

K.D. WENTWORTH

AS YOU SOW

The market stalls teemed with chattering wives and white-bearded old men whose arguing voices vied with the screech of the gulls overhead in the ice-blue spring sky. Ungern smelled the salt spray in the breeze and wished he could watch the boats in the harbor instead of returning to break his back in the landlord's endless flax fields.

"Birdseed!" a querulous voice rose over all the others. "Come and buy my fine seed!"

Ungern craned his head, trying to see to the end of the cobbled street. Yes, that was him, Konstantin Poeg, the last birdseed merchant in all of Estonia. He felt a surge of relief. Sonya would have flayed the hide off him if he had arrived too late.

The old peddler, a small, bristly man with wild-looking eyes, plucked at the burlap bags laid out before him on a wobbly plank table. "So, friend, what sort of birds shall you plant this year?"

Ungern reached into his pocket. "Nightingales." He laid a single copper coin down on the peddler's table.

"Nightingales." Poegstroked his bushy white beard. "Well, if I had some left, they would cost two coppers a seed. As it is, I'm afraid I sold all I had three villages ago."

"Oh." In his mind, Ungern saw how his wife's raisin-black eyes would stare holes through his body if he came home without her seeds. She meant to have nightingales this summer, and if she didn't get her way, there would be no peace or comfort in his one-room cottage for much longer than he cared to think about. He cleared his throat. "Haven't you got something else for one copper?"

"Now, let me see." The old man poked through his heap of burlap sacks, then picked one up. "What about some fine fat geese? I can let you have two of my best grays for one copper."

A tantalizing vision of roast goose and golden-yoked boiled eggs floated through Ungern's head~ then he sighed and slid the lonely coin back into his pocket. "My wife has her heart set on songbirds and one copper is all we have."

"One copper will not even cover my expenses on songbirds!" The peddler leaned over the plank table. "I suppose you think just anyone can harvest birdseed. Well, if you don't find the eggs before the new life quickens, they hatch all by themselves in the ordinary way. Have you ever tried climbing a towering tree to find a nest, not to mention a cliff, or fought your way into a bramble

thicket?

Why else do you think harvesting birdseed is a dying craft? It needs a young man's strength."

Ungern lowered his gaze. "Thank you anyway." He turned to go.

"Wait!" The peddler's hand flashed out and gripped his shirt. "I may have just the thing!" With his other hand, he reached below the table and brought up a small grimy bag tied shut with a bit of string.

"What kind of seed is that?" Ungern squinted at the bedraggled paper label, but the written characters were little more than faded squiggles.

"Something very special left over from several years ago." The old man's wrinkled face beamed. "A little exotic for some folk, but you have the look of a man who can appreciate life's finest. I can't guarantee that all of it will sprout, so I'll let you have a full one half of this bag for one copper."

"Half?" Ungern picked up the tiny bag, feeling the seeds shift inside. There must be dozens. He had never been able to afford more than four birdseeds at a time in his whole life.

"All right, the whole thing then." Poeg folded his arms across his bony chest. "I must say though, sir, you drive a hard bargain. It's not often a man gets the best of me."

A smile stole over Ungern's face as he replaced the single copper on the table. "Thank you!"

"Well, I need to clear out my stock." The peddler leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Frankly, my bones are getting too old to harvest seed anymore. I love it, but it's really a young man's craft. I need someone to take over the collecting end of the business. Why don't you spend a few weeks in the forest with me and learn the trade?"

"Leave the fields?" Ungern's forehead wrinkled at the thought. "That would be wonderful!" But then he considered the consequences--if he did that, the landlord would take back their cottage. He and Sonya would have to live in a hut in the forest, and he could not see her agreeing to anything as drastic as that. "But I'm afraid I have responsibilities."

"That's what they all say." Poegscowled. "Time was when people knew what was important. They wanted a little beauty and song in their life, but no one cares anymore. After I die, no one will be left who remembers how to find seeds before they hatch. Where will people go for birds then?"

No more birdseed? Ungern tucked the bag inside his shirt, trying to imagine a spring in which the only birds he saw were there by chance. It was a lonely thought.

"So, Ungern?" Sonya's heavy eyebrows marched upward with the same forcefulness with which she did everything. "I suppose you took the marketplace by storm."

Ungern sighed. It was a nuisance to be named after a famous pirate. When people heard your name, they always thought you were full of pepper and nails when just the opposite was true. He could still see the disappointment in Sonya's dark eyes whenever she looked at him; eight years ago she had thought him to be someone else, someone bigger and wider, taller inside. But he wasn't. He was just Ungern the farmer, and not such a good farmer at that.

Sonya dried her large, capable hands on her apron. "You did get my seeds, didn't you~"

"Of course, dear, actually more than last year." He pulled the burlap sack out of his shirt and set it in the middle of the freshly scrubbed table.

She clucked her tongue. "That is a lot, too much, in fact. What's the matter-- is something wrong with it? Did you let that disgusting old peddler cheat you~"

"No, no." Ungern opened the sack and poured out the seeds, suddenly aware that POeg had never exactly said what sort of seeds these were. "See? They're nice and dry, not a bit of mold or rot."

"Are you sure these are nightingales?" She poked at them with her finger. "They're much larger than any songbird seeds I've ever seen."

A knot the size of a foot swelled in Ungern's throat. He brushed the seeds into a heap, then back into the bag. The peddler had said they were special, he told himself, and what was the use of upsetting Sonya until he knew for sure? "I'll plant them this evening when I come home."

"I suppose that will have to do." Sonya rapped a wooden spoon against the side of the soup pot, then bent down to scoop up a handful of kindling for the fire. "But don't be late. The sooner they're in the ground, the sooner I'll have my birds."

A week later, the pale-green shoots pushed their rounded heads out of the ground. Ungern studied them nervously, but could tell no difference from the vines of previous years when they'd sown skylarks and warblers.

As they grew, the tiny plants straightened their bowed heads and stretched for the sky, adding pointed leaves along their stems. In two weeks, they reached the height of his knees and were visibly bigger each morning, twining and looping across the garden.

The rapid rate of growth troubled him. He couldn't remember any previously purchased variety growing so fast. He knelt in the rich black soil and tugged at an insistent weed. Of course, on the other hand, he told himself, the added height might be a sign of superiority. No doubt the best songbirds always came from the tallest vines.

As they grew taller, he staked each twisting, dark-green vine and tied it firmly with thin strips of linen. Elongated white pods formed near the tops, two to each vine.

One rainy, gray morning, Sonya stopped by the kitchen garden on her way to feed the pigs. She gazed at the sinuous vines for a long silent moment. "They should be hatching soon."

"Yes, soon," Ungern murmured, keeping his eyes on the weeds.

"But why are they so big?" She balanced the bowl of slops on her jutting hip and fingered a pod. "Is there more than one bird in each?"

"That-- must be it," Ungern agreed, while a little voice inside his head nagged he was just postponing his misery.

Sonya narrowed her eyes and went on to her pigs.

Two days later, Ungern was just tying up the last of his weekly shipment of fodder to the landlord, when he heard a distinct peeping. Giving the twine a final twist, he dropped the bale of hay to the ground and bounded up to the garden.

At the base of the glossy green vines, several small white shapes tottered back and forth. He ran harder, knowing from the previous years this moment was critical; unless the newly hatched chicks saw him within the first hour of hatching, they would fly away as soon as their feathers were mature, instead of staying near the cottage all summer to delight Sonya with their song.

At the sight of him, the white hatchlings retreated into the vines. He dropped to his knees, whispering, "Come, babies, come."

The dark-green leaves rustled.

He held out his fingers and waggled them invitingly. "Come to Ungern." A small white head poked out of the leaves, then the young bird inched forward, its bright black eyes fixed on his face. He clucked encouragingly at it. "Come, babies."

Another appeared behind it, then another, each with a long curving neck and frowning hooked beak that seemed to have been dipped in black ink. His heart skipped a beat. These were most definitely not nightingales or goldfinches or larks or any other sort of bird he had ever seen before in his life.

The nearest chick opened its bizarre bill in a tentative, unmelodic squawk, then circled him shakily on skinny, impossibly long legs.

Ungern sat back on his heels. What in the name of Saint Peter had that peddler sold him? If he squinted, they looked a little like geese, but those legs! Their heads already reached as high as his shins, and they were only just hatched.

Pulling his shirttail out, he made a makeshift sling to carry the three downy chicks to the drying shed where Sonya wouldn't see them. Perhaps, he told himself as he cradled the soft, warm bodies against his chest, the sack had held a variety of seeds. Perhaps the rest of the hatchlings would be songbirds, wonderful ones with soul-lifting melodies no one around here had ever heard before.

Perhaps tomorrow would be better.

More awkward, long-necked chicks hatched the next day, and again the next. Each time, he quickly bundled them up and hid them in the shed by the pond.

On the fourth day, he stopped to chop some kindling before joining his brothers in the fields. One minute, he was swinging the axe at the block of wood on the old stump, grunting a little with each blow, the next, he was running trying to locate the source of Sonya's piercing screams.

"What -- what is -- that?" One hand to her mouth, she pointed at a honking long-necked chick as it waded into the pond's green water on legs that looked like stilts.

"Oh, that." Ungern noticed how her staring eyes were practically all whites. "That's one of our new -- , ,

"New what, Ungern?" Gathering up her long skirts, Sonya ventured nearer to the muddy edge of the pond.

The sound of menace in her voice made his skin crawl. "New birds."

"Our new birds!" She moved in closer. "Are you trying to tell me these misshapen things are my nightingales?"

"Well . . ." He watched helplessly as two more downy, long-legged chicks squirmed through a crack in the drying shed and ambled toward the pond. "The peddler didn't have any nightingales, and besides, prices were up. Songbirds cost at least two coppers this year. This was all I could get, but he did say they were very special."

"Those monstrosities are the ugliest things I've ever seen!" She shuddered as one chick inverted its down-bent bill and plunged its head beneath the water.

"They're not that bad." Ungern reached down as a dozen or so white chicks gathered around his knees. "And after all, see how many we got, a lot more than last year."

Sonya grabbed a chick by its skinny legs and held it up while it squawked and thrashed its wings. "I suppose I could try cooking one." She plucked a feather.

"They might at least be good to eat."

"Eat!" Horrified, Ungern snatched the panicked chick from her. He turned it right side up and cradled it against his chest where he could feel its heart thumping like a runaway horse.

"Well, of course, eat." Sonya crossed her arms across her ample bosom. "It's obvious they can't sing, and they're certainly not good to look at. What else can we do with them?"

"They're just babies!" Lowering his head, he cuddled the terrified chick against his cheek. "You can't eat them."

"I'm certainly not going to feed the wretched things." She jerked aside as a chick tottered close to her skirt. "And don't let me catch you giving them the chickens' corn either." She brushed her hands off and turned sharply around, heading for the cottage at a ground-eating pace that boded trouble.

"Never mind," Ungern whispered to the bird in his arms. He watched a wading chick pull its beak out from under the shallow water, dripping with weeds and mud. "You wouldn't like com anyway."

Over the following weeks, Sonya scolded him about his poor hatchlings every morning when he went out to the fields, and every night when he returned. Until he got rid of those stupid-looking things, she said, he would never have a moment's peace.

And so-- his dinner was burned, his clothes unwashed, and his bed most decidedly cold.

But Ungern decided he hadn't known the true meaning of misery until his two strapping brothers found out about his birds.

"I swear, Kaarel, those things had legs as long as a woman's!" Jaan, the oldest, yellow-haired and broad-shouldered, grinned as he hitched up a drowsing brown ox. "And thin as sticks!"

His younger brother, Kaarel, who towered above him by almost a head, paused in the middle of loading the cart with flax bound for the lord's storehouse. His broad face puckered with the effort of thought. "It doesn't sound as though there'd be much meat on the drumsticks."

"They're not for eating." Ungern didn't look up from the farm cart's balky rear wheel. "Shut up and hand me that grease."

"If you're not going to eat them, then why did you plant them?" Kaarel passed him the tin of axle grease, then squatted down beside him in the wagon ruts.

"Not everything in this world has to be practical, Kaarel." Ungern pried the lid off and scooped up a fingerful of strong-smelling black grease for the squeaky wheel. "Some things are just good to look at." A faint smile twitched at his lips. "You should see them when they fly. Up in the air, they look just like beautiful white swans."

"Yeah, well, swans are for the ponds of lords, not peasants like us." Jaan hung on the edge of the wagon and stared down at him. "And besides, swans never had such ridiculous long skinny legs."

"I ate a swan the winter before last." Kaarel's gray eyes misted over in fond

recollection. "It landed on our pond by mistake. Mina boiled it in a soup."

A small figure came bobbing across the shorn fields, shouting and waving its arms. Ungern brushed his hands off on his work pants and stood up.

"Uncle Ungern! Uncle Ungern!" The figure became his young nephew-by-marriage, Nigol. The boy stopped in front of him, his black hair tousled, his cheeks reddened from running. "Uncle Ungern -- Aunt Sonya says to come quick!"

Ungern put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "What's wrong? Is she hurt? "

"No--" Nigol leaned over, one hand on his stomach as he straggled for breath. "She -- just says -- come!"

Jaan winked. "Maybe your birds are lonely."

Ungern ignored him. "You two had better go on. I'll meet you at the southeast flax field in an hour."

"You'd better." Jaan flicked the languid ox with his birch stick. "You already owe Lord Kreutzwald two days' work from last week. He'll have your neck if you get further behind."

The wagon groaned as the ox leaned into its traces and plodded down the heavily rotted path. Ungern watched his brothers fall into place beside the heavy load, reaching their hands up to steady the bales of flax. He turned to Nigol. "Where is Aunt Sonya?"

"At the pond."

"Well, come on, then." They tramped across the uneven field for a few minutes, their feet crunching through the stiff stubble. "Surely you must have some idea what she wants, "he said finally.

Nigol's brown eyes squinted. "I think it has something to do with all the people."

"What people?"

"The ones at your pond."

Ungern let that enigmatic reply rattle around in his head. "What are they doing?"

"Looking at those funny birds of yours."

Ungern began to run.

They had come from the village, a rustling, whispering, pointing crowd of women and old men and big-eyed children, all gathered on one side of his pond. Ungern regarded them with dismay as he and Nigol topped the last hill.

Sonya stood in the middle of the whole mess, her shoulders thrown back, her arms

crossed, her legs planted like trees. An icy tingle of dread shivered down Ungern's back.

In the pond, his uneasy flock of birds had retreated to the opposite shore which was protected by cattails and thick, brambly brush. There, they watched the crowd nervously, ducking their long, graceful necks, huddling together and muttering in low bird-voices.

"So there you are, you moron!" Sonya's voice rang out, silencing the crowd.

He tried to meet her angry eyes without flinching. "I came as fast as I could."

Over on the other shore, the heavy brush began to crack and snap as a determined, grimy-faced urchin pushed through with a rock in his hand. The shy birds squawked and fluttered their wings, hurriedly wading out toward the middle of the pond.

"Stop that!" Ungern waved his arms at the boy. "Leave them alone! You're scaring them!"

A muffled current of laughter ran through the assembled villagers. Sonya's face darkened.

"Hey, Ungern!" Ants Andreesen, the oldest man for three villages, hobbled to the forefront and held up his walking stick. "I have a bet with Hans here that my wife can cook anything and make it taste fit for the lord's table. I'll give you a copper for two of your fattest birds."

"They're not for sale!" A wave of panic surged through him as, on the other side of the pond, the boy drew back his arm to fling the stone. Without thinking, Ungern plunged into the pond and waded toward him. "Stop that, you young hooligan!"

Startled, the boy hesitated.

"Go on, get out!" Ungern's feet lost contact with the bottom of the pond. He slipped, swallowed a mouthful of green water, then began to swim, his arms splashing awkwardly, his feet kicking.

The boy giggled, and sailed the rock through the clear morning air. A tall hatchling fell backward with a shriek and thrashed in the water. With almost a single cry, the rest of the flock leaped into the sky, their flapping wings a brilliant blaze of white in the morning sun. Ungern swam harder and two strokes later felt his boots graze the muddy bottom again.

He stood up, waist-deep in the green water and struggled toward the wounded bird. The boy fought his way back through the thicket. Gasping for breath like a beached fish, Ungern gathered the terrified bird to his chest and pinned the flailing wings so he could examine the wound. A spot of bright blood marked one



wing where the rock had struck. He began to stroke the poor bird's weaving head, willing calmness into it. "It's all right, "he crooned into its hidden ears. "No one else is going to hurt you, no one!"

Across on the shore, the villagers watched him, their mouths open, their eyes staring.

"What's the matter with you?" he shouted at them. "Don't you know anything to do with something rare and beautiful besides kill it or eat it? You've done enough damage for one day! Go home!"

As though a spell had been broken, they glanced at each other and seemed to shake themselves. In mumbling ones and twos, they drifted away, headed for the village or neighboring farms.

Feeling sick inside, he clutched the bird's trembling body closer. It lay against him, exhausted, its eyes half-closed.

"Well, that was certainly a fine show!" Sonya's voice snapped like a whip.

His arms full of limp bird, he began to wade around the edge of the pond, looking for a spot where he could come ashore without having to fight his way through feather-tearing bushes.

"Why didn't you sell old Andreesen some birds, you idiot?" Her hands on her hips, she contemplated him with narrowed eyes. "We could have used the money and everyone can plainly see those stupid birds of yours are worthless."

He slipped on a submerged rock, then caught himself. "Well, they're gone now, so you don't have to worry."

"And who's to say they won't come back?"

As for that, he thought, struggling up onto the shore, he didn't know whether to hope they would or wouldn't.

He settled the injured bird in a corner of the kitchen, close to the fire, and wrapped it in an old blanket. Fortunately, the injured wing seemed to be more bruised than broken.

It lay there quietly, its eyes dull and pain-hazed, the long legs folded beneath it. He sat on the floor beside it and tried to coax its hooked beak open so he could spoon a bit of warm vegetable soup into its mouth.

"I won't have that filthy, disgusting creature in my clean house!" Sonya watched him from the other side of the room. "Take it outside this instant!"

"Maybe tomorrow, "he said, "if its wing is better. I don't want a fox to get it."

"And I'm telling you that a fox is the least of your worries!"

He glanced up to see her standing before him, dressed in her Sunday-best apron and scarf, holding a lumpy bundle tied up in a sheet.

"Either you take that bird outside right now, or I'm going home to my father's house." Her foot tapped on the floor. "I want an answer, Ungern."

"But I can't." He tucked the blanket more securely around the bird's body and stood up. "It would die."

"Fine." She heaved the bundle of clothes onto her sturdy shoulder. "Maybe a few days alone will teach you to appreciate me. Let me know when you've come to your senses, but you'd better not wait too long. My cousin, Hilda, wants me to live in Tallin with her. She works for a fine family there and says I could get on staff too. I may not want to come back and slave for a mealy-mouthed excuse of a man like you anymore."

Ungern watched her open the door. "Don't you think you're being a little hasty?"

Her only answer was to slam the door behind her.

The next morning, he woke up to find his bird walking around the kitchen and peering at Sonya's pots with curious black eyes. Ungern coaxed a handful of moistened oatmeal down it, then hacked off a chunk of Sonya's dense black bread for himself. Chewing, he tried to decide if he missed her. Somehow, the one-room cottage seemed brighter now, almost cheery. Perhaps, he told himself, it wasn't so much that Sonya was gone, but that the bird was here.

Outside, the sky turned a golden rose in the east. He leaned against the side of the open door, enjoying the crisp dawn air on his face, wondering if he should leave the injured bird in the house while he worked in Lord Kreutzwald's fields, or send it back to the pond.

Above, the air began to reverberate with shrill calls and beating wings. He ran out into the yard, scattering Sonya's brown chickens before him, and looked up. A host of slim white birds with black-edged wings circled the pond, once, twice, then landed close to the water on their stilt-like legs, clacking their great, hooked beaks and squawking contentedly.

As he looked at his birds, something inside him hurt, like a sweet note on the violin drawn out to almost unbearable clarity. No matter what anyone else said, they were wonderful, just so incredibly marvelous and strange with their smooth, curving necks and delicate legs; the black on the ends of their beaks and wings was as inky as the inside of a cave, and in the dawn light, their feathers even

seemed to have acquired a pinkish cast.

In fact, as he reached the first one, which was already busily seining mud and water through its down-bent bill, he realized its feathers were faintly pink. And it was not the only one. At least half the flock was showing a tendency toward pinkness too.

He didn't know what to make of that-- did it portend good health or bad? He wished he could ask the old peddler. There was just so much that he would have liked to know.

"Ungern Aavik!"

Turning around, he saw a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder trotting up on a sturdy, big-hooved chestnut gelding. "Yes?" he said, shading his eyes as he looked into the rising sun, then shuddered. It was Juri Masaryk, the landowner's overseer, a heavy-browed, slump-shouldered man with a penchant for the whip.

"Lord Kreutzwald sent me after you. What's your problem? Do you think that flax jumps into the wagon by it self --" Masaryk broke off, his mouth sagging under his black mustache as he stared at the wading birds. "What -- are those?"

"Birds, "Ungern replied uncomfortably.

"What kind of birds.~"

"I don't know." Ungern walked toward the horse. "Look, I'm sorry about the missing days. I'll make them up, starting right now. I'll do the work of two men, I promise."

"Humph! Any day I get the work of one man out of a peasant will be a great surprise to me." Masaryk unsung the rifle and brought the barrel around to bear on the flock. "You get your miserable carcass out to the fields. I'm going to bag a few of these for the lord's table. He likes unusual game."

"No!" Ungern stepped into his line of fire. "You can't!"

The overseer lowered the rifle. "And why not?"

"Because they're mine and they're not for sale." Ungern glanced over his shoulder at the quietly feeding birds.

"This is Lord Kreutzwald's land, peasant. Everything on it belongs to him, including you!" Masaryk sighted along the rifle. "Now get out of the way."

Ungern's heart skipped a beat, then he turned and ran back toward the pond, waving his arms and shouting like a demon. The startled birds jerked their heads up from the water and eyed him nervously. "Fly!" he shouted. "Fly away and don't come back!"

They watched him for another second, then took to the sky, their necks outstretched, their great wings beating. Behind him, he heard the gun crack. One graceful flier plummeted to the ground. Ungern felt as though his heart had

been

tom out. "No, they're beautiful! Can't you see?"

Masaryk threw down a game bag. "Fetch that bird, idiot, and be quick about it."

Ungern stared at the leather pouch on the grass, a red haze boiling behind his eyes. He snatched a rough-edged stone from the ground and flung it with all his might at the gelding's well-brushed hindquarters.

The startled horse squealed with pain and jumped sideways. Pinning its ears back, it took the bit in its teeth and plunged recklessly toward the newly plowed fields. Ungern could hear the overseer cursing as he hauled back on the reins, fighting to regain control before it tripped in the soft furrows and broke its leg -- or his neck.

His hands shaking, Ungern crossed to where the dead bird lay sprawled, half in, half out of the pond. A few of the flock had already landed again, and were dancing back and forth on their webbed feet with quick, nervous strides. He knelt and touched the body -- still warm. A hot tear rolled down his cheek, and he buried his face in the bird's silken feathers.

A moment later, he heard honking, and looked up as the flock circled anxiously above the pond. He wiped his aching eyes with the back of his hand. Somehow, somehow, he must send the birds away forever, because if he didn't, they would all come back -- the overseer, his brothers, the villagers -- with their stones and knives and guns until nothing remained of his birds but a pile of bones, bleaching in the garbage midden.

His hands clenched. He couldn't let that happen; he wouldn't! But twice now, they had been frightened away and then returned. He glanced around, the air rasping in his throat, trying to think why they always came back. His gaze stopped at the pond. His birds were water feeders; it must be the water that attracted them. If he knocked out the wooden dam built across the stream, the pond would drain and they would have to seek another feeding ground.

Ungern squinted at the sun, calculating. As soon as the overseer regained control of his horse, he would return with more of the lord's men and whip the hide off him for what he had done. He had an hour, maybe less.

He sighed and went to look for tools.

Half an hour later, he leaned on his axe and watched the water trickle through the splintered wood into the rocky bed of the small creek below. He used his sleeve to mop the sweat on his brow. The silvery water gurgled as it flowed faster and faster.

In the distance then, he heard shouting voices and the steady beat of running hooves. For a moment, he was frozen, then he swung the axe over his head and ran at the wading flock of birds, hoping to scare them away one last time. "Fly!" he shouted at them. "Go away!"

They stared at him with puzzled black eyes and dodged out of reach.

"Leave!" He threw the axe at one clump. With a shocked squawk, they flapped into the air and landed on the other side of the slowly diminishing pond, safely out of reach, protesting in harsh chitters.

The hoofbeats were nearer now. There had to be ten or more horses in that group, closing fast. He felt close to tears as he watched his elegant birds dip their heads back into the muddy water. It was no use; they just weren't afraid of him.

Something hard and cool poked the middle of his back. He turned around and saw the injured bird he had kept in the cottage last night. It cocked its head and stared into his eyes as though trying to speak.

He reached out and touched its neck with trembling fingers. Lowering its head, it pressed against him. It trusted him . . . loved him even.

Loved him.

And then he understood. They weren't staying for the pond; there were farm ponds all over this part of the country. They were staying for him, the one who had been there when they hatched, who had talked to them and cared for them, protected them, loved them. They wanted him.

A wild hope grew in his heart. "Come on!" Fie waved his arms at the birds. "Come with me!" Turning, he ran toward the dark edge of the forest, three fields away, across the newly plowed furrows that were so treacherous to a horse's delicate legs.

At first, they didn't seem to understand. Then the injured bird leapt into the air and followed him, awkwardly flapping its cut wing. Fie glanced back over his shoulder and saw the others staring. Please! he thought at them with all his might. We can't stay here anymore! Come on!

Then they rose into the sky and sailed after him, a great pink and white cloud, their cries strangely glad.

Sweat poured down his cheeks and his straining lungs ached for air as he raced, but there was no time to stop and catch his breath. Behind him, he heard the jingle of harness and men yelling. They must have seen him, but they would either have to leave their horses or go slowly across the plowed ground. If he could just make it to the forest, they would never find him.

Half a field lay ahead of him, a quarter. He slipped and fell face down in the soft black dirt. Spitting, he scrambled up, but now the hooves were upon him.

A whip snapped and caught him full across the back. Stunned by its hot bite, he sprawled forward across the furrows. Voices laughed, loud and hearty. A shifting forest of horses' legs surrounded him.

Overhead, the flock wheeled and swooped back over the men and homes. He heard

rifles crack as the pink and white birds descended, flapping and honking.

The horses squealed and shied. Ungern lurched back onto his feet and dodged between the frightened, plunging horses as their riders sawed at the reins for control. He stared in amazement; his birds were a storm of beating wings and slashing sharp-pointed beaks. The air was thick with the smell of freshly turned dirt and sweaty horses and burnt gunpowder.

Several of the landlord's men fell; some put their heels to their mounts and fled. Those remaining fired their rifles at the angry birds, but it was impossible to aim accurately astride the terrified horses.

Ungern put his head down and ran until he broke into the welcoming cool green shade of the trees. Behind him, the flock abandoned its attack and sailed after him into the safety of the forest.

Two days later, his birds led him to a backed-up creek bottom where long ago the trees had been flooded out, creating a shrouded, marshy depression in which they could safely rest and feed. The sunlight slanted down in broad golden rays, so intense, it seemed he could walk on it up into the sky. The air was thick with the scent of green growing things and rich black mud, and best of all, the surrounding trees were alive with an incredible assortment of birds. Ungern cobbled together a lean-to of dead-fall wood close to the cattail-choked water, and sat there, thinking, while his birds waded and fished.

For some reason, as the next several days passed, his flock became increasingly pink in sharp contrast to their black-edged feathers and bills. He watched them for hours, studying the way they stood on one leg when resting in the water, and the elegant curve of their necks as they slept with their heads tucked against their backs. No matter what anyone said, they were glorious.

In most ways, he found himself content; he had never been much of a farmer, and to his surprise, Sonya's absence was actually cheering. But even so, something was missing in the vast green silence under the towering trees -- something important that he could not name.

As the long, lazy days passed, his birds grew restless and sought other feeding grounds, often leaving for more than a week at a time. He missed them, but realized it was right. They weren't babies anymore. They had their own bird-thoughts to think, their own lives to live. He had shared something special with them, but it was time to move on.

Sometimes he thought that perhaps he should travel south to where his birds might winter and no one knew him. But always, for some reason he could not name, something in his heart whispered stay.

Then one afternoon when he was fishing from the bank, he heard a rustle in the bushes. His heart lurched painfully as he turned around. Had the Lord

Kreutzwald's men finally found him?

"So I see that you've decided to join me after all." Konstantin Poeg scratched his nose. "About time someone finally listened. I'm half-dead as it is. Now look at this nightingale nest." He parted the stiffly interwoven branches of a bramble thicket and revealed a nest containing six olive-brown eggs. He picked one up and listened to it. "Ah, just right." He passed it to Ungern.

Ungern hesitantly pressed the egg to his ear~ the shell was cool and smooth, silent.

The old man picked up another one and cracked it over the nest. Ungern glimpsed two small golden-brown seeds within. His breath caught in his chest.

They left the other four eggs in place. No need to be greedy, and besides, as Poeg pointed out, people wanted more than just nightingales. There were warblers and shrikes and wagtails and swifts and . . .

The dazzling possibilities stretched out before Ungern as he followed the old peddler through the forest, a lifetime spent in pursuit of an infinite variety of birds. He would watch them, follow them, share their nests and their thoughts. It would be the best of all possible lives, and the most important.

Because no matter what anyone said, there was always room for more beauty in the world.