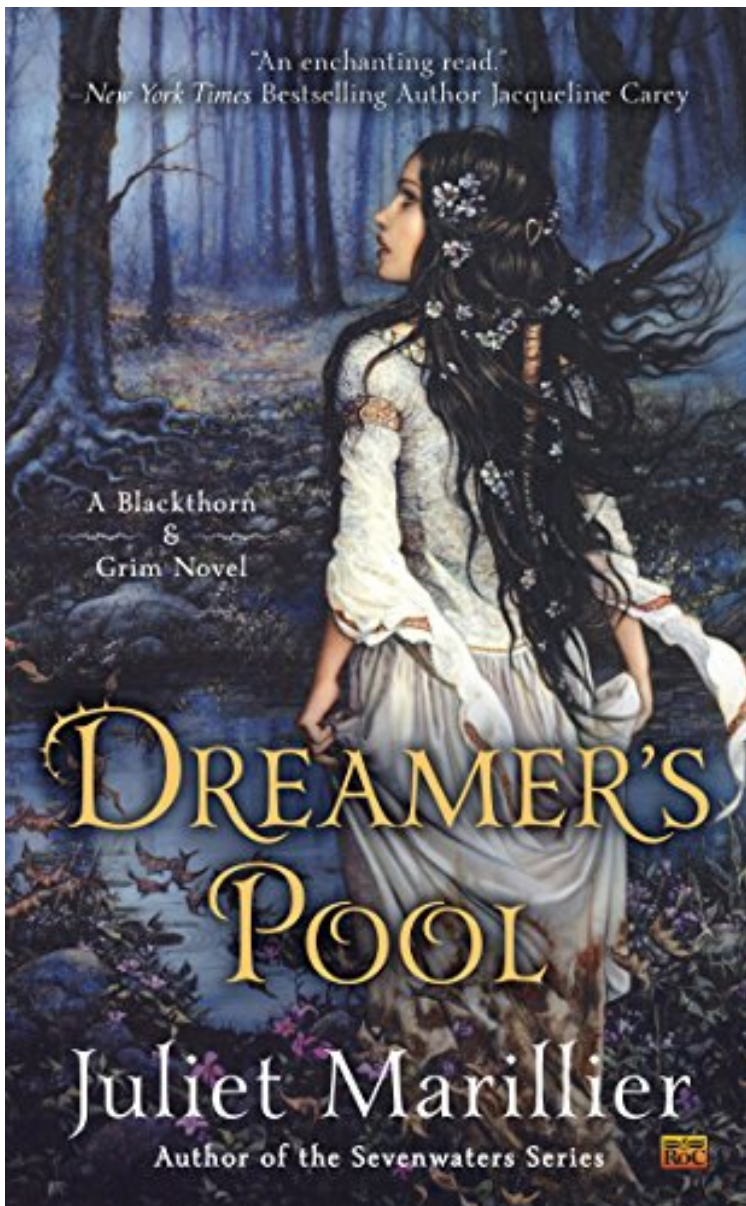


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Dreamer's Pool: A Blackthorn Grim Novel



Par Juliet Marillier

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAward-winning author Juliet Marillier weaves magic, mythology, and folklore into every sentence on the page (The Book Smugglers). Now she begins an all-new and enchanting series that will transport readers to a magical vision of ancient Ireland....In exchange for help escaping her long and wrongful imprisonment, embittered magical healer Blackthorn has vowed to set aside her bid for vengeance against the man who destroyed all that she once held dear. Followed by a former prison mate, a silent hulk of a man named Grim, she travels north to Dalriada. There shell live on the fringe of a mysterious forest, duty bound for seven years to assist anyone who asks for her help.Oran, crown prince of Dalriada, has waited

anxiously for the arrival of his future bride, Lady Flidais. He knows her only from a portrait and sweetly poetic correspondence that have convinced him Flidais is his destined true love. But Oran discovers letters can lie. For although his intended exactly resembles her portrait, her brutality upon arrival proves she is nothing like the sensitive woman of the letters. With the strategic marriage imminent, Oran sees no way out of his dilemma. Word has spread that Blackthorn possesses a remarkable gift for solving knotty problems, so the prince asks her for help. To save Oran from his treacherous nuptials, Blackthorn and Grim will need all their resources: courage, ingenuity, leaps of deduction, and more than a little magic.

Approximate pronunciations are given for the more difficult names (kh is a soft guttural sound, as in the Scottish loch).

1. BLACKTHORN I fished out the rusty nail from under my pallet and scratched another mark on the wall. Tomorrow would be midsummer, not that a person could tell rain from shine in this cesspit. I'd been here a year. A whole year of filth and abuse and being shoved back down the moment I lifted myself so much as an inch. Tomorrow, at last, I'd get my chance to speak out. Tomorrow I would tell my story.

In the darkness of the cell opposite, Grim began muttering. A moment later the door down at the guard post creaked open. How Grim could tell the guards were coming before we heard them was a mystery, but he always knew. The muttering was a kind of shield. At night, when the place belonged to us prisoners, he spoke more sense. A jingle of metal; footsteps approaching. Long strides, heavy footed. Slammer. Usually, when he came, we'd shrink back into the shadows, hoping not to draw his attention. Today I stood by the bars waiting. My time in this place had broken me down. The person they'd locked up last summer was gone, and she wasn't coming back. But tomorrow I'd speak for that woman, the one I had been. Tomorrow I'd tell the truth, and if the council had any sense of right and wrong, they'd make sure justice was done. The thought of that kept me on my feet even when Slammer went into his little routine, smashing his club into the bars of each cell in turn, liking the way it made us jump. Yelling his stupid names for us, names that had stuck like manure on a boot, so we even used them for one another, Grim and I being the only exceptions. Peering in to make sure we looked sufficiently cowed and beaten down. Bonehead! The club crashed against Grim's bars. Stop your stupid driveling!

At the back of his cell Grim was a dark bundle against the wall, head down on drawn-up knees, hands over ears, still muttering away. Funny thing was, if Slammer had opened that cell door just a crack, Grim could have killed him with his bare hands and not raised a sweat doing it. I'd seen him at night, pulling himself up on the bars, standing on his hands, keeping himself strong as if there might be giants to kill in the morning. The guard turned my way. Slut! Crash! I wished I had the strength to keep quite still as the club thumped the bars right by my head, but the three hundred and fifty-odd days had taken their toll, and I couldn't help wincing. Slammer didn't move on to the cell next door as usual. He stopped on the other side of the bars, squinting through at me. Pig. Got something to tell you, Slut. His voice was a confidential murmur now; it made my skin crawl. Slammer liked playing games. He was always teasing the men with talk of messages from home, or hinting at opportunities for getting out. He was a liar. They all were. Something you won't like, he said. If I won't like it, why would I want to hear it? Oh, you'll want to hear this. He put his face right next to the bars, so close I could smell his foul breath. Not that it made much difference; the whole place stank of unwashed bodies and overflowing latrine buckets and plain despair. It's about tomorrow. If you're here to tell me that tomorrow's the midsummer council, don't trouble yourself. I've been waiting for this since the day I was thrown into this festering dump. Ah, said Slammer in a voice I liked even less than the previous one. That's just it. Meaning, I could tell, exactly the opposite. What are you talking about? Now you're interested. What do you mean, that's just it? What'll you give me if I tell you? This, I said, and spat in his face. He was asking for it. Euch! He wiped a sleeve across his cheek. Filthy whore! Filthy was right; but not the other. I'd never given myself willingly in here, and I'd never been paid for the privilege. The guards had taken what they wanted in those first days, when I'd still been fresh; when I'd looked and felt and smelled like a woman. They didn't bother me now. None of them was desperate enough to want the rank, skinny, lice-ridden creature I'd become. Which meant I had nothing at all to offer Slammer in return for whatever scrap of information he was teasing me with. That's the last time you'll spit at me, Slut! hissed Slammer. You're right for once, since I'll be out of this place tomorrow. He smiled, but his eyes stayed cold. Uh-huh. The way he said it meant I was wrong. But I wasn't. I'd been told my name was on the list. The law said a chieftain couldn't keep prisoners in custody more than a year without hearing their cases. And with all the chieftains of Laigin here, even a wretch like Mathuin, who didn't deserve the title of chieftain, would abide by the rules. You'll be out, all right, Slammer said. But not the way you think. Oh, he was enjoying this, whatever it was. My mouth went dry. Over in the cell opposite, Grim had fallen silent. I couldn't see him now; Slammer's bulk took up all my space. I forced myself to keep quiet. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction

of hearing me beg. You must have really got up Mathuins nose, he said. What did you do to make him so angry? Perhaps knowing he wouldnt get an answer, Slammer went right on. Overheard a little exchange. Someone wants you out of the way before the hearing, not after. Out of the way? Someone wants to make sure your case never goes before the council. First thing in the morning, youre to be disposed of. Quick, quiet, final. Name crossed off the list. No need to bother the chieftains with any of it. He was scrutinizing me between the bars, waiting for me to weep, collapse, scream defiance. Why have you told me this? A lie. A trick. He was full of them. I willed my heart to slow down, but it was hopping all over the place like a creature in a trap. What, youd sooner not know until I drag you out there in the morning and someone gives you a nasty surprise? Little knife in the heart, pair of thumbs to the throat? Youre lying. Better say your prayers, Slut. He moved off along the row. Pox! Smash! Strangler! Crash! Frog Spawn! Slam! Across the walkway, Grim was standing at the front of his cell, big hands wrapped around the bars. What are you looking at? I snarled, turning away before my face could show him anything. The three hundred and fifty-odd marks stared back from the wall, mocking me. Not a count to freedom and justice after all; only a count to a swift and violent end. Because, deep down, I knew this must be true. Slammer didnt have the imagination to play a trick like this. Lady? Shut your mouth, Grim! I never want to hear your wretched voice again! I sank down on the straw pallet with its teeming population of insects. Even these fleas would live longer than me. I wished I could find that amusing. Instead, the anger built and built, as if the swarm of crawling things was inside me, breeding and multiplying and spreading out into every corner of my body until I was ready to burst. How could this be? Id held out here for one reason and one reason only. Id endured all those poxy days and wretched, vermin-infested nights, Id listened to that idiot Grim mumbling away, Id seen and heard enough to give me a lifetime of nightmares. And Id stayed alive. Id held on to one thing: the knowledge that eventually Id get my day to be heard. Midsummer. The council. It was the law. Curse it! Id done it all for this day, this one day! They couldnt take it away! The crawling things broke out all at once. From a distance, detached, I watched myself hurling objects around the cell, heard myself shouting invective, felt myself hitting my head on the wall, slamming my shoulder into the bars, ripping at my hair, my mouth stretched in a big ugly square of hatred. Felt the tears and snot and blood dribbling down my face, felt the filth and shame and utter pointlessness of it all, knew, finally, what it was that drove so many in here to cut and maim and, eventually, make an end of themselves. Slammer, you liar! I screamed. Youre full of shit! Its not true, it cant be! Come back here and say it again, go on, I dare you! Filthy vermin! Rancid scum! It was catching, this kind of thing. Pretty soon everyone in the cells was shouting along with me, half of them yelling at Slammer and the other guards and the unfairness of everything, the rest abusing me for disturbing them, though there wasnt much to disturb in here. Crashes and thumps told me I wasnt the only one throwing things. All the while, there was Grim, standing up against his own bars, silent and still, watching me. What are you staring at, dimwit? I wiped a sleeve across my face. Didnt you hear me? Mind your own business! He retreated to the back of his cell, not because of anything I had said, but because down at the end of the walkway the door had crashed open again and the guards were coming through at a run. It was the usual when we got noisy: buckets of cold water hurled in to drench us. If that didnt work, someone would be dragged out and made an example of, and this time around that person would have to be me. Not that a beating made any difference. Not if Slammer had been telling the truth. I got a bucket of slops. There was a bit of cursing from the others, but everyone stopped yelling, not wanting worse. The guards left, taking their empty buckets with them, and there I was, dripping, stinking, bruised and bleeding from my own efforts, with the buzzing insects of my fury still swarming inside me. The cell was a mess, and with wretched Grim over there, only a few paces away, there was nowhere to hide. Nowhere I could curl up in a ball with the blankets over my head and cry. Nowhere I could give way to the terror of knowing that in the morning I would die, and Mathuin would be alive and going about his daily business, free to do to other folks families what he had done to mine. I would die with my loved ones unavenged. I scabbled on the floor, searching among the things Id hurled everywhere, and my fingers closed around the rusty nail. Those marks on the wall were mocking me; they were making a liar of me. I hated the story they told. I loathed the failure they showed me to be. Weak. Pathetic. A vow breaker. A loser. With the nail clutched in my fist I scratched between them, around them, over them, making the orderly groups of five, four vertical, one linking horizontal, into a chaotic mess of scribble. What was the point in hope when someone always snatched it away? Why bother telling the truth if nobody would listen? What use was going on when nobody cared if you lived or died? I waited for death. Thought how odd human nature was. All paths were barred, all doors closed. There was no escaping what was coming. And yet, when the guard known as Tinya very tall

manbrought around the lumpy gray swill that passed for food in this place, I took my bowl and ate. We were always hungry. One or two of the men caught rats sometimes and chewed them raw. Id never had the stomach for that, though Strangler, in the cell next to mine, always offered me a share. In the early days we used to talk about food a lot; imagine the first meal wed have when they let us out. Fresh fish cooked over a campfire. Mutton-fat porridge. Roast duck with walnut stuffing. Carrot and parsnip mashed with butter. For me it was a chunk of bread and cheese or a crisp new apple. When I thought of that first bite my belly ached and so did my heart. Then Id got beaten down and worn out, like an old mattress with the stuffing gone to nothing, and I didnt care anymore. Same with the others; we were grateful for the swill, and thankful that Tiny didnt rattle our cages and scream at us. So, even when I was looking death in the eye, so to speak, I ate. Across the walkway, Grim was on his pallet, scooping up his own share and trying to watch me and avoid my eye at the same time. The long day passed as they always did. Grim muttered to himself on and off, making no sense at all. Frog Spawn went through his list of all those who had offended him, and what he planned to do to them when he got out. It was a long list and we all knew it intimately, since he recited it every day. The others were quiet, though Poxey did ask me at one point if I was all right, and I snarled, What do you think?, making it clear I didnt want an answer. I sat on the floor, trying out the pose Grim seemed to find most comforting when under threat, head on knees, arms around legs, eyes squeezed shut. The day before you died was the longest, slowest day ever. It gave you more time than you could possibly want to contemplate all the things youd got wrong, the chances youd missed, the errors youd made. It was long enough to convince the most hopeful person that there was no point in anything. If only this... if only that... if only I had my chance, my one chance to be heard... Another round of swill told us it was getting on for nighttime; a person wouldnt know from the windows, which were kept shuttered. It was a long time since theyd last let us out into the courtyard. Maybe Mathuins men didnt know folk could die from lack of sunshine. Our only light came from a lantern down the end of the walkway. Frog Spawns ravings slowed, then stopped as he fell asleep. Hey, Slut! called Strangler. Place wont be the same without you! Our lovely lady, put in Poxey, mostly mocking, a little bit serious. Well miss you. Dont let the vermin take you without a fight, Slut, came the voice of Dribbles from down the far end. Give em your best, tooth and nail. When I want your advice, I said, Ill ask for it. Wake us up when they come for you, said Strangler. Well give you a proper send-off. Worth a bucket or two of slops. Grim wasnt saying anything, just sitting there gazing across at me, a big lump of a man with a filthy mane of hair, a bristling beard and sad eyes. Stop looking at me, I muttered, wondering how I was going to get through the night without going as crazy as Frog Spawn. If there was nothing I could do about this, why was my mind teeming with all the bad memories, all the wrongs I hadnt managed to put right? Why was the hate, the bitterness, the will for vengeance still burning in me, deep down, when the last hope was gone? Finally they all slept; all but Grim and me. The lantern burned low. Soon wed be in darkness. Lady? What? Maybe you can... Maybe I can what? Fly through stone walls? Charm the guards with my feminine wiles and make a miraculous escape? Wave a wand and turn them all into toads? He was silent. I cant fix this, Grim. I wish I had a magic charm to set the world to rights. To see evil-doers punished and good men rewarded. To see the innocent protected and the guilty judged. But it doesnt work that way. I looked across at him hunched on his pallet. I hope you survive, I said, finding that I meant it. I hope you dont have to wait too long for... whatever comes next. I vowed to myself that when the end came I would be strong. No pleading; no tears; no cries for mercy. I would not give them the satisfaction. You should try to sleep, I said. Another silence, then Grim spoke. Ill wait up. If thats all right. Suit yourself. Time passed. If Id had even a skerrick of faith in gods of one persuasion or another, Id have prayed to them to make a lie of Slammers words, or if that wasnt possible, at least to give someone else the chance to do what death would prevent me from doing. Never mind my own so-called crime and the need to prove my innocence. Mathuin must be brought to account. He must be stopped. He must be made to pay. But I did not believe in gods, not anymore, and there was nobody else. When I died, my vengeance would die with me. There was no justice in the world. Maybe I could use the rusty nail to slit my wrists. Better to make an end of myself than let Slammer or one of the others butcher me like a pig for the table. More dignity in it this way. But no; Id blunted the nail with my wild scratching, and it wouldnt even break the skin. I contemplated sticking it in my eye. But that wouldnt be final enough, and I doubted I had the resolve anyway. I could smash my head against the bars, harder than before, but Id probably only knock myself senseless and come to just in time for that little knife Slammer had mentioned. Hanging was too slow. By the time Id ripped up my skirt and made a noose, then managed to tie it high enough, Grim would have made enough racket to fetch whichever guard was sleeping outside the door down the end. Which

made no sense, when you thought about it; rush in to stop a person killing herself, so you could do the job for her in a scantwhatsix hours or so?How long till dawn, do you think? I murmured.A while yet. Grims voice was held quiet, too, so as not to wake the others. In this place, good sleep was a gift not to be taken lightly. He muttered something else.What?Id go in your place, if I could.I hadnt thought the big man had it in him to surprise me, but Id been wrong. Thats just stupid, I said. Of course you wouldnt. All men are liars, and youre no better than the rest of them.A silence, then. After a while he said, I would, Lady. The way I see it, your lifes worth something. Minell never amount to much.Bollocks. My life, the one I had, is gone. Even if I walked out of here right now, a free woman, it would still be gone. There was one thing I wanted: justice.

Sounded good; wasnt the whole truth. Two things. Justice and vengeance. I dont mind dying so much. My lifes a poorer thing than you imagine. But I do mind dying with that man unpunished. That fills me up with fury.Lord Mathuin? Grims voice was not much more than a breath, and in that moment the lantern flickered and went out, plunging us into darkness.One more day. Was that too much to ask, one poxy day?This time the silence stretched out so long I wondered if he had fallen asleep. But then his voice came again.How will

I... A long pause. I dont know how Ill...How youll what?No reply.You dont know how youll what, Grim?Nothing. Forget it.The night wore on, and in the cells it was quiet. Was it getting close to morning out there, or was I only imagining that? At a certain point I began to shiver and found I couldnt stop, even when I curled up on the pallet with the blanket wrapped around me, a grub in a meager cocoon. The shaking was deep down, as if frost was creeping into my bones. My teeth chattered; my joints ached like an old womans. My good intentions, of standing up bravely before they did whatever they were going to do to me, vanished away in the face of my wretched, trembling body. Maybe, when a person was truly terrified, mortally afraid, there was no hiding it, not even for the best dissembler in all Erin. Hey, Grim! I forced the words out. Talk to me about something warm, will you?Big woolen blanket, Grim said straightaway. Flame red in color.

Wrapping you up from head to toe, with only your face showing. Roaring fire, throw on a pinecone or two for the smell. Bowl of barley broth. Mulled ale with spices. Curl your hands around the cup, feel the warm in your bones. A pause. Any better? His voice sounded odd.Yes, I lied. Keep it up.Out of doors, Grim said. Big field of barley all ripe and golden, sun shining down, yellow flowers in the grass. You go down to paddle in the stream, and the waters like a warm bath. Ducks swimming by with little ones. A dog running about. Sky as blue asForget-me-nots, I said. Grim, are you all right?Fine, he mumbled. All out of words now.A sudden rattling at the door down the end. If Id been cold before, now I was frozen. They were here. Already, theyd come for me.Wake up the others. Thats what they said.No, Grim. Let them sleep.The door creaked open, as if someone was trying not to make too much noise. The light that came through was not the light of day, but the glow of a lantern. Out there it must still be nighttime. They were robbing me, not only of midsummer day and the council but of half the night before as well. Typical of this piss hole and the foul apologies for the men who ran it.Slammer was at the bars. I stood by my pallet, the blanket around me, trying to breathe.You got a visitor.A what? How many stupid tricks could he inflict on me before this was all over?A visitor. Make yourself tidy, and be quick about it.I was dreaming. Nobody had visitors in here, and especially not me. Who was there to come? Unless it was Mathuin wanting to gloat, and hed hardly do that at a time when all sensible folk were in their beds fast asleep.Slammer was unfastening the door of my cell; swinging it open. Hurry up, he said. Havent got all night.A lie. It had to be. The only reason theyd let me out of here was so they could kill me without anyone finding out, or at least anyone that mattered. Nighttime

would make that easier. Id be neatly buried in some corner before the sun was even thinking about rising.Slammer. Grim spoke in a tone I had never heard before; it sent a chill right through me. Youre top of my list. When I get out of here, Ill hunt you down, I swear it. Before Im done with you, youll be in such little pieces nobody will know you were ever a man.Hah! Slammer was scornful. When you get out of here? By that time youll be an old man, Bonehead, a dotard dribbling into your beard.Shut up! mumbled a sleepy voice from farther along the cells.Slammer seized me by the arm and hauled me out of my cell, then along the walkway beside him, blanket and all. There was nobody at the guard post and the door was ajar. We were going outside. Out into the open air, under the night sky.Get a move on, Slammer said.I snatched a glance at the moon and stars as he hustled me across the courtyard. The open space made me dizzy. I sucked in a breath of air, but all I could smell was my own filthy body. No sign of the other guards; no sign of an executioner. Maybe Slammer had requested the privilege of doing it all by himself. He was pushing me ahead of him now, into some kind of outhouseI had a sudden image of myself being hauled up on a rope like a pig for the slaughterand then there was the bright light of two lamps, and a man sitting at a table looking at me, and the shock of realizing that maybe Slammer had been telling the truth.Thank you, the man said,

rising to his feet. Leave us now. Womans a miscreant, Slammer protested. Not safe Nonetheless. Against the rules, Slammer muttered. The man long-legged, dressed in a fine hooded cloak suddenly had a little jingling bag in his hand. He counted out some coins. I doubt that Ill be in any danger, he said, but youre welcome to stay just outside the door. Well call you when were done here. The bag was put away, still jingling, and Slammer went out and closed the door behind him. Sit down, please, said my visitor, as if we were a pair of high-born folk meeting for a little chat. I sat down on a bench; I was still shivering. The tall man seated himself opposite me and slipped back his hood. This was a person of striking beauty, and almost certainly fey or half-fey. I had seen enough of his kind, in my old life of long ago, to recognize the signs: the widely spaced eyes, the broad brow, the proud, chiseled features. His manner suggested privilege, certainly, but it was lacking in the arrogance of men like Mathuin of Laois. Facing him across the table, I was sharply aware of my lice-ridden, scabby body in its ragged apology for clothing. What in Morigans name was this elegant creature doing here? He could hardly be my executioner. You dont remember me, do you? he asked, lifting his brows as if at some private joke. So he was going to play games too. I had never seen him in my life before. I dont know you, and I dont know why youre here. After a moment, because he had not called me Slut, I added, My lord. The stranger sat there examining me for a while. I made sure I looked him in the eye. If I was pathetic and wretched, draggled and filthy, that was not from any fault of mine. I was damned if Id leave this place looking beaten, even if that was the way I felt. Your case was up to be heard today, yes? I managed a jerky nod. Was. So he knew. The guard told me that plans been changed. Did he tell you the new plan? A quick and covert disposal at dawn. No due process, no hearing, no case. What business was it of his? Are you going to tell me who you are? I blurted out. Did Mathuin send you? Unlikely; a fey nobleman would hardly act as messenger boy for a human leader. I have a proposition for you, the man said. If a name will help you trust me, I will give it. I am Conmael. It meant absolutely nothing. I couldnt for the life of me imagine why the fellow would have any interest in what happened to me. As for offering my own name, Id had one when theyd locked me up, and another one before that, but I wasnt going to share either with a complete stranger. What proposition? Under the circumstances, only one kind of proposition was of any interest, and that was one that would see me survive the dawn and stand up before the council as Id expected. How this Conmael would achieve such a thing, and why hed bother, was quite beyond me. Lies, all lies what else could this be? Im growing weary of tricks, I said. These days, I lose my temper quickly. Conmael smiled. He folded his hands on the table before him. His fingers were long and graceful; he wore a number of silver rings. It is no trick, he said. Nor is it an unconditional offer of freedom. But you can leave this place safely, no longer in fear for your life, provided you agree to my terms. Despite everything, my heart leaped at the word freedom. I clamped down the sudden elation. He wanted something from me, no doubt of that. I couldnt imagine what it might be, since I had nothing at all to offer. The whole thing was deeply suspect. I might be exchanging my present hell on earth for something even worse. But youd be alive, said a little voice inside me. Terms. What terms? You had a calling before ill luck visited you. A profession, a direction in life. Yes? If he thought I was going to talk about the time before, he was wrong. That was past, over, forgotten. All that remained was Mathuin, and vengeance. You have certain talents by which you can provide for yourself and do good in the community. Had. Not have. That times over. That womans gone. If you were free now, this moment, what would you do? Why would I tell you that? You could be anyone. You could be in Mathuins pay. I am in no mans pay. Answer my question, please. Id do what I thought Id be doing until the guard kindly brought me the news that my execution was imminent. Id stand up before the midsummer council. Explain what it was that got me locked up. Tell them what Mathuin does. Tell the story of the young woman who fell pregnant with his child when he took her by force, and how her husband abandoned her when he found out, and how she asked me to help her get rid of the child. How I spoke out publicly against Mathuin, and found that there were a dozen other women whom hed treated in the same way. How he locked me up for smearing his name. Mathuin should be brought to account for his behavior, most certainly. But it was not this wrong that burned in me, crying out for vengeance. It was a far older evil. I would not tell of that. When the chieftain of Laois had imprisoned me, he had not known who I was. Id planned to tell him when I spoke out before the council. I want that man exposed for what he truly is. I want him punished. Mathuin is not fit to be chieftain. And afterward? What do you mean? After you expose the chieftain of Laois as an evildoer and have him removed from his position of power, what then? Dont mock me! Answer the question, please. Dawn is fast approaching. Then nothing. All that matters is... Vengeance? Conmaels voice was very quiet. This is not simply a case of standing up for those women, is it? Its more, far more. Its a burning need to right a personal wrong. An old wrong. I stared at him, and he

gazed back, eyes blue as deep water, handsome features perfectly composed. How can you know all this?

Who are you? A friend. Someone who would rather not see you destroy yourself. Destroy myself? Its Mathuin whos doing the destroying. If you want me to help you, you must set your need for vengeance aside. Then the answer is no. If I could not make an end to Mathuins ill-doing, what point was there in anything? Conmael was silent for a little. Then he said, Life is a precious gift. It seems you set a low value on yours. Consider what you could do with this opportunity. You could help people. Free them from pain and suffering. You could heal your own wounds. Im not after personal redemption. I want justice. I want that man to admit to his misdeeds. I want him to pay the price. Refuse my offer, and youll be the one paying the price. What do you want from me? My temper was hanging on a fast-fraying thread. Get to the point! Ah, so you will hear my terms, then? Id be stupid not to. Letting him set out his conditions, whatever they were, would at least keep me out of the cells a bit longer. Was that the first trace of dawn light coming in around the edges of the door? Very well. Im offering you a chance to be safely out of here before they come for you. Youd leave the district and travel north to Dalriada. There d be help along the way, and a place to stay when you got there. After that, youd need to earn a living doing what you did before. Theres always a need for skilled healers. Travel north. When? Straightaway. As I made to speak again, to say I couldnt go anywhere because I had to appear at the council, Conmael gestured me to be quiet. There are three conditions you must agree to meet before I grant you this opportunity. Firstly, the considerable skill you possess must be used only for good. You will not let bitterness or anger draw you down the darker ways of your craft. Secondly, if anyone asks for your help, you will give it willingly. I do not mean solely those who come to you for assistance with their ailments, but anyone at all who seeks your aid. And thirdly? It occurred to me that I could be as good a liar as anyone. What was to stop me from agreeing now, and once I was out of here, doing whatever I pleased? I might yet live beyond dawn and see Mathuin brought down before nightfall. My heart began to race. Thirdly, you will not seek vengeance. You will remain in Dalriada and stay away from Mathuin of Laois. That, I could not do. But I bit back the no that sprang to my lips. Is there a period of time attached to this ridiculous proposition? Conmael gave a cool smile. Seven years, he said. That is the term for all three conditions. I opened my mouth to say yes, but he got in first. You understand what I am, I believe.

Although you may not always see me, I will be watching. You will not break the terms without my knowledge. Each time you do so, one further year will be added to the seven. What? Morigans curse, Id be lucky if I managed seven days, let alone seven years! Walk away and leave Mathuin behind me, his crimes not only unpunished but not even reported? Agree to every single request for help? As for using my gifts for good, all the good had been beaten out of me long ago. My spirit was as stained and foul as my reeking, vermin-ridden body. But then, what did it matter if I was bound to his stupid plan for my whole life, provided I saw Mathuin brought to justice first? Mathuin has done ill deeds, Conmael said. Hes also a powerful chieftain who enjoys the support of many fellow leaders. You are a prisoner, without family, without resources, with no home to go to and no friends to help you. Even if you did stand up at the council, even if you did make these accusations before the assembled chieftains, who would take your word against Mathuins? All you would achieve is your own destruction. So let us set a limit on the number of times you may break the rules. Five, I think. Or what happens? Or you find yourself back here, filthy, worn down, defeated, with the executioner knocking on your door. And this time, no reprieve. I gaped at him. Are you telling me you can turn back time? He was fey, no doubt of that, and the fey had powerful magic. I had seen it, long ago. But this the fellow must be out of his mind. Conmaels gaze was wintry. Try to exact vengeance now, and you will surely fail. You are no fool; in your heart, you know that is simple truth. Exercise patience and self-control for the period I have set out, and you may have some small chance of success later. My proposal is your only way forward. It would be a mistake to believe I cannot, or will not, do exactly what I have told you. Youre proposing that instead of being Mathuins prisoner I should be yours. Conmael rose to his feet. That comment shows a willful misunderstanding of the situation. I thought Id made myself quite clear. Im offering a home, safety, an opportunity to do some good. Im giving you the chance to remake your life. Youd be the first to say what a wretched, broken thing it has become. I found myself unable to speak.

Conmael moved toward the door. Almost dawn. He put his hand on the latch. Wait! My mouth was dry. Supposing I agree to this and stick to the conditions, what happens after seven years? He turned his head toward me. His face was grave. Then you are your own woman again, and free to make your own choices. He opened the door, and there was Slammer, waiting. Were done here, Conmael said, and before I could get another word out, he had stepped past the guard and was gone from view. Wait! I called. Yes! I say yes! I rushed out the door and into the immovable form of Slammer. But there was no reply; only the plangent note

of a bird as it flew across the brightening sky: Fool! Fool! Conmael was nowhere to be seen. 2GRIMShe goes out and the door shuts behind her. Gone. Not coming back. Not ever. Dont rightly know how Ill go on without her. Dont know how I can keep on breathing through the dark. As long as shes here Im still alive, deep down. As long as shes here Ive got a job to do. Someone to look after. When they kill her, Ill know. Ill feel it like she does, the moment, the snuffing out. After that itll be dark all the time. Nobody to hear me. Nobody to see me. When shes gone, Im gone. Shut it, Bonehead! someone yells from down the other end. Didnt think Id been making any noise. Put my head down on my knees, stuff a fold of blanket up against my mouth, push the words in. Squeeze my eyes tight. Stupid. You cant see the sunrise in here anyway. But I do see it: the sky getting brighter, the guards holding her still, the knife flashing in the sun. Shell be brave. Shes been brave from the day they threw her in here. Standing up for me. Talking me through the dark. Snappish and foulmouthed, but alive. So much alive. Like a flame that never goes out, no matter what. Looking over at me and seeing, not a big lump of nothing, but a man. Door creaks. Keys jingle. I start the words to shut the bad things out. Get a move on, Slut! Slammer snarls. Then, For the love of all the gods, Bonehead, knock it off! And, a wonder, I hear her steps along the walkway and the clang of her cell door. Shes back. Slammer leaves her. I wait till the door down at the end shuts behind him. Lift my head; try to keep my voice steady. Lady? You there? Shut up, Grim. Who was it? Did they...? Are you deaf? I said shut up. I do as she says. When that door opened, light came in. I heard a bird singing. Its got to be nearly dawn. Why did Slammer bring her back? I want to ask, Does this mean theyre not going to kill you after all? But they are, or she wouldnt be hunched up in there, trying not to cry. I cant see her, but I know thats what shes doing. Who came to visit her? She always said there was nobody. Maybe thats a lie. Maybe theres a husband, a lover, a sad mother or father out there. Lady? She sighs, a little sound in the dark. I was offered a lifeline and I was too stupid to take it. Too slow, too cautious. Missed my opportunity. Nothings changed. The sun will come up, just the same as it does every day, and what happens will happen. She goes quiet for a bit, then says, If you ever get a second chance, Grim, grab it with both hands. Dont hesitate for a moment, you hear me? If I could hold a tune, I tell her, Id sing you a song. Spare me. What song would you want, if I could? Believe me, I wouldnt. If it was me going out there, I wouldnt want one of those trumpet-call, flag-waving things. Id want a lullaby. Id want to be sung to sleep quietly. What are you trying to do, Grim, turn me into a blubbing heap? Dont sing, I beg you. I dont want a march, I dont want a ballad, I dont want a dance. And I really, really dont want a lullaby. Good, I say. Funny; my effort to stop her crying has left my own face all tears. Because Im the worst singer you ever heard. Even Strangers a better musician than me. Not crying, are you, Grim? A big bad fellow like you? Me? Nah. Im just saying this when theres a crash like the end of the world, and all of a sudden Im lying on my back with everything coming down around me, and somewhere above me, above the heap of rubbish thats weighing down my chest and legs and half covering my face, theres open sky. Everyones shouting. Takes me a while to get myself out; for a bit I think my leg might be broken, but no, I can move all right. Place is all chunks of stone, bent bars, splintered wood, like a huge storm has hit it, but theres no rain coming down, no wind roaring over, just that sky calling me to climb up and get out, quick, before the guards come. Scrabbling noises tell me the others have the same idea, and now heres Poxys clambering toward me across a mountain of rubble, his face all over dust, and after him comes Dribbles, making sobbing noises as if he cant catch his breath. The bars of my cell are bent all out of shape; I squeeze between them into whats left of the walkway, and theres Lady, white as a ghost, muttering something about not hearing her say yes. Making no sense at all. Need to get her out, quick. Where the guard post door was theres a big heap of stones. Roofs broken open up above my cell. From behind us, down the other end, comes an awful muffled screaming. I look that way and all I see is a tangle of bars and stones; the whole place has come down on Strangler, Frog Spawn and the others. Not dead, though. At least one of them not dead. I grab Ladys hand and pull her over to the spot where the roofs open. Ill boost you up, I tell her. Crawl across the roof and climb down on the western side. Then run. Theres woods not far off. As Im bending to get hold of her so I can lift her up to the gap, I see it: Slammers hand sticking out from under all those stones, with a knife in it. But Ladys protesting. I make sure shes got hold of the edge of the broken roof, then push her up so she can scramble out. Shut up and run! Dont look back! She disappears through the hole. Im not hearing much from outside, no shouting, no hammering, nobody rushing to the rescue, and thats mostly a good thing; if theyre slow to come, shell be in the woods before anyone spots her. Away. Safe. Ill have done my job. Poxys doesnt look too badly hurt. I boost him up high enough to haul himself out. Hes hefty, even on the gruel diet. Then I lift up the bundle of skin and bone thats Dribbles, and Poxys leans down through the hole to grab his arms and pull while I push from underneath. Cant see Dribbles getting far, out there. Look

after him, eh? I say to Pox, but the boys aren't talking; just getting up through the holes been enough of a stretch. They're out of sight, and I head back to the other end, where everything's come down in one god-awful mess. It's Strangler doing the screaming. No sound at all from the others. It'll take me too long to dig them out, and if they're still alive, they won't be in a fit state to run anywhere. But I can't leave Strangler without at least trying. Big block of stone leaning up against his cell; can't see him, only the bars broken and sticking out, and a pile of rubble behind. Strangler! Coming to get you! Try to keep quiet, will you? Don't want the guards in here. Bonehead! Shit, this hurts! Strangler's voice is all pain. I try to shift the big block, which is nearly as tall as I am and too wide to get my arms around. I move it a whisker and a pile of stuff falls on me. I look up and see that if I shift this any farther, the other half of the roof's going to come down and Strangler and me will be flat as griddle cakes. Can I tunnel in below maybe, slip him out like a ferret from its hole? Hang on, Strangler. Listen, can you move? Can you get down on the floor? He tries, it hurts, he starts to scream and bites it back. If you can get down low I might be able to pull you out under here. There's a gap, just small. But you always were a skinny runt of a man. Look, here, I'm sticking my arm through. Can you feel it? This is taking too long. I can hear someone shouting out there. If the guards spot us going over the roof, they'll be onto us before we get a chance to run. A hand touches mine. He's there, he's made it. Good man. Can you give me both hands? This is going to hurt a bit. The gaps small. I'd get a child out easily, but a man's another matter. An injured man, even worse. There's a broken bar sticking out halfway through, and pieces of the stone wall balanced on one another like some kind of toy, all set to fall at a wrong touch. This could kill him. Got you. Deep breath, Strangler. I'll try to make it quick and clean. He lets out an unearthly shriek as I haul him through. I'm going to hear that sound forever, in my nightmares. Then he's out, lying facedown beside me, his chest heaving. He curses me with every foul word he knows, which I take as a good sign. Got to get out, I tell him. Up there. Now. Others, Strangler whispers. Are they...? Some out already, some... gone. I jerk my head toward the wreckage of the other cells. Come on, we've got to move. Shit. My back. He can't walk. Whatever happened, it's hurt him too much to let him even stand for long. The roof's pretty high. Had planned to boost him up, same as the others, then jump for the edges and haul myself after him. Change of plan needed. People shouting outside now, and it's day. Something I haven't seen in a long while: blue sky. Just leave me the knife, Bonehead, says Strangler, eyeing Slammer's weapon, which I've stuck in my belt. Go on, climb up, save yourself. And when I gape at him, he asks, Your Lady get out all right? Lady, Pox, Dribbles, I tell him. And now you and me. Don't argue, put your arm around my shoulders, here. I crouch down and lift him onto my back; he screams again. Sorry, Strangler. No choice. Try to keep quiet, will you? Give me the frigging knife. If he thinks I'm going to let him kill himself right in front of me, he's got me all wrong. I head back toward the gap with Strangler draped over me like an outsize shawl. If he can hold on long enough, maybe I can do this. Block of stone in the middle; second block on top. What in the name of... groans Strangler. Keep still and try not to fall off, I tell him; then I step up on the two blocks, with him still over my shoulders, and reach up toward the gap. Someone's trying to open the door now, and not having any luck; no surprise, since it's blocked by a heap of stones with a dead man underneath. I start to wonder what we'll find outside. Shit, Bonehead, Strangler protests, which is fair enough, since it's pretty certain I'll drop him when I jump. Hold on, I say, and reach up with both hands. Not quite high enough to get a grip on the edges, but not far off. I stand on tiptoes; I'm only an inch or two short. Bonehead! someone hisses from above. The two of them are still there, Pox and Dribbles, and Pox's got a bit of rope, gods only know from where, but I'm not asking questions; I'm setting Strangler back down, tying a loop around his chest and praying hard. My heart's going crazy. Strangler's sobbing, begging me to stop trying to save his life. Now! I call when the knots are done. The rope tightens; I boost Strangler up toward the hole. His screams cut through me. He can't hold on to anything; strength all gone but we get him up and out, and I'm left in Mathuin's lockup with a bunch of dead men for company. I don't wait. I jump, hook my elbows over the side of the gap and hang there, pretty sure a big chunk of roof will break off and crash down with me attached. I take a breath, tighten my belly, think of Lady out there on her own. I pull myself up. I'm on the roof, or what's left of it, with Strangler sprawled beside me. Pox's disappearing off the western side. I didn't expect them to wait for me and they haven't. Strangler's face is a nasty shade of gray in the morning light. Feeling a bit the worse for wear myself. Down below guards are milling around, but nobody's spotted us. They're all working on getting the door open. No sign of a storm. The sky's cloudless, the winds only a breath. What's happened is freakish. When I give myself time to think about it, this is going to scare the shits out of me. Right, I murmur to Strangler. Over that side, down the tree, then a sprint across farmland to the woods. I'll carry you. But you have to keep quiet. I remember the layout pretty well; I've thought about

getting out a lot, down there in the dark. This place is outside the walls of Mathuins fortress, which is up the hill behind us. And its clear of the village. Nobody in a place like that wants a bunch of thieves and murderers a hop and a skip away from their little ones. Have to hope its too early for sentries to be up on the fortress walls, ready to pick us off with a well-aimed arrow or two. Not far. Then well get you some help. Hah! wheezes Strangler. Give us the knife, Ill help myself. Shut up. Here. I get him up on my back again, then go crab-wise across the roof. I try to walk soft-footed but it sounds like theres a giant stomping around up here. The guards dont come. We struggle down the big oak tree and stagger away across the fields, where sheep and cows take a look at us, then go on grazing. Morrigan's curse, its so open out here. Feel like a mouse or a shrew, creeping from one hidey-hole to the next with owls and hawks up there ready to swoop. Every shadow a threat; every rustle in the grass is an enemy. Strangler goes quiet. He gets heavier and heavier. But we make it into the woods. We go deep in, where the oak roots are old and tangled and the leaves grow so thick its all shadows. No sign of Lady. No sign of Pox and Dribbles, either. Hope that means they all got away safe. All right? I say to Strangler, whos lying prone beside me. Sorry I had to hurt you; only way to get you out. But Strangler doesnt answer, and when I take a look at him, I see that hes staring straight upward to the light coming through the leaves, and hes lying with his arms out and his hands open, like a child sleeping. Only hes not sleeping, hes dead.

3ORAN You disappoint me, my mother said. Such directness was typical of her. My father was more likely to show his opinion of me by lifting his brows and tightening his lips. This occurred, for instance, when I failed to show adequate enthusiasm for such activities as hunting, hawking, and combat practice. I had learned to acquit myself adequately at all three; I was no fool. A future king of Dalriada must be as capable at blood sports as he was at, say, strategic thinking. My parents had never understood my passion for poetry, my love of lore, my fondness for observing birds and animals about their natural activities, and my corresponding distaste for the business of impaling them on arrows or skewering them with spears. They saw this as a weakness in me, an unfitness for the destiny that lay before me, a destiny that was mine whether I liked it or not, since, inadequate as I might be, I was the only son they had. At two-and-twenty, you might at the very least attempt to show some interest in the matter, Mother went on. Your manner hints at something... not quite right. Something... amiss. With respect, Mother, I said, though my patience was wearing thin, this being a subject we had edged around many times in the past, if you mean what I think you mean, you are in error. I understand the need to father an heir, and when the right woman comes along, I will marry and procreate as you wish. If you find fault with my demeanor, it is not because I hanker after some young man, Donagan for instance, but because the notion of a strategic marriage fills me with unease. The thought that so significant a matter could be decided on the basis of a formal letter from Father to some ruler in a distant kingdom, and that I might not see my bride in the flesh before she arrives for the betrothal... it feels deeply wrong to me. In the ancient tales, marriages made for purposes of power and alliance often went awry. The stories that stirred me were those of lovers who met by chance and knew at first sight that they were made for each other. A man like me might wait a lifetime for such a story. You speak like a green girl of thirteen, Oran, not a grown man. Sometimes I despair of you. I know, Mother. At eighteen, Lady Flidais is perhaps a little older than is quite ideal, but in view of her pedigree we can overlook that. And there are obvious advantages to your father of an alliance with Cadhan. His holdings may be small, but his connections are beyond reproach. I met Flidais once, when she was a child of six or seven; a charming, well-behaved little thing. Her fathers letter suggests she has retained those qualities. Cadhan describes her as exceptionally comely, accomplished in the domestic arts and of a sweet and gentle temperament, which I must say sounds rather suited to your tastes, Oran. I have read the letter, Mother. So? I suppressed a sigh. Such a missive is written for one purpose only, to persuade the recipient that the woman in question is a paragon of all the virtues and has a face and figure to rival those of ancient goddesses. Its hardly likely to say the girl is short and dumpy with pimples, and bone lazy to boot. Or that she doesnt much care for the idea of marrying a man whom shes never clapped eyes on. Even if that is the truth. Theres a picture. So Father mentioned. Are you suggesting a picture cannot lie just as effectively as a letter? Oran, you would madden the most patient of mothers! At least look at it. She reached across the table and laid the little wooden oval in front of me. Since I could hardly screw my eyes shut like a three-year-old refusing to eat his mashed turnips, I looked. The tiny painting had been executed with great skill. Such images frequently have something of a sameness, as if the artist can conjure only one face, and varies it with changes in the style of the hair, the clothing, the background. But the girl depicted here was very much herself. Her hair was worn loose, flowing down over her shoulders in waves as dark as a crows wing. Her eyes were a deep blue and gazed directly from the portrait, giving me an uncanny sense that she

could see me. The letter had said sweet and gentle; this heart-shaped face with its small, straight nose and not-quite-smiling mouth suggested the description might not, after all, be a lie. On the girls lap was a tiny white dog, a delicate thing with spindly legs and large ears; she held it with some tenderness. The artist had chosen to show the two of them against a background of oak leaves. A pretty thing, observed my mother. I was not sure if she meant the portrait or the girl herself. I only knew that now that I held the painting in my hand I did not want to give it back to her. You know, of course, that once you marry you'll have your own household; no new bride wants to be under the eye of her mother-in-law. You'll move to Winterfalls. That should be pleasing even to you. I opened my mouth to say she should stop making assumptions, then shut it again. At some point I would have to give in. My parents were right: I did have to sire a son and heir, and at two-and-twenty I was past the age when a man was expected to get on with such things. What chance was there, really, that I would find the one woman who was my perfect complement, my other half, my long-dreamed-of true love? My mother had told me often enough that I had my head in the clouds. To be a dreamer at the age of ten was acceptable. At fifteen one might almost get away with it. In a man of two-and-twenty it was starting to verge on risible. And this girl, this woman in the picture... There was something about her, something that went far beyond the obvious beauty, the tender pose, the artful execution of the image. Unless the artist was an exceptional dissembler, the subject of his work was a rare creature. All your father is asking, Mother said, evidently taking my silence for a mulish refusal to listen to her wisdom, is that he may reply to Lord Cadhans letter telling him you are interested. No, I said, rising to my feet. Before she could say anything I added, Ill write the letter, and it wont be to Lord Cadhan, it will be to his daughter. As for being interested, Ill wait until she replies before I decide that. I had the satisfaction of seeing my mother completely lost for words. I poured her a cup of mead from the jug on the table. Only after she had gulped down several mouthfuls did she find her voice again. Your father would have to read the letter. He would need to approve it. No. It will be for no eyes but hers. I see. Mothers face showed a peculiar blend of shock and hope. However, I have no objection to Father writing a covering letter to Lord Cadhan; Ill seal my own missive and give it to his scribe to enclose. I paused to draw breath; assessed that look on her face again and decided to press this rare advantage. When Flidaiss reply comes, well discuss the matter further. A condition of my agreeing to marry would be that I move to Winterfalls as soon as the decision is made. The handfasting would take place there. In my own home, on my own ground. Winterfalls, near Dreamers Wood, was surrounded by forest and lake. It was a place of birds and creatures, peace and tranquillity. My heart began to race. My mind soared into a realm of dreams. This was foolish indeed; both letter and portrait were probably lies. Well, my letter would be all truth, and Id see what Flidais made of that. Two turnings of the moon passed before my father received Lord Cadhans reply; spring was turning to summer. Enclosed was a sealed message bearing this inscription: To Prince Oran of Dalriada. Personal and Private. I took it away to my apartments unopened. My heart was beating with such violence I wondered what would happen if these negotiations did bear fruit, and I came face-to-face with the woman of the portrait. I would, perhaps, drop dead from sheer excitement, proving to be the ultimate disappointment as a son. Only once the door was closed and bolted behind me did I break the seal and read the words within. I do not know how to address you, she wrote, since we have never met. You have the advantage of a picture I have seen the artists rendition of my features, and I believe it to be true to life but I know only that you are two-and-twenty years of age and in excellent health. I would have written a formal letter of the kind my fathers scribe has taught me to construct, but that would be an inadequate response to the beautiful words you sent me. My mother wanted to open your sealed message. It was only the words Personal and Private that prevented her from doing so. As it was, she sat beside me while I read it, which did rather diminish the pleasure. Later, I took your letter out of doors and read it again in the shade of my favorite oak tree, with only my little dog Bramble for company. (There is a story to Brambles namedont you find there are stories everywhere if you look for them? but I will save that for another time.) It is odd that my mother, who believes me old enough to travel far from home, marry an unknown prince and in time, perhaps not so very much time, bear his children, was concerned that a sealed letter might contain material shocking to my tender disposition! I assured her that your missive included nothing of the kind. It was, I said to her, full of courtesy and goodwill. I did not mention the poem. That is between you and me. What you wrote was lovely. I read it over to Bramble several times and she agrees. I would like to write my own poem in return but I confess to feeling somewhat shy about it. Perhaps next time. Will you write to me again before a final decision is made about the marriage? I liked the description of Winterfalls. There is a forest near here where I love to walk, just me and my maid with Bramble. My little dog is very well trained and knows not to bark or run about after the wild creatures.

Shy deer live there, and scampering squirrels, and frogs in the hidden ponds. I think you would like the place, Prince Oran. Perhaps Winterfalls is something similar. I hope so. My father is writing a reply to your father. From what little he tells me, I gather we are at the stage of considering the proposition. Do you sometimes feel as I do, as if you were a commodity to be traded? If my whole future were not in the balance, that might make me laugh. I hope you will write again soon. Flidais of Cloud Hill Your letter warmed my heart, I wrote. Please take all the time you need to make up your mind. My father is so delighted that I am at last prepared to consider marriage that he will be easily persuaded to wait a little before things are quite settled. I hasten to assure you that I have no objection to the general idea of being a husband and father; only that I have read too many old tales, and they have made me wary. I wanted to wait for the right woman. I wanted to be quite sure each of us could make the other perfectly happy, not only while we were young and hale, but through all the years of our lives. I believe that in you I may have found that woman. I believe you will think me foolish. I knew it the moment I saw your picture. Too many old tales, indeed. That is what my mother would say. But I spoke to Donagan, who is my body servant and friend, the brother I never had, and he said I had been wise to wait. He reminded me that I love wild creatures and am fascinated by their ways, and suggested that trusting my instincts would serve me well. So perhaps I am not so foolish. Should agreement be reached on our marriage, I understand I would ride to Cloud Hill for the betrothal and stay on awhile. This, dear Flidais, would allow you ample opportunity to show me your forest with its scampering squirrels. I do not at present have a dog of my own. My beloved old hound, Grey, died last autumn, and thus far I have not had the heart to replace him. Perhaps you would allow me to share Bramble. If you do me the honor of agreeing to be my wife, we might in time acquire another small dog as companion for her. Were you going to tell me Bramble's story? I will tell you a secret, she wrote. Bramble is not the kind of purebred dog people expect a lady like me to own. I found her in the woods one day, entangled in blackberry bushes, her poor skin covered in bleeding scratches. She was crying most piteously. It took me and my maid some considerable time to extricate her. While we worked, Bramble was so patient and good, despite her fear. She knew that at last she had found friends in a dark world. So she was rescued and given a new name, and she has been my constant companion ever since. You will laugh at me, but I have wondered if Bramble came from the realm of the fey. Sometimes her eyes take on a particular look, as if she is gazing right out of our world and into a place I cannot see. Do you believe what some folk say, that the fey still walk the land of Erin, but only show themselves when they choose? Or do you think me foolish for giving credence to any such idea? My maid says I am fanciful, but she likes it when I tell her stories of those ancient times. Oran, are you a tall man or short? Fat or thin? Fair-haired or dark? These things weigh nothing in the final decision, you understand. Only, I would like to know. **BLACKTHORN** One thing was certain: there'd be no sleeping in warm barns or begging crusts from local farmers until I was off Mathuins land, and even then I'd have to find some way of cleaning myself up before I let anyone see me. These filthy, sodden tatters were all the clothes I possessed, and there was no concealing my matted, crawling locks and my bruised and stinking body. All very well for Conmael to say Make your way to Dalriada. Dalriada was far away, and even if I'd had so much as a paring knife or fishhook, I was too weak to do more than pick a berry or two from the bushes as I passed. I was the kind of vagrant who made folk hustle their children indoors and bolt the door behind them. Which I could understand, since if I'd been a respectable sort of person I'd have been doing exactly the same thing. There was little doubt in my mind that what had happened was Conmael's doing. The sturdy-looking roof suddenly caving in on a fine morning without a breath of wind; the door conveniently blocked so the guards couldn't come rushing in; nobody stopping me as I clambered over the roof, climbed down, and crossed open ground to get to those woods that had to be fey work. Conmael must have heard me calling after him, saying I wanted out after all. Or maybe he knew what I wanted without being told, just as he seemed to know a whole lot more about me than any stranger possibly could. It made me feel queasy. And now here I was, free at last, but bound by his poxy conditions unless I wanted to find myself right back in Mathuins lockup, waiting for the executioner. Could he do that? After what had just happened, I had no wish to put it to the test. The first night out saw me making camp if you could call it that under oaks, on rising ground. Midsummer, hah! It was freezing. Everything I had on was damp, including the blanket I'd had wrapped around me when Slammer and his cronies threw that bucket of slops to shut me up. I'd been drinking from streams, crouched like some feral creature, wary of capture, but all I'd found to eat were those berries, and they'd been dry and shriveled, not even good enough for sparrows and shrews. The idea of getting to Dalriada on my own was laughable. One more day like this and I'd be too weak to walk ten paces. All I'd managed to do was find a hollow and hunker down in it with the clammy blanket over me. As

the darkness deepened and the night birds started up a mournful chorus, I decided Conmael was nothing but a meddler. In the old tales, the fey were full of tricks. A curse on the man, I shouldnt have trusted him an inch. Hed taken me out of one hellhole to drop me right in another. It was too cold to let myself sleep. The chill would carry me off before starvation got a grip. Grim would have solved the problem by performing his nightly exercises, pulling himself up on a branch of the oak or walking on his hands awhile. Even thinking about that made me tired. Hed used some of that strength to get me out; bade me run and not look back. But what about him? What about the rest of those poor sods? A soft noise in the dark. I sat up, peering over the edge of my hollow. Had that been only a creature padding by, or had I caught the tread of a human foot? Earlier in the day Id stopped on a rise, and when Id looked back Id seen men with dogs, searching along the road; men in Mathuins colors. Morigans curse, I was shivering so hard my nest of foliage was trembling all around me. No sound now, but light; somewhere not far away, someone was making a fire. The warm glow of it touched the mossy trunks of the oaks and turned the foliage to a rich tapestry: green silk, gold thread. The fire called me as a dryad calls a lovelorn shepherd or a mermaid a lonely fisherman. A wonderful smell came wafting my way: was that chicken soup? My mouth watered. Now someone was approaching, not furtively but in measured fashion. You can come out. Conmaels quiet, authoritative tone. Unless, of course, you prefer to sit there and freeze to death. No contest. I dragged my cramped limbs up to stand and hobbled out. Come this way, the fey man said, offering a supportive arm. I did not ask whether the fire might draw pursuit after me. If Conmael could make the roof of Mathuins prison cave in, I imagined hed have no trouble casting some kind of invisibility charm over us for as long as he needed to. Who knew what he could do? By the gods, the warmth of this little fire was good! And yes, there was a pot of soup warming on it, and a dry blanket that he passed me to wrap over my wet things, and another blanket, folded, to sit on. I sat, swathed, and thought how dangerous it was for a person to become so weak she might do almost anything for a fire and a full belly. Conmael filled a cup from the pot and passed it to me. Careful, he warned. Dont drop it. I willed my shaking hands to take control; lifted the cup to my lips; took a mouthful. Shut my eyes in utter bliss. I could almost understand those old stories in which folk exchanged their first-born child for a bowl of broth. And drink slowly, he said, or youll make yourself sick. Then, after a moment, But I dont need to tell you that; youre a healer. And now youll need a healers name. I imagine you wont be wanting to use either of your old ones. You imagine right. This was the best meal I had had in my life. Ever. If that was because it was fey food, and if that meant drinking it changed me into a toad or whisked me off to another world, too bad. I was going to finish every drop and probably lick the cup clean afterward. Somewhere in the back of my mind was the question of names, and how he knew I had two, but right now it didnt seem to matter. Theres bread, said Conmael. Take just a little at first. When he passed me the chunk of oaten bread, I had to blink back tears. In the lockup, when the men had dreamed of roast pork, sausages and plum pie, I had longed for fresh, honest bread. Thank you, I made myself say. The first bite transported me to that place Grim had described: barley fields in sunshine, yellow flowers, bare feet paddling in a stream. I had indeed become weak, to be thus overwhelmed by simple things. Blackthorn, I said, trying to get control of myself. That is the name I choose. It felt right; it had in it the idea of what I was now, walking under a shadow and all prickles. Mm-hm. That was all he said until I had finished both soup and bread, and had warmed up sufficiently to stop shaking and begin yawning, the food and the fire conspiring to draw me toward sleep. Then my companion spoke again. I have a bag here for you, with a change of clothing and some items for the journey: a knife, a flint, way-bread and so on. When you reach Winterfalls there will be other supplies ready. Not much; only sufficient to get you started. And youll be wanting to bathe. My folk will bring warm water shortly, and will ensure that you have privacy. That is for tonight only, Blackthorn. From tomorrow youll be relying on your own resources. I understood he was not planning to stay, which was just as well if I was supposed to strip and wash here under the trees. Out of the myriad urgent questions, I chose what seemed the most important right now. Winterfalls. I dont know the place where and what is it? Winterfalls is a holding in the northeast, near the coast of Dalriada. Its the residence of Prince Oran, only son of the Dalriadan king. Quite a young man, I understand, and establishing his own household for the first time. Theres a sizable settlement there and many small farms. They dont have a local healer, so therell be no shortage of work. Are you telling me Ill need to live in this settlement? Conmael smiled. You loathe that notion so much, Blackthorn? Lets just say it would add to the difficulty of keeping your conditions. I know you better than you realize, he said. There is an old cottage some miles from Winterfalls settlement, on the edge of a wood. The local folk can walk or ride there quite easily; theres a path through Dreamers Wood and another that skirts it. The place will be highly suitable for you, though its run-down. Youll need to do some

work on it. People can get to you if they need help, but you'll have plenty of time in your own company. There are the makings of a garden; the house was tenanted by another wise woman some years ago. You'll be able to gather wild herbs in the woods. And my folk are nearby. To keep an eye on me. To watch over you. And to slap another year on the sentence if I make even the tiniest error. You think my terms harsh. But you have received your life back in return. Besides, learning can be very harsh indeed. And long. You know that already. Conmael. Yes? Did anyone else get out of that place? When you did what you did? When he did not answer straightaway, I wished I'd kept my stupid mouth shut. After a while he said, My interest stretches only as far as yourself. What became of those incarcerated with you, I have no idea. He gave me a very direct look, then added, I did not believe you could surprise me, Blackthorn, but you just did. What, because I asked after my wretched cellmates? What if Grim had lifted me up to the light, waited until I was safely out, then fought an impossible battle, one man against ten, twenty, thirty of Mathuins men-at-arms? The whole wretched bunch of them, Strangler, Frog Spawn and the rest, might now lie crushed beneath those stones. Conmael had made it happen and he didn't even seem to have thought about that. For them, maybe death was a kindness, I muttered. An hour ago, before the fire and the soup, I would have believed my own words. Now, I was not quite so sure. I'll leave you. Conmael rose to his feet. Enjoy your bath. It will be safe to sleep by the fire here. You will not see my people, but they will guard you. He did not wait for me to reply, but with a sweep of his grand cloak simply vanished.

Revue de presse An enchanting tale grounded by [Marilliers] compelling protagonists, Blackthorn and Grim, who rise above adversity to become a formidable team. Jacqueline Carey, New York Times bestselling author of Poison Fruit Dreamers Pool is a fabulous read, a rich tale that resonates of deepest myth peopled by well-drawn characters who must sort out their personal demons, while unraveling mysteries both brutally human and magical. Kristen Britain, New York Times bestselling author of the Green Rider series A simply gorgeous story a tale that will tug at your heart and, like the fable that it draws upon, linger in your head and soul for days afterwards. I cannot wait for the next installment in this series. Karen Brooks Filled with beauty, wisdom and wonder she's one of my all-time favorite authors and I only wish that she would write faster. A new book by Juliet Marillier is always a cause for celebration. Kate Forsyth [A] world full of enchantments, devotion, heartache, and mystery deliver[s] a tasteful feast for the imagination. Publishers Weekly (starred review)