

Hoof beats drummed hard on the packed ground as the silhouette of a horse moving at an easy lope emerged from the tangled thickets at the edge of the forest and began crossing the downs, rapidly accelerating to a heart pounding gallop. Sarna was on her way home to visit her family, half rising in the stirrups, her hair and cloak streaming behind her. She loved the rushing feeling of the wind pouring over her, the feeling of power in the muscles that bunched and stretched beneath her and her greater power in guiding them along the best and safest route, the thrill of speed and the sense of danger, even though she was wise enough to only go at full speed here where the ground was firm and relatively smooth. Joyous excitement poured through her from more than the ride. It had been over eight moons since she had last been home and she missed the familiar sights, sounds, and smells that had been a source of comfort since before her earliest memories. She missed knowing where every item was in the kitchen and in the tool shed, missed sleeping in her own bed, where the mattress sagged in just the right places, molded to her exact shape over more than a decade of nightly sleep. But most of all she missed the warmth of her mother's cooking in her belly and the warmth of her mother's arms around her. As the years has passed, their relative heights had reversed so now her mother's chin barely reached Sarna's shoulder but this in no way changed the overwhelming aura of boundless love and comfort that still flowed from the now bony embrace.

Her sword slapped hard against Sarna's back as she urged the horse into a leap, clearing a small creek that cut through a low spot on the downs. The impact momentarily winded her but she was used to such things and managed to keep a firm hand on the reins as she recovered her breath. Normally, it was men who left home to fight or to travel far in search of a fortune. Women moved away in order to marry but, unless they wed a man from a distant village they would probably be able to return home frequently. For a daughter to not have visited home in eight months was highly unusual. But then, so was Sarna. She had started learning the ways of sword and bow from an older cousin soon after she could walk and, while he had probably seen it as no more than a passing entertainment at the time, she had taken to it at once and retained her interest long after the age where other girls would have forgone such things.

Other parents, wiser but less caring, would have tried to induce her to give it up, pushed for marriage, but hers did no such thing, even paid for her to train under the local sword master with the other boys, caring only that she was happy and following her spirit's call. Of course, they had worried, and still did, about her being lonely and, of course, she was. She had always had few women friends. What could they possibly talk about? And, while most men who knew her were more than happy to have her at their side in a battle, most behaved coolly towards her at other times on account of her strangeness and, certainly, any other sort of companionship was and had always been completely out of the question. She had wept and raged against the last ever since she had been old enough to know what she was missing and her mother had been party to many such incidents but, while they hadn't always seen eye to eye on the topic at least, Sarna could give her great credit for the fact that she loved and understood her daughter enough that she never tried to change her, no matter how much she might worry or disapprove.

She smiled slightly to herself, feeling a warmth within at the thought as she came racing up to the edge of the downs and pulled her horse in sharply, looking at the land spread below her. To the left lay the lake, shining in the light of the midday sun. She could even see the dark shapes of some of the village fishing boats gliding across the waters. One or two of the houses where the fishermen lived were visible near the shore but most of the farms and homesteads of the region were hidden in the hollows and copses away to the right and in the distance, beyond, she could see the dark, dead expanse of the heath where the reya grew, where the hydra roamed. She had to slow her pace now as she made her way down the steeper trail from the downs to the lowlands around the lake. This was her least favorite part of the journey for she hated looking out at the dreary heath. It had always been there, a

looming shadow in the back of her mind since her earliest memories. Though she had never seen the hydra, like all the people in the village, she knew it was real. On a few occasions, she had heard whistling and roaring noises in the distance and, while there was no way to prove they had been made by the hydra or, indeed, anything more than the wind in the stones, they had made her blood run cold and still haunted her darkest nightmares.

The hydra was like a plague, striking without reason or logic. There were those who said it was a mystical spirit guarding the reya plant and there did seem to be a correspondence between how often one picked reya and the likelihood of becoming its victim, but some went to the heath every day to dig for reya and lived to a ripe old age, never catching sight of the hydra. Some went only occasionally and were brought down while still young and there were even a few deaths among those who had never touched reya at all, only gone to the heath to aid their loved ones. Sometimes two would travel together, pick the same reya, and it would murder one and completely ignore the other. The attack was not always fatal. A few would manage to stagger back to the village, burned, wasted, and disfigured. Of those few, most would never fully recover and, for all, the hydra's venom lingered in their blood and could suddenly spring to life and carry off one who had seemed healthy but a short time before.

Considering the danger, it was a wonder that anyone would take the risk to go pick reya, small firm balls of dull grayish-green. The thick rubbery skin could be easily pierced with a knife, revealing paler succulent flesh which could then be chewed and the juices sucked out. And it did not even taste good. Truly, Sarna had never tried it but the bitter smell of the juice alone was frequently enough to make her feel ill and she could only imagine the taste would be fouler still. It was true that plant had some ability to induce calm and to provide relief when tensions were running high. But that was hardly enough to risk one's life over. The problem lay in the fact that using reya created a craving for more. Usually how it began was that one would begin using it to help them through a particularly rough time, thinking "just this once," or even be offered it by another in such a situation. But, apparently, the relief it provided was so soothing that it became easier to turn to when the next, less serious, crisis came along and then the cravings began, the desperate gnawing emptiness that would drag one back to the heath again and again, even when fellow villagers were still mourning the hydra's most recent victim.

Sarna knew all of this well for her mother was one of those enslaved to the plant. Although she was not insensible to the danger, her need for the reya was too strong. Several times, she had tried to give it up, weaned down her indulgence to almost nothing. But it took all she had and, as soon as something else came along that required her will and strength, she would lapse to allow herself to focus on the new crisis. Sarna harbored a deep guilt inside herself, remembering times she had fought with her mother, times she had been reduced to despair over her lack of acceptance as her warrior spirit emerged. Had one of her outbursts, the extra strain and worry she caused, ever been what drove her mother back to the reya? If she'd held her tongue, kept her feelings inside, would they all be free now? Even as a young child, she had envied other children whose parents did not indulge in reya, wondering what it was like to live without the constant fear every time she smelled the bitter odor of the roots on her mother's breath and knew she was breathing the smell of death.

"I wish I had never started," her mother had cried in her own defense on more than one occasion. "Back then we didn't know it was dangerous. No one had ever seen the hydra in living memory. We thought it was a legend. All the adults took reya. They'd leave a little offering to placate the spirit of the plant and we thought that was all it was. Then the deaths started. But, by then, I was already bound." It was easy to be complacent as the years passed and nothing happened but, always, in the back of Sarna's mind there was the knowledge that something might. When she rode home this time, the sense of foreboding had become so habitual she almost dismissed it, until she saw the inky smear of smoke across the sky. The muscles of her legs flexed, squeezing the horse with her thighs and urging it to faster speeds. Bowing low over its neck, she felt the wind strike her in her face and her hair

snap behind her. The same wind brought the smoke towards her, twisting it in ragged threads, and it did not smell like burning. It was a heavy, putrid smell, like smoldering rot, reminding her of when her father burned leaves that had been left out in the rain too long or that had lain on the ground from the previous winter, only far, far worse. She gagged on it and almost reeled in the saddle but held her steed steady so as not to undercut her speed.

All the old, familiar landmarks came racing past her. Here was the wide field where she had learned archery, there the dark, leaning rocks she had once believed were haunted, until she discovered the buzzing sound came from the bees' nest they sheltered, after which she had taught herself to steal honey from it, and now she was ducking under the branches of a group of trees she had played beneath as a child. The little creek raced, chattering over its rocks, the clear water, foaming around her horse's ankles as she forded it and then only the final rise of the ground hid her home from view, feeling, despite her worry, as she breasted it, the same sense of warmth and welcoming she always felt upon seeing it again. No matter what happened out there in The World, here she was welcome, here she was loved, here she could return and be at peace.

In the open space between the wings of the house her father had a kettle over the fire and was stirring it with a long pole. It was from here that the stench came, not from the burning itself, but from the steam rising from what bubbled in the pot. As she rode up, he raised his head and smiled at her, but there was unease behind the smile and, as he could not leave his work to come embrace her, she went towards him, fighting down the stench induced nausea with difficulty. Then she saw the green black ooze in the pot and the pit of her stomach knotted so tightly she forgot the odor. This was anti-venom with which victims of the hydra were doused to give them the faintest hope of survival. Sarna had never seen anti-venom brewed, though she had heard horror stories about the stench, but she had known for as long as she could remember that her father kept a ready supply of the herbs used in making it in the cellar below their house.

Once or twice, when her mother had been gone on the heath for a particularly long time, she had seen him take out the herbs, the pot, and begin to arrange them to start the brewing. The solar eclipse that had made the other children cower in fear she had faced un-phased, but the sight of her father laying out his brewing tools like this had made her howl in abject terror. Never before had he gone so far as to actually brew the concoction. Do that too often and your neighbors might descend on your farm in an angry mob after their cattle started dying from the fumes. Always before, her mother had come stumbling back, looking dusty and weary, with some story of how she'd slipped down a trench or gotten lost out on the heath, heavy with the bitter odor of reya but no trace of any other smell, of the dark, sick odor, like old blood, that some whispered clung to the hydra. The situation must be dire indeed if he had already mixed the foul liquid.

Sarna's warrior training shot up her spine like a cord of steel. She vaulted from the saddle to stand before her father. "How long?" she asked, her eyes hard. There was no need to explain. They understood one another without words.

"A day." His face was lined with worry and his shoulders slumped forward. It was plain he had not slept in that day but had spent it preparing and stirring the pot. "We know it's not just an accident. We heard the hydra roaring out on the heath."

Sarna felt dizzy. Hope waned with every hour. Even if there was another reason for the delay, the odds the hydra *would* find her increased the longer her mother remained on the heath. "Has anyone gone after her?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No one dared. They're all afraid the hydra will turn on them. And I can't go. The anti-venom must be ready if she ever makes it back."

"But I am here now." She rushed forward to embrace her father, then leaped back into the saddle and spurred her horse towards the heath as swiftly as she could. Past the homestead she raced

and past more homesteads and farms, some where friends or schoolmates had once lived. No one was out now and she was glad of that for she would have felt nothing but overwhelming hatred for those who had abandoned her mother out of fear for themselves. After less than an hour hard riding, she was already leaving behind the familiar places and crossing into the realm of her nightmare. The ground began to climb steeply and she had to slow her steed for fear of laming it on the dark scattered stones all around, but seethed at every second of the delay. She had never been on the heath before. Her mother had been careful never to expose her to that immediate danger and, when she became older and some of the youths her own age had fallen prey to reya, her very oddness had protected her. Others, weaker, might have been taunted into visiting the heath, the desire to please and the fear of being thought a coward eclipsing their better judgment. But it was well known she had no desire to please or be accepted. The very fact of who she was proved that.

But, though she had never seen it with waking eyes, except at a distance, the black, blasted expanse of the heath was known to her, having been described in countless cautionary tales and haunting the dark places she visited on the other side of sleep. The ground was cracked and broken like dried mud, but harder as if, somehow, a liquid had been solidified into hard rock. There were loose stones as well, irregular, jagged, sharp enough to cut easily, scattered over the ground and she could not tell clearly where the solid ground ended and these rocks began. Were they pieces that had broken off from the earth itself or something else? It was impossible to tell, but the scattered stones made footing very treacherous, as did the wide ruts cutting through the ground, like water courses carved deep into parched earth. But Sarna thought this unlikely on the harder surface of the heath. Rather, she imagined with horror that these grooves had been cut by the corrosive slime than oozed from the hydra as it dragged its serpentine body across the heath.

Even as she thought this, she heard an echoing bellow that, despite her years of battlefield experience, sent cold racing down her spine. It was coming from the west, deeper into the heath and, despite the fact that every instinct she had screamed for her to flee in the opposite direction, she spurred her steed towards it, but dared not urge it to full gallop on the treacherous ground. Once she had found her mother, she needed the horse un-lamed to carry them to safety. Clenching her teeth, she willed herself to think only of that. She *would* find her mother, *would* escape with her, and she *would* be cured by the potion Sarna's father was brewing. This was only a nightmare she would wake from, as it had been so many times before. Everything would go back to normal and, years from now, they would look back on this and smile over how worried they had been. Her mind distracted by these thoughts, Sarna almost rode directly into one of the wiry stunted bushes scattered across the ruined land. At the last second, she managed to pull up on the reins and veer sharply to the side to avoid its clinging branches. The horse scrambled to maintain its footing, sending a stone bounding down in to one of the nearby ruts, but managed to stay upright and, after a moment's pause, they went on again.

From the legends she knew these bushes were one of the only things that grew on the heath, clutching for life, their leaves black and brittle from the poison in the land. The branches writhed and twisted in sinister knots and, said the tales, were resilient and pliable as vines but far far stronger so, if you tumbled into one, you could get tangled up and never manage to pull free. The only other thing that grew in the desolation of the hydra was the cursed reya itself and this she saw as well, the only spot of color in the endless grayness, bulges of pale green that reminded her of plague sores. Bitter rage welled up inside her at the sight and then she found herself struggling to fight back tears. She had been so happy an hour ago, with no thought of any misfortune and, such a short time later, she was facing the situation she had feared more than any other. She had ridden directly past the refuge she had spent the last fortnight dreaming of, a refuge that might never be able to return to. No, no, no, no! That could not happen. It was impossible. Her mother was the first thing Sarna had known, as if the world had come into existence with her and its life were hers, as eternal as the earth and the lake and the sky.

Heart hammering, she crested another ridge and now she could hear the growlings and roarings, the dragging of the heavy body. The horse shied under her and she felt its skin shudder as it rolled back white eyes at her and Sarna was afraid as well. All her life, she had feared the Hydra as she had feared no other of the denizens of the wilderness. She was a warrior by blood and by training and any foe she could face with her sword and have a chance, even a long chance, of defeating she did not fear. But the hydra was no such creature. There was no known way to destroy it and her blade would only make it more dangerous. Every head that was cut made more until, even the best fighter would be overwhelmed by the number of foes and that was the true horror of what she had always feared, the crushing magnitude of the hopelessness. The choices were either to surrender at once or to fight until the very act of fighting brought defeat, both almost certain routes to death. One just took a little longer than the other but was likely to be far more painful. Even those few who survived an encounter were forever marked, their skin and hair singed away by its burning breath, their bodies withered and warped by its venom.

Cresting another barren and blasted ridge of stone, she saw it, a vast black shape, shining wetly, its skin utterly smooth, supple, and mucus coated like a salamander or an eel, and its necks, currently three, flexed and twisted as if they contained no bones. The heads were flat and earless, like snakes' heads, but the jaws were longer and they had wide, leathery nostrils, flexing and sniffing the air. Hooked fangs hung from the jaws, yellowed and stained with venom and the eyes were red and rolling, a burning madness of destruction. As she watched in horror, it made a wheezing sound, sliding one of its great flat feet over the ground, the discolored claws scraping against the rocks. At the sound, her horse panicked and bolted. Only her well-honed reflexes allowed her to leap from the saddle before she was carried away with it and it wasn't a clean landing. The dismount had been too sudden for that. Though her training had enabled her to avoid breaking any bones, the rough ground still left her badly bruised and scraped. But, far worse, her escaped rout was gone. How would her mother ever find the strength to flee the monster on foot? But that did not matter right now. First, she had to find her. Springing to her feet, Sarna drew her sword and took off as quickly as she could, clambering over the rocks towards the beast.

Drawing closer, she could see all the heads were focused on one point and her heart withered at the sight of the pale, bone thin figure she could now make out against the dark rocks. One of the heads came swooping down and Sarna screamed in involuntary terror, her voice sounding shrill and alien in her own ears. The figure staggered back awkwardly, just out of reach, and Sarna redoubled her efforts to reach the place. A short distance more and she could see the woman in front of her was, indeed, her mother, but so changed that Sarna felt her stomach turn, almost sick with the shock of it. Her mother's hair had been singed off by the hydra's breath with only a few dried and broken strands remaining. Her face was swollen and reddened by the heat and venom. She swayed, disoriented by the poison and the jerky movement of her limbs showed how weak she had already become. Tears began to form in Sarna's eyes but she took a deep breath, forcing them back. Now she could not afford the liability. Her vision must be clear to fight.

Even as she struggled to process the damage that had already been done, another of the heads was already descending. Vaulting over the final rock, she swept her sword up, catching the hydra across the chin. It withdrew with a hissing, gurgling sound. But, as it did so, drops of black blood leaked from the wound, clinging viscously to the stones and secreting acrid fumes. Her mother coughed as the harsh vapors caught her throat, a raw dry cough that Sarna observed with concern as she moved forward to stand between her mother and the beast. But she was allowed scant respite for worry. The head she had cut may have drawn back momentarily to nurse its wound but a mere breath later the other two were descending on her. She stabbed one in the side of the muzzle and it recoiled with a snarl, but the other weaved sinuously, evading her stroke, drew back slightly and struck again

while she was pulled off balance with the failed swing. This time Sarna calmed herself and aimed slow, waiting until the slick, gleaming neck was at full stretch. Then, she made a level cut and the head fell to the ground, blood leaking from it like dark wine. Beside her, she felt her mother clutch her arm to steady herself and made a broken sound as a wave of nausea swept through her at the foul odor. Sarna took her sword one handed and used the moment of rest they had won to put a comforting arm around the frail shape beside her, shuddering at how thin and papery the skin felt. "It's all right. I'm with you," she whispered, holding the bony shoulder as tightly as she dared.

"My Sarna," the other replied, "my little girl." But Sarna's attention was snapped away as her eyes caught the motion of the Hydra reeling closer. It was happening now as, in her heart of hearts, she had known it would. An oozing, writhing sack was emerging from the bleeding stump where she had cut the head. Larger and larger it swelled, like a pustulant sore, until it burst, spraying dark ichor, to reveal the two new heads within. Even though she had not been weakened by its poison, Sarna felt dizziness surge up inside her. She felt faint, confronted by the reality of the task before her and almost gave way to despair. For what hope could there be when battling the creature only made it more dangerous? This was her nightmare in the flesh before her and she felt her limbs go numb with the impossible enormity of the task, becoming dull and heavy as if weighted down with layers of black mud.

But, as one of the heads made a sudden snap towards her mother, her body roused itself even though her brain still felt empty. The tense and release of her muscles in the sword swing brought some awareness and sturdiness back to her. No matter what, she would fight to the bitter end. And so she fought on, hour after weary hour, doing her best to spill little blood and, at all costs, not to sever any more heads, striking with the flat of her sword whenever possible. But, in time, her arms ached from lifting the sword over and over. She had been trained for endurance, to last for many hours of battle, but not while fighting five opponents at once, all larger than she so each stroke necessitated lifting the full weight of the sword above her head. Now, the blood in her veins seared like fire as it forced its way through muscles pulled ever tighter from the strain. Still, Sarna gritted her teeth against the pain and raised the blade again. But will could not sustain her forever. When her arms began to tremble, her next stroke went wide and she knew she must have a respite, if only for a moment, and there was only one way to achieve that. Rousing her energy for one final effort, she lifted her burning arms and leveled her blade to slice off another head. As it fell to the ground, she let her sword fall also, ringing on the stones, then, immediately crumpled down over it, her forehead to the earth, taking great, heaving breaths as every muscle screamed in relief at no longer having to make the effort to support her. Yet it took only a few moments for the new heads to emerge and then she was back defending against them with all her strength. But, because she had an extra opponent to fight, she tired all the sooner and could see no way to halt the brutal wheel now in motion.

She had thought at first that they might escape by retreating beyond the edge of the wasteland. But, now, Sarna saw that this would be near impossible. Her mother had never been strong and now the Hydra's venom had further sapped her energy. She could not run and, over the rough ground they had to travel, even walking would prove difficult and slow. Step by step, they staggered back. But her mother was obliged to stop frequently to rest and, when she did so, Sarna saw her gasp for air as her seared and withered lungs struggled to take in sufficient breath. But she was helpless to aid her mother, could only stand and hold back the hyrda. Given how far they had to go, there was little hope they could reach safety before the number of heads grew so vast that Sarna could no longer hope to beat them back. Worse, the acrid blood from every head she did sever only increased her mother's coughing and made her have to rest more frequently. Shortly before sunset, she had a particularly harsh coughing spell that drove her to her knees and there she knelt, head bowed, her sleeve pressed across her face, as her body heaved, draining more of her valuable strength. Just in front of her, Sarna stood,

still holding doom at bay.

She felt her mother's hands knot in her tunic and braced herself to take the full force of the other woman's weight as her mother used her as a ladder to climb back to her feet. Fortunately, the weight was slight, but Sarna still had to lock her knees with all her strength to keep from swaying and risk upsetting her mother's fragile balance. But, even as she did so, she still had to wield the sword, to swing her arms while her body stayed rigid. She felt the bony fingers lock hard into her sleeve as her mother struggled to pull herself up but, at that very moment, the hydra lunged at her and she had to lean to the side, then swing her body back around to strike at it and, in the sudden movement, her mother lost her balance and fell against her. Sarna felt her mother's face pressed against her upper arm and her arms wrap her torso and she could feel both the weakness and the wild desperation in their grip. Fortunately, at that moment, she was able to beat back the hydra sufficiently to win the space to steady her mother and for them to take a few more hesitant steps back. But, later, she happened to look down at her arm and saw a dark rusty smear across the faded brown of her shirt where her mother's face had pressed. At the sight, Sarna felt sick and had to fight hard to avoid giving way to despair. If her mother was coughing up blood the venom must be deep within her now and, almost certainly, had already done irreparable damage. What was the point of all the fighting if they had already lost? Another head swung forward and instinct moved her to intercept it, even if her heart was not in it. Do not think, do not feel, only fight. She was a warrior and a warrior did not surrender until the final shadow fell. If there was no hope, she would fight without hope.

But, thought she tried to keep her focus wholly on the battle, other thoughts came leaking into her head, like water through a roof when it had not been re-thatched in months. These very arms that now clutched her desperately, relying wholly on her for support and protection, were the same that had lifted up and guided her when she took her first faltering steps. They had held her close in a circle of safety as she sobbed over lost toys and cuts and bruises from playing in the woods and, again, when she was older, they had held her the same way, when the tears were for the loneliness and hurt she felt when the others around her ostracized and mocked her for what she was. These hands had washed dirt from skinned knees, guided her hands as she learned to draw and write, and brushed her long, flowing hair, her only claim to beauty, for more years than she could remember. She had given up such childhood pleasures long since, when she had left home to train. But now it came over her like a cold wind that such things might never again be and, at that, she felt a wild panic rise in her, crushing her throat like a strangling hand. She was not a grown warrior with years of battle experience behind her. She was a lonely, lost little girl who needed her mother, needed her with every fiber of her being to brush her hair and sing her to sleep.

After many hours, when Sarna was almost fainting from exhaustion and the fading light made traversing the rough ground of the heath far too dangerous, they crawled into a crack in one of the great ruts, too small for the hydra to fit into and there they squeezed, shivering, while the beast paced back and forth outside, sometimes drooling foul saliva on the stones at the entrance which only made her mother's cough worse. Sarna let her mother put her head in her lap to shield her from the worst of the rough stones. She would have to sleep sitting up anyway as the crevice was too narrow for them to both lie down. Overhead, the sky was a dark velvet blue, and a cool wind somehow found its way into the crevice bringing air less stale than was normal for the heath.

Sarna felt a pang, thinking of how they were in a mirror of the pose they had adopted before bed when she was a child while her mother would read her bedtime stories. "Do you remember?" she asked softly, "when you read the *Lay of Artigan* to me?" The bald, ruined thing beside her cracked a smile and, for a moment, in the shape of those lips and the light in those eyes, she saw her real mother again, shining out through all the oceans of pain and suffering piled upon her.

"I do remember." The voice was weaker, more harsh and raw, but still recognizable...just.

“Artigan’s right general was such a joke, how they said he could perform the work of four men but at one point said he was alone because he only had three servants with him.” They both laughed and Sarna felt a warm glow spread through her even as she took a firmer grip on her sword, seeing the hydra lumbering towards them again. “But that’s not as funny as *The Quest of the Brothers*.”

“No.” Sarna giggled, even as she raised her arm slightly, testing the weight, thinking how soon she would have to ready it for the first blow on a fresh head. “What could possibly top how they kept pretending to be poets and reciting the same bad poem over and over again to try to get every item for their quest?” As they spoke they could hear the hydra nosing at the mouth of the crack but it was far too big to fit in and soon it shuffled away. Sarna felt the warmth of her mother’s skin against her arm as she looked up at the blue-black of the cloudless sky above. Two silver stars could be seen in its majestic vault, a reminder that beauty and peace existed beyond the ruin of the heath and Sarna felt stir again in her heart a hope that, somehow, they could win back to that place. She felt her mother shift slightly in her lap and heard her murmur something about another of the stories they had shared before her slow even breathing told Sarna she was asleep. Trying to match the rhythm of her mother’s breathing to help sooth her, as she had as a little girl when she was woken by a nightmare, Sarna soon drifted off as well, in circumstances so like yet unlike her earliest memories of sleep.

She woke the next morning refreshed despite her lack of sustenance. There was no food and she took no water herself, saving the last few swallows in her flask for her mother. But they both set to with a good will. Sarna wrapped her left arm around her mother, took her sword in her right hand and, together, they staggered up out of the cleft and set off again towards home, taking their direction from the newly risen sun. The heath was silent all around them and while the faint undertone of stale smoke and wet ash that mantled everything in the wasteland still lingered, it was much fainter than normal. Almost she could believe that the hydra had abandoned the pursuit, as it did sometimes for no discernible reason. Hope wild within her, she set out with renewed energy but was soon brought up short by her mother’s lack of energy. Although the other woman smiled happily at her and seemed to share her optimism, she was unable to move faster than a cautious shuffle. Sarna supported her as best she could, trying not to be frustrated by the delay, her heart in her mouth the entire time.

But their reprieve did not last long. After they had been on their way for less than an hour, the Hydra found them again. It came racing up, as fast as it could on its great ungainly body, making a gurgling and whistling sound, venom dripping from all its maws. A weight of black despair settled on Sarna at the loss of the chance that had seemed so bright in the morning. Fighting back tears again, she took a firmer grip on her sword and raised her weary arms once again to the endless task of fending off the beast. Then, sometime late in the morning, her mother lost the strength to stand. When Sarna next released her to turn and keep the hydra at bay, she crumpled to the ground, her bony hands splayed over the biting rocks. Sarna had to steel herself against the pain the sight caused so she could focus on the fight at hand. Over the course of the last day and a half, the number of heads had grown to ten and she had to ward off attacks from three sides at once. It was only by being careful to always keep to ground where the beast could not gain enough height to bring some of the heads to bear behind her that she had managed to survive this long. It was said that, with lack of use, the heads would atrophy and drop off, which must be true for it was often seen with fewer heads than it had had at the previous sighting. But that could take months or years, certainly too long for it to be of any use to her. She could hope for no such reprieve and, very soon, the number of heads would become too great for her to fend off, even with her careful use of the terrain and that, combined with her mother's dramatically increasing weakness forced her, at last, to face the possibility, even the probability, of failure and it took everything she had not to crumple to the ground in despair herself.

Even in the abject terror of the first mad gallop, it had seemed so simple. Yes, things might look dark at the moment but, soon, they would be riding for safety and look back at this ordeal from a place

of relief and contentment. The idea that her mother might actually die was a thought her brain had been unable to grasp. In a way, it still was. That the world could be so fundamentally altered and still exist seemed an impossibility. But, at the same time, there was a feeling of hollow helplessness, growing stronger each time her mother coughed at the poisoned air, which told her that, in the natural course of things, this was exactly what would happen. Humans could not defeat the Hydra. They could only drive it back for a time and, even this, was not a guaranteed success. She wanted to scream until her voice broke, run wildly in circles, fling herself upon the blade-sharp edges of the rocks. What was the point of anything when all was doomed to fail? A black madness swirled in her brain and she could feel the world coming apart at the seams.

And yet...and yet...her proud heart would not admit to utter despair. This foe could not be overcome by human strength, but divine strength could conquer all. She could not kneel with bowed head and clasped hands, could not close her eyes and lift them to the heavens. But, as she fought on, she prayed harder than she ever had before. With grim determination, she steeled herself against weariness and against despair, thinking no longer of gaining ground nor of accomplishing anything by her actions alone. Her only goal was to stand her ground, stand and nothing else, to keep her mother's spirit in the world if she must cling to it with her teeth and nails to do so. Every second longer she could hold out was one second more in which a miracle could take place.

And a miracle did take place for when the hydra drew back briefly, when she was forced to sever another head, she turned to look and saw that, despite her weakness, her mother was moving, crawling, using every last drop of her remaining strength to drag her body over the rough ground. Sarna's heart bled at the sight, almost able to see the throb and ache in the withered muscles as they strained to their limit with each tiny movement. The fingers, shrunken almost to skeletal claws scrabbled desperately against the hard stones, raw and cut from their jagged edges and Sarna felt sick and filled with awe at the same moment. She had always thought of her mother as sweet, meek, modest, only a caring nurturer, even looked down on her a bit for being weak, for not understanding the warrior call in her daughter. But this, *this*, was strength and courage far beyond anything Sarna was capable of, she knew. Beneath the softness and love was a core of stone and steel great as in any of the legends Sarna had idolized. Here was a hero who would fight to her dying breath and, even as her heart shuddered with pain at the understanding that that dying breath could not now be far away, she felt a rush of burning pride to know she carried the blood of such a one.

And so she fought on, even as her tears ran, she being now powerless to stop them. Her vision blurred and, often now the hydra's heads were only black blobs rushing at her, sometimes barely discernible against the dark gray of the rocks but, somehow, she still kept fending them off. Her arms burned and she could feel her breath rasping through her throat, tasting of blood, but she kept on in blind, numb agony, spurred on but the thought that the wasted, ruined thing behind her was striving and suffering far more and this was the least she could do. An eternity seemed to pass in this raw fiery emptiness though, by the position of the sun it could only have been a couple hours, and they had moved less than a dozen yards, when another miracle occurred. Off to the left, no more than a stone's throw, there was a shallow gully with an overhang and cleft between the rocks, just barely space for them to shelter from the hydra and rest. Rallying herself, she hacked off another head and, half lifting her mother in her arms, made for the meager shelter as fast as their failing legs could go, scrambling to fit into the narrow cleft.

The stones bit and bored into them but she hardly noticed, so relieved was she to no longer have to expend energy to lift the sword, to hold her body upright, to keep her eyes open. Cheated of its prey yet again, the hydra paced back and forth on the edge of the gully, bellowing in rage but the noise barely registered to Sarna. Certainly, in her dead weariness, it no longer held any fear for her. This time, there were no embraces or laughter or memories, there was no strength left for speech or

unneeded movement. Sarna made sure her mother was laid in the smoothest part of the cleft and gave her the final drops of water in her flask, most of which she was unable to swallow so they dripped out of her slack mouth. Then she eased herself down into a far less smooth depression and did her best to ignore the rocks digging into her back, the gnawing hunger in her belly, and the acid ache of fatigue in every limb. But, as it turned out, like the sounds of the pacing hydra, these were things that simply no longer mattered beside the numbing blackness of exhaustion and she was asleep, or at least insensible, in a matter of moments.

Sarna saw herself wandering in some hazy land, wandering over rough ground she could not see, her feet buried in the clinging mist. But she could tell it was not the heath. There were no loose stones and, though the ground was uneven, there was nothing like the great ruts on the heath. This was fortunate as she knew she was looking for something urgently, struggling to reach it as soon as possible, and the direction she knew she must go lay on an upward slope. The weariness of her body had not been soothed at all by the brief rest in the rock cleft and, at every step, she felt ready to drop from exhaustion, her feet scrabbling for purchase on the incline and her breath ragged, burning her throat. Where was she going? What was she looking for? She could see nothing in front of her or anywhere around her. She could hear no sound so it was doubtful there were foes nearby but, in the cursed fog, she could easily pitch into a hole or over a cliff without the slightest warning. She had no idea where she was or why she was here. All she knew was that she must go on and up and that it was vitally important.

At last, the broken slope began to level off and, at the same time, the mist gave way so she found herself emerging into an open area like a flat mesa on top of the rise. The mist still swirled around her in high walls so it was as if she were at the heart of a dark whirlwind but, looking up, she could see a circle of clear sky above her with a full moon like bone looking bleakly down on her. A few whip thin, twisted trees, their bark silver gray and gleaming as if wet, were scattered about the table land, roughly in a circle, their branches, like serpentine tendrils, reaching towards the sky as if in prayer. In the center of that circle lay a low flat stone, plainly an altar, and it was this that called to her with a throbbing pull like the vibrations from plucked harp strings.

Staggering the last few yards to the stone she found there was a body laid upon it for sacrifice and that, as she should have known it would be, it was her mother's body. The legs were set straight, side by side, hands crossed on the chest, ready for coffin or pyre but, in no other way had the body been prepared. She still wore the same old clothes, filthy and rent beyond recognition from her final desperate struggle over the stones of the heath on her belly like a worm. Her face had not been washed with no attempt to hide or wipe away even the stains and burn marks of the hydra's black blood against her pale withered skin. But, most horrifying of all to Sarna, her now bald head had been left naked, the wrinkled skin laid directly against the hard, cold surface of the stone slab for all to see. Rage rose inside her at the blatant lack of respect, so violent it was as if a hand had seized her by the throat, choking her. But, even as she felt the tears start to well in her eyes, she saw, beyond hope, the faintest shiver of movement. The ruined body on the altar still lived but only barely. She could feel the life force inside it, somehow, like a silken strand between her fingers, a shining cord that slid like water, impossible to hold, slipping away, running out between her grasping hands, evading her.

Clutching desperately, Sarna found there was a knife in her hand. She knew its purpose, what was expected of her. The rites were to be honored, the sacrifice killed, even if there was no need. But she had learned her own lesson to not obey. Even when there were parameters impossible to circumvent, there were still ways to obey that were not what was desired, that made the obedience displeasing. And so the wound she opened, the blood she poured on the stone, did not come from the intended victim. Weary as she was, it was her own arm that supplied the offering and, as it dripped down on the altar and on the body there, she saw a change. The shallow, straining breaths became

deeper, easier, the skin was washed clean as it should have been before the laying out so, at the sight, her tears began to fall, mingling with the blood. And then, most amazing of all, a white silver down began to form on the bare scalp like fine powder. Wild hope sang through Sarna, her heart pealing like a bell as, under her eyes, a miracle took place, and the fresh locks of hair began to grown longer and longer, flowing down from the scalp until they touched the altar, pooling there, not the everyday steel gray of her mother's normal hair but with a luminous sheen on it like moonlight, far more wholesome than the grim moon above her. The shinning puddles lapped against her mother's cheeks and shoulders before overflowing the altar stone and beginning to drip down to the ground below. Billows of it began to form around Sarna's feet like drifts of snow but far softer, sweet and comforting, just the right temperature, like being lapped in the most delicate of baby blankets. She felt safe, loved, cocooned in wonder as she wept rivers of tears and the beautiful reprieve that had been granted.

Then, most amazing of all, her mother opened her eyes and they were clear. "My Sarna," she said, her voice soft but not raw and strained from coughing as it had been on the heath. Her mouth turned up in her own smile that also had seemed lost forever. "You've taken all the pain away. Now I can go in peace." Go! Go! No, there was to be no going anywhere. They had found one another again and, after the terror she had experience, Sarna meant never to let her mother be apart from her again. "Farewell, Sweetie." There was another perfect smile as the eyes closed gently, and the slow, even breathing leveled into nothing. The luminous glow faded from the coils of hair, leaving her daughter utterly bereft in a world of darkness as the skeletal trees groped suddenly in a frigid wind and the mist came racing up to swallow her as she stood uncaring, the horror within far surpassing the horror without.

Sarna woke from her nightmare as evening was falling. The last faint glow of the sun was fading and a single star, hard as white ice, could be seen through a cleft in the rocks where they had sheltered. For a moment, she felt overwhelming relief that it had been a dream. But, then, something in her warrior's sixth sense twinged. She knew what she would see before she turned around. She had dreaded this moment for so long and now her dream had left her dead and without feeling. The Hydra was more terrible than she had always imagined. Part of her could only feel relief that it had taken someone other than her and the other part of her was ill with shame at this thought. She was a warrior and not afraid as long as she could defend herself. But how could one fight the pestilent breath, the hideous wasting of the body? In a struggle where she could fight back, Sarna would never flee, but a panic of terror gripped her if there was nothing she could do to resist.

Her mother lay where she had gone to sleep the night before, carefully fitted into the smoothest patch between the sharp stones. Her expression was blank, with no sign that her last moments were either of peace or suffering. In some ways, she was now more like herself than she had been during her struggles. The redness and swelling had gone from her body, leaving only the delicate skin and bones. But, at the same time, the figure who lay there seemed utterly alien to her, as if it were really the soul Sarna had seen all along and, now that it was flown, there was nothing left to recognize. But how could she say now what was like or unlike? With a growing horror, she now realized she had all but forgotten what her mother used to look like. The strain and suffering of the past days has so filled her mind and soul that there was no longer anything else left. She tried to imagine the empty skull flowing with hair again as it had in her dream, the cold lips parted in laughter, and could not. She had lost more than the reality of her mother, she had lost her memories as well.

She had expected to feel her heart torn from her body, to weep until she could no longer see. She had thought to raise her hands to the sky and curse the Gods who had chosen such a fate. But now, it was all too great an effort and useless as well. To grieve would do nothing except prove Sarna's own helplessness yet again. And, in some ways, there was relief as well. She hadn't know it was going to happen, hadn't had to tell her mother farewell, nor hold her hand and look in her eyes as the light

faded. Despite her prowess on the battle field, Sarna knew that, in some ways, she would always be a coward. She reached out and took the cold, stiff hands and crossed them over the body, as she did so, seeing clearly, as she did so, how the joints stood out and the fingers were bent at an unnatural angle, curling in on themselves like bird claws. No tears fell. Sarna looked in her mother's face, looked on the reality of death, and felt only a dull emptiness, and, even as this was happening, she felt a wild panic that this lack of pain was not right.

Sarna was startled out of her thoughts by the sound of scraping and pawing on the stones above. For a second, she was frightened that the Hydra had returned but that was impossible for none of the rotten reek was to be smelled anywhere. Sensing its victim was no longer available for further torment, the creature had wandered away to hunt for some other unfortunate creature. Raising her head, she saw her horse standing at the edge of the ravine, its hooves echoing against the rocks. Sarna could not even bring herself to feel resentment towards the beast for abandoning her, then returning as soon as it was too late. But that was beyond reason, for it was the Hydra's departure that had allowed it to return. Slowly, she rose and moved to climb out. But, immediately, she felt all the weariness and the aching in her muscles. With no will left to sustain her, she felt barely able to stand. The horse made a concerned noise and stretched its neck down towards her. Weakly, Sarna reached out her hand, straining to touch its nose but not quite able to make it. Then, behind the scraping of the hooves, she heard other sounds, more horses and voices. They were coming closer, alerted by the horse that had noticed her.

"There she is," a voice yelled out and then a hand was being stretched out towards her and she took it, finding herself pulled to her feet by Gordon the blacksmith. "Your steed came back to the outskirts of the village and we followed it," he explained almost apologetically. "We knew it was safe because no horse would ever go towards the Hydra, especially without a rider." There was a pause and he looked away. "We also knew what it signified that it was willing to return, what it meant must have happened." She nodded numbly, no longer having the energy even to be angry. Then, her knees buckled and she reeled and would have fallen to the floor, if he had not caught her waist and then, with the aid of two other villagers, whom she was too far gone to recognize, helped her onto her horse. She swayed in the saddle, the world a gray haze around her, and the voices of the rescue party faded to a dull buzz. There was some milling, the horse shifted nervously, and then she saw two men carrying something long and heavy in a sagging sack between them. In an agonizing moment of hyper clarity, she realized it was her mother's shrouded body they were loading onto a pack horse to take back for burial. She should be glad of it for the remains of the hydra's victims were not always recovered. For a brief moment, she realized the full horror of what had happened and crumpled forward, almost toppling from the saddle. The man holding her bridle, probably Gordon though she was long past caring about such things, put out a hand to steady her and that was the last thing she was aware of before she plunged in to the escape of empty blackness.

Gradually, the black dizziness abated and her eyes focused on the dark cross-beams of the ceiling. Her blanket, woven with deer and rabbits, was snug under her chin. On the bed-side table beside her was the old, pierced metal lamp shield and a copy of the *Lay of Artigan*. The window on the far side of the room was thrown open so she could hear the chatter of the stream beyond and the rustle of the leaves on the mulberry bush which, she could now see, were edged with flame and gold. She was in her own room, waking under the same ceiling she had opened her eyes on at least half the days of her life, the refuge that had the power to wash away any fear and sorrow. For a moment, Sarna felt completely safe and at peace, then memory rushed back over her. This room was a haven no longer. It was only an empty shell, the presence that had made it warm and secure gone forever.

On the wasteland, the hurt had been less. Since she had never been there before it had no connection to her normal life and she could almost believe that the terrible things that happened there would not persist beyond the bounds of the heath. Now the loss was written on everything. The

blanket wrapped around her was the very one those hands, now empty, had drawn over her so many times. There was the stool on which she had sat to read to Sarna in the evenings by the flickering light of the brass lamp. One of her mother's shawls lay, half folded on the windowsill, as if she had just been called away as they watched the birds out the window. But she would never come to pick it back up. "She must have been standing there, thinking of me, only a few days ago," she mused, feeling all her years of future loneliness well up inside her.

The door swung open and even the familiar creak as the hinge caught partway rung her heart. Her father stepped through the doorway and came towards her, holding out a steaming bowl. Sarna suddenly realized she was very hungry, as if she had not eaten in days, and reached for the bowl eagerly. It was beef stew, her favorite, with chunks of meat and potatoes, carrots and peas, floating in an herbed broth. In her vulnerable state, she felt so touched that her father had remembered and was afraid she might cry. "Thank you," she whispered.

He looked relieved, but still concerned. "Eat it," he said, as he pulled up her mother's stool and sat down on it. "You've been ill for some time and need the nourishment." Sarna dipped the spoon into the soup, blew on it, and swallowed, then forced a smile through her shock. The broth was dull and bland, the vegetables half cooked, and the meat chewy and tasteless. This was clearly not her mother's stew. Of course not. She had had years to perfect that delicate, flawless balance of flavors, whereas her father had almost never cooked before. There had never been a need and, now that there was, he had tried his hardest. And this was the only beef stew she would ever have now. Sarna swallowed again, the taste in her mouth nothing beside the bitterness in her heart.

"You said I've been ill for a long time," she said as she felt her strength return. "Does that mean...?"

"No, we all agreed to wait for you to be well enough to attend," he reassured her. "The elder wants to bury her in..."

"Bury," cried Sarna. "No, never. I want her laid in a boat and given to the lake and the fire." There was a silence as he allowed her to recover her breath to speak again. "She died in battle as much as any of those in the blessed hall of warriors. When she could no longer walk, she crawled to escape."

He gave her a wan smile, like watery sunlight through rain clouds. "I knew she would," he said quietly. "It would not have been possible for her to do otherwise. After so many years, I knew that about her without consciously realizing it. You're right and, if the elder will not agree to it, we will do it ourselves." Sarna threw back her head, her long hair flying, and raised eyes that smoldered with gratitude. Again, they were met by that sad smile. "You're so much like her...inside and out. Your intelligence, your patience, your practical side, these came from me. But your mother, she gave you her warrior's soul." At these words, the depths of Sarna's feelings overwhelmed her at last and she threw herself into her father's arms. In this closeness, her tears were finally loosed and her weeping poured out in a torrent. Gradually, she could feel a wetness spreading over her shoulder from her father's tears as well.