

Chapter One

The wolves came down to the farm last night. They spoke to me of freedom.

I lay by the last of the fire with my four feet turned towards the embers and the last of the heat warming my belly. I did not listen to the wolf talk. This is no time to think of freedom.

Tomorrow, in the morning, I will choose the place. Out in the byre, where the bedding is deep and the children cannot find me.

My back aches from the pull of my belly. However long I lap from the cold cattle trough I am still thirsty. I think tomorrow is the day.

I rest. The fire ticks. Grindecobbe grunts in her stall. Humble creeps in through the window and curls beside me, soft as smoke.

I can smell mouse on her. She has eaten, and come in to the fire for the warmth.

Rufus snores on his pallet of straw. Comfort, his wife, lies curled around him, dreaming. Down by their feet the children cough and fidget in their sleep, as children do. Only Alice, the baby, is awake. Only she hears, with me and Humble, the wild song of the wolves.

I heave my belly up and hobble on splayed feet to stand beside the cradle. Alice reaches her small, red fist towards my ear and smiles. She does not fear the wolves. Their voices come to her from far outside the house, which is the only world she knows.

Thin, frail, far off and going further, their call wavers back from where the snow lies deep under the pine trees. They grey rock pushes like bone through the cold hide of the earth and moon hangs over all.

I know the world beyond the house. I know Rufus's byre. I know Joan's house, which stands beside the village field. I know all the village. I know the Great House barn and sheep pens; I know the Great House fields. I know every small place where oats and beans and barley grow.

I know where the rabbits creep out from their burrows. I know where the wicked wildcat leaves her stink on the grass as she passes. I know where foxes hunt, where deer step out on fragile legs to graze. I know where the wild boar roots and where the great bear nurses. I know where the little grey bear with the striped face digs for bluebell bulbs in springtime, when the woods are full of hatch-lings that fall into your mouth, dusted with down, and the rabbits on the bank are slow and sleek and foolish.

I am a creature of several worlds. I know the house and the village and have my place in both. I know the pasture land beyond the great field. I know the wildwood. I know the wetlands all along the river, where every green leaf that you step on has a different smell. I know the high, dry heath.

Soon now I shall climb into the bracken stack next to the medlars that sit in rows, skins wrinkling while they ripen and decay. I'll make a bed there, like the soft bed Rufus made for Comfort at the time of Alice's birth.

I shall not groan, as Comfort did, nor beg Rufus to rub my back. I shall push and wait and push again, three, four, maybe five times.

Move over, Humble, let me uncoil my aching back.