

GUNNORA'S GIFT

by

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I'm going to Gunnora's shrine because I haven't borne a child in eight years of marriage, but I'm certainly not going to tell you that, Kyria thought, smiling politely at the innkeeper. She returned a noncommittal reply to what he had no doubt intended as a civil question, then set about the business of arranging for food and a night's lodging for herself, her pony, her dog, and her hawk. The innkeeper insisted, however, that all the animals sleep in the stables, pointing out that the dog was almost as big as the pony anyhow.

Kyria acquiesced with a sigh. She would have been glad of the dog's company—she slept with her at home when her husband was gone; that way she didn't wake up freezing in the middle of the night. Still, this was the last inn before she reached the shrine; for the next few days they would all be camping out together and could make what sleeping arrangements they pleased.

The inn was not crowded, so she had a room to herself. But, as she had feared, she woke up in the dark time before dawn, shivering violently. She doubled the blankets up at the foot of the bed and scrunched down under them, pulling the pillow

with her to stop the drafts around her neck. She wouldn't be able to sleep much in this position, but at least it was a bit warmer. She would really have preferred to be asleep; for now there was nothing for her to do but think, and her thoughts these days were not pleasant.

Harne would not send her away for her failure to bear him a child; she knew that. Even if he didn't care for her, and she had reason to think he did—he had always been kind to her, ever since she was turned over to him as a nervous fifteen-year-old-*bride*—she was the key to his possession of her father's hold. But her father had certainly not been happy that her mother bore him no child save this one daughter, and she certainly didn't think that Harne would be content forever with no child of his body to be his heir.

And now she knew that it was her fault. Last week, while riding out past one of the tenant cottages, she had felt someone watching her and turned to see a boy, about nine years old, staring at her with Harne's peculiar gray-green eyes. While she stared back in astonishment a woman had come out of the cottage, looked from her to the boy, and hastily dragged him inside. For a moment Kyria had considered following, to ask what this meant, but the woman had looked terrified, and Kyria had always been reluctant to make anyone unhappy. At the time she had been a bit in shock, and she had always hated awkward scenes. This one promised to be very awkward indeed.

The boy was Harne's son; this much was sure. If it were merely a chance resemblance, the woman, presumably his mother, would have had no reason to be afraid of Kyria's seeing him. After all, he had clearly been born before Harne married Kyria. Past was past; Kyria had no right to complain about anything Harne had done before he married her. But why had the woman looked so frightened? Was Harne still seeing her? Were there other, younger children?

Stop it! Kyria told herself firmly. *You're being morbid; these are simply the kind of horrible ideas you get when you wake up in the dark. You know Harne wouldn't do that—he's an honorable man!*

But the sight of that boy had been enough to make Kyria

take the journey she had been considering for the past year—a pilgrimage to Gunnora's shrine. Kyria had always wanted a large family; she had been very lonely as an only child. And all the time she was growing up, as she carefully learned everything her mother had to teach her, she had thought, *Someday I'll be teaching all of this to my daughters*. Why couldn't she have a child—even one? After all, her maidservants had babies every year, and they didn't need them as much as she did; they didn't have two holdings waiting for a child to inherit them. So now Kyria journeyed to Gunnora's shrine, to ask the Goddess to grant her a child.

As soon as the first glimmering of light showed in the sky Kyria got up. It was still very cold, but anything was better than huddling in bed with her thoughts running about her head like small animals in a trap. She went to the stable, where Lara, her dog, bounced excitedly about her for several minutes, as though they had been parted for years, rather than hours. Once Lara had calmed down and was willing to keep all four feet on the ground again, Kyria went to saddle her pony and transfer the hawk to the block on the front of the saddle. By this time the light was stronger and the innkeeper was up and about, enabling Kyria to get breakfast and make an early start.

Her day's journey was uneventful, but very tiring, being largely uphill. She walked a good deal of it, leading the pony, who was burdened with supplies—after all, he had to carry himself and the food and bedding, it would be unkind to force him to carry her on top of it all. In many places it would also have been impossible; her legs would not have fit between his sides and the rock walls of the trail they followed. Kyria was quite thankful that it was late enough in the spring that there was no snow, especially when it came time to camp for the night. True, it was cold, but at least she didn't have to wade through snow or sweep it away from her sleeping area. She found a small indentation in the cliff wall, which might, if one was very imaginative, be called a cave, and curled up there between the pony and Lara, while the hawk roosted on the saddle block that was piled up with the rest of the gear. She slept the night through, without dreams, and when she woke, the sun was already high.

She ate quickly and got back on the trail, loosing the hawk to fly free and get some exercise. The hawk flew high above them as they continued up the trail, but Kyria was surprised when it dove suddenly downward—she hadn't thought there would be any game to interest a hawk this high up in the hills. Lara also took off in the direction where the hawk had dropped from sight, so Kyria went to see what they found so interesting.

It was a baby. Someone had apparently left it here, for it was placed in a sort of bowl-like shelf in the cliff, high enough so that Lara had to put her front paws up on the rock to reach it and lick its face. It was wrapped in a black cloth and appeared to be about four months old. Kyria reached out and picked it up. As she did so, she heard a cawing noise overhead and looked up to see four crows flying away as if she had disturbed them. *Well, if they were planning on this baby for dinner, Kyria thought indignantly, they can't have it!*

The bundle in her arms felt decidedly damp, so Kyria shifted it to one arm and rooted around in her pack for something dry to put on it and something warm to wrap it in. While she changed the baby girl, she wondered who had left her there, and why. The black cloth around her wasn't warm enough to have kept her alive through the night, so she must have been put there that morning. But why would anyone do that? The Dales were not so thickly populated that anyone would want to throw a baby away—and surely here in the high hills a child would be even more valuable—wouldn't it?

Kyria wrapped the baby up snugly, improvised a sort of cradle by making a sling on the side of the saddle, and continued on her way. The baby quickly fell asleep, lulled by the rocking of the saddle, leaving Kyria free for other concerns, such as food. What was she going to feed her? Maybe she could find a house somewhere about and get some goat's milk. Maybe if she could find a house, they would know who the baby was and how she had gotten to where Kyria found her.

The sun was dropping noticeably when Kyria found a cottage. There were two goats wandering about it, so she stopped to ask if she could buy some milk. The woman who came in answer to her call looked old and worn, but two toddlers clung

to her skirts. She looked at Kyria with resentful suspicion, even after Kyria politely explained what she wanted.

"And what would you be wanting milk for then?" The woman's tone was positively hostile, and the baby, which had been sleeping peacefully, chose this moment to wake up and start screaming.

"I found a baby on the trail this morning," Kyria said simply. "Do you know whose she is?"

The woman's glare became even more pronounced as she frowned at the baby. "She's Raidhan's! Best you put her back where you found her!"

Kyria stared in frank astonishment. "But how can the crone have a baby?"

"Young fool!" the woman spat at her. "You know nothing! Go on to Gunnora's shrine and pray—but be careful what you pray for, for you will certainly get it!"

Kyria's lips tightened. She didn't need to be mocked for her childlessness; it might be her fault but it certainly wasn't her doing! "About the milk," she began, but the woman interrupted her.

"You'll get nothing from me," she snarled. "Go your way, and never return here!" Voices floated down from the hills behind the cottage, a man's voice, mixed with those of several children. "Go on!" the woman snapped. "Go *now*, and never come this way again!"

Kyria went. There was something going on here that she didn't understand, but she was not at all sure that she wished to understand. She went a good deal farther on the trail before stopping for the night, this time in a small cave lit by the small sliver of a new moon. She broke bread into small pieces and soaked them in water, and the baby ate them hungrily. Tomorrow she would reach the shrine, and in less than a week she should be back among civilized people. The baby wouldn't die of starvation in only a few days.

She settled down to sleep with the baby cradled securely in her arms, tucked between her and Lara. But that night she dreamed.

Raidhan stood in the mouth of the cave. The hood of her dark, ragged cloak was thrown back, and her eyes were greedy

as she stretched out her skeletal arms toward the baby. The long clawlike nails on her fingers seemed ready to rend the child to bits. Kyria clutched the baby more tightly. Even her hawk had not sought to lay claws to the child—was the crone less than a hawk? Lara was crouched on her haunches, growling softly at the crone.

"Give her to me," Raidhan demanded. "She's mine."

Kyria sat up, still clutching the baby protectively, and faced the crone. "How can she be yours? You don't bear children."

"Neither do you, my girl," Raidhan snarled back.

"I didn't say she was mine," Kyria said steadily. "I said that she was not yours. I say that she *is* not yours."

"And I agree." From the light shed by the thin sliver of crescent moon low in the sky, a figure appeared around the voice that spoke. Kyria recognized her at once, thought it had been many years since she had seen her. Dians, the Maiden Goddess, stood there, thin and silver as her moonlight. She wore a short tunic and was crowned with the crescent moon. "If this child belongs to the goddess, Raidhan, then surely she is mine. Even you cannot claim that a child this young is not a maid—or that she has chosen to serve you."

"Her mother chose, and her mother gave her to me!" Raidhan's voice was fierce. "Can you say that the woman is not capable of free choice—or do you hold that many years of Gunnora's 'blessings'—she made the word a sneered curse—'have unsettled her wits so as to make her incapable of rational thought?'"

"Any woman is free to choose for herself whom she will serve," Dians said calmly, "but she is not free to choose for another, whether her child or no. You know that, Raidhan. And if you claim this child to be one of Gunnora's 'blessings,' why then, let Gunnora decide whose she is." She turned to Kyria. "You served me once, Kyria, serve me now in this. Take the child to Gunnora's shrine. Tomorrow night we shall meet there and decide her fate."

Kyria bowed her head in assent, and when she looked up again, they were both gone and the moon had set.

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She woke as the sun rose, and shuddered slightly as she remembered the dream. How could any mother give her child to Raidhan? How could any woman even think of such a thing?

It was only a dream, she reminded herself. No doubt it was inspired by the odd behavior of that woman yesterday.

And if it was a true calling?

What matter? You're going to the shrine in any case.

Kyria got up, changed the baby, fed her some more moistened bread, and continued her journey.

It was evening when she arrived at the shrine. She fed the animals and the baby, but did not eat herself, knowing that it was easier to see the Goddess without food in one's stomach. Food tied one too much to the material world.

Like the Moon Shrine where she had worshipped Dians when she was a girl, this one had four pillars. But instead of being carved with crescents, these had the circles of the full moon. There was a pool beside it, where she bathed both herself and the baby before entering between the pillars of the shrine and kneeling before the plain stone table that was the altar. Although the sun was still up, the new moon was faintly visible high above it in the western sky. Kyria knew that it would set about two hours after full dark.

Kyria knelt there with the baby in her lap and thought about Gunnora as the sun set. As it disappeared the Goddess appeared, golden with the color the sun had left behind. The amber pendants in the shape of sheaves of grain hung on her breast and forehead and seemed to glow with their own light, shedding it upon her dark hair and the deep yellow of her robe. She stood across the altar from Kyria and smiled down at her.

"Be welcome, my daughters," The Lady said. "Why have you come here?"

The question had the feel of a ritual challenge, and Kyria, forgetting all the careful prayers she had formulated during the past months, answered with the first words that came into her head. "I have come to ask you for a child."

Gunnora laughed. "You have a child," she said.

"What do you mean?" Kyria stared at her in bewilderment.

"What is that you are holding?"

Kyria looked down at the baby in her lap. "But she's not mine."

"Really?" Gunnora still sounded amused. "Whose is she then? What makes a child 'yours'?"

Kyria sat in silence. That was a question she had never considered, beyond the obvious "a child of your body is your child."

The last traces of daylight were gone, and the moonlight made a pale pool to the left of the altar. Now Dians appeared in the moonlight and took form, as Raidhan moved from the darkness outside the shrine to stand to the right of the stone table.

Raidhan spoke first. "I have come to claim that which is mine," she said firmly.

"Which is?" Gunnora's voice was cold and even.

Raidhan's clawlike left hand, drooping from her bony arm, indicated the baby. "That child."

"No." Dians's voice was firm and sure. "That girl is a maiden, hence she is mine. For all maidens are mine unless they choose otherwise."

"Her mother gave her to me!" Raidhan shouted furiously. "She has had more than enough of Gunnora's 'blessings'—the annual baby that breaks the body and wears out the spirit—and she has prayed to me for release from these 'gifts.'"

"And offered her last-born child as payment for this great boon?" Dians asked sarcastically.

"Yes!" Raidhan snarled. "I wouldn't expect *you* to understand. What does a maiden know of the suffering children cause—of having your body torn apart by their births and your heart torn ever after? Of never having any place or time to call your own? Of being ever pulled by the demands of others, until such time as they abandon you altogether? What do you know of this, Dians?"

"Nothing," Dians said quietly. "As you say, Raidhan, this is not my path. But many do choose it, and seem not to regret their choosing."

"And it is my path," Gunnora said gently. "It is true that there are pains upon it, but there are many joys as well. With the demands come love, if you can only see and accept it. Can

you never understand this, Raidhan, my sister? Will you always be blind to love?"

Raidhan drew her hood over her face and did not answer.

"The child." Dians spoke in the dispassionate tone of one long accustomed to reminding others what they had been discussing before their emotions had dragged the conversation elsewhere.

Gunnora smiled. "Yes, the child. Kyria, you have said nothing through all this; answer us now. Whose is the child?"

Kyria grasped the baby tightly as she looked at them; at Dians, standing calmly and watching her; at Gunnora, looking at her with the look of a mother willing her child to answer a question correctly; at Raidhan, a dark shadow with an unseen face.

"The child is mine," she said steadily. "I found her on the trail where her natural mother had left her, giving up all claim to her. But she had no right to give her to Raidhan; a child is not a piece of property to be disposed of as her parents wish. It is her choice as to whether she shall serve Dians, Gunnora, or Raidhan, and when she is old enough to understand the choice, she can choose. Until then, she is mine, to care for as I have done since the moment I found her."

"Well said," Gunnora spoke approvingly. "Take her as my gift, to teach and to care for."

"Agreed," Dians said shortly.

"Very well," Raidhan snarled from beneath her hood. "Take her for now, but remember, she'll come to me in the end."

"Perhaps," Kyria acknowledged. "I know not what lies ahead. But if she does come, it will be by her choice, not another's." She looked down tenderly at the baby and stroked her hair.

When she looked up again, she and the child were alone in the shrine, the moon had almost set, and it was cold. She hastily left the shrine and went to her baggage to bundle up the baby, dress herself, and start a fire. As she worked, the words of the woman at the cottage came back to her: "Be careful what you pray for, for you will certainly get it." *And so I did, she thought in amusement, but not at all the way I expected.*