

Arms and the Woman

Nancy Kress

The hour after the third-year class in Advanced History of Armor Styles was supposed to be my research time, but a tyro knight had asked to see me, and of course tyros are so sacred that we mere loremasters must drop everything and counsel them, no matter what valuable papers might miss the *Loremaster Quarterly* deadline. To make it worse, the apprentice turned out to be Tyro Marigold. I have little patience with stupid people; it is my only fault. Marigold is the stupidest apprentice that Castle Olansa has ever had. By far.

"Loremaster Gwillam, I'm being *haunted*," she said, sitting on the edge of the wooden bench in my study, her blue eyes perfectly round. The emblem on her breastplate was upside down. I reached over and twisted it to its locked and upright position.

"If you're being haunted, then go get a spell from Father Martin."

"I can't, because—"

"Don't tell me you `can't.' You know tyros are exempt from hauntings during all of training except vigil week." Although probably she didn't know. Certainly I hadn't been able to teach her much about chivalric lore. Why should Father Martin have been any more successful teaching her about death duty?

"I can't see Father Martin about this because—"

"Don't tell me `can't,' girl! Just do it!"

"—the ghost is my aunt, First Dame Cecilie of Castle Thlevin!"

That, of course, put a different cast on the situation. I leaned forward and scrutinized Marigold carefully. No, she wasn't lying. Her pop-eyed blue gaze looked genuinely baffled, and genuinely frightened. Besides, she was too stupid to lie.

Which was what made the situation interesting. Ghosts almost never choose relatives to haunt for their

tutions. Obviously an unstilled ghost has to haunt someone to learn whatever lessons it failed to learn in life, but usually relatives are part of the reason they didn't learn the lesson in the first place. Wisdom deficits tend to run in families. Most ghosts need to go outside the family to discover the principles they didn't see illustrated in life. So why was a First Dame haunting her own niece?

And why *Marigold*? What could a tyro this stupid—she was dead last in the lists for jousting, hunting, arcana, military strategy, fencing, astrology, and heraldry—possibly teach anybody? The only award Marigold had ever won, in three years at Castle Olansa, was Miss Congeniality, and I suspect that was a pity vote by the other tyros. The tyromistress is constantly trying to eradicate their sentimentality, but with thirty-three teenage girls in the tyro class alone, it's difficult.

Marigold squirmed under my close inspection, looked away, looked back, nervously fiddled with her armor emblem, which again ended up upside-down. No, she wasn't lying.

"Tyro, when did you last see the ghost of First Dame Cecilie?"

"Last night! At midnight, Loremaster. Oh, she was so aw-ful! She wore full armor—breastplate, tace, tasset, pauldron, all of it—and was smeared with blood! And she had no . . . no right arm!" The young voice was filled with horror. The right arm, the sword arm.

"All right," I said. "You may go."

"G-go? But . . . but what should I do?"

"Nothing, until I send for you again. That will be this evening. I need to think."

At the mention of thinking, Marigold nodded reverently, in homage to a foreign activity. She tiptoed out, so as not to disturb my thinking, her armor clanking on the stone threshold. When she'd clanked out of sight, I closed the door to my study and posted a watchraven. I needed to use everything at my disposal, both scrolls and spells, to learn what I could about First Dame Cecilie of Castle Thlevin.

* * *

"What did he say? What did he tell you?" The tyros crowded around Marigold in the Third Bedchamber. They had just come in from strength training and the smell of strong healthy sweat perfumed the summer air. "What's he going to do, Marigold?"

"He's going to think."

The other residents of the Third Bedchamber nodded sagely, but Tyro Anna frowned. She was first bed in the First Bedchamber, top of the lists, and wouldn't have ventured this far near the bottom for anything less momentous than haunting by a relative. Anna was tough, smart, and much resented, although this did not save her from Loremaster Gwillam's sarcasm. Some of the other girls turned to stare at her coldly.

Anna said, " `Think'? That's it? What action is he going to take on your behalf, Marigold?"

"He's going to send for me this evening," Marigold said. She smiled, glad to have been able to produce information for Anna, whom she admired. It was a smile of exceptional sweetness; Marigold possessed neither jealousy nor malice.

Anna said, "That's not action, that's postponement of action. Did he say anything else? Try to remember!"

Obediently Marigold racked her mind. "Nooo . . . that was all."

"Then keep me informed of your next visit to him," Anna ordered, and swept out of the room.

Catherine muttered, "That one will be having to haunt somebody herself, someday. To study humility."

"Oh, never mind her," Elizabeth said. "Tell us again about the ghost, Mar!"

Obligingly Marigold described yet again the terrible armless figure in the long red robe, while the Third Bedchamber shivered and squealed.

* * *

After six hours of scrolls and spells so intense that my head hurt, I knew much more about First Dame Cecilie than she would have liked me to know. Or anyone else, either. I poured myself an ale, watched the glory the sinking sun made of my small stained-glass window, and pondered amid the litter of my small library.

First Dame Cecilie had been born into an undistinguished yeoman family—Marigold's family—in West Riding, forty-seven years ago. She had been tested in the usual way at her woman-ceremony, and, astonishingly, had proved to have ability in knighthood, lore, war counsel, *and* barter. Only at childlove

and housewifery had she scored low. Several castles had made her a bid, and her proud parents had chosen knighthood at Castle Treffin, very ivy-rank. Cecilie had easily become first bed in the First Bedchamber, and at class knighting she'd won every honor open to her. She'd left Treffin to join Princess Margaret's army, then invading the Sixth Kingdom, and distinguished herself in several battles. She'd married a beautiful and wealthy landowner, Duke Michael of Kern, and had done such a superb job of reorganizing and leading his household forces that no one had dared challenge the duke's army.

That had apparently been the problem.

Cecilie had had nothing more to do. There was no war to fight. She'd borne Michael twins, beautiful daughters, but she had no talent for housewifery or childlove, and her daughters did not fill her days. The house steward, a woman just as formidable as Cecilie, successfully resisted Cecilie's efforts to take over the household barter. Cecilie grew more idle, more bitter, and more desperate. Michael did not understand. They got separate bedchambers.

Finally Cecilie took to pretending she had a lover. This gave her an excuse to go away for a week at a time. Away from the estate, she disguised herself as a foreign knight and entered second-rate tournaments where credentials weren't checked too closely. Naturally, she won them all. She was too good, and someone traced her real identity. There was a scandal, and Cecilie was disgraced. Michael divorced her. She was disarmed by the Parfait Gentle Knights Association. Her birth family disowned her.

But there was more. After a few years, Cecilie tried the foreign-disguised-knight routine *again*, and again she was exposed. After that, she holed up for a few months in an abandoned monastery in the wilds of North Riding. Naturally I couldn't summon up what had happened there; even the lingering-spirit-of-a-place was thick with spells. But no one else entered during Cecilie's stay there. I am sure of that. And when she emerged, she had only one arm.

She entered the second-rate lists a third time, was not recognized, fought badly (she had, after all, only one arm), and was killed in her second tournament. She was buried, an anonymous knight, in a greave yard.

I'd brought my watchraven inside my library when I'd finished working. Now I raised my goblet to it.

"The most major scroll of my career, raven. Perhaps of any loremaster career!"

The raven stared at me from his shiny flat black eyes.

"There are only two possibilities, you know. Cecilie was completely unable to bend with fate. Marigold bends with everything anyone asks of her. Marigold is too close a relative for haunting under any but the most extraordinary circumstances, which always means that no one else's actions have ever matched so closely the dead ghost's mistakes, nor ever will. There are hundreds of people that Cecilie could have observed in order to learn ordinary flexibility. No, it's an extraordinary event. And there are only two possibilities, raven!"

It stared at me impassively.

"Either Tyro Marigold, too, will cut off her own arm, in some way that will teach Cecilie her death lesson. Or—listen to this!—we have here an example of the rarest of all death tuitions. There hasn't been even one in the last century. If Marigold doesn't cut off her own arm—then the haunting is a *reversal*! It won't be Cecilie who learns from Marigold, but Marigold who learns from Cecilie! And either way, I can write the scroll before it happens, and have it ready to go! I will be famous, you stupid bird! I will be called to Queen Eleanor's court! I will be revered and consulted and rich and never see this dump of a training castle again! What do you think of *that*?"

A mistake. If I hadn't been so exhausted and jubilant and ale-wild, I would never have asked a raven a direct question. They have a limited vocabulary, all of it irritating.

"Clever bore."

"Oh, shut up. What do you know? You're as stupid as Marigold and the rest of the giggling tyros!"

The raven stared at me, unblinking.

* * *

Marigold and her best friend, Tyro Catherine, stood outside the loremaster's chamber, clutching hands. Catherine had come to lend Marigold spiritual support, even though both girls understood that only Marigold would be summoned into the chamber. They awaited that summons now. Both wore full dress armor except for helmets, in honor of the solemnity of the occasion. Their fidgeting clanked on the stone floor.

"What if he tells you to *talk* to the haunt?" Catherine breathed.

"Oh, he wouldn't! I couldn't!"

"But he might. You know how he is."

Marigold nodded. Her chin piece clinked against her gorget, which in turn rattled her breastplate, with its slipped emblem. "I don't—oh, what was that? Around the corner!"

"Not your aunt. Really! I saw the right hand. It was *there*."

"Oh," Marigold said, visibly relaxing. "Who was it?"

"I didn't see. But I guess it was one of those snotty First Chamber girls."

Marigold looked puzzled. "Why would they be here?"

"Oh, Mar, you're so innocent. Don't you know they're all jealous of this?"

"Jealous? Of this? Of *what*?"

"Of all the attention you're getting from the loremaster! Any of them would die for a private conference with him!"

"Ooohhh," Marigold said. Her smooth brow creased. "But . . . Cathy, I don't think so. They don't like him any better than we do. He's just as mean to them, you know. Even to Anna."

"I know. But she's probably jealous anyway. That whole crowd sucks up to all the teachers."

"But, Cath . . . I don't think they—"

"You don't think it because you're so nice. But everybody else in our chamber can see it. That Anna—oh!"

The door opened to reveal the loremaster. Marigold and Catherine clutched hands harder (clink, rattle). The loremaster frowned.

"You are not needed here, Tyro Catherine. Go away."

"Yes, sir."

"On second thought, stay."

"S-stay?"

"I said so, didn't I? God, you girls are a waste of air. Come in. Sit there. No, not there—*there*."

Marigold and Catherine settled their armor on the edge of the raised stone hearth, empty in the warm summer. They sounded like a tray of dropped kitchenware. Loremaster Gwillam studied them with distaste.

Long miserable moments dragged by for the girls.

Just when they could bear it no longer, the loremaster barked, "Tyro Catherine, have *you* seen this haunting?"

"No, sir."

"Are you lying?"

"No, sir!"

"I think you're lying."

"I d-don't lie, sir."

"If you say that, you're lying now. Everybody lies. Isn't that true?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I—"

"Do you think I lie?"

"No, sir."

"You're wrong. I lie. Am I right?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I . . ."

"Stupid as I thought. Both of you. Tyro Marigold, this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to go where you go, do what you do. Everywhere. I will see what you see, and thus gather information on this haunting. I will—"

"Everywhere?" Marigold gasped.

"Everywhere. I will sleep in the Third Bedchamber. The tyromistress has given her permission. Her watchravens will accompany me, for propriety's sake. But I will be with you, and I will get to the bottom of this."

The girls looked at each other, appalled. Catherine, the bolder, finally said, "But, sir . . ."

"But what?"

"What . . . what if the haunt doesn't appear again?"

"It will appear again."

Once more the girls stared at each other.

"However," Loremaster Gwillam said, "I will certainly not tell you what I expect. You are both too stupid to understand. You may go. I will join you as soon as the tyromistress's ravens are delivered to me."

Outside the loremaster's closed door, Marigold burst into tears. Catherine put an arm around her.

"To have him . . . " sob, clank " . . . watch me all the time . . . " clank, sob " . . . *criticizing* the way he does . . . oh, Cath!"

"I know," Catherine soothed. "Old sot!"

"Sshhhh! He'll hear you!"

"I don't care if he does!"

But at a sound behind them, they both scurried away, raw-nerved and rattling.

* * *

Tyro Marigold was not lying. The other girl believed her utterly; I examined Catherine specifically to be sure of this. The haunting is real, there is nothing like it in all the modern literature, and I am going to be renowned throughout the Twenty-four Kingdoms.

All I need is for Marigold either to lose her sword arm or to learn something significant from the haunt of her aunt.

For the next five days I stuck to Marigold like a spell on a frog. I watched intently as she jousted; no fall severed her arm. I peered over her shoulder at her lesson scrolls; no writing changed to haunted runes from a tutelary ghost. I sat on the sidelines as she worked out in the ring; no opponent's sword cut through her elbow. I knelt beside her at vigil; no haunt appeared, dressed in bloody armor.

I was not discouraged. But I may have become a touch impatient with the stupid tyros (it is my only fault). Unfortunately, they are all stupid. This is how I know I will have nothing to learn beyond the grave—I am being given all my trials now.

On the sixth day, however, it happened. Everybody saw it, even the watchravens.

Thus is scholarly vigilance rewarded in the worthy.

* * *

"I can't stand it," Marigold moaned. "I can't, I can't!"

"Keep your voice down," Tyro Elizabeth said nervously from the pallet beside Marigold. Loremaster Gwillam slept on Marigold's other side. Three watchravens perched on the six-inch-high carved wooden fence between.

"Liz, it's awful. Today in Summa Logicales he screamed at me that I was horse dung. In front of everybody!"

"I know. But quieter, Mar. Shhhhh."

"What does he want from me?"

Elizabeth didn't answer. No one knew. From beyond the symbolic fence came the loremaster's soft snoring. The ravens' black eyes, wide open, gleamed in the moonlight from the open window.

"And tomorrow," Marigold moaned, but very quietly, "we have to—what was that?"

"I didn't hear any—oh!"

Both girls sat up, grabbed each other, and rose to their knees to look out the window. Then they shrieked to raise the dead, although in this case that was unnecessary.

The haunt of First Dame Cecilie of Castle Thlevin stood a hundred yards off, at the edge of the wood. At such a distance she was a small armor-clad figure, but clearly one-armed. She keened despairingly, "Marigold! Marigold of West Riding!"

"Oh! Oh!" Marigold shrieked.

"What? What?" screamed the rest of the Third Bedchamber, now awake.

"Severed yore!" cried the watchravens.

"Go! Go to her, you stupid girl!" Loremaster Gwillam cried, bolt upright on his pallet, clutching the windowsill greedily. His striped nightcap fell over one eye and he shoved it away. "Go! Wait—go alone!"

"Alone?" cried Marigold, aghast.

"Yes, yes! How else can she cut . . . er, how else can she learn whatever she must know from you? Go!"

Marigold was not the brightest young woman in the Twenty-four Kingdoms, but she did not lack bravery. At an order from a loremaster, she started to pull on her armor.

"No, wait—I *will* go with you!" the loremaster cried.

"You go with—no, no, I'll go alone!"

"Are you contradicting me, Tyro?" Loremaster Gwillam pulled himself up to his full height, plus slightly tilted nightcap.

"No," Marigold said miserably.

"Never sore," said a raven.

"Ever on the floor," said another.

But by the time they reached the edge of the wood, the haunt of Dame Cecilie had vanished.

* * *

The mistake was mine. I admit it; I am not one such as cannot admit when he is in error. I was impatient (it is my only fault). I should not have tried to go with Marigold the Stupid. I should have instead let her go alone, respecting the sacred privacy of a tuition haunting, and then spied on her with a spell pool. Next time, I will know better. Next time, I will be better prepared.

Next time came two days later.

Although I thought, before those two days had elapsed, that I had my prize. Tyro Marigold fell at sword practice in the armory.

She was matched against Tyro Catherine, who was as inept as she. Oh, I will be glad when I shake the dust of this brackish excuse for a castle from my boots, and leave these stupid girls behind me! Living always among women is itself enough of a curse; living with tyros is a flagellation no loremaster should have to bear.

The practice was held indoors in the armory, a windowless building large enough to hold all thirty-three tyros, only because outside it rained. For an hour the tyros had been set at the pel-quintain, a stake driven upright into the ground, with which they "fenced" with double-weight sword and shield. Each girl wielded forty pounds of metal, so that when it should be changed for regular weaponry, sword and shield would seem light by comparison. Rain drummed steadily on the roof, just above the bannerettes and pennoncels stored in the rafters. A rack against the wall held more shields, swords, and armor, most of it slung over nails and pegs.

"Change now!" called the training mistress. "Hut, hut!"

The weary girls staggered to the wall rack and switched their double-weight swords and shields for standard-weight. Training Mistress Joan again paired them off, this time without regard for list ranking. Perhaps it was a deliberate attempt to expose them to different competencies. Or perhaps Joan was weary, too, and paired whomever happened to stand beside each other.

Or perhaps—I thought then—it was fate.

Tyro Anna smiled, nastily, at Tyro Marigold, who smiled back, waveringly.

"Begin!"

The girls started whacking away. Tyros, of course, were not allowed to foin; a direct thrust of the point by such beginners might cause serious injury. So they slashed and feinted and whacked, most of them unbalanced by the sudden change in weapon weight, all of them looking as silly as flailing chickens thrown into a pond. And in the midst of the whacking and flailing and lurching, Tyro Marigold tripped.

She slashed at Anna, who moved easily out of the way. The too-hard slash unbalanced Marigold, carrying her sideways until she crashed into a pel-quintain. That caromed her into the wall rack of armor. It was bolted to the wall, but the careless and stupid and exhausted tyros had slung their double-weight weapons on the pegs any which way, and many pieces fell.

A double-weight sharpened sword fell bladeside toward Marigold's right forearm.

The room seemed underwater, so slowly did the sword fall. There was time for me to jump to my feet, to raise my fist halfway to the sky, to cry out.

"Yes! Oh, thank you, Fate!"

The sword turned in the air, as heavy objects sometimes will. And Marigold turned, too, twisting her body away from the falling weapon. With both these turnings, the sword landed flatside on Marigold's arm. It would leave no more than a bruise.

I could not contain myself. "You stupid bitch! Why did you move? Do you know what you've thwarted, what you've destroyed, you moronic thieving turd, you silly bitch—"

They all looked at me, tyros and teachers alike, mouths gaping open. They did not understand. I stalked from the room, and it was many hours before I could calm myself and return to my usual deep understanding of a complex situation, my usual far-seeing knowledge.

She had not lost her arm. Even though it was the perfect time for it. This, I finally saw, was intended as a sign to me. Marigold would not lose an arm, so the other circumstance must be the truth. This was a reverse haunting, and soon Marigold would learn something from Dame Cecilie instead of the other way around.

Once I realized this, I was no longer disappointed that Marigold had not been maimed. In fact, I could see that her escape was a gift to me. It showed me the broad outlines of the marvelous phenomenon I

was chosen to witness, even if the exact details must wait for my later sharp-eyed discovery.

After that, I stuck closer to Marigold than ever. But in my far-seeing mind I began writing my paper, certain that soon the rest of the gift would be given me.

The next night, it was.

* * *

"You must try to eat, Mar," Elizabeth whispered. Catherine hovered anxiously on Marigold's other side at the long refectory table.

"I can't," Marigold whispered back. "Not with him watching me like that."

Loresmaster Gwillam sat across the table. His attention had been momentarily distracted by a watchraven, which had swooped over his shoulder and stolen a piece of fish from his plate. The loresmaster batted away the bird, which mumbled something unintelligible around the fish in its beak—the mumble ended in either "door" or "whore." The loresmaster then returned his gaze to Marigold. Under that gaze—steady, intent, cold—the girl felt she couldn't breathe properly, let alone eat.

Or joust.

Or fence.

Or sleep.

"You must try to sleep," Catherine whispered at bedtime, squeezing Marigold's hand. Marigold nodded wanly.

Nonetheless, she was snoring when the voice came from beyond the window. "Maaarriigggooollllddd . . ."

"Wake up, you stupid girl! It's her! Dame Cecilie is here!" Loresmaster Gwillam shook Marigold until her teeth rattled.

Fearfully, Marigold crawled up from her pallet and peered over the windowsill. As before, the one-armed figure stood at the edge of the woods.

"What on earth is she *wearing*?" said one of the girls clustered behind her.

"Where's her armor?"

"That's a gown like my mother used to wear when . . . when . . ."

"She's pregnant!" Catherine gasped.

"With a horse, at least!"

"Haunts can't get pregnant!"

"No, they . . . can they, Loremaster?"

"Shut up," Loremaster Gwillam said. "Go out there, Marigold."

"Me? Alone? No, I—"

"Go on, you silly bitch! This is it!"

The loremaster pushed Marigold so hard she fell over. An indignant, scared murmur ran over the tyros. Elizabeth started to say quaveringly, "Loremaster, you mustn't—" when the figure by the woods made a quarter turn, and someone cried, "Oh my good heavens! Now she's got *two arms*!"

It was true. The haunt, undeniably dressed in a gown instead of armor, undeniably pregnant, was also undeniably bi-armed.

Loremaster Gwillam appeared to be having a fit of some kind. "Two arms! A restored arm! A reverse

haunting! Oh, my paper, oh the ground-breaking, oh the scientific sensation, the—get going, girl! Get out there before the haunt decides not to teach you anything!"

"T-t-teach me . . . "

"Go!"

Marigold went. Shaking, and brave despite her fear, she pulled a cloak over her nightdress and stumbled alone across the dark open expanse between the castle and the wood. The tyros of the Third Bedchamber, watching, huddled together in awed silence.

Closer, closer . . . and then Marigold and her dead unmaimed aunt stood face to face in the gloom.

"Ooohhh," groaned Elizabeth softly, in sympathy.

"She's so *brave*," moaned Catherine.

"Endeavor more," said a raven.

* * *

I had it. I had it! Not from that stupid girl, who staggered back from her historical and miraculous meeting and promptly fainted. But who needed her? I went immediately to my chamber and invoked a spell pool. The pool had stood ready for days.

And there, in the inky waters, they appeared clear as morning. Marigold walking toward Dame Cecilie and, as the tyro got closer, a distinct view of the haunt herself. She did indeed have two arms—she held up both to stop her niece from approaching too close. She did indeed wear a house-gown instead of armor, and it did indeed bulge in pregnancy. All was clear except her face, partly hidden by her unbound hair as it swung forward. Yet Marigold was certain of the face. She choked out, "Aunt Cecilie . . . "

"Yes, child. It is I." The voice, coming from my spell pool, was low and sepulchral.

"You look . . . you look so . . . waxy . . . "

"I have been dead these nine years."

"That would explain it," Marigold faltered.

"Child. Learn from me. Don't—"

"Aren't you . . . forgive me, aunt! Aren't you . . . "

"Spit it out, child."

". . . supposed to learn from . . . from . . ."

The stupid tyro couldn't finish. Well, the idea of anyone learning anything from Marigold was indeed hard to conceive of. Dame Cecile helped her out.

"Learn from me, child. Be willing to change your armor."

Marigold looked innocently down at herself. "But I'm not wearing armor."

"It's metaphorical," the ghostly voice said, a bit impatiently. "If you can no longer do something well, don't do it any longer. Do not go armored in failure. Give yourself to the new life completely. Not like me."

"But . . . I can't do *anything* well," Marigold said.

"Good . . . bye . . ."

Gown fluttering, the haunt of Dame Cecile waddled backward into the woods, waving with both arms. The gown slipped back from her forearms and I could just make out, inside the right elbow, a tattoo of clasped hands. It was then that jubilation seized me; that is exactly the kind of detail that makes for memorable papers!

In the spell-pool image, Marigold gasped. Quickly Dame Cecilie said, "Say no more! Please!" and that, too, was a good detail for the paper. Dame Cecilie knew how significant her reverse haunting was, how rare, how important. It must have been a terrible strain on her materialization. She could take no more, not even another word.

The haunt disappeared into the night woods.

The pool went dark, and I hurried back to the Third Bedchamber. I doubted that the stupid girl could tell me any more than I had seen—spell pools, after all, are the exact truth—but it never hurt to be thorough.

The Third Bedchamber was full of girls, more than the eleven that belonged there. They had fluttered in from the first two chambers, clacking and fussing like the geese they were. Marigold sat in the center of this feminine maelstrom, on a chair whose back was topped by two of the tyromistress's watchravens.

"Tyro Marigold! Tell me what happened between you and Dame Cecilie!"

She did. It was precisely as I had seen in the spell pool, of course. I listened to her stumble through the account, as dim-witted in the telling as in all else. And then I was ready for the important question.

"And from your aunt's haunt—did you learn anything?"

Marigold smiled strangely. "Oh, yes."

"And what did you learn?"

She recited, in the same mechanical voice with which she recited her memorized lore in class (when she could remember it at all):

"`Be willing to change your armor. If you can no longer do something well, don't do it any longer. Do not go armored in failure. Give yourself to the new life completely.'"

"But what does it mean to *you*, you stupid child?"

Marigold took a long time to answer. The gaggle of girls stayed quiet, almost holding their breaths. Finally she said slowly, "It means that dung happens, and when it does, you should walk on a different path."

That, of course, I did not put in my paper, which was dignified, important, magnificent. I penned it that night, working feverishly until dawn (of course, I'd already written the "Background" and "Search of the Literature" sections). In the morning I sent it off by Feudal Express, which guaranteed that it absolutely, positively would be in Queen Eleanor's court by the next day.

The summons from court would probably take a week. Maybe less. And I would be on my way, out of Castle Olansa, free forever of stupid tyros and squires and second-rate faculty.

Maybe it was self-indulgent of me, but I took my imminent escape as reason to no longer treat the girls with kid gloves. Finally, I could speak to them in class as their stupidity deserved. It was a great relief to me.

* * *

"No, no, Marigold, not like that," Anna said. "Hold your arm like this, so I can't get under your guard . . . Yes. Much better."

The tyros went at it again in the practice yard, Anna in standard armor, Marigold in double-weight. They circled, feinted, thrust . . . and Marigold scored.

"Well done!" Anna said.

In the circle of watchers, Elizabeth whispered to Catherine, "Mar really is getting better, isn't she?"

"She was never *that* bad," Catherine said loyally.

"Oh, come on, you know she was terrible. But with Anna giving her all these lessons . . . Anna isn't so mean, after all."

"I still don't like her, Liz. But she's tough, I'll give her that. She's out there like a champion even after what the loremaster called her in class today. And she's being very nice to Marigold."

"She should be, after what—"

"Shhh," Catherine said. "Here he comes!"

The girls held their breaths. Carefully the circle shifted, a feminine realignment to shield Marigold and Anna until Loremaster Gwillam had passed. However, he hurried past with no more than a single contemptuous sneer at the practice yard.

"He's going to pack," Elizabeth said. "He got a summons from Queen Eleanor's court. He leaves tomorrow."

The two girls covered their mouths and giggled.

In the practice circle, steadily improving under Anna's careful tuition, Marigold's eyes were as bright as her armor.

* * *

I had nailed the lid of my box and packed the fragile items, such as the spell pool, in barrels lined with hay. The headmistress had given me a cheap cloak pin and a cold speech of farewell, the ungrateful bitch. As I checked under the bed for any forgotten items, I noticed the note pinned to my pillow.

Come to the wood at moonriseto meet Dame Cecilie.Methinks you will regret itif you do not.

My first reaction was outrage. Who would *dare* . . . The writing was large and round and girlish, an inkblot on one corner.

"Ever deplore," said one of those damned ravens, and for some reason, a cold spear pricked my spine.

Bluebells bloomed in the wood, and honeysuckle and loosestrife and violets. Summer light filtered down between the green leaves, dappling the ground with gold. It was two days before graduation. The air was light and warm.

"Lloorremmmaaasssttterr Gggwillaaamm . . ."

And she was there, First Dame Cecilie of Castle Thlevin . . . dressed in bloody armor, pale as death,

one-armed until she moved.

"Hey nonny nonny, Bill," she said, and threw away the carved stump of her severed arm. With both hands she pulled off the waxy death mask, and I was staring at Tyro Anna. A burst of laughter behind me sent me whirling to see the rest of the tyros rising from bushes and dropping from trees.

"What is the meaning of—"

"You can guess the meaning, Bill," Anna said. "Can't you?"

All I could do was stare in stupefaction.

"It was a mummery," Anna said. "Only you never guessed it, did you? We did our research on our classmates' knightly kin—thank you for teaching us how—and we put it to good use. A shame you already wrote your paper and sent it off, isn't it? You're going to look a bit of a fool when the truth comes out."

I opened my mouth, but no words came out, only a bleat. "Marr—"

"Marigold didn't know it was us," Anna said. "Nor did any of the Third Bedchamber. They couldn't have played their parts so well if they had. Oh, and there's one thing more that you don't know, loremaster. After graduation, I'm not doing my squireship here at Castle Olansa. I'm doing it at court. My cousin has found me a place there. In fact, there'll be a steady supply of us tyros going up to court in the future. You'll probably want to use your new position to make things as comfortable as possible for us, don't you think?"

"Or else," Elizabeth said.

"Don't you have anything to say, Bill? Your mouth is wide open. Don't you want to call us silly bitches or stupid idiots or worthless dung?"

Marigold said, "Maybe that's enough, Anna. He looks sorry."

"Oh, he's sorry, aren't you, Bill? He's sorry he thought we were too stupid and too defenseless to take

care of ourselves."

Anna stepped closer. She raised her forearm and I saw, through my numb horror, that the inside of the elbow had a tiny tattoo. Of clasped hands.

Suddenly I remembered that the emblem on Marigold's breastplate, the one that was always coming loose, was two clasped female hands.

"Your lore doesn't include everything," Catherine said to me. "We girls have lore among ourselves, you know. We go armored in each other."

"Whereas *you* go armored in failure," Anna said, smiling, "unless you can be willing to change your armor. If you can no longer do something well, don't do it any longer. Give yourself to your new life completely, Bill."

"That's *us*," said Elizabeth, "we're your new life. Serving us as we come up to court, one by one by one."

"Never yore," a raven said. "Forever more."

And I could say nothing at all, just gaze at them in horror: the stupid silly bitches, the clasped hands, the unthinkable future.