

Harbinger

by Dean H. Wild

Smoke from the oil lamp traced the wall. It gave Nana something to read. Hester and I breathed a sigh of relief to have her occupied and got back to the small capons stretched out on the table. Our hands flew in the amber gloom since juices ran quickly once the insides were drawn out. The tiniest droplet plummeting table to floor would bring Old Gammer over from the fire where she scrubbed the hearth with sage and dark wort to prepare it for the stewing.

I saw the sparrow soar in through the shutters. Its fluttering panic against our rafters made every one of us look up.

"Gads, another child has died in the village," Nana exclaimed clutching at the collar of her shift, gnarled fingers snagged like hooks below her gaping trout mouth.

"Nay," Hester wiped her hands on her slim hips, marking the bird as if recalling a dream. "'Tis a birth, a good birth. A boy, I think."

"Past the waning moon, it is," Nana corrected. "So the sign is a passing, not a birthing."

I finished both capons quickly and coddled all I extracted into a bucket. The contents would be spiced and chanted over, and we would dump them out nine days hence to read their autumn stories by ember light.

"Birthing," Hester insisted, her hands cupped aloft to offer our visitor a place to shelter or perhaps to catch its droppings and find a telling glyph in her favor.

"Escape is what it seeks," Old Gammer declared, her voice a decades-old hammer on a black and weary anvil. She pounded dried herbs from the deep creases of her hands. Every edge of her silhouette shifted in draughts of fireplace warmth. "But we offer no refuge here. The tide of fate beats a path in which all must lie and be washed. Let it be."

The bird stopped its thrashing and settled on a craggy peg which moored our ceiling to our wall. I looked away from its bright, trapped eyes.

"Death," Nana confirmed and went back to vague portents rendered in wall soot.

"These times are dark and hard," Hester concluded, her gaze and her hands drifting down. "'Tis more to fear from birth than death."

I plunged the capons into a vat of water, thinking of sisters past, and shivered.

