24

Contradance

Greatheart came from a long line of sheepdogs. The rainlike drumming of hooves on rock, the gentle tinkling of sheep bells stirred his blood like a clarion call. These were the sounds he awoke to, his nose twitching to the smell of warm wool and manure.

Hassad was in a good mood. He was singing a song about a girl from the Wadi Hammamat, who was as beautiful as a green parakeet. Hassad had never seen either the Wadi Hammamat or a green parakeet; the song was one his grandfather had sung, and he liked the way it trilled and curled in the air, its loops and curlicues of sound. It was a song you could sing all day and not get tired of it. While Hassad sang of the girl from Wadi Hammamat, he thought about the little Nora whom Pierre had found, and hoped that she would stay with them awhile. He would make a good

Muslim of her, maybe then a girlfriend or wife. He imagined bringing her into his grandfather's garden, where his grandfather sat to smoke with the men in the cool of the evening. The other women of the household would be peeping out to see this new woman, curious and whispering to each other, but out of sight behind the leaves. Nora would follow Hassad, bowing respectfully to Grandfather, her hands on her knees. And Grandfather would see the color of her hair, and say, "Oh! But she is a Christian!" and Hassad would say, "No, Grandfather, not anymore. I have taught her well." Then Grandfather would say, "Speak, child," and Nora would recite twenty suras flawlessly, and the women behind the leaves would coo and applaud gently, and the breeze would shake the leaves, joining the applause. . . .

Hassad's reveries were interrupted by a mad puppy, who came catapulting over the ridge of a hill and dashed straight toward the shepherd, scattering frightened sheep to either side, leaping on Hassad's chest, tail wagging, tongue licking. Hassad was not fond of dogs. He shouted in surprise. He tried futilely to calm the animal, and set about trying to round up the excited, bleating sheep. The sound of this commotion, echoing in the quiet of the morning, woke Thomas, who had been searching the rocks near the Way all night, and had

fallen asleep at dawn, worn out by climbing up and down hills and by the intensity of his wish for Elenor. Thomas jumped to his feet. Greatheart ran a wide circle and headed for this new, vaguely familiar person. Hassad raised his arms to heaven, shouting in Arabic, "*Hamd'Allah!* He has sent me another Christian pilgrim!"

"*Yaar!* She's gone," said Hassad. He and Thomas peered into the little cabin. It was empty, its door held neatly open on leather hinges by a stone.

"Pierre must have gone with her to take her to the trail of pilgrims." He grimaced and shook his head. "Why was she in such a hurry to leave? It was good to have her here. Good to have a person to talk to. You! You could have stayed, too. Tonight the girl was going to tell me what I asked her . . . which I think she could not do . . . to tell me in few words what is Christianity."

Thomas was looking curiously at the cabin where Elenor had slept, admiring the neat simplicity of it, the oven, the amulet by the door, the leather hinges. Hassad recaptured his attention by punching him in the arm.

"Can you tell me?"

Thomas felt weak-kneed with gratitude at learning that Nora was alive, and clearheaded but slow from lack of sleep. He wished Hassad had asked

him almost anything else. He understood Hassad's question as a challenge, albeit a gentle one: he had heard it said before that most Muslims understood their religion better than most Christians understood theirs. He recognized, too, the hunger of shepherds everywhere for a scrap of conversation rich enough to think over through many days of solitude.

"Let's walk toward your sheep, and toward the Pilgrim Way, and I will try to answer."

They set off, Greatheart at Thomas' heels. Thomas tried to think of Christianity in the simplest terms, simpler than the Ten Commandments, which came from Judaism; simpler even than the Nicene Creed.

"When Jesus was on earth," he said to Hassad, "he was preaching one day to a group of farmers and fishermen on a hill by a lake. He said that there were two commandments on which all the rest of religion depended."

"And what were they, these two commandments?"

"To love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and to love other people as yourself."

They walked in silence for a moment. Then Hassad put his hand to his forehead. "Hooooo-eeee! These two commandments are harder than all five of ours! To fast you can do even when you

are angry. To say the prayers, yes, they will make you feel happier. I give alms whether I love the beggar or not, for my own good, to be holy. But always to have your heart turned the right way? Impossible! These are difficult commandments, sounding so gentle." He shook his head again, and said almost to himself, "No wonder Christians carry such anger. . . ."

"These are not funeral bells," Fra Ramon told Fra Jaime of Sancti Spiritus. "Break the rhythm! Give it a little"—he lifted his robes and did a dance step, tapping his heels—"lift! It is a call of welcome."

Ringing the bells cheerfully, irregularly, hour after hour, wore Fra Jaime out, and he staggered gratefully to his cot.

Most of the pilgrims had taken off together toward Santiago. Only three were still at Sancti Spiritus: Fra Pietro, too feeble to walk; Martin; and Etienne. Each hid his worry over Elenor and Thomas.

Fra Pietro slept.

Martin, champion at the game of stone-putting, continued to hone his skills, resolutely not thinking.

Etienne grieved. He took from his pack the parchment scraps he had begged from Aimery, the

bookseller, fingering them, wishing he had given them to Elenor as he had meant to do. *I'm a coward,* he thought. He had not given Elenor the scraps because he knew with absolute certainty that she would cry tears of joy. He knew how they would spring up in her gray eyes. He even knew, he thought, how she would feel.... And the affection between Elenor and Thomas was so fine, so frail. Etienne wanted to cup his hands around it the way Thomas cupped his around a tinder spark, to give it every chance.

He borrowed Martin's lute. He sat on a rock in the sun and wind, tried to ignore the bells, and sang softly to himself, trying out tunes, making up songs. Martin interrupted his practice to give advice:

"Make up some long story songs. We need long songs to make the road shorter.

"What about that story Fra Pietro told about the two pilgrims? Wouldna tha' make a good song?"

Later still he listened attentively. "That's verra nice. Now put in some kind of a refrain for people who canna remember the words. But first, one round of stones, to loosen up the fingers."

The Brothers of Sancti Spiritus rang the bells for as long as any pilgrim was lost in the pass. All night. All day.

Martin and Etienne disagreed about a point in their game. Nose to nose, both wild-eyed and ready to kill, they came to the same conclusion at the same time:

"We've got to get out of here!"

"The bells have driven us mad!"

"Holy Father Abbot," said Etienne, "we'll head back toward France and look for signs. We'll—"

"There'll be two of us; we'll be verra careful—"

"I have a song to try out."

The abbot rolled his eyes to heaven. "Stay on the path," he said.

"Is it a song fit to walk to?" asked Etienne anxiously. Martin strode beside him, crooning harmony and making changes here and there; it took his mind off worrying about Elenor. Neither of them mentioned either her or Thomas, but they kept up the noise: anyone within half a mile would be sure to hear them. Rabbits ran for cover.

Pierre brought Elenor to the Way a few miles north of the hospice. There was no one in sight, but they could hear the bells ringing.

"I will leave you here, Nora. I must go back to my sheep, before they all get into mischief. And I do not wish for the priests to know I am here."

"Pierre," said Elenor, wishing there was something she could give him, and knowing that there wasn't.

"Yes, Nora." He took her chin in his hand and looked at her with his bright searching eyes.

"I will always remember you with joy," she said.

"And so will I remember you, Nora, with joy and some regrets." He kissed her forehead. "Now go!"

She did, running down the path, stopping only at the turning to look back and wave. She was crying.

Hassad was as reluctant as Pierre to go anywhere near the hospice. "This is not a good place for people of my religion," he explained to Thomas. "Many Christians expect us to be—" He jumped sideways, crouched, pretended to pull a cutlass from his belt, and snarled. Then he laughed. "I do not wish to hang. I have a great love of life, so I stay away from the trail of pilgrims." He gestured toward the mountainside. Then he pointed to Thomas and patted his chest. "Though some pilgrims I like very much."

"I understand," said Thomas. "I am sad to say good-bye already. Go with my thanks, and Hassad—"

"Yes?"

"Salaam aleikoum," Thomas said, putting his hands on his thighs and bowing.

"Wa aleikoum salaam," answered Hassad, bowing in the same way.

Thomas took off down the trail at a run, with Greatheart at his heels.

He ran longer and faster than Elenor and caught up to her before she had gone far. She heard the footsteps behind her and turned in alarm. She jumped in the air and ran toward him, almost tripping over Greatheart, who was mad with glee, and threw her arms around Thomas' neck. He lifted her off her feet and swung her around and kissed her tearful face, and then stopped and held her from him, gazing raptly. Greatheart seized the chance and jumped into her arms and began licking her face.

"I'm getting a good face washing today." She laughed shakily. "Oh, Thomas, I'm so sorry. I've made such trouble. But oh, Thomas, I'm so glad I got lost!"

"And found, too?"

"Oh, yes, and found, too."

Just then, Etienne and Martin came around the bend, singing lustily.

Fra Pietro was dying. His face had a pale and almost translucent radiance, the bones clear and prominent. He was, Elenor thought, like a person waiting for a ship to leave, though far less apprehen-

sive than she had been at the sailing of the *Lady Elwyse*. Elenor held a cup of wine to his lips, but he drank very little. She wiped the rest off his chin gently and, dabbing the napkin on his pale lips, wondered if he had ever kissed anyone. She held his hand during the meal. Seeing that she could not get her hand free, Thomas cut her fish for her.

Fra Pietro had received last rites earlier in the afternoon. He made no effort to talk, but watched the Brothers and pilgrims, sometimes keenly, sometimes remotely, as his last energies came and went. Elenor was shaking with tiredness, and the evening stretched out for her like an endless dream. *Hurry up and die, Fra Pietro,* Elenor willed, *so I can sleep.* He held her hand. *Take your time, Fra Pietro. Take your blessed time,* she thought, contrite.

"Brother, we have put one of the stories you told us into a song. Would you like to hear it?" asked Etienne, and the old man smiled faintly. Etienne sang softly but very clearly. Martin joined him on harmonies, serious now, intent on making the best of the song. Shadows flickered on the whitewashed walls made pink by the firelight. The Brothers' faces, each so different, were serene. Greatheart thumped his tail gently. *Their voices are like a dance,* thought Elenor, too tired to blink back tears.

The story told of two pilgrims traveling together to Santiago. One pilgrim dies on the way, and the

other continues, making the pilgrimage for them both. In the last verse of the song, the pilgrim is leaving the sanctuary at Santiago alone. He feels a hand on his shoulder and hears the voice of his companion. By the end of the song all of the Brothers were singing the refrain. They sang the last one over twice, a lullaby for Fra Pietro.

In the quiet after the song, his ragged breath came and went more and more slowly, each exhalation deep and complete, each new inhalation a restless interruption. Elenor thought of a dog settling to sleep, standing, turning, lying down again.

Fra Pietro gave Elenor's hand a squeeze, and died. The body on the stretcher was no more Fra Pietro than was the bench beside it.

Elenor swayed on her knees. Fra Jaime caught her before she hit the floor, and made her go to bed, where she fell into the deepest sleep of her life, with Greatheart warm and snoring at the crook of her knees.

25

Bonds

Welcome, pilgrims! Welcome to Zubiri in the name of God and of his holy mother. Take a drink here. The water is sweet and there is plenty of it all the year round, thank God." An old lady dressed in black, her eyes sparkling in a sea of wrinkles, helped fill their gourds, as the pilgrims crowded around the fountain, drinking from cupped hands. A sow wallowed at their feet, adding her own cries of joy at the splashes of spilled water.

Going into the town out of the hot sun was like diving into a tunnel, or an animal's burrow. The houses were built so tightly together that they blocked out the light. Sheep, goats, and cattle trotted in the street as if down mountain gulches and were slapped and prodded into stables on the ground floor of people's houses.

In the dark, people called greeting and encouragement, and when they burst out into the sun

again, the pilgrims found a market-day welcome.

The church adjoined an old square. Roman columns held up the half-timbered porches of houses and taverns. Merchants and farmers had their wares spread out under the porches and around the square. Beside a table piled with fresh-baked bread, a child waved branches to keep off flies. Elenor thought back to the day at Ramsay when they had heard the men were coming home, so very long ago, and wanted to pummel bread dough again; she wanted to show off her muscles to Elise and Helen.

Some men came into the square dragging a cart loaded with pigskins of wine. Villagers took long pulls, squirting the wine through the air and catching it in their mouths, and challenged the pilgrims to do the same. Martin winked at Elenor when he saw her admiring his skill. Thomas had wine on his chin and on his shirt. He shrugged his shoulders and held a wineskin out to her with a grin. No other ladies were drinking straight from the skin, she noticed, so she shook her head, but she felt flooded with well-being.

She and Thomas slept separately now, by unspoken agreement. Pierre had taught Elenor that men could want her, and she herself could no longer pretend that Thomas was Carla.

The sound of church bells brought people hurrying and hobbling down the streets from all sides; merchants left their wares unattended. After vespers, people stayed in the plaza, lingering in the summer dusk, and the music started. The pilgrims had been invited to bed down in the church or under the arcades of the plaza, but it seemed the townspeople had little intention of letting them sleep. A young man carrying a drum and a pipe danced in shuffling circles, playing a shrill repetitive tune with one hand, while keeping up a steady beat on the drum. Wherever he passed, everyone from toddlers to ancient grandpas raised their hands in the air, snapped their fingers, and stepped to the music. Elenor saw an old farmer showing Etienne the steps, cheering him on with yelps of encouragement, clapping him on the back and plying him with wine.

Well fed on bread and cheese, wine and grapes, Elenor asked a child where she could relieve herself, and was directed to a ditch that ran out under the wall at the low end of the village. Back in the plaza, she rolled herself in her cloak and, using her bag for a pillow, settled against one of the stone columns. She watched the colorful blur of festivities through half-closed eyes and was soon asleep.

Sometime in the night Elenor had a dream of bugs singing in harmony. She woke to the voices

of old, old ladies. Opening her eyes, she saw seven crones moving through the plaza to the light of a lantern that one of them held aloft. Another held a human skull, turning its grin one way and another like royalty greeting a crowd. Merrily they called out in singsong voices, "Pray for the souls in purgatory! Wake up, you sleepers, and say one little prayer for your brothers and sisters in purgatory, waiting for the glory of God. Just one little prayer, and then sleep well." Among them, Elenor recognized the old woman who had welcomed them at the fountain.

Lauds was already ringing when she woke. Elenor sat up in the pale light, chewing a stick to clean her teeth, dreading the trip to the ditch. When she came back, she combed her hair. It took a long time to get it free of snarls, and her arm ached. Her hair was almost to her waist now, and it was a relief to get it plaited and looped up out of the way.

She let her eyes rest on Thomas. He twitched and pulled his blanket closer in his sleep. His head rested on the hard stone of the square. An old man hobbled from group to group of sleeping pilgrims, shaking them awake. Elenor watched him grab Thomas' foot. Thomas gave a kick that sent the old man sprawling, then instantly staggered to his feet, apologizing and helping the man up.

"So sorry, brother—didn't mean to hurt you—took me by surprise. Here, have you breakfasted?"

Poor Thomas.

The man's name was Gregoire. He had fallen sick here in Zubiri years ago on his way to Santiago.

"I stayed at the church for many nights, and every day people brought me their good bread and their wine, their prayers, too, and a little girl came and sang to me, so that I hoped to die here and never leave, knowing the women would pray for my soul along with the others."

"But you got well," Elenor prompted.

"Yes, *hija,* I got well, but then I realized that I didn't need to keep traveling, for if the people of Zubiri could forgive my wickedness, then surely God, who is greater in kindness, had forgiven me long since."

Chewing yesterday's bread and sipping water from their gourds, Thomas and Elenor thought over what Gregoire said.

Thomas spoke. "Tell me, brother, how do you think that this undertaking of a pilgrimage helps us to win forgiveness?"

Gregoire took his time in answering.

"Horses," he said flatly at last, startling Elenor. "Battle horses. You have to train them, right?"

Thomas nodded.

"You put them through trials. You make them tough. The world, the temptations and hard times and sorrows toughen us, readying us for heaven. That's how." He nodded emphatically.

Later, when they had said good-bye to Gregoire and to Zubiri, and the path again became wide enough so that they could walk side by side, Elenor asked Thomas what he thought of the old man's answer.

"I think that for Gregoire his pilgrimage worked as expiation." Thomas hesitated. "The baker told me that, years ago, Gregoire flew into a jealous rage and murdered his whole family. He was banished from his village and wore a sign saying I AM A MURDERER, until he settled in Zubiri."

"Like Cain," said Elenor, and shivered. "But what if you like being on pilgrimage? How can it be a trial? I mean, what if you would rather be on pilgrimage than doing anything else? How would it toughen your soul?"

"You can be happy and tough both, don't you think?" said Thomas. "A battle horse enjoys his training."

"But I haven't done anything hard yet."

Thomas thought about her giving away Mab, carrying Jean-Paul, holding Fra Pietro's hand, but he didn't contradict her, for surely she would know

better than he what was hard for her and what wasn't. Instead he asked, "Do you like being on this pilgrimage, and in my company?"

He sounded so pleased with himself, as if he had invented the whole idea of pilgrimage, that some of Elenor's misgivings came back. But she could still say, "Yes, Thomas of Thornham-Ramsay, except for the bugs and the latrine ditches and a few of the maudlin songs, I like it very much indeed." They walked on companionably in silence until Thomas spoke again.

"Then what, for you, would be a trial of fire?"

Without thinking she answered, "Boredom. To be the lady on the tapestry and spend my life waiting. Also, to bear children."

"Oh," said Thomas.

Elenor was embarrassed.

"But maybe that wouldn't be so bad, either, once I, ah, put my mind to it," she mumbled.

At Puente la Reina a major road joined theirs, bringing in pilgrims from the south of France, Italy, Romania, even Greece. Elenor suddenly felt shy and tired. She was ashamed of her timidity. It didn't help that some of these new pilgrims were girls almost as young as she was, big Italian girls who traveled together confidently, with no men,

and laughed and joked together, their voices like music, like bubbly water. Elenor saw one of them watching Thomas, catching his eye and giving him a broad smile, only to be teased and scolded by her companions. They didn't notice Elenor.

A third road led due south to Saragossa. This was the road that Etienne must take to get to Toledo. They had traveled together for so long that it seemed impossible to Elenor that they would not be seeing Etienne anymore, hearing his voice in the night and his songs along the road. She, Thomas, and Etienne stood at the crossroad shrine, not wanting to say good-bye.

"Come with us to Compostela," Thomas urged him.

"Remember my quest, Thomas? To learn about Islam and the world of the Arabs? Maybe, Thomas, our quests are the same. *You* come with me."

Elenor could tell that Thomas longed to do just that. They had talked over what each had learned from Hassad, and Elenor was surprised to find that Thomas was familiar with the Koran. Etienne had shown them both what he knew of Arabic writing, and the three of them had practiced flourishing Arabic letters in the dust when no other pilgrims were around.

Elenor was beginning to see that Thomas had a

lively, curious, and patient mind. She wished, for his sake, that he could go to Toledo, or to some great center of learning. Maybe in England . . .

"Maybe your travels will bring you to England someday," Thomas was saying to Etienne, but none of them could really picture such a faraway future.

"Thank you for the stories and the songs," said Elenor. "I have them here." She pointed to her head. "I'll write them down when I get home."

"Under your hat, are they?" said Etienne, putting his hand on her head in a gesture that was half caress, half blessing. "I've been wondering what was under that hat. Oh!" he added nonchalantly, fishing parchment scraps from his satchel. "These are to write them down on, or for pictures." Tears sprang to Elenor's eyes.

With hugs all around, they parted company. When Etienne was very small in the distance, he turned, and they waved energetically at each other from one end to the other of the dusty road.

Thomas and Elenor had fallen behind the main body of pilgrims, and they were in no hurry to catch up. The road was so dry it would take a long time for the dust to settle. They walked off the path a ways. Conversation seemed a great effort.

"I need to find a place to wash clothes," said Elenor, to break the silence.

"Fleas?" asked Thomas.

Elenor nodded. "Big Zubiri fleas, and maybe lice."

They followed a sheep path that started within sight of the dusty road. Farther on, the flatness of the land gave way to hills, and the path meandered into a pine woods. The trees shaded them; the needles cushioned their footsteps; the heat of the day opened the pinecones so that the air was mellow with the smell of rosin. They walked as in a dream, quietly, and the path became indiscernible in the play of light and shadow, the soft browns and greens and coppers. Elenor had a tremendous desire to lie down in the soft pine needles. She saw little sandy burrows under the roots where rabbits surely nestled. She followed Thomas, heedless as a sleepwalker.

"Can we take a rest?" she finally asked, just as she was stumbling to her knees.

"Aye," said Thomas, "I think we must, for how else can we find out where we are now? This is a strange wood with no moss on the trees." He squatted down and, clearing away pine needles, drew a big circle on the ground. "If we stay still for an hour or so, perhaps we'll see how the sun moves, and then we can follow it to the southwest and meet the Way." He took a little stick, put it upright in the ground, and drew a line where its shadow ran. "And now we wait," he said contentedly. But

Elenor was already nestled in a spot of sun, her pack under her head, fast asleep.

He was there when she woke up; she knew it without seeing him. His being there added warmth to a day already hot and dancing with the smell of pine sap and the hum of little forest insects. She rolled over and found him watching her, his eyes dark and serious. She longed to roll over twice more and bury herself in his warmth and forget about being a pilgrim. Instead, she sat up and started picking pine needles out of her hair.

"Let me," said Thomas. She was wondrously surprised to see that his hands were shaking.

It was well past noon when they found the Way again. The road was empty, save for a solitary tinker who struck up conversation with Thomas. Elenor hurried on ahead. She heard the faint sound of water, could feel a freshness in the air, and soon came to a newly built stone bridge arching over a small river.

The water tumbled over rocks, a good sign: fast-running water was usually clean and drinkable. But Elenor's heart sank: there were already some women in the river doing their wash, and among them she recognized several Italian girls and Melinda. She fought off an impulse to hurry on. She

shouldered up her bundle and climbed down the embankment.

The women paused for a minute in their talking and looked at her with friendly curiosity. She nodded a greeting, dumped her bundle on the bank, and threw her heavy cape toward the water. A clamor went up from the girls. They clustered around her, holding the cape up, feeling the wool, shaking their heads.

In the babble of voices Elenor recognized three words: *mal,* which meant "bad," *lavare,* which could only mean "wash," and *lana,* which had to be "wool." They were worried that she would ruin her cloak by washing it. She forgot her shyness in the involved ritual of talking in signs and mixed languages. She put her hand on one girl's shoulder to get her attention.

"Look, *regarde, mira.*" She showed her where the cape had become infested, probably from sleeping against the column in Zubiri. She showed how big the cape was on her, trying to show that it could use a little shrinking. There were shruggings of shoulders and shakings of heads, but finally one girl brought over a pot of soft soap and shouted to the others. Elenor heard *ajuda,* the Latin word for "help," and *inglesa,* "English girl."

The others flocked around and plunged into

helping Elenor do what they had all advised her not to do. They soaked the heavy wool and rubbed the soft soap through it. Then they trampled it underfoot on the clean gravel bottom of the river, stomping out soap and dirt and vermin together. Clouds of black dirt and dye swirled downstream. One girl suddenly shrieked, shaking a blackened foot in the air, and they all began inspecting their bare feet. Three girls put their arms on one another's shoulders and did a line dance, shaking first one foot, then the other.

"E come se chiama la piccola inglesa?" asked one. Elenor was catching on to the language. They were asking her name.

"Nora," she said, pointing at herself, and *"Tu?"* touching the girl nearest her.

"Anna," the girl answered.

"*Io* Bea!" said the biggest, most beautiful and outspoken of the girls, the one who had been trying to get Thomas' attention, with such a flourish that the others laughed and cheered.

They were so splashed they gave up trying to keep dry. Bea tucked her skirts in her belt and waded in up to her thighs, and the others followed. Washing all the clothes was a long job, standing in the icy water, but at last Elenor and the others hauled the heavy cape up onto a grassy part of the bank, wrung it out, and spread it in the afternoon

sun. Elenor's feet were numb and her back ached. She sank contentedly to the ground watching the others spread their clothes on rosemary bushes.

And when they had finished and stretched out beside her, Thomas appeared, carrying his cloak to the washing. He was met with a roar from the Italian girls, a roar of greeting, protest, and exasperation.

"Wouldn't it be fine," said Thomas after supper, as they lay around the campfire ready for sleep, "wouldn't it be sensible if we could just forget who is supposed to do what?"

"Shall we have a debate about it?" asked Elenor, with a yawn.

"A disputation . . ."

"Aye," said Martin, who had turned up again after a week in someone's wine cellar, "aren't we doing just that? Look at Nora. Long ago, she was an English lady; now she sets snares, fishes, cooks—"

"Hardly, Martin," muttered Elenor, who had burned the fish for supper.

"And she can read and write like an abbot."

Elenor, embarrassed, tried to change the tide of the conversation. "There's Thomas, who washed his own cloak this afternoon, with a little help from the Italian *brigata*—"

"No!" broke in Martin, clasping his hands over his heart. "Not my Italians!"

"While our wandering poet looked for the meaning of life in a skin of Rioja wine," continued Elenor. "Why get stuck with being just one person? Thomas, are you thinking of taking up the priesthood?"

Her question, asked flippantly, hung in the air a moment, and a sudden sadness hit Elenor in the pit of the stomach. Did she care what he answered? Anyway, she had broken the mood of joking without meaning to.

"Well," Thomas said at last, "I think I would like to study with a wise person like Bernard of Chartres, or Abelard, and surely there are some such great scholars teaching now." He stared into the fire a little wistfully; then he smiled. "I don't think, though, that I'd like to be a priest."

"Why not?" asked Elenor.

"I wouldn't like being celibate, for one thing," said Thomas, smiling but not looking at her as he rolled over and turned his back on his companions.

"Ha!" Martin snorted. "And ye think the priests are?"

26

The Brigata

Elenor was beginning to hate her heavy cape. She still used it to sleep on, to keep her off the ground, but all day every day now she carried it on her back, rolled as tightly as she could get it. The sun poured down on the high plateaus of northern Spain like honey; she swam in it step after step and felt as if she would never be cold again. Underfoot, dry desert flowers opened and blossomed and were crushed to powder. The air was full of the drone of insects.

"Did you know that Saint Francis used to stop and pick little bugs off the road and set them on the side so they wouldn't get trampled?" asked Anna, one of the Italian girls.

"It's a wonder he ever made it to Compostela, then," replied Elenor shortly. With a whispery crunch, herbs powdered underfoot, releasing a tangy smell. Tiny bees swarmed around the herbs and wildflowers, oblivious to the passing humans.

One landed on Melinda's skirt, and she shook it off gently.

"At home we believe that bees are the souls of babies who are waiting to be born. And so we are very careful."

"That's depressing," said Elenor, looking at the millions of bees around her.

"Why?" asked Bea, who was striding steadily on her other side. "Don't you want to have many babies, you and Thomas?" The Italian girls all laughed.

"Bea is jealous," teased Gisella, and Bea blushed, but she put an arm around Elenor's shoulders.

"Look at them all." She smiled. "Just waiting."

Elenor swallowed. She was very thirsty. "Maybe just one," she said hoarsely. "But you can never have just one, can you?"

"Well," said Bea, "maybe and maybe not." What a child this English girl was! Didn't she know anything? "But if you're lucky and want to, you can take a good long rest between each of them."

"Can you really? And for how long?" Elenor had never known anyone whom she had thought to ask these questions.

"Oh, two years, anyway. You just keep nursing the first one, and like as not, you won't get another until you stop."

Elenor laughed. She knew that about milk cows. Why hadn't she guessed it would be true of women,

too? What foolishness it seemed that ladies put their babies out to nurse with wet nurses and then died of too many births too close together! Suddenly the day seemed very beautiful.

"Start a song, Bea."

Bea threw back her head and called out to the blue sky, *"Utreeeeeiiiiaaaa!"* which was picked up by Elenor and Melinda and Gisella and pilgrims all up and down the Way. But they were all too thirsty for the singing to last long.

"Tell us a story, Bea," said Gisella.

"*Oc.* Here's one I heard in Puente. It's about how they got their school for children there."

"Tell it."

"Once upon a time, actually about fifty years ago, the town of Puente la Reina in the kingdom of Navarre had a very greedy mayor. He was one of those fellows who hates terribly to part with his money, and yet he loved fine clothes, fine tapestries, and, above all, fine food.

"As this mayor was passing through the market one day, checking the scales of the merchants and keeping everyone honest, he spied in a fish stall a most beautiful mackerel, fresh and shiny silver, with an eye so clear it seemed to have just jumped out of the ocean.

" 'Merchant!' said the mayor. 'What do you want for that fish?'

"'Ah! Lord Mayor, that is the best of fish, and for it I am asking one gold peso.'

"'A gold peso! For a simple fish! You must be mad, man!'

"The merchant did not answer, but simply shrugged his shoulders and bowed in a humble way. The mayor strode away in a huff, and went home, where he sat on an embroidered chair and thought about how good that fish would have tasted. At last he was unable to bear the temptation. He called for his servant, and once again he headed for the market. When he got to the fish stall, the beautiful fish was gone! The merchant must have put it in the shade somewhere.

"'Ahem! Merchant! I have decided to buy the fish. The large one that was right here. Where is it now?'

"'Ah, Lord Mayor, I am sorry to tell you that that fish has been sold.'

"'Sold! At the price you told me?'

"The merchant nodded.

"'Who in this town can possibly have bought a fish for that price? Why, a person could get a pair of good shoes for a gold peso!' The mayor was outraged to think that anyone had more money to spend than he did, and he was even more outraged when he thought of someone else eating that delicious fish.

" 'I believe that may be just what happened, sir,' said the merchant. 'The person who bought the fish was a poor cobbler, but he told me he had just been paid the peso for a pair of boots.'

" 'Is he nearby?' asked the mayor. 'I would like to speak with the man.'

" 'Yes, right over there.'

"So the mayor strode up to the little cobbler, who stood holding his young son by the hand, a large fish-shaped parcel under his arm.

" 'You, fellow. Did you just buy the large mackerel that was for sale over there?'

" 'Yes, sir. I did,' said the cobbler, a smile spreading over his face.

" 'And how could you afford to spend money so irresponsibly?'

"The cobbler seemed at a loss for a reply, but after thinking a moment, he said, 'Lord Mayor, this is a truly exceptional fish, and with it my family and I will have a truly exceptional meal, which we can remember on days when we are hungry.'

" 'But have you no savings?' asked the mayor. 'What will happen to you if you fall sick?'

"The cobbler scratched his head. 'If I am sick, some kind soul will help me. There is, I think, a charity hospital in this town.'

"When he heard this, the mayor was even more incensed, for in his will, which he had drawn up

before a magistrate, he had left all his wealth to the charity hospital. It had seemed a good way to assure himself a place in heaven. Now he thought about how this cobbler would enjoy fish while he, the mayor, who had accumulated so much wealth, would dine on something ordinary. He went home and called the magistrate.

"'I want to change my will,' he said. 'I will not leave anything at all to the charity hospital. Instead, I will leave all my wealth to build a school for the children of Puente, that they may grow up to be wise. It will be open to all children except the children of cobblers, who have enough good fortune already.'

"And as far as I know," said Bea, "that is the true story of how Puente got its school."

"And children of cobblers still can't go?"

"That's what I was told," said Bea.

"Did you ever go to school, Nora?" asked Gisella. "You can read, can't you?"

Elenor told her about Father Gregory's tutoring. "And what about you?"

The Italian girls all looked at each other and laughed.

"We all go to school together," began Gisella.

"*Went* to school, Gisella. It's over now, don't you remember?"

"When we were all working as shepherdesses in

Tuscany, we used to meet for lunch in the shade of some willow trees near the church. We ate and rested and talked—"

"And pretended we were queens."

"And climbed the trees."

"When I was six and Bea was ten, she fed me mud pies!"

"And Gisella ate them, *poverina,*" teased Bea.

"You've all known each other that long?" Elenor asked.

"Oh, yes. We are a *brigata.* We stick together."

"And what about the school?"

"There was a wonderful old priest at the church—"

"A saint!"

"Fra Giacomo. He came out one day and said—"

"He said, 'As long as you girls are here every day, we should have a little school.' And he broke off sticks from the tree and started teaching us our letters."

Bea stopped and traced in the dirt, while the other girls chanted slowly, "A-V-E M-A-R-I-A!"

"If it hadn't been for Fra Giacomo, our fathers would never have let us do this pilgrimage; mine wouldn't have, anyway," said Anna.

"After we told him what we wanted to do, he went to each house and talked so long to our par-

ents, saying how brave we are, and religious, and sensible . . ." They all laughed, and Bea made a halo with her hands over Gisella's head. "And how we will work so much harder and better when we come home again."

"I won't complain about walking from Petrella to Cascalenda, that's for sure."

Thomas watched Nora, Melinda, and the Italian girls from below as they came down a hill—six black figures against the landscape of endless red earth hills. They were all practicing carrying their bundles on their heads, and their laughter floated down to him. From this distance they looked very tall, as if the bundles were extensions of their heads. It was evening. Shadows stretched long, the sky was deep blue, the hills striped rust and gold, deep rich colors. A flock of blackbirds rose suddenly from a shadowed dip into the copper sun.

27

Calvary

Elenor grabbed at a small tree to pull herself up a steep stretch. It occurred to her that those who had first worn and then paved the Pilgrim Way didn't much care about getting to Santiago. Their aim was to get close to God. They built shrines on the tops of mountains. The harder the mountain was to climb, the better.

Santa Lucia was a pilgrimage church built where nothing grew but stunted pines, up where it was windy and cold even in August. A hundred and thirty stone steps were carved into the highest peak, on its steepest side. To climb these steps on their knees, saying an Ave Maria on each step, and a Paternoster every ten, one for each Station of the Cross, was called by the pilgrims a Calvary. It was designed to make the pilgrim suffer the way Jesus suffered on his way to being crucified.

Thomas and Elenor stopped to rest on the mountainside across the valley from Santa Lucia.

"Melinda is doing the Calvary tomorrow," said Elenor.

"Our martyr Melinda. She'll faint halfway up."

"Melinda says she wants to do the Calvary as a pledge."

"A pledge of what?"

"Toward honesty, I think; not to tell fortunes or fake visions anymore."

"Why choose such a dramatic way of making a pledge? I don't see how climbing those steps on your knees is any different from scourging yourself with a flail. It's the kind of thing Friar Paul might tell somebody to do." Thomas peeled some pine sap from a tree, rolling it between his fingers. "Doesn't it seem perverse to you, Nora, to act as if pain were holy, and pleasure a sin?"

Elenor thought suddenly of the pine woods, the strong pull of pleasure that seemed to have no wrong in it except that it was forbidden. She thought of Pierre, of his honest, questioning face, eyebrows raised.

"I don't know," she said. And she didn't. Back at Ramsay, she had always thought that Friar Paul was perverse in his love of pain, but she wondered lately if she had misunderstood him or been too quick to dismiss his every sermon because of his ugly body and his squeaky voice.

"Melinda says that voluntary submission to pain is a virtue, in imitation of Christ."

"Maybe," said Thomas. "But Christ didn't ask to be crucified, did he? It was the outcome of his work. He dreaded it. He prayed to be spared."

Elenor nodded, agreeing, while the words she meant to say next stuck in her throat.

"Thomas, we—I—am doing the Calvary with Melinda. All of the *brigata*, too. Because we are her friends."

Thomas threw the sticky rosin away. His mouth tightened and he looked out over the valley.

Elenor felt desolate. Before he had come back to England, she had never expected that she and Thomas of Thornham would agree on anything; in the last few months the bond between them had become her greatest joy. Now that she was deliberately doing something he did not agree with, she felt as if she were breaking a trust.

"I let Melinda know when I thought she was being stupid; I should let her know when I think she's doing right," she managed to say, but her heart wasn't in it.

"Couldn't you just tell her?" tried Thomas.

Elenor shook her head. Afraid she would lose her resolve, she got up and left to find the *brigata*.

Thomas picked up a rock and threw it hard

against a tree. Was Elenor going to become a Doomsdayer and join Friar Paul's keeners at Ramsay? He would hate that. He had thought that he and Nora agreed that self-inflicted pain was perverse. He had thought that she shared his distrust of overpious ladies who spent their time crying on their knees. He thought about her pigheadedness and the prospect of marriage.

Elenor slept with the *brigata* that night. Thomas and Martin shared a jug of wine and then rolled up in their cloaks under the stars. The cold wind blew along the ground, smelling of mountain sage. Thomas fell into a deep and forlorn dream: he was in a large, luminous gray room. Before him he could see the black squared shoulders of a woman kneeling, facing away from him. Her face was hidden, but he could see the white shaft of her bent neck, the black mass of her bound hair. He could hear the repetitious words of prayer. He was unable to speak, but all of his being longed for the woman to turn toward him. The words of the prayers fell on him in gray pebbles, covering him, weighing him down, constricting his chest like swaddling bands. The woman never turned.

Elenor, Bea, Gisella, Anna, Irena, and Melinda bought rags from the children who hawked

them at the bottom of the Calvary, and tied them around their knees. "Else we'll not get to the top, much less to Santiago," said Irena.

"God doesn't mind, or he'd strike down these little varmints for selling the rags," reasoned Bea.

Together they began the climb, Bea and Melinda leading off with the first half of the Ave Maria, the others coming in on *"Sancta Maria, mater dei,"* and continuing through to "Amen," at which point they moved to the next step and Bea and Melinda began again. Elenor took pleasure in the sound of their voices as the familiar words flowed and jumbled together. Bea speeded things up by beginning her *"Ave"* just before Elenor said "Amen," and bit by bit, the two groups overlapped more and more, so that the prayers flowed faster and faster and there was no time to rest on a step before shifting onto one knee to climb to the next. Moving up the steps was very awkward: the steps were high.

Every ten steps there was a tiny side chapel, a place where the ground leveled out enough for them to crawl off the steps and rest. In the first of these chapels they found a comforting statue of San Roque, the patron saint of cuts and bruises, showing his scraped knees.

"Nice knees, Roque," said Bea.

"I'm going to turn into a goose before this is over," muttered Anna.

The second decena was twice as hard as the first, and when the girls reached the chapel of San Blas, patron of sore throats, they rolled over and stretched their legs and cried with relief.

By the third chapel they were leaning on each other for support, dragging one another up by the elbows.

By the fifth chapel, Elenor's knees were raw, and sharp pains shot through her hip joints. Her mind wandered and she half dreamed she had been turned into a dwarf for ingratitude.

From the sixth chapel, dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows, they could look back over the valleys. The sun was setting and mist rose from a river below. But it made Elenor dizzy to look down, and miserable to look up. Waves of nausea swept over her. They were only halfway. She was determined not to faint.

On and on it went. The rags bit into her knees, and then one came untied, so that she left a splotch of blood on each step. She didn't notice. She was intent on gathering up her pain and offering it as a prayer. All of her concentration was on dragging herself up one more step, and one more after that. The flow of prayers slowed, as each step became a struggle between body and spirit.

It was dark before they reached the top. Candles burned in the church, constantly relit as they blew

out in the drafts. The air was acrid with smoke, and Elenor saw only a blaze of light, because her eyes were swimming. It was over; they had all made it; and Elenor collapsed on the hard rock of the church threshold.

A Sister from the hostel attached to the church of Santa Lucia had just revived her when Thomas found them. He picked her up as she came to, and when she protested, he couldn't think of anything to say, but rocked her gently. He carried her to the hostel and made his way through the crowd to a place near the fire, because she was shaking. When a Sister came by with a bowl of water for washing the knees of the penitents, he took it from her and very gently washed the blood off Elenor's knees. There were no words spoken between them.

The rule is, water and bread for one day for each pilgrim, and then he has to move along, unless he's sick, like your friend here. She's got to stay a few days, until her fever's gone, God bless her, but we can't be feeding the lot of you while you wait for her to get well."

The hallway outside the tiny cell where Elenor lay shivering and sweating was crowded; the four Italian girls were there, and Thomas and Martin, and Melinda, who had brought her well-worn Saint Christopher medal for Elenor. Sister Antonia tried

to quiet them down, and at last it was decided that the *brigata* would go on, Melinda with them. Thomas and Martin would be allowed to wait for Elenor and bring her along as soon as she could travel, provided they put a new roof on the barn for the Sisters.

"We'll hurry, and you travel as slowly as you can. We'll catch up with you in a few days," Martin told them. Each of the girls hugged Martin and Thomas good-bye, while Sister Antonia looked on impatiently. Martin was taking advantage of the confusion to start on a second round of hugs when the Sister finally pushed them all outside.

Thomas was glad and sorry to see them go. It touched him to see them limping down the steep mountainside, joking and supporting one another so much like wounded men after a battle.

He liked the *brigata,* especially Bea. He loved the way she looked and the way she moved, and he thought of her often, though he tried not to. As his affection for Nora was growing, so was his appreciation of all other women. It was troublesome.

Way at the bottom of the steep path, Bea turned to wave.

What an onion! Elenor held it between her hands; it filled them both, smooth and brown. Her throat ached; her eyes watered; she

could hardly breathe. Outside the nuns' hostel, the wind howled, banging the wooden door, moaning down the chimney, scattering ashes and coals. Elenor had been huddled by the fire all morning, her only job to sweep the coals back into place with a hearth broom. Thomas was squatting by the fire now, squirting water from a pigskin into the kettle. His voice mingled with the sounds of the wind.

"One of these old Sisters used to be a curing woman. *La Curandera,* they call her. Back home, I don't know . . . They took me to her cell."

"Is she—a witch?" Elenor croaked.

Thomas turned to see if he could tease her, but she looked so small and scared he decided against it.

"She's not a witch, or if she is, she's the helping kind. A little magic mixed with the prayers can't hurt. It's just that she's got a face like a mandrake root. And the only way she was going to come out to see you was if I carried her in a sack. I told her how you were shaking, your head on fire, your knees big as pig bladders . . . no offense. 'Go straightaway to the kitchens,' she told me. 'Yes, ma'am!' I said. 'And get the biggest onion they've got. Make her eat the whole thing raw, and wash it down with hot wine. When she's sweating like a horse, call one of the Sisters to come and bring some holy water and wash off the sweat. That'll get rid

of the fever and shakes,' she said, 'sure as Judgment Day.'" Thomas put his thumb in the kettle to test the water. "Sister Antonia thinks the knees are almost healed. It's just the fever we have to cure. There. Tell her there's hot water here when she comes in."

Stop being so busy, thought Elenor. *Just rock me.* "Thanks for the onion," she whispered as he went out the door.

Sister Antonia came in as Thomas went out, carrying holy water and a white cloth. Elenor obediently took her first chomp.

Later, after she had cried more tears than she thought she had in her, the fever broke and she slept like a baby, dreaming gentle dreams of ponies and flowers. Two days later fierce Sister Antonia told her to get on the road, and she did, though Thomas carried her bundle after they were out of the Sister's sight.

28

Slowing

At Los Condes they came to a shallow but fast-running river. A burly man sat in a heavy, painted rowboat, waiting to ferry the pilgrims across. He told Elenor that he had been carrying pilgrims over the river for thirty years.

"Have you ever been to Santiago?" she asked him.

The man shook his head. "I don't feel the need to travel yet," he said. "Maybe one day, when I've finished looking at the river."

Elenor watched the breeze ruffle the water, the delicate willow leaves trailing from the banks in green lacy curtains, and heard the plop of frogs and fish. The stones along the bank were golden in the sun, cool and brown in the water. Sheep grazed right up to the edge of the river, their bells clinking gently, their grunts conversational as they tore softly

at the grass. Behind them rose the mellow stone wall of the convent of Santa Clara, broken by a welcoming arched portal decorated with zigzags of stone, rows of stone baubles, as sure and exuberant as a child's drawing. The gates stood open, and a ewe looked out, her head raised, sun shining on her wool so that she glowed. Elenor smiled at the boatman. "I don't think you will ever run out of things to see on the river."

He laughed. "Neither do I, little girl. So you must say a prayer for me in Santiago."

"And you must say one for me here. It is very good to be in one place."

She thought how glad she would be to be home, to see one particular lamb grow into a sheep, to see one particular tree flower and leaf out and make fruit and wither and bloom again.

On the arched ceiling of the church in León, Elenor saw paintings so beautiful she lay awake thinking of them all night, of the ochers and earth reds, the soft blues, the expressive sheep and sad-eyed shepherds.

The Way was crowded now, the pilgrimage like a river gathering strength. Too much to see, too much to hear. Too many stories and reasons and wishes. It made Elenor want to stop.

"Could we leave the Way?" she asked Thomas. "Could we take a side path? Or better yet, no path?"

"Why?" asked Thomas. But he was tired of having dust in his teeth.

"I want to slow down." She wasn't ready to get to Santiago.

Thomas thought about it. "After Ponferrada, the Way branches. We could take whichever branch seems less traveled."

So she walked patiently, listening to the stories, the songs, hoping to find the *brigata.* Greatheart walked at her heels, his tongue hanging out.

At Ponferrada, the pilgrims were lodged against the lower walls of a castle high above a river that snaked and shivered on its shale bed. The hostel and church were roofed in slate set in patterns like the scales of a dragon, gleaming in the rain. Only the intense greenness relieved the austerity of the place, and brilliant pink wild vines. Elenor pulled one of these to tickle the nose of a black kitten, until Greatheart chased it away. Could such a pink ever be transmitted to paper? Light but intense. *Some berry must have a juice like that,* she thought, scratching Greatheart behind the ears.

The Way forked. The main road led on to Santiago through a long valley. Another path went up

over the hills, along the ridges, reaching Santiago in fewer miles over higher mountains. The lower road was the more frequented, and was well served by hostels. Elenor, Thomas, and Martin decided to take the high road.

Climbing ever higher, they could see the pilgrims on the pass road below, like ants, and they could hear snatches of song and the droning high notes of a Galician bagpipe.

"Herru Sanctiagu
Got Sanctiagu
E ultreia, e sus eia
Deus, adjuva nos."

The hills rose in gentle, powerful waves. Sometimes the path ran along the ridge of the mountain, with green fields falling away steeply, down, down to patches of forest where charcoal burners' fires smoked, down to the valley where sheep looked like tiny aphids, down to rushing streams.

The cool gray air made Elenor feel strong. She wrapped her cloak around her, flinging one end up over her shoulder so that no wind could get in. Her staff still felt heavy, but it was useful, too, for in places the path gave out altogether and she had to scramble over rocks and up ledges. She was glad to

have it crossing streams as well, something to lean on when a rock tipped suddenly underfoot. Greatheart bounced at her heels. When she jumped from one rock to the next, he jumped, too, never seeming to realize there might not be room for both of them.

Greatheart was always hungry. One day of green fields and gray rocks and gray windy sky, he came bursting out of the heather with a rabbit in his mouth. Martin and Thomas gave him such applause that he dropped the rabbit, ran to Elenor, and rolled over backward, squirming with embarrassment and pleasure. Elenor skinned the rabbit a little sadly while Thomas built a fire, scraping and washing the skin, leaving it complete with ears, planning vaguely to make something soft for someone.

Ninety days to Santiago, Father Gregory had said. Elenor had lost count of the days they had been on the road: in León, Thomas had figured one hundred. Sometimes the gusts of wind coming in from the west carried the taste of the sea. Elenor did not look for an end to the pilgrimage. She had no wish to arrive in Santiago. Each day was complete, and the chores of survival absorbed her completely: gathering firewood, hunting or trapping, cooking, finding water, walking westward.

And looking. Martin found her lying on her back, one eye closed and the other staring into the throat of a blue morning-glory blossom.

"You're a lazy lass, you are. And do you think we'll be home before the snow flies, at this pace?"

"I'm not lazy," stated Elenor without moving, "nor do I care if I never get home." And she realized that this was almost true.

Martin went back to pitching trees, "tossing the cawber," he called it, with Thomas. It was something Scots did for fun, and Thomas was good at it. With his wild yells he reminded Elenor of his fourteen-year-old self.

Every once in a while, one of them remembered a new song, and they seized on it and sang it over and over until they were sick of it but couldn't get it out of their heads. They carried on the rambling conversations of people who have gotten to know each other very well. Thomas and especially Elenor pumped Martin to tell them about all the places he had been, and Martin stretched the truth in his enthusiasm to amaze and entertain them.

"Martin," said Thomas as they settled around the fire to sleep, "tells me that he has traveled almost to the Garden of Eden."

Elenor was skeptical. "Does it still exist somewhere? Is it in this world?"

"He talked to someone who was there. Martin! Wake up! Tell Nora your story."

Martin rolled over to face her across the fire.

"He was a verra old man I met on the road in Persia. He asked if I could help him, and I asked where it was he wanted to go. And he said to the garden, the Garden of Eden. I thought he was joking, and I said, 'Father, you would have to go back in time for that, back to the time before Adam sinned, and none of us can do that.' But he said, 'No, no, my son, don't believe that, for I have been to the Garden, and have seen it with my own eyes. . . .' And he took my arm, and as we walked, he said, 'The trees and plants there are of surpassing color and have a thousand scents that never fade, and they heal a person of any ill. The little birds sing in harmony, and the rustling of the leaves and the rippling of the streams make music. The rocks are jeweled, and the sands brighter than silver, and the breeze is gentle and health-giving, so that no one can ever be sick there.' "

Martin lay flat on his back, watching the sparks fly up to join the stars. Thomas looked across the fire at Nora.

"Shall we go there?" he asked. His face no longer looked ugly to her. *So that's what we're trying to do,* thought Elenor. *Go back to the Garden. . . .*

"When I asked the old man which way the Garden might be," continued Martin in his sleepy voice, "he turned his face up to the sun, and I could see that he was blind. 'Toward the heat,' he said. 'Always go toward the heat. The Garden is surrounded by a wall of fire as tall as from here to the moon.' "

Thomas turned on his back, pulled his rolled-up cloak under his neck, and stared up at the stars.

"No wonder he was lost, poor man, following the sun from east to west, day after day." Martin seemed to have dozed off. Elenor wished she could cross the fire.

Early the next morning, Martin spotted a tiny cross on the crest of one of the waves of hills that rose around them.

"If I'm not far wrong," he said, "that cross marks the pass at Cebrera. From there I hear tell that on a clear day you can see the spires of Santiago."

"And if you *are* far wrong . . ." said Elenor, laughing, exhilarated and awed by their human smallness in this hugeness of mountains.

All day, they made their way toward the cross, without seeming to get any nearer. Clouds clung to trees below them. Hawks and sea gulls circled between them and the misty valley bottoms. By midday, only a deep dark green valley lay between them and the last pass.