitingly, along with a thread of wood smoke. Jenia’s stomach rumbled with hunger, and she found herself wondering if what was cooking would taste as good as it smelled.

“So come and tell us your story. I promise you, Talas has thrown no one off the cliff who did not lie and cheat at games and steal and beat the slaves.” Tsusiat’s smile flickered. “And only one spy was ever sent back to the other traders naked in an open boat. We really do enjoy meeting new people, to tell stories in winter when no one wants to go outdoors. Now it is time to go indoors.” And Jenia let herself be brought inside the wide wooden doors, into the shadowy interior of the great wooden house with the rain drumming lightly on its roof of cedar planks.

Chapter Two

The air inside was a little smoky. Almost immediately she noticed with relief that there were no more of the small, flying insects that had plagued her. For Jenia, this house would be a blessing if for that reason only, and no other. There was no obvious reason the biting flies stayed outside the door; she wondered how it was done. *Nothing I tried myself during the night would keep the pests away.*

There were carved pegs set along a wall inside the door, where wet shawls were hung and cloaks spread out to dry. Several curiously woven hats were hung there as well. It was dark and smoky inside, and Jenia paused near the door to let her eyes adjust. She was shown a peg where she could hang her oiled leather cloak and small pack, while Tsusiat called a child to come take the bowl of berries.

Jenia gave up the bowl to be shared in the evening meal, and shook out her cropped hair, trying to finger-comb it into some kind of order instead of its usual tousled mess. “Who are these berries for?” lisped the child, shy in front of a stranger, and Tsusiat patted the small, round head for reassurance.

“Where did you gather these?” asked Tsusiat. With a start, Jenia realized that it was she who was being addressed, not the child, as Tsusiat went on, “Where you

were standing when we met you?” Jenia nodded. With eyes closed, Tsusiat sang a brief chant, in a low, true voice but almost inaudibly, in a sing-song way that reminded Jenia of the counting rhymes she learned as a child. “That is where your aunt Clata gathers, where the old houses were built in grandmother days,” Tsusiat then told the waiting child with the bowl clutched in grubby hands. “Tell her, Lop, so she won’t think you got greedy.”

It was good to be among people again, after so many days alone during the past months. Several times during the night, Jenia had heard sounds under the trees, rustling sounds of branches bending and bushes being pushed aside. It had probably been nothing larger than a quick-footed raccoon, but her imagination had run away with itself, peopling the woods with bears and giant cats like the ones whose skins lay draped over the wooden benches which she was now able to see clearly, in the half-dark inside the Tlakwa house.

Oh, I’m glad I didn’t see those furs before sleeping outdoors under a fallen tree, she thought ruefully. There would have been brown cats, soft as smoke, instead of whiskery bob-tails in my dreams. I wouldn’t have slept a wink, knowing the bears get this big here!

Jenia wished she could relax. It was clear these people were not like the soldiers who had tracked her as far as the traders’ boats on the mainland shore, but still she worried about the ultimatum Talas had given her just before they entered the house. She felt expected to entertain the household, as well as telling the truth about the reasons for her journey, and hoped she had the storytelling skills

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to win her freedom among the Tlakwa. Life as a slave did not appeal to her, and she had already run from the fate of being a captive in another strange place.

Tsusiatic brought her to the open hearth in the centre of the floor, where benches were pulled close to the fire's warmth. "This is Jenia don Dela don Tared," Tsusiatic announced to the people gathering to meet the stranger sitting at their fire. As quickly as Tsusiatic named twenty or more of the villagers, Jenia forgot their names, overcome by the strangeness of their dark-eyed, broad faces and the strong wood smoke which stung her eyes. The shapes of the women's skirts and shawls hung strangely to her eye; used as she was to woolen clothing, Jenia found the cloth of pounded cedar bark as unfamiliar to her as the soft-tanned leather of the men's breeches. She did notice, though, that there were five or six other people, dressed simply and moving quietly in the corners where lamps were lighted, among those whom Tsusiatic did not introduce.

Perhaps they were slaves. They did not seem cowed, or sullen to her as they worked. Some were deftly cutting up roots to put in baskets simmering in a box of hot water; others were bringing hot stones from the fire, rinsing them and dropping them into the box to keep the water near boiling. Two more quiet people were lighting stone bowl lamps. With quick, covert glances while she looked about the great wooden hall, Jenia compared them to those who had been introduced. All of the people she saw looked well fed, and the only scars she noticed were callused, workers' hands. *Well, anyone who did an honest*

day's work would have calluses! Even soldiers, training with spear and axe and sword, raised calluses as hard as any farmer. It seemed that a slave's life here was not as miserable as she knew it could be among even crueller masters. Their voices were quiet, but not timid under the high ceiling that echoed Talas' voice as he told of the day's boating, and how they had found nothing as memorable as one traveller, on foot on their home beach.

The great wooden house was a marvel to Jenia, who had lived all her life in the much smaller, wattle-and-daub houses her folk built. There, two or three rooms would house a family, and most gatherings were held in the open square in good weather. Apparently good, dry weather came more often in her inland valley than could be expected here. *At Musky Creek, the traders built like this, too, but I didn't go indoors there.* Jenia tried not to be prying or rude as she looked around this busy place. *And they laughed when I asked when the rain was expected to stop. This is summer; it's supposed to be the dry season!*

This Tlakwa house was larger than the lord's hall she had seen in Kultis. It looked almost like a market square with a great, wooden tent sheltering a dozen partitioned stalls where families lived and the common space. Jenia noticed Tsusiat stepping aside into one of the alcoves, removing a shawl damp with rain. After a few moments, Tsusiat lifted the curtain and came out of the alcove wearing a dry, woolen shawl, and dry trousers under it instead of a woman's skirt. Barefoot on the dirt floor pounded hard and dustless by many feet, Tsusiat walked closer to an open hearth. There, red coals flared under logs as big

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as Jenia's leg, logs which had obviously just been added when the boats had been seen returning to the beach.

Most of the smoke went up through an open hole in the plank roof that rose more than three times her own height, but some smoke drifted among the posts and beams, and into the curtained stalls along the great plank walls. Jenia had seen whole forests of trees big and straight enough to make these beams and planks as she crossed Copper Island. She wondered how the posts were ever moved and set into place. Surely the Tlakwa would need hundreds of pairs of hands to lift those great beams, and all those people would need food and shelter for weeks while it was built. Wattle-and-daub was much simpler, in Jenia's opinion, but might not be practical here if the winter rains were hard. The bench creaked under Jenia, and she turned to see Tsusiat sitting on the other end. "Now let us have food and stories," said Talas, startling Jenia out of her quiet thoughts as he came into the brighter circle of firelight. "Let us hear from Jenia..." he looked around for a moment.

"Jenia don Dela don Tared," said one of the quiet, unnamed women as she put a bowl of soup into his hands. "Ah! This smells good. Let us hear the story of why she is here, so we can know whether she is our welcome guest." Others came to sit or stand near the open hearth, taking bowls of soup as they were passed from hand to hand. The first row of faces was well lit by the firelight, and behind them stood other people, half-lit by lamps flickering in the shadows. The smells of smoke, of food and so many people close together pressed on Jenia like a gauze

blanket, but the people were clean, the food was good and the sharp, spicy tang of the smoke was both exotic cedar and familiar enough as smoke to give Jenia a thrill as she saw the gathered people turn as one to watch her, expectantly. They quietened enough to hear as Jenia drew a deep breath to begin, fisting her hands together in her lap to keep them from trembling.

“One night very early this spring, an hour after sunset, I was suddenly no longer in my home but outdoors in a strange place where the sun was just at the horizon,” Jenia began. The ring of quiet people around her murmured in satisfaction; with her first words, she had their attention and interest. One of the women dipped another bowl of soup from a cooking box and gave it to her as she spoke. “The only familiar faces I saw were my brother and sister, Tared and Dela. We had been falling asleep, talking quietly at home about how we wanted to travel for a while to nearby villages. One moment we were at home, the next in this unknown place. We did not know where we were taken, nor for what purpose. There were many people there we had never seen before, some very strange. We were made to work with shovels and yoked pails, carrying gravel to build a road and a gravel base.”

Jenia paused to look around her at her hosts, wearing soft leather or tough cedar bark, and the bare small children who reached, bold and shy at once, to touch the softness of her damp woolen shirt and loose pants. The threads woven in her clothes were much thinner than the wool woven into shawls or blankets draped around people’s shoulders. “Many of those who worked were

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dressed as though we had been taken from our beds. I was barefoot, as were most others. Some were naked, and ashamed. Others went naked and brown as if they did so all their days, but it was the labour that wore them down. And the whips. There were guards... with whips.”

It was hard to talk about the whips. Jenia bit her lip and forced her hands to open, relaxing where her nails had driven into the skin of her palms. “There were guards to keep us from walking away into the forest, guards who set us to filling yoked pails and carrying them to where they were to be emptied, and these guards let the whips fall on our backs and legs if we resisted them, or if we spoke with one another, or if we simply sat down to rest. They spoke only one word to us as they showed us where we were to carry the yoked pails and place the gravel: Krummholz. Whether that was the name of the place or of the tall man who stood there, looking down on our labours, we were not told.”

She was silent for a while, thinking what to say next, when Talas prompted her. “Why didn’t you fight?” It seemed a natural question, hearing her story, she knew.

“We were confused, and it was dark. Perhaps the magic which the tall man made, that brought us there, also kept us bewildered.” It felt like she was making a lame excuse for cowardice to the people listening. They were brave enough to dare the sea in their long, narrow boats. She wanted to say, *I’m not so timid, really...*

Clearing her throat, Jenia told them of one memory. “There was a man who seemed clear-headed compared to the rest of us. Naked and barehanded as he was, he

grabbed a guard by her bronze armour and knocked her down. The other guards beat him to death with their boots and whips as the tall man watched and the rest of us stood with our yoked pails swinging,” she said bitterly. “When it was done, the guards saluted the tall man, crying ‘Krummholz!’ and he told them to throw the broken body over the cliff. One of the guards fell too, but he said nothing. I’ve never seen a man like him, cold glaring eyes in a face that was always grim, under lank hair as bright as butter. When he walked on a ledge above us, directing his guards with a word or two and a gesture, his robe swirled as he walked and turned, swirling light as smoke. Later, at daybreak when it grew light, I stole a glance over the cliff edge and saw waves pounding over rocks far below, and bones on a small stony shore.” The soup bowl shivered in her hands, but did not spill.

“Then in the day, we were already tired and hungry and thirsty, and the whips were on our backs if we so much as looked up. But I did look up, enough to see mountains, and in the daylight the waves on the beach below.”

She tried to speak with the confidence she had felt earlier, seeing the nearby low mountains against the clouds. “I saw the low mountains inland from this bay, on this island. This is where I was taken, and it must have been by magic.” It sounded strange to say that word. Were the Tlakwa people more familiar with magic than her own home village? Magic still didn’t seem plausible to her. “I - I didn’t know magic was real, or that it made things like this happen, but nothing else could take me so far from

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my home in the time it takes to draw breath.”

Looking around, Jenia saw that she had the attention of everyone near enough to hear her, even away from the hearth, where small stone bowl lamps cast flickering lights over wooden chests in the sleeping corners of the great house. “We worked all night laying gravel for a road, and pounding it down hard, and into a shape like the floor of a building. At least,” she said uncertainly, “it made me think of a building, when we were made to put a kind of wooden fence around it. And in that frame, we had to put iron bars. Were they supposed to be like tent poles? I don’t know why they weren’t wooden, then - some of the bars were already rusting, eaten out by the rain and the salty air from the shore.”

Her audience traded knowing glances, and Talas made a crumbling gesture with his hands. “Iron is eaten by weather, here on the Island,” he said. “Only copper and gold and bronze stay hard here. You know that already, do you?”

“I learned it that night and day I worked here,” Jenia said wryly. “My earrings rusted through, and fell as I tried to catch them. These new ones are ruined already.” She pulled her cropped hair back from one ear to show the stain of rust at her earlobe, and the crumbling ring.

“When the rain stopped at noon, we were made to mix a cold porridge of gravel and sand and powder that made my brother Tared cough, and pour it into the double fence and onto the gravel we had pounded flat. That was when it began looking like a floor, and a set of walls that we had been building. But I didn’t think of that until later,

when I was travelling here, when I saw other ways of building houses and halls and barns. Then I was only carrying pails of the gravel porridge, and worrying about Tared coughing as he mixed. I couldn't see Dela anywhere, and didn't worry for her right then. I don't know why I wasn't thinking clearly about her when I couldn't see her. I've been tired before. It wasn't that." Her face flushed, and she hoped that was hard to see by the firelight.

"One pail spilled on him, from chin to his bare feet cut by the sharp, broken stones, and he was not even allowed to wash in the sea. The sun was out then," Jenia said, eyes faraway, seeing the bright sun on water after the rain had stopped, not the dark and smoky walls of the Tlakwa house. "The muddy porridge dried on him as he mixed more, and the dust made him cough as we worked. There was clean water in a stone casing around a spring, but we weren't allowed to drink any of it."

Her lips and throat felt dry again with that remembered thirst, and she paused to drink from her bowl. The savoury soup was good and meaty. She lowered the bowl and continued speaking. "As the sun touched the horizon I saw the workers leaving. In an eye-blink, they were gone, like a trout taking a fly. The man watching us sent them, sweeping his arm like he was sweeping crumbs off a table, and his guards saluted him and cried out "Krummholz!" Then I was back in my home, an hour after sunset."

There was silence again as she sipped from the bowl. A baby stirred and cried and the mother stepped aside into

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her family's partitioned space to unwrap and soothe it, cooing nonsense words softly.

"Was it a dream?" asked Tsusiat eventually.

Jenia unlaced her woolen shirt. The women among these people wore shawls over bare breasts, so she knew their modesty would not be offended as she pulled the shirt off her back to show the stripes from the whips, now healed. "Our village was astounded to see us returned with marks of the whips and our feet torn and bruised by the sharp stones, after they had looked for us all day."

"You may have been caught by a great wizard, to be his slaves and do his work for a night and a day," said an old woman, pushing her way into the circle of firelight near the hearth. She glared at one young man until he moved aside to let her by, and stepped casually on his bare foot in passing. The people she pushed past looked away, clearly unhappy at the unwashed smell rising from her faded shawl and skirt and her stiff hide slippers.

Tsusiat leaned over to whisper in Jenia's ear. "This is Karn. Please be careful..."

"It may have been in a faraway place, south where the wizards live. You don't know anything about wizards," she said scornfully. "You don't know anything about here, either. Why would you be taken here? It was probably somewhere else, far away or long ago. Or it may have been a different world."

"It was this world, and by foot and water I have come to the place where I laboured under that spell," Jenia said grimly, putting her shirt back on. Her temper flared at the old woman's words, but she fought back the urge to speak

sharply to a woman older than her own grandmother. “It was here.”

“How would you know that?” demanded the old woman, warming her hands at the great fire, standing so close her slippers were in the ashes. “Here we have plenty of everything we need. Do you think we steal people to do useless work? How would you know if you were taken here, of all places? How would you know that it was even this world?”

“Would another world have our moons in the same phase?” Jenia demanded. “I walked north for a month, until the light lingered longer in the sky after sunset than it does in my home village. I walked west for half a month towards the sunset, to the seashore where the sun sets later than over my home village in the mainland valley. I know the mountains I saw, veiled in rain and in clear air, as I was beaten. I know the smell and feel of the wood frames I built, the same wood you use for your houses and fire. I was here, on your island but not in your village.” She felt an obscure triumph, for speaking her mind without cursing the old woman or raising her voice. More than a few admiring glances from the listening people showed that they appreciated her standing up to the bad-tempered harridan.

There was silence following her words, broken only by the crackling of the fire, while the old woman bristled with indignation. Finally Talas said flatly: “There is no Tower here. We have not seen one being built along our shores.”

“Perhaps you had better look in the poisoned lands,

then,” retorted Jenia, looking into the flames rather than at him, to take the sting out of her words. “On a small mountain with a spring on its slumped shoulder, overlooking a bay of the sea.” Sparks raced upwards towards the smoke hole in the roof while she watched and her hands stopped trembling.

No one commented on her suggestion. Perhaps they did not think it a wise plan. Jenia sat on the cedar bench again, and reached for the last of the soup in her bowl, now grown cold.

“So, you had an adventure, and got off lightly,” said Talas at last. “A few scars to show for it, perhaps, and you were tired from your work. Now you know more of road building and wizards than you ever expected to learn, I suppose. We know little of either here.” He nudged Tsusiat with a big-knuckled hand, and laughed. “We go about here in our boats, not by paths except along the shores. We build no roads. We have no wizards, here, either. The wizards are all far to the south.” He winked at an old man who was carving a small piece of wood. “The only wizard we have is old Karn, and even she cannot light a lamp with a word anymore, and her medicines don’t work like they used to.” He laughed again, and there were a few smiles on the faces of people standing behind the old woman.

Karn screeched, “You still came for my salves when you strained your shoulders! Lift your boat alone next time, and see how you feel without my medicines,” she grumbled, and pushed her way out of the circle of light. She glared at one young woman and fingered her clean,

embroidered shawl, greedy eyes bright, but the woman gently took the shawl from her hands and stepped back to let Karn pass. “No peace for you when you sleep without my salves,” she muttered at Talas as she tottered towards a dark corner.

“I had a terrible adventure,” Jenia said softly. Before her, a log burned through and fell into the coals, breaking apart with a soft thud and a shower of sparks. “But Tared had his death of that night and day’s work. We found him in his bed, blistered from the muddy porridge, his lungs eaten out by the dust that burned him like lime for the garden. He died after two days of pain.” Shocked gasps met her words, and she saw sympathy in the dark eyes of the Tlakwa people. The strange spell of which she spoke seemed no longer to be a prank, or a whim, but an accident gone awry.

“And Dela, your sister - was she as well as you after you all returned?” asked Tsusiat softly, when no one else spoke.

“My sister miscarried, and lost the babe of her hopes.” Jenia heard a gasp of sympathy, and another hot bowl of soup was pressed gently into her hands by the woman who had served her earlier. “Dela had only vague memories of our hardships when she recovered. She remembered that night and day very differently from me, insisting we were taken to help build a fairy’s palace, and we were honoured to be chosen to build a beautiful tower.”

One of the bare little children who had crept close enough to listen whispered, “But fairies are only in sto-

ries.”

“And so were the nightmare beasts, until the poisoned highlands brought them out of the bogs,” said Tsusiat. “But I think these fairies were only in Dela’s dream, Lop, not walking under the two moons.”

Jenia wondered if the Tlakwa people felt like she was a dream instead of a real person walking into their home, eating their food. Were they afraid of her, or did they see her as a person much like themselves? “Dela was afraid of what had happened to us. She wouldn’t talk with me about how we were called for Krummholz, or how Tared died. The funeral chants were miserable for both of us, an empty acknowledgement of our loss. She won’t consider looking for a husband, or for another orphan to be our brother,” Jenia said, almost into her bowl as she sipped. “She even said that it was my fault. I had wanted us to travel after the babe was born, and they were agreeing with my wishes, just as we were taken by the magic. She said that I must be a wizard myself, and made it happen, so that we were chosen instead of someone else, stronger people more suited to build a palace.”

“Some palace,” grunted Talas. “Mud and broken stone, and rusting iron poles. Your Dela was wandering in her mind when she called that a fairy palace. And could you be a wizard, caught like that, like a fish in a net? Karn,” he called. “Come tell us if our guest is a wizard.”

Jenia relaxed inwardly, but tried to give no sign. So she was a guest now, instead of a stranger who might be thrown off the headland for lying or spying. She felt the knot of worry in her gut relax even as she heard the old

woman screech, “What? You care what I think? When my medicines no longer work? If I cannot light your lamps, how do you think I can tell if she is a wizard or telling winter stories out of season?”

“Karn can tell,” Tsusiat said softly to Jenia, pulling long dark hair into a braid that the firelight gave red highlights. “She has no one to train now, and is still looking. No one wants to train with her, her temper is bad since the end of winter, and her songs and dances rarely work now.”

With a temper like that, it was no wonder at all that no one wanted to train with the old witch. The sour thought drifted away as Jenia watched Tsusiat’s hands moving, plaiting dark hair long like Dela’s before it was cut for the funeral. But Dela’s hands were not so long and lean.

“I know I am no wizard,” Jenia said with a sniff. The idea had hurt when Dela had suggested it, but her poor sister could not be held responsible for the effects of the magic abduction. As if Jenia would have done anything likely to get Tared or Dela kidnapped, and herself as well! *O Tared, buried now, and the tiny baby with him...* Jenia felt her eyes sting at the thought, and tried to talk of more practical things. “The only gift I have is for pruning fruit trees so they bear well. Often I can coax a tree others thought was dying into bearing fruit again, but that is hardly magic. I learned it from my parents before they died, and practiced with Dela and Tared for years to do it well.” In fact, Jenia was very good at it, better than either of her parents or her siblings. Her grafts nearly always took, her pruning cuts rarely infected, and neighbours in-

Tower in the Crooked Wood

sisted that after she worked on the pet trees at their doors, the fruit was larger and sweeter. *But boasting is of little use, when one blight striking an orchard could ruin all the gardeners' hopes for the season.*

The child who had spoken earlier wormed his way through the adults and came up to Jenia's elbow, where he tugged on the sleeve of her wool shirt, distracting her. She was touched by the engaging, open curiosity on his grubby face. "Was that all your adventures?" he asked wistfully.

"No," Jenia said with a smile. She saw other children being given food from their parents' bowls, and knew children were well loved here. This strange village, with only four great houses instead of two dozen huts, began to seem less strange to her. "I also pruned trees on my way here. It was like being at home in my mother's orchard, so it did not seem like a daring adventure to me, but maybe it would to you. I have not seen any orchards here."

"What's an orchard?" he asked, eyes gone round.

"It is a place where trees that grow fruits or nuts are planted together, close to a home or a village," Jenia explained. "The trees will get plenty of sunshine and rain, and you don't have to go looking all through forests of other trees to find the ones with fruit."

He nodded. "Karn grows some plants like that, by her house. She calls it a garden. Tell me your story," he said, and sat friendly and trusting on the floor beside her, petting the small white dog that had crept up unnoticed, and now lay curled dry and warm at her feet. "Tell me like

Tsusiatic tells me a story. ‘One day under the two moons and the bright sun,’ Jenia came to an orchard...” he prompted, and Jenia began.