

# Spider Silk

by Andre Norton

The Big Storm in the Year of the Kobold came late, long past the month when such fury was to be expected. This was all part of that evil which the Guardians had drawn upon Estcarp when they summoned up their greatest power to blast and twist the mountain lands, seal off passes through which had come the invasion from Karsten.

Rannock lay open to that storm. Only the warning dream-sending to the Wise Woman, Ingvarna, drew a portion of the women and children to the higher lands, there to watch with fear and trembling the sea's fierce assault upon the coast. So high dashed those waves that water covered and boiled about the Serpent Teeth of the upper ledges. Only here, in pockets among the Tor rocks, could a fugitive crouch in almost mindless terror, awaiting the end.

Of the fishing fleet which had set out yesterday morn, who had any hopes now of its return save perhaps a scattering of wreckage, playthings of the storm waves?

There was left only a handful of old men and boys, and one or two such as Herdrek, the Twist-Leg, the village smith. For Rannock was as poor in men as it was in all else since the war years had ravaged Estcarp. To the north perched Alizon, a hawk ready to be unleashed upon its neighbor, from the south Karsten boiled and bubbled, if aught was still left alive beyond the wrecked mountain passages.

Men who had marched with the Borderers under Lord Simon Tregarth or served beneath the Banners of the Witch Women of Es—where were they? Long since, their kin had given up any hope of their return. There had been no true peace in this land since old Nabor (who could count his years at more than a hundred) had been in his green youth.

It was Nabor now who battled the strength of the wind to the Tor, dragged himself up to stand, hunched shoulder to shoulder, with Ingvarna. As she, he looked to the sea uneasily. That she expected still their own fleet, he could not believe, foresighted as all knew her to be.

Waves mounted, to pound giant fists against the rock. Nabor caught sight of a ship rising and falling near the Serpent's dread fangs. Then a huge swell whirled it over those sharp threats into the comparative calm beyond. Nabor sighed with the relief of a seaman who had witnessed a miracle, life won from the very teeth of rock death. Also, Rannock had the right of storm wrack. If that ship survived so far, its cargo was forfeit

now to any who could bring it to shore. He half turned to seek the shelter of the Tor hollows, rouse Herdrek, the others, with this promise of fortune.

However, Ingvarna turned her head. Through the drifts of rain her eyes held his. There was a warning in her steady gaze. "One comes—" He saw her lips shape the words rather than voice them above the roar of wind and wave.

At the same moment, there was such a crash as equaled the drum of thunder, the lash of lightning. The strange ship might have beaten the menace of the reefs fangs, but now had been driven halfway up the beach, where it was fast breaking up under the hammer blows of the surf.

Herdrek stumped out to join them. "It is a raider," he commented during a lull of the wind. "Perhaps one of the Sea Wolves of Alizon." He spat at the wreck below.

Ingvarna was already scrambling over the rocks towards the shore, as if what lay there were of vast importance. Herdrek shouted after her a warning, but she did not even turn her head. With a curse at the folly of females, which a second later he devoutly hoped the Wise Woman had not been able to pick out of the air, the smith followed her, two of the lads venturing in his wake.

At least when they reached the shore level, the worst of the storm was spent. Waves drew a torn seaweed veil around the broken vessel. Herdrek made fast a rope about his waist, gave dire warnings to his followers to keep a tight hold upon it. Then he ventured into the surf, using that cordage from wind-rent sails, hanging in loops down the shattered sides, to climb aboard.

There was a hatch well tamped down, roped shut. He drew belt knife to slash the fastening.

"Ho!" His voice rolled hollowly into the dark beneath him. "Anyone below?"

A thin cry answered, one which might issue from the throat of a seabird such as already coasted over the subsiding surface of the sea on hunt for the bounty of the storm. Yet he thought not. Gingerly, favoring his stiff leg, the smith lowered himself into the stinking hold. What he found there made him retch, and then heated in him dull anger against those who had mastered this vessel. She had been a slaver, such as Rannock's men had heard tell of—dealing in live cargo.

But of that cargo, only one survived. Her, Herdrek carried gently from the horror of that prison. A little maid, her small arms no more than skin slipped glovelike on bones, her eyes great, gray, and blankly open. Ingvarna took the strange child from the smith as one who had the authority of clan and home hearth, wrapping the little one's thin, shivering body in her own warm cloak.

From whence Dairine came, those of Rannock never learned. That slavers raided far was no secret. Also, the villagers soon discovered the child was blind. Ingvarna, though she was a Wise One, greatly learned in herbs and spells, the setting of bones, the curing of wounds, shook her head sadly over that discovery, saying that the child's blindness came from no hurt of body. Rather, she must have looked upon some things so horrible that thereafter her mind closed and refused all sight.

Though she must have been six or seven winters old, yet also speech seemed driven from her, and only fear was left to be her portion. Although the women of Rannock would have tried to comfort her, yet secretly in their hearts they were willing that she bide with Ingvarna, who treated her oddly, they thought. For the Wise Woman did not strive to make life easier in any way for the child. Rather, from the first, Ingvarna treated the sea waif not as one maimed in body, and perhaps in mind, but rather as she might some daughter of the village whom she had chosen to be her apprentice in the harsh school of her own learning.

These years were bleak for Rannock. Full half the fleet did not return from out of the maw of that storm. Nor did any of the coastwise traders come. The following winter was a lean one. But in those dark days, Dairine showed first her skill. Though her eyes might not see what her fingers wrought, yet she could mend fishing nets with such cleverness that even the experienced women marveled.

And in the following spring, when the villagers husked the loquath balls to free their seeds for new plantings, Dairine busied herself with the silken inner fibers, twisting and turning those. Ingvarna had Herdrek make a small spindle, and showed the child how this tool might be best put to work.

Good use did Dairine make of it, too. Her small, birdclaw fingers drew out finer thread than any had achieved before, freer from knotting than any the villagers had seen. Yet never seemed she satisfied, but strove ever to make her spinning yet finer, more smooth.

The Wise Woman continued her fosterling's education in other ways, teaching her to use her fingers, her nose, in the herb garden. Dairine learnt easily the spelling which was part of a Wise Woman's knowledge. She absorbed such very quickly, yet always there was about her an impatience. When she made mistakes, then her anger against herself was great. The greatest when she tried to explain some tool or need which she seemed unable to describe but for which she evinced a need.

Ingvarna spoke to Herdrek (who was now village elder), saying that perhaps the craft of the Wise Woman might aid in regaining a portion of Dairine's lost memory. When he demanded why she had not voiced such a matter before, Ingvarna answered gravely:

"This child is not blood of our blood, and she was captive to the sea wolves. Have we the right to recall to her past horrors? Perhaps Gunnora, who watches over all womankind, has taken away her memory of the past in pity. If so—"

He bit his thumb, watching Dairine as she paced back and forth before the loom which he had caused to be set up for her, now and then halting to slap her hand upon the frame in frustration. It seemed as if she longed to force the heavy wood into another pattern which would serve her better.

"I think that she grows more and more unhappy," he agreed slowly. "At first she seemed content. Now there are times when she acts as a snow cat encaged against her will. I do not like to see her so."

The Wise Woman nodded. "Well enough. In my mind, this is a right choice."

Ingvarna went to the girl, taking both her hands, drawing her around so that she might look directly into those blind eyes. At Ingvarna's touch, Dairine stood still. "Leave us!" the Wise Woman commanded the smith.

Early that evening as Herdrek stood at his forge, Dairine walked into the light of his fire. She came to him unhesitatingly. So acute was her hearing that she often startled the villagers by her recognition of another presence. Now she held out her hands to him as she might to a father she loved. And he knew all was well.

By midsummer, when the loquths had flowered and their blossoms dropped, Dairine went often into the fields, fingering the swelling bolls. Sometimes she sang, queer, foreign-tongued words, as if the plants were children (now knee height, and then shoulder height) who must be amused and cherished.

Herdrek had changed her loom as the girl suggested might be done. From Ingvarna, she learned the mysteries of dyes, experimenting on her own. She had no real friend among the few children of the dying village. Firstly, because she did not range much afield, save with Ingvarna, of whom most were in awe. Secondly, because her actions were strange and she seemed serious and more adult than the years they believed to be hers.

In the sixth year after her coming, a Sulcar ship put in at Rannock, the first strange vessel they had sighted since the wreck of the slaver. Its captain brought news that the long war was at last over.

The defeat of the Karsten invaders, who so drained the powers of the rulers of Estcarp, had been complete. Koris of Gorm was now Commander of Estcarp, since so many of the Guardians had perished when they turned the full extent of their power upon the enemy. Yet the land was hardly at peace. The sea wolves of the coast had been augmented by ships of the broken and defeated navy of Karsten. And as in times of chaos, other wolfheads, without any true lands or allegiance, now ravaged the land wherever they might. Though the forces under Captain General Koris sought to protect the boundaries, yet to clearly defeat such hit-and-run raids was yet well beyond the ability of any defending force.

The Sulcar Captain was impressed by the latest length of Dairine's weaving, offering for it, when he bargained with Ingvarna, a much better price than he had thought to pay out in this forgotten village. He was much interested also in the girl, speaking to her slowly in several tongues. However, she answered him only in the language of Estcarp, saying she knew no other.

Still, he remarked privately to Ingvarna that somewhere in the past he had seen those like unto her, though where and when during his travels he could not bring to mind. Still, he thought that she was not of common stock.

It was a year later that the Wise Woman wrought the best she could for her sea-gift foundling.

No one knew how old Ingvarna was, for the Wise Woman showed no advance of age, as did those less learned in the many uses of herbs and medicants. But it was true that she walked more slowly, and that she no longer went alone when she sought out certain places of Power, taking Dairine ever with her. What the two did there no one knew, for who would spy on any woman with the Witch Talent?

On this day, the few fishing boats had taken to sea before dawn. At moonrise the night before, the Wise Woman and her fosterling had gone inland to visit a certain very ancient place. There Ingvarna kindled a fire which burned not naturally red, but rather blue. Into those flames, she tossed small, tightly bound bundles of dried herbs so that the smoke which arose was heavily scented. But she watched not that fire. Rather, a slab of stone set behind its flowering. That stone had a surface like unto glass, the color of a fine sword blade.

Dairine stood a little behind the Wise Woman. Though Ingvarna had taught her so much over the years, to make her other senses serve her in place of her missing sight, so that her fingers were ten eyes, her nostrils, her ears could catch scent and sound to an extent far outreaching the skill of ordinary mankind; yet at moments such as this, the longing to be as others awoke in her a sense of loss so dire that to her eyes came tears, flowing silently down her cheeks. Much Ingvarna had given her. Still, she was not as the others of Rannock. And oftentimes loneliness settled upon her as a burdensome cloak. Now the girl sensed that Ingvarna planned for her some change. But that it would make her see as others saw—that she could not hope for.

She heard clearly the chanting of the Wise Woman. The odor of the burning herbs filled her nose, now and then made her gasp for a less heavy lungful of air. Then came a command, not given in words, nor by some light touch against her arm and shoulder. But into her mind burst an order and Dairine walked ahead, her hands outstretched, until her ten fingers flattened against a throbbing surface. Warm it was, near to a point which would sear her flesh, while its throb was in twin beat to her own heart. Still, Dairine stood firm, while the chant of the Wise Woman came more faintly, as if the girl had been shifted from farther away in space from her foster mother.

Then she felt an inward flow from the surface she touched, a warmth which spread along her hands, her wrists, up her arms. Fainter still came the voice of Ingvarna petitioning on her behalf, strange and half-forgotten powers.

Slowly the warmth receded. But how long Dairine had stood so wedded to that surface she could not see, the girl never knew. Except that there came a moment when her hands fell, as if too heavily burdened for her to raise.

"What is done, is done." Ingvarna's voice at the girl's left sounded as weighted as Dairine's hands felt. "All I have to give, this I have freely shared with you. Though being blind as men see blindness, yet you have sight such as few can own to. Use it well, my fosterling."

From that day it became known that Dairine did indeed have strange powers of "seeing"—through her hands. She could take up a thing which had been made and tell you of the maker, of how long since it had been wrought. A shred of fleece from one of the thin-flanked hill sheep put into her fingers would enable her to guide an anxious owner to where the lost flock member had strayed.

There was one foretelling which she would not do, after she came upon its secret by chance only. For she had taken the hand of little Hulde during the Harvest Homing dance. Straightway thereafter, Dairine dropped her grasp upon the child's small fingers, crying out and shrinking away from the villagers, to seek out Ingvarna's house and therein hide herself. Within the month, Hulde had died of a fever. Thereafter, the girl used her new sight sparingly, and always with a fear plain to be seen haunting her.

In the Year of the Weldworm, when Dairine passed into young womanhood, Ingvarna died, swiftly. As if foreseeing another possible end, she summoned death as one summons a servant to do one's bidding.

Though Dairine was no true Wise Woman, yet thereafter she took on many of the duties of her foster mother. Within a month after the Wise Woman's burial, the Sulcar ship returned.

As the Captain told the forgotten village the news of the greater world, his eyes turned ever to Dairine, her hands busy with thread she spun as she listened. Among those of the village, she was indeed one apart, with her strange silver-fair hair, silver-light eyes.

Sibbald Ortis, Sibbald the Wrong-Handed—thus they had named him after a sea battle had lopped off his hand, and a smith in another land had made him one of metal—was that captain. He was new come to command and young—though he had lived near all his life at sea after the manner of his people.

Peace, after a fashion, he told them, had encompassed the land at least. For Koris of Gorm now ruled Estcarp with a steady hand. Alizon had been defeated in some

invasion that nation had attempted overseas. And Karsten was in chaos, one prince or lord always rising against another. While the sea wolves were being hunted down, one after another, to a merciless end.

Having made clear that he was in Rannock on lawful business, the Captain now turned briskly to the subject of trade. What had they, if anything, which would be worth stowage in his own ship?

Herdrek was loathe to spread their poverty before these strangers. Also, he wanted, with a desire he could hardly conceal, some of the tools and weapons he had seen in casual use among them. Yet what had Rannock? Fish dried to take them through a lean winter, some woven lengths of wool.

The villagers would be hard put even to give these visitors guest-right, with the feast they were entitled to. And to fail in that was to deny their own heritage.

Dairine, listening to the Captain, had wished she dared touch his hand, and thus learn what manner of a man he was who had journeyed so far and seen so much. A longing was born in her to be free of the narrow, well-known ways of Rannock, to see what lay beyond in the world. Her fingers steadily twirled her thread, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

Then she lifted her head a little, for she knew someone was now standing at her side. There was the tang of sea-salted leather, and other odors. This was a stranger, one of the Sulcar men.

"You work that thread with skill, maid."

She recognized the Captain's voice. "It is my skill, Lord Captain."

"They tell me that fate has served you harshly," he spoke bluntly then. But she liked him the better for that bluntness.

"Not so, Lord Captain. These of Rannock have been ever kind. And I was fosterling to their Wise Woman. Also, my hands serve well, if my eyes are closed upon this world. Come, you, and see!" She spoke with pride as she arose from her stool, thrusting her spindle into her girdle.

Thus Dairine brought him to the cottage which was hers, sweet within for all its scents of herbs. She gestured to where stood the loom Herdrek had made her.

"As you see, Lord Captain, I am not idle, even though I may be blind."

For she knew that there, in the half-done web, there was no mistake.

Ortis was silent for a moment. Then she heard the hiss of his breath expelled in wonder.

"But this is weaving of the finest! There is no fault in color or pattern . . . How can this be done?"

"With one's two hands, Lord Captain!" She laughed. "Here, give me a possession of yours that I may show you better how fingers can be eyes."

Within her there was a new excitement, for something told her that this was a moment of importance in her life. She heard then a faint swish as if some bit of woven stuff were being shaken free. A clinging length was pressed into the hand she held out.

"Tell me," he commanded, "from whence came this, and how was it wrought?"

Back and forth between her fingers, the girl slipped the riband of silken stuff.

Woven—yes. But her "seeing" hands built no mind picture of human fingers at the business. No, strangely ill-formed were those members engaged in the weaving. And so swift were they also that they seemed to blur. No woman, as Dairine knew women, had fashioned this. But female—strongly, almost fiercely female.

"Spider silk—" She was not aware that she had spoken aloud until she heard the sound of her own words.

"Yet not quite spider. A woman weaving—still, not a woman. . . ."

She raised the riband to her cheek. There was a wonder in such weaving which brought to life in her a fierce longing to know more and more.

"You are right." The Captain's voice broke her preoccupation with that need to learn. "This comes from Usturt. And had a man but two full bolts of it within his cargo, he could count triple profits from such a voyage alone."

"Where lies Usturt?" Dairine demanded. If she could go there—learn what could be learned. "And who are the weavers? I do not see them as beings like unto our own people."

She heard his breath hiss again. "To see the weavers," he said in a low voice, "is death. They hate all mankind—"

"Not so, Lord Captain!" Dairine answered him then. "It is not mankind that they hate—it is all males." For from the strip between her fingers came that knowledge.

For a moment she was silent. Did he doubt her?



"At least no man sails willingly to Usturt," he replied. "I had that length from one who escaped with his bare life. He died upon our deck shortly after we fished him from a waterlogged raft."

"Captain," she stroked the silk, "you have said that this weaving is a true treasure. My people are very poor and grow poorer. If one were to learn the secret of such weaving, might not good come of it?"

With a sharp jerk he took the riband from her.

"There is no such way."

"But there is!" Her words came in an eager tumble, one upon the other. "Women—or female things—wove this. They might treat with a woman—one who was already a weaver."

Great, calloused hands closed upon her shoulders.

"Girl, not for all the gold in Karsten would I send any woman into Usturt! You know not of what you speak. It is true that you have gifts of the Talent. But you are no

confirmed Guardian, and you are blind. What you suggest is such a folly—Aye, Vidruth, what is it now?"

Dairine had already sensed that someone had approached.

"The tide rises. For better mooring, Captain, we need move beyond the rocks."

"Aye. Well, girl, may the Right Hand of Lraken be your shield. When a ship calls, no captain lingers."

Before she could even wish him well, he was gone. Retreating, she sat down on her hard bench by the loom. Her hands trembled, and from her eyes the tears seeped. She felt bereft, as if she had had for a space a treasure and it had been torn from her. For she was certain that her instinct had been right, that if any could have learned the secret of Usturt, she was that one.

Now, when she put a hand out to finger her own weaving, the web on the loom seemed coarse, utterly ugly. In her mind, she held queer vision of a deeply forested place in which great, sparkling webs ran in even strands from tree to tree.

Through the open door puffed a wind from the sea. Dairine lifted her face to it as it tugged at her hair.

"Maid!"

She was startled. Even with her keen ears, she had not heard anyone approach so loud was the wind-song.

"Who are you?" she asked quickly.

"I am Vidruth, maid, mate to Captain Ortis."

She arose swiftly. "He has thought more upon my plan?" For she could see no other reason for the seaman to seek her out in this fashion.

"That is so, maid. He awaits us now. Give me your hand—so. . . ."

Fingers grasped hers tightly. She strove to free her hand. This man—there was that in him which was— wrong— Then out of nowhere, came a great, smothering cloak, folded about her so tightly she could not struggle. There were unclean smells to affront her nostrils, but the worst was that this Vidruth had swung her up across his shoulder so that she could have been no more than a bundle of trade goods.

## Chapter 2

So was she brought aboard what was certainly a ship, for in spite of the muffling of the cloak, Dairine used her ears, her nose. However, in her mind, she could not sort out her thoughts. Why had Captain Ortis so vehemently, and truthfully (for she had read that truth in his touch), refused to bring her? Then this man of his had come to capture her as he might steal a woman during some shore raid?

The Sulcarmen were not slave traders, that was well known. Then why?

Hands pulled away the folds of the cloak at last. The air she drew thankfully into her lungs was not fresh, rather tainted with stinks which made her feel unclean even to sniff. She thought that her prison must lie deep within the belly of the ship.

"Why have you done this?" Dairine asked of the man she could hear breathing heavily near her.

"Captain's orders," he answered, leaning so close she not only smelt his uncleanly body, but gathered with that a sensation of heat. "He has eyes in his head, has the Captain. You be a smooth-skinned, likely wench—"

"Let her be, Wak!" That was Vidruth.

"Aye, Captain," the other answered with a slur of sly contempt. "Here she be, safe and sound—"

"And here she stays, Wak, safe from your kind. Get out!"

There was a growl from Wak, as if he were close to questioning the other's right to so order him. Then Dairine's ears caught a sound which might have been that of a panel door sliding into place.

"You are not the Captain," she spoke into the silence between them.

"There has been a change of command," he returned. "The Captain, he has not brought us much luck in months ago. When we learned that he would not try to better his fortune—he was—"

"Killed!"

"Not so. Think you we want a blood feud with all his clan? The Sulcarmen take not lightly to those who let the red life out of some one of their stock."

"I do not understand. You are all Sulcar—"

"That we are not, girl. The world has changed since those ruled the waves about the oceans. They were fighters and fighting men get killed. The Kolder they fought, and they blew up Sulcarkeep in that fighting, taking the enemy—but also too many of their own—on into the Great Secret. Karsten they fought, and they were at the taking of Gorm, aye. Then they have patrolled against the sea wolves of Alizon. Men they have lost, many men. Now if they take a ship out of harbor, they do it with others than just their kin to raise sails and set the course. No, we do not kill Sibbald Ortis, we may need him later. But he is safe laid.

"Now let us to the business between us, girl. I heard the words you spoke with Ortis. Also did I learn much about you from those starvelings who live in Rannock. You have some of the Talents of the Wise Women, if you cannot call upon the full Power, blind as you are. You yourself said it—if any can treat with those devil females of Usturt, it must be one such as you.

"Think on that spider silk, girl. You held that rag that Ortis has. And you can do mighty things, unless all those at Rannock are crazed in their wits. Which I do not believe. This is a chance which a man may have offered to him but once in a lifetime."

She heard the greed in his voice. And perhaps that greed would be her protection. Vidruth would take good care to keep her safe. Just as he held somewhere Sibbald Ortis for a like reason.

"Why did you take me so, if your intentions are good? If you heard my words to the Captain, you know I would have gone willingly."

He laughed. "Do you think those shore-side halflingmen would have let you go? With three-quarters of the Guardians dead, their own Wise Woman laid also in her grave

shaft, would they willingly have surrendered to us even your small Talent? The whole land is hard pressed now for any who hold even a scrap of the Power.

"No matter. They will welcome you back soon enough after you have learned the secret of Usturt. If it then still be in your mind to go to them."

"But how do you know that in Usturt I shall work for you?"

"Because you will not want the Captain to be given over to them. They do not have a pleasant way with captives."

There was fear behind his words, a fear born of horror, which he fought to control.

"Also, if you do not do as we wish, we can merely sail and leave you on Usturt for the rest of your life. No ship goes there willingly. A long life for you perhaps, girl, alone with none of your own kind—think of that."

He was silent for a moment before he added, "It is a bargain, girl, one we swear to keep. You deal with the weavers, we take you back to Rannock, or anywhere else you name. The Captain, he can be set ashore with you even. No more harm done. And a portion of the silk for your own. Why, you can buy all of Rannock and make yourself a Keep lady!"

"There is one thing—" She was remembering Wak. "I am not such a one as any of your men can take at his will. Know you not what happens then to any Talent I may possess?"

When Vidruth answered her, there was a deep note of menace in his voice, though it was not aimed at her.

"All men know well that the Talent departs from a woman who lies with a man. None shall trouble you."

"So be it," she returned, with an outward calm it was hard for her to assume. "Have you the bit of silk? Let me learn from it what I can."

She heard him move away the grate of whatever door kept snug her prison. As that sound ceased, she put out her hands to explore. The cubby was small, there was a shelflike bunk against the wall, a stool which seemed bolted to the deck, nought else. Did they have Captain Ortis pent in such a hole also? And how had this Vidruth managed so well the take-over of the Captain's command? What she had read of Sibbald Ortis during their brief meeting had not been such as to lead her to think he was one easily overcome by an enemy.

But she was sitting quietly on the stool when Vidruth returned to drop the length of riband across her quiet hands.

"Learn all you can," he urged her. "We have two days of sail if this wind continues to favor us, then we shall raise Usturt. Food, water, what you wish, shall be brought to you, and there is a guard without so that you need not be troubled."

With the silk between her hands, Dairine concentrated upon what it could tell her. She had no illusions concerning Vidruth. To him and the others, she was only a tool to their hands. Because she was sightless, he might undervalue her, for all his talk of Talent and Power. She had discovered many times in the past that such was so.

Deliberately, Dairine closed out the world about her, shut her ears to creak of timber, wash of wave, her nose to the many smells which offended it. Once more her "sight" turned inward. She could "see" the blur of those hands (which were not quite hands) engaged in weaving. Colors she had no words to describe were clear and bright. For the material she saw so was not one straight length of color, but shimmered from one shade to another.

Dairine tried now to probe beyond that shift of color to the loom from which it had come. She had an impression of tall, dark shafts. Those were not of well-planed and smooth wood; no, they had the crooked surface of—trees —standing trees!

The hands—concentrate now upon the moving hands of the weaver.

But the girl had only reached that point of recognition when there was a knock to distract her concentration. Exasperated, she turned her head to the door of the cubby.

"Come!"

Again the squeak of hinge, the sound of boots, the smell of sea-wet leather and man-skin. The newcomer cleared his throat as if ill at ease.

"Lady, here is food."

She swirled the riband about her wrist, put out her hands, for suddenly she was hungry and athirst.

"By your leave, lady," he fitted the handle of a mug into her right hand, placed a bowl on the palm of the other. "There is a spoon. It is only ship's ale, lady, and stew."

"My thanks," she said in return. "And what name do you go by, ship's man?"

"Rothar, lady. I am a blank shield and no real seaman. But since I know no trade but war^ one venture is nigh as good as another."

"Yet of this venture you have some doubts." She had set the mug on the deck, kept upright between her worn sandals. Now she seized his hand, held it to read. For it

seemed to Dairine that she must not let this opportunity of learning more of Vidruth's followers go, and she sensed that this Rothar was not of the same ilk as Wak.

"Lady"—his voice was very low and swift—"they say that you have knowledge of herb craft. Why then has

Vidruth not taken you to the Captain that you may learn what strange, swift illness struck him down?"

There was youth in the hand Dairine held and not, she believed, any desire to deceive.

"Where lies the Captain?" she asked in as low a voice.

"In his cabin. He is fevered and raves. It is as if he has come under some ensorcelment and—"

"Rothar!" From the door, another voice sharp as an order. The hand she held jerked free from hers. But not before she had felt the spring of fear.

"I promised no man shall trouble you. Has this cub been at such tricks?" Vidruth demanded.

"Not so." Dairine was surprised her voice remained so steady. "He has been most kind in bringing me food and drink, both of which I needed."

"And having done so—out!" Vidruth commanded. "Now"—she heard the door close behind the other— "what have you learned, girl, from this piece of silk?"

"I have had but a little time, lord. Give me more. I must study it."

"See that you do" was his order as he also departed.

He did not come again, nor did Rothar ever once more bring her food. She thought, though, of what the young man had said concerning the Captain. Vidruth's tale made her believe that the whole ship's company had been behind the mate's scheme to take command and sail to Usturt. There were herbs which, put in a man's food or drink, could plunge him into the depths of fever. If she could only reach the Captain, she would know. But there was no faring forth from this cubby.

Now and again Vidruth would suddenly appear to demand what more she had learned from the riband. There was such an avid greediness in his questions that sometimes rising uneasiness nearly broke through her control. At last she answered with what she believed to be the truth.

"Have you never heard, Captain, that the Talent cannot be forced? I have tried to read from this all which I might. But this scrap was not fashioned by a race such as ours. An

alien nature cannot be so easily discovered. For all my attempts, I cannot build a mind picture of these people. What I see clearly is only the weaving."

When he made no answer, Dairine continued:

"This is a thing not of the body, but the mind. Along such a road one creeps as a babe, one does not race as one full grown."

"You have less than a day now. Before sundown, Usturt shall rise before us. I know only what I have heard tell of witch powers, and that may well be changed by the telling and retelling. Remember, girl, your life can well ride on your 'seeing!'"

She heard him go. The riband no longer felt so light and soft. Rather, it had taken on the heaviness of a slave chain binding her to his will. She ate ship's biscuits from the plate he had brought her. It was true time was passing, and she had done nothing of importance.

Oh, she could now firmly visualize the loom and see the silk come into being beneath the flying fingers. But the body behind those hands, that she could not see. Nor did any of the personality of the weavers who had made that which she held come clear to her, for all her striving.

Captain Ortis—he came in the reading, for he had held this. And Vidruth also. There was a third who was more distant, lying hid under a black cloud of fear. Was this day or night? She had lost track of time. That the ship still ran before the wind, she sensed.

Then—she was not alone in the cubby! Yet she had not heard the warning creak of the door. Fear kept her tense, hunched upon the stool, listening with all her might.

"Lady?"

Rothar! But how had he come?

"Why are you here?" Dairine had to wet her lips with her tongue before she could shape those words.

"They move now to put you ashore on Usturt, lady!

Captain Ortis, he came up leaning on Vidruth's arm, his body all atremble. He gives no orders, only Vidruth. Lady, there is some great wrong here—for we are at Usturt. And Vidruth commands. Such is not right."

"I knew that I must go to Usturt," she returned. "Rothar, if you have any allegiance to your captain, know he is a prisoner to Vidruth in some manner, even as I have been. And if I do not do as Vidruth says, there will be greater trouble—death—"

"You do not understand." His voice was very husky. "There are monsters on this land. To see them even, they say, makes a man go mad!"

"But I shall not see them," Dairine reminded him. "How long do I have?"

"Some moments yet."

"Where am I and how did you get here?"

"You are in the treasure hold, below the Captain's own cabin. I have used the secret opening to reach you as this is the first time Vidruth and the Captain have been out of it. Now they must watch carefully for the entrance to the inner reef."

"Can you get me into the Captain's cabin?" If, in those moments, she might discover what hold Vidruth had over Captain Ortis, she perhaps would be able to help a man she trusted.

"Give me your hands, then, lady. I fear we have very little time."

She reached out, and her wrists were instantly caught in a hold tight enough to be painful, but she made no sound of complaint. Then she found herself pulled upward with a vast heave as if Rothar must do this all in a single effort. When he set her on her feet once more, she sensed she was in a much larger space. And there was the fresh air from the sea blowing in as if through some open port.

But the air was not enough to hide from her that telltale scent—a scent of evil.

"Let me go, touch me not now," she told Rothar. "I seek that which must be found, and your slightest touch will confuse my course."

Slowly she turned away from the wind, facing to her right.

"What lies before me?"

"The Captain's bed, lady."

Step by step she approached in that direction. The sniff of evil was stronger. What it might be she had no idea, for though Ingvarna had taught her to distinguish that which was of the shadow, she knew little more. The fetid odor of some black sorcery was rank.

"The bed," she ordered now, "do you strip off its coverings. If you find aught which is strange, be sure you do not touch it with your hand. Rather, use something of iron, if you can, to pluck it forth. And then throw it quickly into the sea."

He asked no questions, but she could hear his hurried movements. And then—



"There is a—a root, most misshapen. It lies under the pillow, lady."

"Wait!" Perhaps the whole of that bed place was now impregnated by what evil had been introduced. To destroy its source might not be enough. "Bundle all—pillow, coverings—give them to the sea!" she ordered. "Let me back then into the treasure cubby, and if there be time, make the bed anew. I do not know what manner of ensorcelment has been wrought here. But it is of the Shadow, not of the Power. Take care that you keep yourself also from contact with it."

"That will I do of a certainty, lady!" His answer was fervent. "Stand well back, I will get rid of this."

She retreated, hearing the click of his sea boots on the planking as he passed her toward the source of the sea wind.

"Now"—he was back at her side—"I shall see you safe, lady. Or as safe as you can be until the Captain comes

to his mind once more and Vidruth be removed from command."

His hands closed upon her, lowered her back down into the cubby. She listened intently. But if he closed that trap door, and she was sure that he had, it had fallen into place without a sound.

## Chapter 3

She had not long to wait, for the opening on the floor level of the cubby was opened and she recognized Vidruth's step.

"Listen well, girl," he commanded. "Usturt is an island, one of a string of islands, reaching from the shore. At one time, they may all have been a part of the coast. But now some are only bare rock with such a wash of sea around them as no man can pass. So think not that you have any way of leaving save by our favor. We shall set you ashore and keep down-sea thereafter. But when you have learned what we wish, then return to the shore and there leave three stones piled one upon another. . . ."

To Dairine, his arrangements seemed to be not well thought out. But she questioned nothing. What small hopes she had she could only pin on Rothar and the Captain. Vidruth's hand tightened about her arm. He drew her to a ladder, set her hands upon its rungs.

"Climb, girl. And you had better play well your part. There are those among us who fear witchcraft and say there is only one certain way to disarm a witch. That, you have heard...."

She shivered. Yes, there was a way to destroy a witch—by enjoying the woman. All men were well versed in that outrage.

"Rothar shall set you ashore," Vidruth continued. "And we shall watch your going. Think not to talk him out of his orders, for there is no place elsewhere. . . ."

Dairine was on the deck now, heard the murmur of voices. Where stood Captain Ortis? Vidruth gave her no time to try to sort out the sounds. Under his compelling, the girl came up against the rail. Then Vidruth caught her up as if she were a small child and lowered her until other hands steadied her, easing her down upon a plank seat.

Around her was the close murmur of the sea, and she could hear the grate of oars within their locks.

"Do you believe me witch, Rothar?" she asked.

"Lady, I do not know what you are. But that you are in danger with Vidruth, that I can swear to. If the Captain comes into his own mind again—"

He broke off and then continued. "Through the war, I have come to hate any act which makes man or woman unwillingly serve another. There is no future before me, for I am wastage of war, having no trade save that of killing. Therefore, I will do what I may to help you and the Captain."

"You are young to speak so, of being without a future."

"I am old in killing," he told her bleakly. "And of such men as Vidruth leads, I have seen amany. Lady, we are near the shore. And those on the ship watch us well. When I set you on the beach, take forth carefully what you find in my belt, hide it from all. It is a knife made of the best star-steel, fashioned by the hand of Hamraker himself. Not mine in truth, but the Captain's."

Dairine did as he ordered when he carried her from the sand-smoothing waves to the drier reach beyond. Memory stirred in her. Once there had been such a knife and—firelight had glinted on it—

"No!" she cried aloud to deny memory. Yet her fingers remained curled about that hilt.

"Yes!" He might not understand her inner turmoil, but his hold on her tightened. "You must keep it."

"Walk straight ahead," he told her. "Those on the ship have the great dart caster trained on you. There are trees ahead—within those, there the spiders are said to be. But,

lady, though I dare not move openly in your aid now, for that would bring me quick death to no purpose, yet what I can do, that I shall."

Uncertainty held Dairine. She felt naked in this open which she did not know. Yet she must not appear concerned to those now watching her. She had the riband of silk looped about her wrist. And within the folds of her skirt, she held also the knife. Turning her head slightly from one side to another, she listened with full concentration, walking slowly forward against the drag of the sand.

Coolness ahead—she must be entering the shade of the trees. She put out her hand, felt rough bark, slid around it, setting the trunk as a barrier between that dart thrower of which Rothar had warned, and her back.

Then she knew, as well as if her eyes could tell her, that it was not alone the ship's company who watched. She was moving under observation of someone—or something— else. Dairine used her sense of perception, groping as she did physically with her hands, seeking what that might be.

A moment later she gasped with shock. A strong mental force burst through the mind door she had opened. She felt as if she had been caught in a giant hand, raised to the level of huge eyes which surveyed her outwardly and inwardly.

Dairine swayed, shaken by that nonphysical touch, search. It was nonhuman. Yet she realized, as she fought to recover her calm, it was not inimical—yet.

"Why come you here, female?"

In Dairine's mind, the word shaped clearly. Still, she could build up no mental picture of her questioner. She faced a little to the right, held out the hand about which she had bound the riband.

"I seek those able to weave such beauty," she replied aloud, wondering if they could hear, or understand, her words.

Again that sensation of being examined, weighed. But this time she stood quiet, unshaken under it.

"You think this thing beautiful?" Again the mind question.

"Yes."

"But you have not eyes to see it." Harshly that came, as if to deny her claim.

"I have not eyes, that is the truth. But my fingers have been taught to serve me in their place. I, too, weave, but only after the manner of my own people."

Silence, then a touch on the back of her hand, so light and fleeting Dairine was not even sure she had really felt it. The girl waited, for she understood this was a place with its own manner of barriers, and she might continue only if those here allowed it.

Again a touch on her hand, but this time it lingered. Dairine made no attempt to grasp, though she tried to read through that contact. And saw only bright whirls.

"Female, you may play with threads after the crude fashion of your kind. But call yourself not a weaver!" There was arrogance in that.

"Can one such as I learn the craft as your people know it?"

"With hands as clumsy as this?" There came a hard rap across her knuckles. "Not possible. Still, you may come, see with your fingers what you cannot hope to equal."

The touch slid across her hand, became a sinewy band about her wrist as tight as the cuff of a slave chain. Dairine knew now there was no escape. She was being drawn forward. Oddly, though she could not read the nature of the creature who guided her, there flowed from its contact a sharp mental picture of the way ahead.

This was a twisted path. Sometimes she brushed against the trunks of trees; again she sensed they crossed clear areas—until she was no longer sure in what direction the beach now lay.

At last they came into an open space where there was some protection other than branches and leaves overhead to ward off the sun. Her ears picked up small, scuttling sounds.

"Put out your hand!" commanded her guide. "Describe what you find before you."

Dairine obeyed, moving slowly and with caution. Her fingers found a solid substance, not unlike the barked tree trunk. Only, looped about it, warp lines of thread were stretched taut. She transferred her touch to those lines, tracing them to another bar. Then she knelt, fingering the length of cloth. This was smooth as the riband. A single thread led away—that must be fastened to the shuttle of the weaver.

"So beautiful!"

For the first time since Ingvarna had trained her, Dairine longed for actual sight. The need to see burned in her. Color—somehow as she touched the woven strip, the fact of color came to her. Yet all she could "read" of the weaver was a blur of narrow, nonhuman hands.

"Can you do such, you who claim to be a weaver?"

"Not this fine." Dairine answered with the truth. "This is beyond anything I have ever touched."

"Hold out your hands!" This time Dairine sensed that the order had not come from her guide, but another.

The girl spread out her fingers, palms up. There followed a feather-light tracing on her skin along each finger, gliding across her palm.

"It is true. You are a weaver—after a fashion. Why do you come to us, female?"

"Because I would learn." Dairine drew a deep breath. What did Vidruth's idea of trade matter now? This was of greater importance. "I would learn from those who can do this."

She continued to kneel, waiting. There was communication going on about her, but none she could catch and hold with either eye or mind. If these weavers would shelter her, what need had she to return to Vidruth? Rothar's plans? Those were too uncertain. If she won the good will of these, she had shelter against the evil of her own kind.

"Your hands are clumsy, you have no eyes." That was like a whiplash. "Let us see what you can do, female."

A shuttle was thrust into her hand. She examined it carefully by touch. Its shape was slightly different from those she had always known, but she could use it. Then she surveyed, the same way, the web on the loom. The threads of both warp and woof were very fine, but she concentrated until she could indeed "see" what hung there. Slowly she began to weave, but it took a long time and what she produced in her half inch of fabric was noticeably unlike that of the beginning.

Her hands shaking, the girl sat back on her heels, frustrated. All her pride in her past work was wiped out. Before these, she was a child beginning a first ragged attempt to create cloth.

Yet when she had relaxed from concentrating on her task and was aware once more of those about her, she did not meet the contempt she had expected. Rather, a sensation of surprise.

"You are one perhaps who can be taught, female," came that mind voice of authority. "If you wish."

Dairine turned her face eagerly in the direction from which she believed that message had come. "I do wish, Great One!"

"So be it. But you will begin even as our hatchlings, for you are not yet a weaver."

"That I agree." The girl ran her fingers ruefully across the fabric before her.

If Vidruth expected her return into his power now— she shrugged. And let Rothar concentrate upon the Captain and his own plight. What seemed of greatest importance to her was that she must be able to satisfy these weavers.

They seemed to have no real dwelling except this area

about their looms. Nor were there any furnishings save the looms themselves. And those stood in no regular pattern. Dairine moved cautiously about, memorizing her surroundings by touch.

Though she sensed a number of beings around her, none touched her, mind or body. And she made no advances in turn, somehow knowing such would be useless.

Food they did bring her, fresh fruit. And there were some finger-lengths of what she deemed dried meat. Perhaps it was better she did not know the origin of that.

She slept when she tired on a pile of woven stuff, not quite as silky as that on the looms, yet so tightly fashioned she thought it might pass the legendary test of carrying water within its folds. Her sleep was dreamless. And when she awoke, she found it harder to remember the men or the ship, even Rothar or the Captain. Rather, they were like some persons she had known once in distant childhood, for the place of the weavers was more and more hers. And she must learn. To do that was a fever burning in her.

There was a scuttling sound and then a single order

"Eat!"

Dairine groped before her, found more of the fruit. Even before she was quite finished, there came a twitch on her skirt.

"This ugly thing covering your body, you cannot wear it for thread gathering."

Thread gathering? She did not know the meaning of that. But it was true that her skirt, if she moved out of the open space about the looms, caught on branches. She arose and unfastened her girdle, the lacings of her bodice, allowed the dress to slip away into a puddle about her feet. Wearing only her brief chemise, Dairine felt oddly free. But she sought out her girdle again, wrapped it around her slim waist, putting there within the knife.

There came one of those light touches, and she faced about.

"Thread hangs between the trees"—her guide gave a small tug—"touch it with care. Shaken, it will become a trap. Prove that you have the lightness of fingers to be able to learn from us."

No more instructions came. Dairine realized they must be again testing her. She must prove she was able to gather this thread. Gather it how? Just as she questioned that, something was pushed into her hand. She discovered she held a smooth rod, the length of her lower arm. This must be a winder for the thread.

Now there was a grasp again on her wrist, drawing her away from the looms, on under the trees. Even as her left hand brushed a tree trunk came the order:

"Thread!"

There would be no profit in blind rushing. She must concentrate all her well-trained perceptive sense to aid her to find thread here.

Into her mind slid a very dim picture. Perhaps that came from the very far past which she never tried to remember. A green field lay open under the morning sun and on it were webs pearled with dew. Was what she sought allied to the material of such webs?

Who could possibly harvest the fine threads of such webs? A dark depression weighed upon Dairine. She wanted to hurl the collecting rod from her, to cry aloud that no one could do such a thing.

Then she had a vision of Ingvarna standing there. That lack of self-pity, that belief in herself which the Wise Woman had fostered, revived. To say that one could not do a thing before one ever tried was folly.

In the past her sense of perception had only located for her things more solid than a tree-hung thread. But now it must serve her better.

Under her bare feet, for she had left her sandals with her dress, lay a soft mass of long-fallen leaves. Around here there appeared to be no ground growth—only the trees.

Dairine paused, advancing her hand until her fingertips rested on bark. With caution, she slid that touch up

and around the trunk. A faint impression was growing in her. Here was what she sought.

Then—she found the end of a thread. The rest of it was stretched out and away from the tree. With infinite care, Dairine broke the thread, putting the freed end to the rod. To her vast relief, it adhered there as truly as it had to the tree trunk. Now. . . . She did not try to touch the thread, but she wound slowly, with great care, moving to keep the strand taut before her, evenly spread on the rod.

Round and round—then her hand scraped another tree trunk. Dairine gave a sigh of relief, hardly daring to believe she had been successful in harvesting her first thread. But one was little enough, and she must not grow overconfident. Think only of the thread! She found another end and, with the same slow care, began once more to wind.

To those without sight, day is as night, night is as day. Dairine no longer lived within the time measure of her own kind. She went forth between intervals of sleep and food to search for the tree-looped thread, wondering if she so collected something manufactured by the weavers themselves or a product of some other species.

Twice she made the error she had been warned against, had moved too hastily, with overconfidence, shaken the thread. Thus she found herself entrapped in a sticky liquid which flowed along the line, remaining fast caught until freed by a weaver.

Though she was never scolded, each time her rescuer projected an aura of such disdain for this clumsiness that Dairine cringed inwardly.

The girl had early learned that the weavers were all female. What they did with the cloth they loomed, she had not yet discovered. They certainly did not use it all, neither had she any hint that they traded it elsewhere. Perhaps the very fact of creation satisfied some need rampant in them.

Those who, like her, hunted threads were the youngest of this nonhuman community. Yet she was able to establish no closer communication with them than she did with the senior weavers.

Once or twice there was an uneasy hint of entrapment about her life in the loom place. Why did everything which had happened before she arrived now seem so distant and of such negligible account?

If the weavers did not speak to her save through mind speech—and that rarely—they were not devoid of voices, for those at the looms hummed. Though the weird melody they so evoked bore little resemblance to human song, it became a part of one. Even Dairine's hand moved to its measure and by it her thoughts were hilled. In all the world, there were only the looms, the thread to be sought for them—only this was of any importance.

There came a day when they gave her an empty loom and left her to thread it. Even in the days of her life in the village, this had been a matter which required her greatest dexterity and concentration. Now, ajs she worked with unfamiliar bars, it was even worse. She threaded until her fingertips were sore, her head aching from such single-minded using of perception, while all about her the humming of the weavers urged her on and on.

When fatigue closed in upon her, she slept. And she paused to eat only because she knew that her body must have fuel. At last she knew that she had finished, for good or ill.

Now her fingers, as she rubbed her aching head, were stiff. It was difficult to flex them. Still, the hum set her body swaying in answer to its odd rhythm.



To Dairine's surprise, no weaver came to inspect her work, to say whether it was adequately or poorly done. When she had rested so that she could once more control her fingers, she began to weave. As she did so, she discovered that she too hummed, echoing the soft sound about her.

As she worked, there was a renewal of energy within her. Maybe her hands did not move as swiftly as the blur of

elongated fingers she had seen in her mind, but they followed the rhythm of the hum and they seemed sure and knowing, not as if her own will but some other force controlled them. She was weaving—well or ill she did not know or care. It was enough that she kept to the beat of the quiet song.

Only when she reached the end of her thread supply, and sat with an empty shuttle in her hand, did Dairine rouse, as one from a dream. Her whole body ached, her hand fell limply on her knee. In her was the sharpness of hunger. There was no longer to be heard the hum of the others.

The girl arose stiffly, stumbled to her sleeping place. There was food which she mouthed before she lay down on the cloth, her face turned up to whatever roof was between her and the sky, feeling drained, exhausted—all energy gone from her body, as was logical thought from her mind.

## Chapter 4

Dairine awoke into fear, her hands were clenched, long shivers shook her body. The dream which had driven her into consciousness abruptly faded, leaving only a sense of terror behind. However, it had broken the spell of the weavers, her memory was once more sharp and clear.

How long had she been here? What had happened when she had not returned to the shore? Had the ship under Vidruth's control left, thinking her lost? And Rothar? the Captain?

Slowly she turned her head from side to side, aware of something else. Though she could not see them, she knew that the looms ringing her in were vacant, the weavers were gone!

Now Dairine believed she must have been caught in some invisible web, and had only this moment broken free.

Why had she chosen to come here? Why had she remained? The riband of stuff was gone from her wrist—had that set some ensorcelment upon her?

Fool! She could not see as the rest of the world saw. Now it appeared that even her carefully fostered sense of perception had, in some manner, deceived her. As Dairine arose, her hand brushed the loom where she had labored for so long. Curiosity made her stoop to finger the width her efforts had created. Not quite as smooth as the riband, but far, far better than her first attempt.

Only—where were the weavers? The shadow of terror lingering from her dream sent her moving purposefully about the clearing. Each loom was empty, the woven cloth gone. She kicked against something—groped to find it. A collecting rod for thread.

"Where—where are you?" she dared to call aloud. The quiet seemed so menacing she longed to set her back to some tree, to raise a defense. Against whom—or what?

Dairine did not believe that Vidruth and his men would dare to penetrate the wood. But did the weavers have other enemies, and had fled those, not taking the trouble to warn her?

Breathing faster, she set hand on the hilt of the knife at her girdle. Where were they? Her call had echoed so oddly that she dared not try again. Only her fear grew as she tried to listen.

There was the rustle of tree leaves. Nothing else. Nor could she pick up by mind touch any suggestion of another life form nearby. Should she believe that the cloth missing from each loom meant her co-workers had left for an ordered purpose, not in flight? Would she be able to track them?

Never before had she put to such a use that sense Ingvarna had trained in her. Also, that the weavers had their own guards, Dairine was well aware. She was not sure that she herself mattered enough in their eyes for them to set any defense against her seeking their company. Suppose, with a collecting rod in her hand, she was to leave the loom place as if on the regular mission of hunting thread?

First she must have food. That she located, by scent, in two bins. The fruit was too soft, overripe, and there was none of the dried sticks left. But she ate all she could.

Then, rod conspicuously in hand, the girl ventured into the woods. All the nearby threads must have been harvested, her questing fingers could find none as she played out her game for any who might watch.

And there were watchers! Not the weavers, for the impression these gave her was totally different—more feeble sparks as compared to a well-set fire. As she moved, so did they, hovering near, yet making no attempt to come in contact with her.

She discovered a thread on a tree. Skillfully, she wound it on her rod, took so a second and third. However, at the next, she flinched away. Any thread anchored here must have been disturbed, for she smelled the acrid odor of the sticky coating.

The next two trees supported similarly gummed threads. Did that mean these had been prepared to keep her prisoner? Dairine turned a little. Already, she was out of familiar territory. Thus she expected to meet at any moment opposition, either from the threads or those watchers.

Next was a tree free of thread. Trusting to her sense of smell, she sought another opening, hoping that the unthreaded trees would mark a trail. Though she moved a little faster, she kept to her pretense of seeking threads from each tree she encountered. The watchers had not left her, though she picked up no betraying sound, only knew they were there.

Another free tree—this path was a zigzag puzzle. And she had to go so slowly. One more free tree, and then, from her left, a sound at last—a faint moaning.

It was human, that sound, enough to feed her fear. This—somehow this all seemed a shadow out of her now-forgotten dream. In her dream she had known the sufferer—

Dairine halted. The watchers were drawing in. She could tell they had amassed between her and the direction from which the moan came. Thus she had a choice—to ignore the sound or to try to circle around.

No sign, make no sign that she heard. Keep on hunting for threads—strive to deceive the watchers. All her nature rebelled against abandoning one who might be in trouble, even if he were one of Vidruth's men.

She put out her hand as if searching for thread, more than half expecting to touch a sticky web. From those watchers she believed she picked up an answering sensation of uncertainty. This might be her only chance.

Her fingers closed about a thick band of woven stuff. That led in turn downward to a bag, the flap of the top turned over and stuck to the fabric so tightly she could not open it. The bag was very large, pulling down the branch from which it was suspended. And within it—something had been imprisoned!

Dairine jerked back. She did not know if she had cried out. What was sealed within that bag, her perception told her, had been alive, was now only newly dead. She forced herself to run fingers once more along the surface of the dangling thing. Too small—surely too small to be a man!

Now that the girl knew no human was so encased, she wanted no greater knowledge of the contents. As she stepped away, her shoulder grazed a second bag. She realized that she moved among a collection of them, and all they held was death.

Only, she could still hear that moaning. And it was human. Also, at last the watchers had dropped behind. As if this place were one they dared not enter.

Those bags—Dairine hated to brush against them. Some seemed far lighter than others and twirled about dizzily as she inadvertently touched them. Others dipped heavily with their burdens.

The moans—

The girl made herself seek what hung before her now. Her collecting rod was in her girdle. In its place, she held the knife. When she touched this last bag, feeble movement answered. There was a muffled cry which Dairine was sure was one for help.

She ripped at the silk with knife point. The tightly woven fabric gave reluctantly, this was no easily torn material. She hacked and pulled until she heard a half-stifled cry!

"For Sul's sake—"

Dairine dragged away the slashed silk. There was indeed a man ensnared. However, about him now was sticky web, for its acrid scent was heavy on the air. Against that, her knife was of no avail. To touch such would only make her prisoner, too.

She gathered up the folds of the torn bag and, using pieces to shield her fingers, tore and worried at the web. To her relief, she was succeeding. She could feel that his own struggles to throw off his bonds were more successful.

Also, she knew whom she fought to free—Rothar! It was as if he had been a part of that dream she could not remember.

Dairine spoke his name, asking him if he were near free.

"Yes, Though I still hang. But that now is a small matter—"

Dairine heard a threshing movement, then the sound of his weight touching the ground. His breath hissed heavily in and out.

"Lady, in nowise could you have come at a better time." His hand closed about her arm. She felt him sway and then recover balance.

"You are hurt?"

"Not so. Hungry and needful of a drink. I do not know how long I have hung in that larder. The Captain—he will think us both dead."

"Larder!" That one grim word struck her like a blow.

"Did you not know? Yes, this is the spider females' larder, where they preserve their males—"

Dairine fought rising nausea. Those bags of silk, the beautifully woven silk! And to be used so.

"There is someone—something—out there," he said.

The watchers, her protective sense, alerted her. They were now moving in again.

"Can you see them?" Dairine asked.

"Not clearly." Then he changed that to "Yes!"

"They have throwing cords of web, such as they used on me before. No blade can cut those—"

"The bag!"

"What do you mean?"

Covered with the bag's rent material, she had been able to pull loose his bindings. Those sticky cords could not find purchase against the woven silk. As she explained that, her knife was wrenched from her hold and she heard sounds of ripping.

The watchers—as Rothar worked to empty other bags, Dairine strove to perceive them by mind. They had neared, but once more had halted, as if this were a place which they feared to enter even if ordered to do so to hold the humans captive.

"They spin their lines now," Rothar told her. "They plan to wall us in."

"Let them believe us helpless," she commanded.

"But you think we are not?"

"With the bags, perhaps not."

If she could only see! Dairine could have cried aloud in her frustration. Who were the watchers? She was sure they were not the weavers themselves. Perhaps these were the ones who supplied the thread she had harvested so carefully in the past.

Rothar once more was back at her side, a bundle of silk from plundered bags. The girl dared not let herself remember what had been in those bags.

"Tell me," she said, "what is the nature of those spinning out there?"

She could sense his deep aversion, revulsion. "Spiders. Giant spiders. They are furred and the size of hounds."

"What are they doing?"

"They are enwebbing an opening. Beyond that on either side are already nets. Now they are disappearing. Only one is left, hanging in the center of the fresh web."

Through her grasp on his wrist, Dairine could read his thoughts, his mind picture, even more clearly, to add to the scene his words had built for her.

"Those others may have gone to summon the weavers"—she made an alarming guess. "So for the present, we have only that one guard to deal with."

"And the web—"

She loosed her hold upon him, clutched a length of the raggedly cut silk. "This we must bind about our bodies. Do not touch the web save with this between your flesh and it."

"I understand."

Dairine moved forward. "I must loose the web," she told him. "The guard will be your matter. Lead me to a tree where the web is anchored."

His hand was on her shoulders. Under his gentle urging, she was guided to the left, was moved forward step by cautious step.

"The tree is directly before you now, lady. Have no fear of the guard." His promise was grim.

"Remember, let nothing of the web touch your flesh."

"Be sure I am well shielded," he assured her.

She fingered rough bark, around her hand and arm the silk was well and tightly anchored. There—she had discovered the end of an anchoring thread. But this was far stronger and thicker than any she had harvested before.

"Ha!" Rothar gave a cry—was no longer beside her.

Dairine found a second thread, felt vibrations along it. The guard must be making ready to defend its web. However, she must concentrate on the finding of each thread, of breaking such loose from the tree.

There was no way for her to know how many threads she must snap so. From her right came the sound of scuffling, heavy breathing.

"Ah!" Rothar's voice fiercely triumphant. "The thing is safely dead, lady. You are right, the cords it threw at me were well warded by the cloth."

"Keep watch. Those which were with it may still return," she warned.

"That I know!" he agreed.

The girl moved as swiftly as she could, discovering thread ends, snapping them. Not only might the spiders return, but the weavers. And them she feared even more.

"The web is down," he told her.

However, she felt little relief at what might be a small victory.

"Lady, now it would be well to wrap our feet and legs with this silk, they could well lay ground webs for our undoing."

"Yes!" She had not thought of that, only of the threading cords from tree to tree.

"Let me get more silk."

Dairine stood waiting, her whole body tense as she strained to use ears and inner senses to assess what might lie in wait beyond. Then he was back and, with no by-your-leave, busied himself wrapping her feet and legs with lengths of silk, tying the strips tightly in places.

While she, who had once so loved the riband Captain Ortis had shown her, wanted to shrink from any touch of that stuff. Save now it might be their salvation.

"That is the best I can do." He released her foot after tying a last knot about her ankle. "Do you hear aught, lady?"

"Not yet. But they will come."

"Who—what are the weavers?" he asked.

"I know not. But they do not hold our kind high in esteem."

He laughed shortly. "How well do I know that! Yet they did you no harm."

"Because, I think, I am without sight, and also a female who knows a little of their own trade. They are proud of their skill and wished to impress me."

"Shall we go then?"

"We must watch for trees bare of threads."

"Those I can see, lady. Perhaps trusting in my kind of sight, we can go the quicker. There has been much happened. The Captain, though he is still weak, again commands his ship. Vidruth is—dead. But the Captain could not get that scum which his mate has signed to come ashore. And only he can hold them in control."

"Thus you alone are here?"

He did not answer her directly. "Set your hand to my belt. And I shall take heed in my going, I promise," was all he said.

Such a journey was humiliating for Dairine. So long had it been since she must turn to one of her kind as a guide. But she knew that he was right.

So Captain Ortis, released from the evil spell, had taken command. She wondered briefly how Vidruth had died, there had been a queer little hesitancy in Rothar's telling of that. For now she must put her mind on what lay immediately before them. That the weavers would allow them to escape easily she did not believe.

A moment later she knew she was right. They were once more under observation, she sensed. This new, stronger contact was not that of the watchers.

"They come!" she warned.

"We must reach the shore! It is among the trees that they set their traps. And I have a signal fire built there, ready to be lighted, which will bring in the Sea Raven."

"Can you see any such traps?"

She could feel his impatience and doubt in the slight contact of her fingers against his body where they were hooked about his belt.

"No. But there are no straight trails among the trees. Webs hang here and there; one can only dodge back and forth between those."

Dairine was given no warning, had no time to loose her hold. Rothar suddenly fell forward and down, bearing her with him. Her side scraped painfully against a broken end of branch. It was as if the very earth under them had opened.

## Chapter 5

The smell of freshly turned soil was thick in her nostrils. She lay against Rothar and he was moving. In spite of her bruises, the jarring shock of that fall, Dairine sat up. Where they had landed she did not know, but she guessed they were now under the surface of the ground.



"Are you hurt?" asked her companion.

"No. And you?"

"My arm caught under me when I landed. I hope it is only a bad bruising and no break. We are in one of their traps. They had it coated over." There was a note of self-disgust bleak in his voice.

Dairine was glad he had told her the bald truth. Rising to her feet, the girl put out her hands to explore the pit. Freshly dug, the earth of its sides was moist and sticky. Here and there a bit of root projected. Could they use such to pull themselves out? Before she could ask that of Rothar, words shot harshly into her mind.

"Female, why have you stolen this meat from us?"

Dairine turned her head toward the opening which must be above. So close that voice, she could believe that a head bobbed there, eyes watched them gloatingly.

"I know not your meaning," she returned with all the spirit she could summon. "This is a man of my people, one who came seeking me because he felt concern."

"That with you is our meat!"

Cold menace in that message brought not fear, but a growing anger to Dairine. She would not accept that any man was—meat. These weavers—she had considered them creatures greater than herself because of the beauty they created, because of their skill. She had accepted their arrogance because she also accepted that she was inferior in that skill.

Yet to what purpose did they put their fine creations? Degrading and loathsome usage by her own belief. With a flash of true understanding, she was now certain that she had not been free here, never so until she had awakened in the deserted loom place. They had woven about her thoughts a web of ensorcelment which had bound her to them and their ways, just as at this moment they had entrapped her body.

"No man is your meat," she returned.

What answered her then was no mind words, rather a blast of uncontrolled fury. She swayed under that mental blow, but she did not fall. Rothar called out her name, his arm was about her, holding her steady.

"Do not fear for me," she said and tried to loosen his grip. This was her battle. Her foot slipped in the soft earth of the pit and she stumbled. She flung out her arms to keep herself off the wall. There was a sharp pain just above her eyes, and then only blackness in which she was totally lost.

Heat—heat of blazing fire. And through it screaming —terrible screaming—which tortured her ears. There was no safety left in the world. She had curled herself into a small space of blessed dark, hiding. But she could still see—see with her eyesfNo, she would not look, she dared not look—at the swords in the firelight—at the thing streaming with blood which hung whimpering from two knives driven like hooks into the wall to hold it upright. She willed herself fiercely not to see.

"Dairine! Lady!"

"No—" She screamed her denial. "I will not look!"

"Lady!"

"I will not—"

There were flashes of color about her. No mind pictures these—the fire, the blood, the swords—

"Dairine!"

A face, wavery, as if she saw it mirrored in troubled water, a man's face. His sword—he would lift the sword and then—

"No!" she screamed again.

A sharp blow rocked her head from side to side. Oddly enough, that steadied her sight. A man's face near hers, yes, but no fire, no sword dripping blood, no wall against which a thing hung whimpering.

He held her gently, his eyes searching hers.

They—they were not—not in the Keep of Trin. Dairine shuddered; memory clung about her as a foul cloak. Trin was long, long ago. There had been the sea, and then Ingvarna and Rannock. And now—now they were on Usturt. She was not sure what had happened.

But she saw.

Had Ingvarna believed that some day this sight would return to her? Not sight totally destroyed, but sight denied by a child who had been forced to look upon such horrors that she would not let herself face the true world openly again.

Her sight had returned. But that was not what the weavers had intended. No, their burst of mind fury had been sent to cut her down. Not death had they given her, but new life.

Then she, who had sent that thrust of mind power, looked over and down upon the prey.

Dairine battled her fear. No retreat this time. She must make herself face this new horror. Ingvarna's teach-

ings went deep, had strengthened her for this very moment of her life, as if the Wise Woman had been enabled to trace the years ahead and know what would aid her fosterling.

The girl did not raise her hand but she struck back, her new-found sight centering upon that horror of a countenance. Human it was in dreadful part, arachnoid in another, such as to send one witless with terror. And the thought strength of the weaver was gathering to blast Dairine.

Those large, many-faceted eyes blinked. Dairine's did not.

"Be ready," the girl said to Rothar, "they are preparing to take us."

Down into the pit whirled sticky web lines hurled by the weaver's spider servants. Those caught and clung to root ends and then fell upon the two.

"Let them think for this moment," Dairine said, "that we are helpless."

He did not question her as more and more of the lines dropped upon them, lying over their arms, legs. Dull gray was the cloth which they had wound about them. That had none of the shimmering quality her mind had given to it. Perhaps the evil use to which this had been put had killed that opalescence.

While the cords fell, the girl did not shift her gaze, but met straightly the huge, alien eyes, those cold and deadly eyes, of the weaver. In and in, Dairine aimed her power, that power Ingvarna had fostered in her, boring deep to reach the brain behind the eyes. Untrained in most of the Wise Woman's skills, she intuitively knew that this was her only form of attack, an attack which must also serve as defense.

Were those giant eyes dulling a little? The girl could not be sure, she could not depend upon her newly restored sight.

About them, the web lengths had ceased to fall. But there was new movement around the lip of the pit above.

Now! Gathering all her strength, pulling on every reserve she believed she might have, Dairine launched a direct thought blow at the weaver. That weird figure writhed, uttered a cry which held no note of human in it. For a moment, it hunched so. Then that misshapen, nightmare body fell back, out of Dairine's range of sight. She was aware of no more mental pressure. No, instead came a weak panic, a fear which wiped away all the weaver's strength.

"They—they are going!" Rothar cried out.

"For a while perhaps." Dairine still held the creatures of the loom in wary respect. They had not thought her a worthy foe, so perhaps they had not unleashed against her all that they might. But while the weavers were still bewildered, shaken, at least she and Rothar had gained time.

The young man beside her was already shaking off the cords. Those curled limply away from his fabric-covered body, just as they fell from hers as he jerked at them. She blinked. Now that the necessity for focusing her eyes on the weaver was past, Dairine found it hard to see. It was a distinct effort for her to fasten on any one object, bring that into clear shape. This was something she must learn, even as she had learned to make her fingers see for her.

Though he winced as he tried to use his left arm, Rothar won out of the pit by drawing on the root ends embedded in the soil. Then he unbuckled his belt and lowered it for her aid.

Out of the earth prison, Dairine stood still for a long moment, turning her head right and left. She could not see them in the dusky shadows among the trees, yet they were there, weavers, spinners, both. But she sensed also that they were still shaken, as if all their strength of purpose had lain only in the will of the one she had temporarily bested.

All were that weaver's own brood—the arachnoid-human, the arachnoid complete. They were subject to the Great One's will, her thoughts controlled them, and they were her tools, the projections of herself. Until the Great Weaver regained her own balance, these would be no menace. But how long could such a respite last for those she would make her prey?

Dairine saw mistily a brighter patch ahead, sunlight fighting the dusk of this now-sinister wood.

"Come!" Rothar reached for her hand, clasped it tight. "The shore must lie there!"

The girl allowed him to draw her forward, away from the leaderless ones.

"The signal fire," he was saying. "But let me give light to that and the Captain will bring in the ship."

"Why did you come—alone from that ship?" Dairine asked suddenly, as they broke out of the shade of the forest into a hard brilliance of the sun upon the sand. So hurting was that light that she needs must shelter her eyes with her hand.

Peering between her fingers, Dairine saw him shrug. "What does it matter how a man who is already dead dies? There was a chance to reach you. The Captain could not

take it, for that rogue's spell left him too weak, though he raged against it. None other could he trust—"

"Except you. You speak of yourself as a man already dead, yet you are not. I was blind—now I see. I think Usturt has given us both that which we dare not throw lightly away."

His somber face, in which his eyes were far too old and shadowed, became a little lighter as he smiled.

"Lady, well do they speak of your powers. You are of the breed who may make a man believe in anything, even perhaps himself. And there lies our signal waiting."

He gestured to a tall heap of driftwood. In spite of the slippage of the sand under his enwrapped feet, he left her side and ran toward it.

Dairine followed at a slower pace. There was the Captain and there was this Rothar who risked his life, even though he professed to find that of little matter. Perhaps now there would be others to touch upon her life, mayhap even her heart in years to come. She had these years to weave, and she must do so with care, matching each strand to another in brightness, as all had heretofore been wrought in darkness. The past was behind her. There was no need to glance back over her shoulder unto the dusk of the woods. Rather must she search out seaward whence would come the next strand to add to her pattern of weaving.