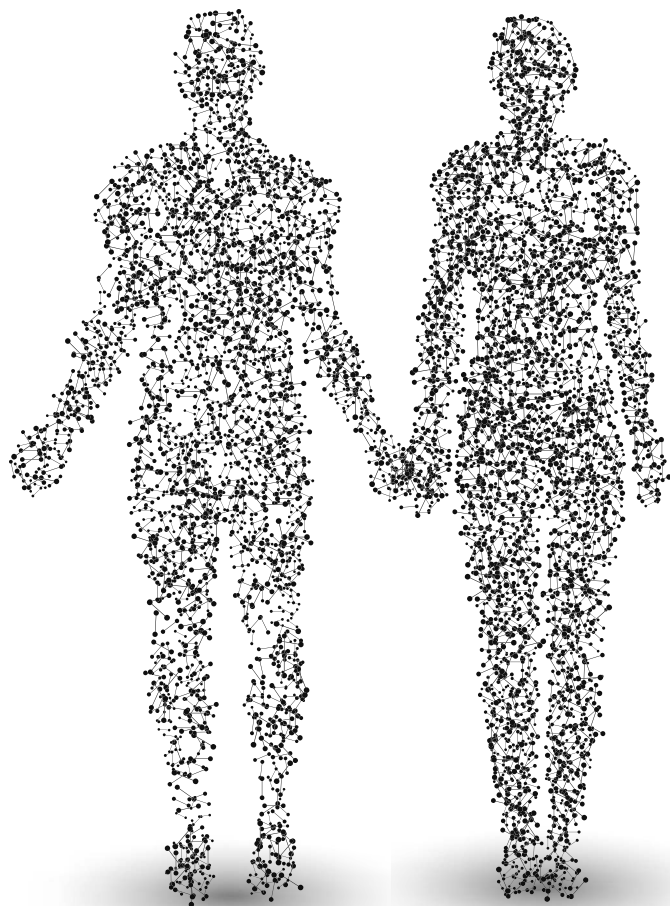


THE ANTLANDS SERIES / BOOK 1

# ANTLANDS



GENEVIEVE MORRISSEY

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# ON A NIGHT OF NO MOON

A woman lay fully dressed on a straw stuffed pallet on the floor of her hut in a tiny farming settlement and stared into the darkness of its single, dirt floored room. Beside her, her small daughter was sleeping curled up like a kitten with her doll in her arms, but the mother lay rigidly alert to every soft night sound. Life in the village of a dozen or so sod huts and barns was generally promising and secure. The early spring weather was pleasant and dry, the crops were greening the fields, and the Ants in the Antlands—as the woman reminded herself—were said to be going about their work nearly naked and wholly unshod.

This reassured her. Men who had nothing, having nothing to lose, might be driven by desperation to acts of aggression. But Ants judged that the time was right to make war on their neighbors when the harvests had been sufficient to feed workers to ret flax and weave linen for clothes, and cattle were plentiful enough that there were hides available to make shoes. A bare, hungry Ant worked passively all day in his colony's fields, and Men in their own countries had nothing to fear from him.

The Ants were not insects, of course, despite their name. In fact, it was said that very long ago they had been man's own creation, made to labor for him. Physically, they resembled man, though the Ancients had, by means no longer

understood, made every Ant entirely like every other one, so that all were identically short-statured, blue-eyed, and fair. But in that past age something had somehow gone desperately wrong; man's creation (made in his image), was now man's feared enemy.

Because the night was one of no moon, the woman was afraid. The watch in the watchtower had been doubled, of course; but if one pair of eyes could make out nothing in the blackness, twice nothing was no improvement. In another hour or two, perhaps (she had no clock to tell her how many), the sun would rise and all would be well again. But while the dark persisted the mother lay without sleeping, and almost without breathing. The villagers were so few that their only hope in the event of an Ant raid lay in the Ants finding them wide awake and forearmed.

A sound outside the shuttered window: A footstep. An early rising neighbor? The woman sat up, and willed her heart to beat more softly so she could hear. No second step followed the first, and she had lain down again and drawn a breath of relief when the unmistakable metallic whisper of a knife being drawn from a sheath brought her bolt upright again. More footsteps, a grunt, and the jostle of one body against another, and then a sound like heavy raindrops pelting to earth. When a head is struck from a body the heart does not immediately know to stop pumping, and blood spurts from the severed neck in a gory fountain. The sound was that of great gouts of a watchman's blood falling from the watchtower where the Ants had surprised him onto the ground below.

"Anne," the woman whispered urgently, shaking the little girl awake. "Up, up!"

The child stumbled sleepily from the pallet. She knew instinctively not to speak.

Dragging the rough mattress aside, the woman felt for the hole dug in the earth beneath it.

Into her daughter's ear she breathed softly, pushing her down into the cavity, "Here. Lie here: That's right. Make yourself as small as you can."

The child still clutched her doll. "Mama..." she whispered—just that one word.

Dawn was breaking at last—too late!—and mother and child could just see by it the gleam of one another's eyes.

“Stay here, stay covered. No matter what happens, no matter what you hear, don't move. All right? Not until you're sure it's safe.” But how would such a little one know? “I'll come for you, if I can,” the woman whispered.

A glint other than her mother's tear-bright eyes caught the little girl's attention—that of the knife, a big one, in her mother's hand.

The noises outside were growing louder and more frenzied. Gods! A child's cry!

“Stay here, stay still; all right, Anne?”

The little girl nodded soberly.

A scrape at the door—

With a mother's hungry eyes the woman devoured her child's face one last time. “You must live,” she murmured, touching small Anne's cheek. “You must try to live.”

The pallet in place again, the woman ran to the door and listened. She was waiting for the Ant outside to move away. She had already decided she must not be taken inside the hut. She must get out somehow, clear of the door, and then run and run as hard as she could, and at last, when she was caught—she knew she would be caught—she must fight. Every step she ran led the Ants further from her child; every Ant she tired by running was an Ant who would search the hut less carefully. And any Ant she killed was an Ant who wouldn't kill Anne.

In one swift movement, the woman threw aside the bar to the door and burst out.

She made it as far as the clearing surrounding the watchtower, twenty steps or so from where her daughter lay shivering with fear, huddled in a hole in the ground with her doll in her arms. Eyes closed, the child kissed the doll's face repeatedly, seeing in her mind as she did so her mother's loved one—but she made not a sound. She was trying to live.

As she lay hugging her rag baby, an Ant whose feet were bare and who wore only the ragged remains of what had once been a roughly-sewn shirt caught

her mother by her long hair and flung her to the ground, and her mother, making good on her promise to herself, sprang up again slashing wildly with her knife. She fought her attacker until another Ant, coming behind her, struck off her head with his great iron sword.

As soon as he had done so, both Ants immediately lost all interest in the woman. A dead Man was neither a threat nor plunder. As her body fell, Anne's mother's head rolled a little way, to the feet of another Ant. He kicked it casually aside.



# CHAPTER ONE

A party of Foresters was traveling through Men's lands, escorting home from great Broadleaf Forest an honored citizen of the much smaller Evergreen. The citizen's name was Deer, and before being wounded he had served with distinction against the Ants as a general of the Forester army. So grave had Deer's injuries been that only now, a year after the Ant War was ended, was he finally recovered enough to go home.

Though Men had been their allies in the Ant War, Foresters generally felt little kinship with them. For a thousand years, the Foresters had lived apart from Men; and during that time, they had evolved a communal way of life quite unlike that of their erstwhile ally. A common saying of the forest held that Men lived by laws, endlessly proliferating, while Foresters lived by principles, few and unchanging. Even Men, had they heard it, might have conceded this axiom was largely true.

The Foresters' strategy for keeping the Ants away was to plant their lands with trees and live among them. The sudden appearances and disappearances of soldiers hidden behind trees made it difficult for Ants to form a single, unified assessment of their situation, and therefore, a single plan of attack. Separately, Ants made poor warriors, and were relatively easily picked off. This was because (in so far as Men and Foresters could understand it), though

Ants had individual brains in their skulls, they did not form individual thoughts in them. Ants worked in unison, in a coordinated effort toward the accomplishment of a common goal.

Behind their own borders, the Ant goal was that of caring for and feeding the Ant population, which they did in primitive, but efficient fashion. When upon a mission of conquest they were equally—terrifyingly—able. An army of Ants swarming out of the Antlands moved over the land as a flock of birds moves through the sky; spreading and contracting, swooping and shifting direction all at once, and in response to no discernible signal. They fed on what they found, spared what might be useful to them in future, and extirpated what—and who—was of no interest to Ants.

They found neither Men nor Foresters of any interest.

From behind their trees, the Foresters kept watch on the clearing surrounding each forestland, and at any incursion of Ants into it, the vulnerable members of the community were safely hidden, while the able and trained engaged the Ants in guerilla actions among the sheltering trees. Over the centuries, the Ants had learned to beware forests and Foresters, and, for the most part, to leave them alone. For the Foresters to live cooperatively, constricted in territory and resources, required of them great discipline; but they preferred it to the more expansive but also more insecure style of Men.

Men lived by agriculture in cleared places, and practiced a defensive strategy based upon flight. By intermittently making war on the Ants, they attempted to keep their enemy confined to a single—though large—region, and at the first sign of a breakout by Ant marauders, Men retreated, on horseback, if possible, to agreed-upon strongholds; where, when sufficient numbers had assembled, they turned to face their enemy in force.

For two days, the land through which the Foresters were now riding had been empty of Men. The presence of cattle grazing peacefully in the pastures told them no hungry Ant had passed through; and so, though wary, the Foresters were not unduly alarmed. Whatever had frightened the Men into flight had evidently passed off, or gone another way.

But on the morning of the third day, as they mounted a rise, they saw in



the distance the compact pillar of smoke that could only come from closely packed buildings and barns burning together. Keeping behind the ridge of the hill, they cautiously scouted the area and were glad to note the Ants were already retreating, moving in the direction of the Antlands. The party observed with sinking hearts the smoldering houses, toppled watchtower and animal carcasses, including horses, stripped to the bone, that meant that there would be no survivors of the raid. The settlement was small, the entire population probably outnumbered by the raiding party, and the Ants must have come upon it suddenly, since no one had ridden the horses away.

Yet remarkably, as they approached they saw amid the destruction and slaughter one small living being. A little girl, injured but alive, sat beside the headless body of a woman, whose stiff hand she cradled tenderly in her own.

Where they were not too rushed, Ants always made certain of their kills, but the child had no wound the Ants could have considered unquestionably mortal. She had been struck a blow in the head that blackened her eyes and bloodied her face, and her right hand had been broken, probably in an attempt to ward off the blow to her head. Her left ankle, too, was shattered. It was not immediately clear to the Foresters how this injury had been inflicted.

But a broken limb is not invariably fatal, and the girl had no body wound at all, whereas the other village children had all been run through, their necks being small and awkward targets for clumsy Ant swords.

In another few hours, had the Foresters not found her when they did, the little girl might have died of thirst and exposure, since she was in no condition, mentally or physically, to tend to her own needs. But if the Ants were now trusting to time and want to finish their victims for them, it was a new thing—and Ants were never innovators.

A Forester called Cade suggested to Deer that the party should take the child home with them.

Deer roused himself with difficulty from some private nightmare to say sharply, "To Evergreen Forest? It's out of the question. The little girl must go with her own people."

“If we don’t take her with us,” Cade said earnestly, “I’m afraid that is exactly where she *will* go.”

Deer looked away quickly, pretending to scan the horizon, but really to avoid seeing where other Foresters were silently burying the rest of the population of the tiny settlement beside its smoking ruins.

The two Foresters, Cade and Deer, were close in age, and like all their race, both were tall and wore their dark hair long and braided. But in every other way they contrasted strongly with one another. Cade was strong and well-built and had an appearance of good humor; while Deer was thin and stooped, and his expression was one of fixed gloom.

“Is she very ill?” Deer asked distantly.

“Yes, she is.”

“We’ll ride south, then,” Deer pronounced. “The Men from those deserted villages we passed probably went toward the Southern Fortress. If we move quickly, we’ll overtake them, and the child will be safe in their hands in less time than it would take to bring her home with us.”

Cade shook his head. “A sick child can’t be moved quickly. And we don’t know that the Men went south. They may have gone east.”

“Then we’ll find their trail, and follow it whether it leads east *or* south.”

“A trail which lies a day behind us,” Cade pointed out. “In any case, every step we move in any direction but north takes us farther from Evergreen. There are only twenty-five of us. Even if it was nothing more than a scouting party that destroyed this settlement, we can’t risk meeting with them.”

In fact, twenty-*six* Foresters were in the party, but Deer was still too disabled to bear any arms more than a light bow, and Cade did not count him as a fighter.

After long silence, Deer asked bitterly, “Why are you pleading for this child? Haven’t you sacrificed enough yet to Men’s interests? Why did these people come to this remote place? Even with lookouts to give warning, it was unsafe. There weren’t ten people here capable of wielding arms properly, and not horses enough to carry them all away. They foolishly gambled they could establish themselves before any Ants came, and they lost. There’s nothing more to the story than that.”

Cade met levelly with Deer's cold gaze. "They came to this land to keep it from the Ants," he said quietly. "And it's not in our best interests for the Ants to take it, either."

As long as the Ants could be kept to the Antlands, they bred, more or less, only to replace themselves. But as soon as they acquired more land, Ants set about in systematic fashion to fill it, first by sending colonists from their own most securely held districts to the new place, and then by a program of furious reproduction. As the colonists they sent to found new communities were always drawn from among their strongest and ablest, once Ants had gotten even a toehold in a place, they were difficult to dislodge.

Cade's point was a good one, and Deer wavered. "Can you get her ready to move soon?"

"Yes. I've already done what I could. She needs more help than I can give her. We must get her into Snow's hands. We'll have to go slowly, though, and stop when she needs to rest."

Snow was Deer's sister in law, the widow of his brother Modest. She practiced as an infirmarian in Evergreen Forest.

"How many extra days will we have to travel, then?" Deer asked irritably.

Cade shrugged. "A few, maybe."

However slowly they were forced to proceed, at least they would be moving in the direction of home, Deer thought.

Reluctantly, he conceded, saying, "When the Men are buried, we'll leave immediately." He added, with a sneering glance around, "The sooner we get out of this hateful, barren place, the better."

The land on which they stood was, in fact, green and fertile; but as trees were few, in the eyes of a Forester it was a desert.

Five years before, the Men had felt strong enough to make war on the Ants; and after long debate among themselves, the Foresters elected to join them in this effort. Deer had voted against the alliance, until persuaded to it by his brothers. The war had continued through four long years, and Deer's brothers had both fallen in it, along with countless other Foresters.

And only, thought Deer sullenly, to have the Ants scouting again for

conquerable territory before the graves of the war dead had grassed over.

As Cade turned away, Deer asked, "What language does the little girl speak? Has she said anything?"

"No. She's in shock, I believe. She's made hardly a sound. But you'll have plenty of time to get to know her; maybe you can get her to tell you. Find out her name, if you can."

Deer frowned. "Why should she talk to *me*?" he asked.

"Because she'll have to ride with you, of course. I don't think you'll find it too much. She's very small."

"Surely one of the females should have her," Deer said uneasily. "Why not Spring, or Bellflower? In the case of a sick child, I think a woman's gentler touch..."

Cade passed a hand over his mouth in an apparent attempt to wipe away a grin that suggested he was enjoying Deer's discomfiture. "If we meet with Ants, Spring and Bellflower may be called upon to fight," he said. "If you want, I can show you how a young one should be cradled."

Replying stiffly that he would not require any such instruction, Deer turned away.

When the Foresters mounted to go and the little girl was put into his arms, Deer briefly regretted not taking Cade's offer, then sternly reminded himself he was a soldier of Evergreen Forest, and therefore equal to any challenge. He had already faced, and faced down, every imaginable terror, including—several times—certain death. He had nothing to fear in simply holding one frail, hollow-eyed child of another race. At worst, she would die; but in that case they would simply stop and bury her by the wayside and continue on to Evergreen at a much better pace.

Deer glanced down at her, and the child solemnly met his glance with the one of her eyes that, though blackened, was not swollen entirely shut.

She looked, in fact, as though she *might* die.

Deer glanced away quickly. He was not sentimental about children, he told himself. Nor did her injuries or losses move him. He had suffered worse injuries and losses himself. Yet something remarkable—almost miraculous—

in her survival to the present moment engendered in him the *merest* preference that she should continue to live.

“Please don’t die,” he muttered grimly to himself.

Aloud, he said, “Now, little one, we’ll go to Evergreen Forest, where our infirmarian, Snow, will make you well. Then we’ll find your family and return you to them. –Are you cold?” Deer felt in the folds of the coat in which she was wrapped for the little girl’s unbandaged left hand and touched it cautiously. “You *are* cold,” he informed her. “Let me...”

He turned to reach for the blanket strapped behind him, but, unexpectedly, small fingers closed around his, and as though a bear-trap had suddenly shut on his hand, he found he could not pull away. Forester and child exchanged long, appraising looks.

Rather sheepishly, Deer maneuvered his horse alongside a nearby companion.

With elaborate unconcern, he said, “Be so good as to cover the child, would you, Spring? I know little concerning the physiology of Men, of course, but I believe it is always best that the injured or unwell be kept adequately warm.”

\*

For the first three days after they rescued Man’s small daughter, the Foresters moved slowly, beginning their day’s travel early, but stopping every few hours to allow both the child and Deer to rest. His initial protests forgotten, Deer became rather possessive of the little girl. He made a habit of remaining on horseback with her in his arms until he was satisfied that a suitable bed had been put together to receive her, and then sat beside it with his bow near at hand while she slept. As they rode, if he noticed she was awake, he sometimes spoke to her; and though she could not have understood a word of what he said, the child nonetheless listened, studying him intently with first one, and then, as the swelling in her face subsided, two bright blue eyes.

Late on the fourth day, however, it occurred to Deer that the glint of her eyes had become too much, and that her formerly pale face was strangely flushed.

“Cade, look here,” he called uneasily. “Look how the child shivers! Yet, when I touch her, she seems very warm to me.”

The party stopped and when the little girl’s wounds were examined, Cade discovered signs of infection. After taking counsel among themselves, the Foresters set off again as fast as they dared to go, reaching Evergreen at sunset two days later.

By custom, upon reaching the forest, the party should have proceeded through the thickest of the trees to the stables, where the animals would be left behind. Horses were not usually permitted in the more lightly wooded areas where the Foresters had their homes. The word of their approach would meanwhile be carried throughout Evergreen by the forest pickets, of whom Deer and his two younger brothers, Modest and Tree, had been three before the war had taken them away. Deer had, in fact, been a captain among them.

Then, after the forest’s children had come to perform their office of garlanding the honored returnees, they should have walked home in solemn procession—Deer, as the longest away, leading the others—between double lines of all the population of Evergreen who could be spared from their duties, joyously singing them welcome. Such customs, the Foresters felt, though unimportant in themselves, gave color and continuity to forest life.

Instead, Deer carried the child horseback to the door of the infirmary.

Hardly taking time first to greet the infirmarian, his sister in law Snow, Deer laid his bundle on the infirmary table. Because the child, briefly conscious, clung to him, Deer refused to leave until her injuries had been dressed and she was laid sleeping in bed.

Then, like all good Foresters after a journey, he went to the baths.

Evergreen had purposely been founded long before at the site of underground thermal pools to give the new forest’s citizens a convenient means of washing. Every true Forester, be he ever so ascetic in other ways, reveled in a deep, hot bath.

As Deer settled himself, he was joined by his nephew Heron, coming at his mother Snow’s suggestion. Nearly every other inhabitant of the forest, save for the pickets, was asleep.

“We’re all proud and happy to have you here again, Uncle Deer,” Heron said, seating himself on the edge of the pool where Deer lay soaking. “I’m sorry we weren’t able to show you how much. We spent weeks planning the ceremonies, and then you came in so quickly, none of us had time to line up or anything. Leaf and her sister were going to lead the singing, and all day yesterday we picked flowers and wove garlands...” Heron stopped abruptly. “What made that?” he asked, frowning.

“What?”

“That...mark,” Heron said, staring at the terrible scar.

Deer looked where his nephew pointed. “Oh, that...” he answered vaguely. “An Ant battleax, I’m told. I don’t remember much about it.”

Tearing his eyes away, after a moment Heron continued, “Well anyway, as I was saying, we wove garlands and so forth. Probably the master had a speech all ready, too.”

“No doubt,” Deer agreed. The traditional encomium was the one part of the customary welcome he was not particularly sorry to have forgone.

Heron offered, “Maybe we can welcome you properly tomorrow—”

“I’ve been welcomed enough, thank you,” said Deer quickly.

“—unless you think the noise of singing might disturb the little girl’s rest. May I see her, do you think? I’ve never seen a Man. What’s she like?”

Instead of answering this, Deer said, “You’ve grown so much I didn’t know you. You’re very like your grandfather, I think.”

“Everyone says that,” Heron smiled. “How old is she?”

“Although I believe I see your mother in you as well.”

“It’s amazing the Ants didn’t kill her. Do you think we could look in on her before we go to bed?”

“What are your duties now?”

“I’m learning to sew. —Is she old enough to talk? What language does she speak? Maybe I could get a dictionary from the library and learn a few words of whatever it is.”

“Ah, sewing. Do you like to sew?”

Heron laughed. “You’re deliberately changing the subject, aren’t you? Yes, I

do like to sew—although I admit I only went to the sewing room at first because it was really cold this winter and I wanted a warm place to work.” Foresters saw no need to consume fuel in heating rooms when simply wearing warmer clothes served as well, but there were exceptions to the rule. The sewing room was a favorite resort of the oldest Foresters and had a fire when the snow was deep. “Why won’t you tell me about the little girl?”

Deer said nothing for a moment.

Then he answered, “Because your mother is unhopeful of her chances. And the less you know of her, the less you’ll feel it if she doesn’t live.”

His desire to save his nephew sorrow was sincere; but Heron refused to be sheltered. “I’ll feel worse if I think she died feeling alone and friendless.”

It was the very remark, Deer thought, that his brother Modest—Heron’s father—would have made. He abruptly climbed out of the bath, saying coldly, “I want no visiting, but only my bed tonight.”

Heron’s face fell.

Seeing it, Deer relented. “If the little girl is still of this world in the morning, your mother will probably let you see her then,” he said. “You may be disappointed: She’s really very little different from one of our own young ones—though not so pretty, of course.”

Foresters and Men were agreed that the Foresters were the handsomest of the three races. (No one knew what the Ants thought, of course.) Their long isolation in the woods was responsible for this: After a thousand years of intermarriage, every Forester was kin to every other Forester, and as a people, they were fortunate in the way their common genes had sorted themselves out. Unlike Men, whose complexions, temperaments, and features varied widely from one to the next, every Forester was similarly brown-eyed, brunette, and dark-skinned. All were rather tall and long limbed, and in character, naturally reserved. Men admired their intelligence but also judged them aloof, stubborn, and inclined to be snobs—an assessment that the Foresters, had they known of it, would have found flattering rather than otherwise. The only heritable trait among them that was unquestionably unfortunate was that Foresters were not particularly fertile. Children were highly valued in



a forest, because there were never many of them there at one time. For this reason, though Foresters tended to be remarkably healthy and famine had not visited the woods for many years, the losses of war could not be quickly made up.

\*

The next morning, Posthumous, Evergreen's master, came to Snow to ask, "Now that you've seen him, what do you think of Deer's condition? Has it significantly improved?"

Snow replied tartly, "He's on his feet, if that's what you mean. I didn't have time yesterday to speak with him much, of course; but from what I did see of him, I'd say Deer's not trying very hard to live. I think he's only with us now, in fact, because you ordered him to continue at least one more year in this world. From what I've heard from the infirmarians in Broadleaf, my brother in law's counting the days until the year runs out and he can, in honor, go where his brothers have gone."

Posthumous considered this for a moment. "Work can be a great palliative in depression. Is Deer fit enough for duty, do you think?"

"By no means," Snow said firmly. "And especially not for the duty of picketing. Picketing is arduous, solitary work. The last thing Deer needs is to be alone."

"He would be alone amid the beauties of nature, though. Beauty is a great healer."

"Broadleaf Forest is also beautiful," Snow pointed out. "But I don't believe Deer noticed it." She had originally come from Broadleaf herself, and retained a great affection for her first home. "No use thrusting beauties before Deer's eyes and expecting it to help when the only place he's looking is into the blackness within himself."

Posthumous nodded thoughtfully. "I'll find something else for him to do."

He looked past the infirmarian to where Evergreen's guest lay sleeping, "How's your other patient?" At sight of the child, the master looked troubled. The little girl's pallor was like wax.

Snow's gaze followed Posthumous's. "Not very well, sir," she said, adding grimly, "But I'm not giving up."

On the little girl's third day in the forest, Deer was walking alone—against Snow's advice—through one of the prettiest parts of Evergreen. This was a sunny valley, with a stream running its length that was broken in one place by a charming little waterfall. It was early spring, and the valley was thick with jonquils. Deer was there because he had promised himself many times since the death of his brother Modest that if he lived to do it, he would revisit every inch of Evergreen in memory of both of his brothers, who had loved it so much. As a part of this memorial, he walked the valley's entire length—but, as Snow had suggested to the master that he might, without noticing in the least how lovely it was.

In approved picket fashion, Bellflower remained absolutely silent and invisible until she wished to be seen.

"Good morning, Captain," she said then, stepping out as Deer passed by her assigned position. She would have been more correct in addressing him by his name, since Deer hadn't yet been returned to his former rank and duties, but Bellflower knew Deer well enough to understand how much the title would please him.

Deer returned her greeting, and the two discussed picket duty for a few moments in a way that could have seemed interesting only to pickets.

Abruptly changing the subject, Bellflower mused, "I was looking at the flowers just now and thinking of that ruined village and those poor Men we buried. Did you know that when Men bury their dead, they put flowers into the grave? I'm sorry I didn't think to look for any at the time."

"Do they?" Deer responded, without much interest. "Strange custom."

"Yes. Someone told me it's because Men regard a blossom as a fit symbol for a life, in that it's sweet and beautiful and endures but a short time."

"An— interesting parallel," Deer conceded. His tone suggested that it irritated him to discover any idea of Men with which he was forced to agree. Then, seeing that Bellflower was studying him with concern, he added dryly, "For some lives, a weed would be a fitter memorial, perhaps."

The young picket laughed. "How's the little girl?"

Deer shook his head. "Snow tells me she's unlikely to survive her injuries. I suppose it would be appropriate if I were to place a flower on her bier."

Urged Bellflower, gesturing, "Take a handful. All too soon they'll be withered in any case."

In the end, Deer did not take a handful, but only one. He was carrying it when he entered the infirmary, where he expected to see a small, shrouded body—withered, like a flower—laid out on the bed.

The little girl was certainly withered, but she was alive, and, propped on pillows in a half-sitting posture, being fed something from a dish Snow held. Deer watched silently for a moment, unexpectedly pleased by the sight.

As Snow laid aside the empty bowl, she caught sight of her brother in law.

Hurrying to him, she kissed his cheek, saying happily, "How wonderful to have you home again!"

Looking him up and down, she continued critically, "You look dreadful. I know you can't be following Roar of Broadleaf's advice. He's highly skilled: If you did as he told you, you'd be fitter than you are."

"Certainly I'm following his advice," Deer answered stiffly. He nodded toward the girl. "I see your patient is improved."

"Come and see how much. Poor little thing, she's too weak even to raise her head, but I think now she'll live. See if you can get her to talk to you."

Dubiously, Deer approached the bed, carrying his flower.

After bending over her and kissing her forehead as he would have a Forester child's, he asked the little girl in his own language, "All right then: What's your name, and what languages do you know?" Trying a Man tongue, he repeated, "What's your name, little one?"

Since she didn't react to this, Deer sat down, and held the jonquil out to her. "A simulacrum of your existence, apparently," he said, reverting to the Forester's language.

The little girl sniffed the flower feebly, but with appreciation—surprising Deer, who fully subscribed to the Forester conviction that Men were indifferent to the beauties of nature. Quickly, he put the jonquil to her nose.

As he did so, he asked, in the language of the inland valleys, “Are you from near the place we found you?” Again, the child didn’t respond—to Deer’s secret relief, since he didn’t know many words in the Valley language. “Or are you from among the coastal people?” he tried again, in the tongue of that region.

The child lost her interest in the flower at once, turning her large eyes to meet Deer’s.

Deer called over his shoulder, “I think I’ve found her language.” In the Coast dialect, he continued, “My name is Deer, and the woman who’s been taking care of you is called Snow.”

Though Deer was careful to make no clarifying gesture as he said this, immediately upon his speaking of her, the child turned her gaze to Snow.

“What’s your name, little one?” Deer asked.

The little girl’s lips moved faintly.

“She’s tired,” Snow said immediately. “Don’t press her.” Snow didn’t know any Man tongues, so she told Deer, “Tell her she should sleep now, but that when she’s rested, if she can tell us her name and where we can find some family member or friend, we’ll bring anyone she wants to be with her as quickly as we can.”

Deer repeated this as well as he could. The little girl’s only answer was to close her eyes as tears wet her lashes.

“She’s tired,” Snow repeated. “If you’ll come later, Deer, we’ll ask again.”