FEILAMORT: THE COLOUR of a dead leaf.

But dead leaves are of different hues. Cooried round the trunk of the mithertree, they shade frae rich gowd tae near-black with everything inatween; edges owerlapping like the fabric scraps I steek intae coverlets.

Mibbe they are at different stages of death.

Froths of hair trail frae the cowl: grey-brown silk glisks in the weak November sun. The fabric of his cloak was rough and coorse: edges frayed, the warp and weft like tracks in a ploughed field. Bitter needles of cauld must have penetrated

his soft skin on the journey; his airms prickled wi gooseflesh when I helped him doon frae the pony. 'Merci,' he whispered. I mind his een that day, feartness drownt in the brown, grummlin their beauty.

They were all feart, the wee laddies, but the others hid it neath a shield of jokes and swagger, shoving their neighbour aff the bench, tugging hair, giggling and tickling each other. There was five of them that day, and we brocht them intae the hall, fed and warmed them in front of the great roaring fire. Waiting for the mistress to arrive, the others jouked about; he stayed apart, crept close to the hearth and lay doon, curled on the harsh flagstones, his body tense, his eyes darting round the room like a whippet who fears he'll be kicked awa frae his place.

My Lady is douce: she smiles and strokes and pets all around her, her voice trills and gurls like a burn in full spate. But she skiffs surfaces, seeks fair weather. Jules, her page, followed her, hauding the train of her velvet frock while she walked the line of lads who stood, backs to the fire. Quiet now, they stared as she examined each in turn, patting this one on the heid, stroking that yin's cheek. Jules was expressionless, but nae doubt he'd be minding the time, three year syne, when he was in their place, and thinking on the months to come when one of them would take his.

They were pretty lads, all of them, the unsuitable already weeded out; boys with harelips, jug-ears, pocked skin, had nae place in My Lady's service. But even as she cooed and murmured to them, asked their names and whence they came, there was nae doubt in my mind which she'd favour. When she reached him she stared, as I'd seen her gaze intae her

glass while she decided which necklace to place round her bonny white neck. His hair tummled tae his shooders, touslie grey and brown like the bark of a tree. His skin was clear, as though he'd been fed naught but milk and honey, and his lips curved like a lassie's, bramble-stained. The fear was still there in his een, but it lessened, and he gazed at her like a calf.

'Mon petit. Et vous est . . . ?'

'Feilamort.'

I was in my thirteenth year then, three-four year aulder than the laddies who had arrived. My family was neither ower-muckle nor poor, and we were all in the service of our Laird and His Lady one way or anither, our lives thirled to theirs. My faither assisted the steward and my auldest brother assisted him, while my mither supervised the care of fine linens and laundry. I sewed and mended, ran and fetched, up and doon the back stair, invisible except when needed.

At nicht I slept with the other maids, at the far end of the passage frae My Lady's chamber. The wee lads, the new pages to be, were in the room next to ours. Their noise and cairry-on soon subsided for they were wearied after a long day, and, in spite of their bravado, lonely for hame. As I lay in the neardark, just a glimmer of moon, I heard a snuffling sound, like a pup. I kent it was him and I slipped frae under the blanket I shared with my sister Catriona.

The others slept sound, in a row on their pallets. He was at the end, hauf-in hauf-out the covers that the boy next him had harled awa in the nicht. Een wide open, he gazed at me. I covered my lips with a finger to indicate silence, held out my haund and led him in beside me. His wee shivery body

gradually warmed, and I lay, his back tucked intae my front, watching his breath rise and fall in the grey moonlicht.

I saw little of him or the others the next few days. Their training had begun, and they were the province of Douglas, whose job was to harden them, initiate them intae mysteries in which women had nae place. The days were short and the licht poor. I sat close by the slit of a windae in the chamber next My Lady's, fingers stiff wi cauld, stitching. I loved the feel of the needle pushing through the fine cambric, the near-invisible track of white on white, steeks tiny as a spider's footprint. My mither's daughter, I'd been an apt learner, progressing quickly frae baissing and ranter tae invisible seams. Noo I was trusted tae surfle a sleeve wi lace and work some of the brusery, patterns of twined leaves on a shawl. My mither still made the special garments: the priest's vestments, the gouns worn by my Laird and Lady for important occasions. But with the passing of time even the sharpest-eyed seamstress would find her gaze pearl ower like a misty morn. My grandam kept sewing till she was near-blind, working by feel alone, but she was rare. In time, my mither would let me tak ower mair of the delicate work while she supervised.

But in the poor licht there were only so many hours you could sew and I was needed for other tasks. I was glad tae fetch watter at the well, for it was warmer outside than in, and, best of all, gang doon tae the kitchen, where there was aye a bleezing fire. Scouring the big pans warmed ye up and you could blether while you worked. And Elinor was there.

Elinor was around my age but seemed far aulder. She was aye scripping at me, in jest.

'You're a richt babbie, you know nothing.'

'Time enough you'll know too much,' my mither would answer when I asked her about something Elinor said.

The day her talk was of the young laird who was visiting the castle with his family.

'Look at all this food. Louis is beeling that we've tae use so much of the salt cod – he says we'll have naething left tae see us through the winter – but My Lady insisted.'

'Why is he so important?'

'He's going tae marry Lady Alicia.'

'Lady Alicia's just a wee lassie.'

'She's auld enough tae be betrothed. And the Laird is desperate tae unite their families.'

'Though,' she whispered in my ear, 'Jules says he's already united their families, the way he looks at the boy's mither.'

'How d'you mean?'

'Oh Deirdre. Jules seen him ficherin wi the lady at the top of the back stair. He doesna know if that was all he done, though Louis says the Laird prefers the back road tae the front and that's how he's only got the one lassie, though he and My Lady have been married lang enough tae faither a whole brood of boys.'

'I dinna ken what you're talking about.'

'Ach, you'll learn soon enough.'

The silvery wab sclints in the low sun. Shining draps strung atween the branches of the rowan. Here and there a tiny beastie, like a French knot embroidered on it. Nae sign of the wyver who spun the wab; mibbe he's awa, working on anither already.

I was sent tae gather firewood frae the big pile in the corner of the yard, but I seized the chance tae pause for a minute, watch the beauty. When I see a wab or a leaf glaizie wi licht or the remnants of the rain clinging tae a branch, I long to haud on tae that moment. I wish I could embroider something this fair but, nae matter how I try, I ne'er succeed. Even when my mither let me stitch some of the wee pearly draps on My Lady's collar – warning me within an inch of my life what would happen if I lost one, they're that valuable – it wasna as bonny as a raindrap in the sun.

The priest says that nothing can compare to the creation of the Lord and he's richt, nae doubt. But I yearn to mak something with which I could feel satisfied.

A feathery sky seemed as if t'were about tae float doon upon our heids. Inatween the clouds was cleaner than any blue you see in summer: autumn blue against a tree gowden wi leafs ready tae fall at the least whisper of breeze. Azure like Our Lady's robe.

'Bleu,' he says, 'but the Italians say azzurro.'

I've escaped frae the hoose this morn, collecting chestons for the kitchen. The lad tagged alang; he's taen tae following me like a wee dug when I gang outside. My mither encourages this. She doesna like my being out alane, no since my bleeding started; she willna speak of it but I ken fine the reason. Last year Margaret, the cooper's lass, was got with child when she was barely ages wi me. Some tinker's lad passing through at harvest time and ne'er seen again. She'd nae idea whit happened, said she thought the laddie was playing a game. 'Knowing Margaret, it would be the truth,' says Elinor.

I love tae run by mysel through the woods or lie on the brae, gazing at the clouds or the trees, and it's no the same if I have tae go wi one of the ither maids. But this laddie is different. He's that quiet it's like having a wee deer or a squirrel follow ye, peaceful like. He and I exchange the words for colours and trees as we go, nae mair.

'This yin is still green.'

'Vert.'

'And this is yella.'

'Jaune.'

We stood aneath an oak, and the wind blew a scour of leaves ower us, broidered his grey-brown hair wi gowd.

He laughed. 'What call you when . . .' he waved his airm downwards through the air.

'When they come doon, you mean . . . they tummle.'

'Tomber.'

'Like tomb.'

Autumn is the season of death yet tae me it is mair alive than any. Leaf fall, tomber, is death, but whit a bleeze of glory precedes it: brichtness like a pain through the heart.

My mither, who has looked on many deathbeds, says it is so for those about to souch awa; the soul, ready to leave its earthly hame, becomes mair true, and you see the person clothed in their real self, no the worn-out auld rags they bore in the everyday. I mind my grandam in her last days; though her een were filmed like lace, it was as if she could see beyond everything. In life she was a busy wee body, blethering and footering intae all things, but at the end, calm like a pointed star, she made me understaund the priest's tales of saints. Afore my grandam's passing I thocht naebody was like these

folk, eyes raised tae heaven, seeing beyond the earth, but Grandam truly saw intae anither world.

Of course, they're no all like Grandam. Many a time when I was wee, I'd be sent out tae play, far frae the screams that would thicken your blood. Auld Jock the Miller fought his way out of life, kicking his legs as if he were on a march. I think I understaund him better; I dinna ken whit Heaven could be if it's no like the leaves in autumn, especially on a morn like this, when the frost draws every vein with silver. Me and the laddie scuff our way through the fallen ones, as wee birds follow each ither frae branch tae branch. Sheltered under a tree I see a brichtness and bend tae look mair closely.

'Feilamort,' I say. 'Look.'

We bend, our heids close. It's a pink rose, frosted, but still alive and in bloom.

November is the month of the dead, when we remember those who have gone afore us and pray for their souls. My grandams, my grandfaither I never kenned, the twa sisters and one brother who died as babes: our family is fortunate, our losses no so great as many ithers'. Helena, who scours the pots in the kitchen, lost every bairn she's ever conceived, some afore birth, some while they still suckled. One, a wee lass wi gowden curls, lived till she was three. 'A faery child,' my mither said, shaking her heid as she sewed. My minnie isna one for greeting – she sheds her few tears in private – but her een mist when she speaks of this bairn and her voice is aye saft wi Helena.

'Tae loss a bairn is the hardest thing for a woman to bear, but to loss them all . . . some day you will understaund,

Deirdre.' She looked at me. 'Sometimes I wonder if you would be better never to bear them at all. What would you say to the convent?'

'I hae no mind to the convent, Mither.'

This isna entirely true. Twa Sisters come tae the castle for provisions each month. Sister Felicity is auld with a face like a cloutie dumpling and breath like rotting kale. But Sister Agnes has skin like parchment and lang white fingers. Elinor's sister went intae the convent and she tells tales of clean white sheets and bells for prayer ringing through the nicht. Sometimes I think it would be grand tae have your life laid out like a track: nae mud, nae doubts, just a path to God, simple and straight and paved; all you'd need to dae is to thole it. But then I think on the leaves, and I want the mud and the stour and the guddle of another life, and surely the mess of a baby is preferable to the cleanness of a cauld bed.

The trees long for us. Their branches dance in the wind and the dry leaves send a shower of notes across the sky. The birk spreads itsel across a coverlet of leaves, shelters us. My grandam tellt me of the aulden days when the forests streetched for miles and you could loss yoursel in them, ne'er be found. Wolves and wullcats skulked in the darkness, bogles and bodachs made it their hame. But they cut them doon, the nobles, for boats and weapons and fancy furnishings. These few trees we hae left are all the mair precious.

We sit in silence. Only when I'm wi him can I stop and contemplate the trees. My sister and Elinor think I'm daft; if there's any time on a fine day they'll lie and sleep under a

tree, no look at it. The laddie feels the longing too: his silence is restful to the heart.

Last nicht he sang and the sound of angels rang through the great hall, like a flocht of siller birds swooping and diving. Lintie and throstle, feltie and laverock, cheetle and chirm and chirple. He seemed transparent, as though you could see through his skin: he and the voice as one. Silence was the only fit response.

My Lady clapped and gushed ower him, petted him as she does the whippet who lies at her feet. My Lady is a fine singer hersel and loves the voices of boys. Each year a page is chosen for his voice, but never have I heard one like this.

My voice is like the craik of a craw; I mouth the words of the hymns in chapel. But there is nothing I love mair than beauty, be it a leaf, or a cloud or a clear note. Some year syne I tellt my mither how I see God in the trees and the flowers and the sky and she made me confess to the priest. He said it was a deep sin – thou shalt not have false gods before me – though not mortal as I wasna auld enough to have full knowledge or consent of what I did. I dinna understaund what is wrang with finding God in His works; surely that which is sublime is the best path to Him.

There is a bleezing fire and great sconces line the walls, throwing shadows. My Lady's jewels glint in their licht. The tables have been cleared and the room made ready for dancing. Each year up till now I have danced with the ither maids and wee lads, loving to birl till my cheeks were pink and my heart gowpin. This year I sit in a quiet corner, watching. I canna jump and skip wi the wee ones, my body has grown in ways that mak me uncomfortable and feart that I will be

looked at. I am different frae my sister. Catriona is only twa year aulder but she is a young lady; my mither and faither are already planning a husband for her. She dances with grace, she smiles at her partner and I can see the heids turn tae look at her in her new goun, made by my mither frae one of My Lady's castoffs.

Naebody looks at me. I dinna ken whether to be glad or no; the priest says it is a blessing to be plain, a woman shouldna attract the attention of men. In front of me are the mairried women, blethering of their babes and men. Further ower the auld men congregate round the ale. A rustle behind me and I turn my heid to see Feilamort creep frae his place wi the pages and settle hissel on the hem of my cloak, coorying in. I turn and wrap an end ower him. He looks up wi they big broon een and smiles afore he closes them.

The next day Elinor tellt me that the Lady Alicia isna going to marry the young laird after all.

'They're all leaving in the morn, at first licht.'

'But whit has happened?'

She paused frae scrubbing the big table.

'Naebody's saying. Louis thinks My Lady found out about Her Laird's dalliance wi the mither of the lad but I dinna think she cares a wheen for his cairry-on. Mair like it's her fancy for the lad that's put a stop to it.'

She pushed a lank of hair awa frae her face; her brow was drint wi sweat.

'I dinna ken whit you mean, Elinor.'

She laughed.

'Ask your mither tae spare you frae the sewing a day or

twa and help oot in the kitchen. You're needing these innocent wee een opened.' She gied my breist a squeeze through my gounie. 'You're coming alang. It disna dae tae be too innocent at your age.'

I felt my face flush hot. 'I ken whit happens atween a man and a wumman, I ken it's like the kye and the sheep. But I dinna ken whit you mean about My Lady.'

'You must be the only one, Deirdre. My Lady is much younger than Her Laird.'

'Aye. The Laird's an auld man.'

'And she was bare your age when she became a bride.' Elinor continued scrubbing, makking lang strokes across the wood. 'When the twa of them sit thegether it's like a sweet young berry next an auld wrinkly russet laid up for winter. Imagine that on a pillow. Or under a coverlet.'

I said nothing. I kent I shouldna be speaking like this – if my mither heard us she'd thrash me – but I couldna help mysel. I wanted tae hear mair.

Elinor looked round tae see if aabody was near, then said in a low voice, 'She loves the lads.'

'Whit lads?'

'Deirdre, ye ken that only Marie is permitted tae serve My Lady in her bed-chamber?'

I nodded. Marie is the maid My Lady brocht frae her hame; she speaks French with her and she is the one who combs her hair and helps her wi her dressing.

'Mind last year when Marie was taen ill, real bad wi the gripping pains in her guts and had tae tak to her bed for twa days?'

I dinna, but I nod, wanting to hear the story.

'My sister Frances had tae serve My Lady in her stead. I had hoped it would be me, I am the elder after all, but then, mibbe she kenned I'd be too observant.'

Frances doesna see much and says less.

'But even Frances noticed. At that time it was the young esquire – Fraser, I think – but she's fickle, changes with the wind. She likes tae tak her pick of the lads when they get tae fourteen or fifteen.'

'Whit aboot the Laird. Does he no ken?'

'He kens richt enough but turns a blind eye. He's danced the reel o bogie plenty times hissel. But mibbe it was too close tae hame when she picked on the lad intended for her ain dochter.'

My Lady spends hours on her knees in the chapel, attends Mass each day and pores ower holy books. Many a time as I sat stitching in a corner of the hall, I have seen her walk up and doon, conversing with the priest on points of doctrine.

'But she'll go tae Hell.'

'Mibbe she'd rather have her Heaven in the here and noo.'

They left the next morn, and made their adieus with all the fyke you'd expect, nae sign that there was any ill feeling atween them. I observed the young laird kiss My Lady's haund, and it did seem tae me that there was a look of longing, of hesitancy in his bearing. But then he was a daft loon, gangly as a colt, legs too lang for his body. My Lady showed nae sign of disturbance, she was as elegant and gracious as ever. And Her Laird bade them fareweel wi his usual heartiness.

Elinor's words had been running through my heid last night afore I went tae sleep. How would it be for a lovely young

woman tae lie wi a man like the Laird? He was what my mither called a fine man; he had a barrel of a chist and sturdy legs, a red and wrinklit face and muckle haunds. His laugh rang out rough and ready and he was happiest out of doors wi the men, riding or hunting. My Lady's music and manuscripts meant nothing tae him. The widow lady who was the mither of the intended was fleshy and bightsom, ate weel and laughed hearty at the table. The twa of them were surely a better fit. I could imagine the Laird's haund on her rump as she ascended the narrow staircase afore him, while My Lady's faery beauty was mair suited tae the slender youth.

My cheeks flushed again. I must turn my mind frae sich things or I will need tae confess tae impure thochts and I couldna bear that.

We processed frae the castle: my mither and faither aheid wi my wee brithers; Elinor, Catriona and I following. On Good Friday the church had been bare, the statues covered, the tabernacle empty, Our Lord crucified. On the third day He is resurrected: bells ring out and the chapel is a bleeze of licht, flooers everywhere, mair lovely than any Easter I had kenned. This year the Archbishop was to say Mass and a special choir had come a distance. Their choirmaster had studied ower the sea wi a famous musician, and was counted the greatest in the land. The Laird had paid for everything.

'The prayers and masses will tak the rest of this year tae get through,' said Catriona.

Elinor laughed. 'They say the Laird's indulgences would

streetch frae here tae Rome and back. But mibbe he is mair afeart of death than in the past, and thinks to mend his ways.'

'Surely he's no ill?' I asked. The Laird strode at the heid of the procession, My Lady on his airm; nane could look as freck as he.

'There's mair quarrels among the nobles; thus far we have kept out of them, but if it gets worse, the Laird may no be able tae avoid trouble.'

'There's aye skirmishing and bickering,' said Catriona, as we entered the pew behind my mither, who turned and quieted us with a look.

The Easter service is the loveliest of the year, wi bells ringing and much incense; we light the Easter candle, reciting the promises made at baptism. Though the readings are ower-lang, ye can sit and look round at the flooers and candles, at all the folk dressed up in their best. I love to gaze at the statue of Our Lady, with the stars round her crown and the babe in her airms. The Archbishop's vestments were white for Easter but with gold broidery; it would be fine indeed to mak vestments like those.

At Communion, I knelt at the altar and Father Graham placed the host on my tongue. The breid melted tae nothing and I returned tae my place, filled with the wonder of it, the body and blood of Our Lord. The church was full; folk were restless and the bairns footered and whispered, but when the choir sang, all was stillness. It was that different frae our usual Sunday Mass, where all sing thegether, whether craws or linties. The choir, come frae Stirling way, was famed for its harmonies. Their choirmaster composes settings for the Mass hymns and each section of the choir had its part; some were high and some lower, but they blended thegether with

sich perfection. They sang a hymn I hadna heard afore, one which lifted the heart to Heaven. I listened, lost in its loveliness, then, efter the first twa verses, I heard something even mair beautiful, as though an angel had joined the earthly voices. Feilamort had begun to sing. I watched him in the pew across frae me; the laddie was oblivious to the effect of his voice, it was as though he sang to hissel and there was no one around him.

After Mass there was much feasting at the castle where the high heid yins and the choir were entertained in lavish fashion; I was needed in the kitchen and kept busy the rest of the day. When the guests were served and we paused for food, there was a jolious time as we listened tae the news of Stirling frae Andrew, the groom, and his lads who accompanied the retinue.

'What is the speak of the toun, Andrew?' asked Louis, pouring him some ale.

'Weel,' answered Andrew. 'Did ye no hear about the Abbot, who thocht he could fly?'

Douglas pointed to his cup. 'I hae thocht I could fly mony a time mysel, but only when I had a bittie too much of this.'

Andrew grinned. 'I dinna think ye can blame the ale in this case,' he said. 'He's a gloustering wee bauchle, aye strushing about the place. Nae doubt he thocht he was going tae flee up tae Heaven.'

'Whit happened?' Archie, one of the wee laddies, knelt at Andrew's feet, gazing up, desperate tae hear the tale.

'A set of wings were made for him. Bonny they were too, constructed frae the fedders of eagles.'

Archie's een shone.

'He climbed up on the battlements, where he strutted back and fore for all tae admire. The gentry was up there wi him

and us common folk stood underneath, watching. Then he spread his wings . . .' Andrew streetched out his airms, mimed the flapping of a bird. 'And took a heider ower the battlements.'

'And did he fly?' asked Archie.

'Did he get killt?' asked Douglas.

We all waited as Andrew took a sup of his ale.

'Did he peuch! He fell in the midden ablow.'

We were all laughing, and wee Archie chuckled that much he near fell ower.

Andrew went on. 'He got up, his fine claes clarted frae heid tae fit in keech, and started blaming the mannie who made the wings. It was all his fault, announced the wee gamphrell. He must have used the fedders of hens insteid of the plumage of eagles, and since the hens covet the midden and no the skies, the wings wouldna tak him upward.'

While we were having a merry time in the kitchen, much had happened upstair and, in bed that nicht, Catriona tellt me about it.

'Efter the Archbishop left there was a great row between the Laird and My Lady. The choirmaster had asked My Lady to send Feilamort tae the sangschool and be trained up to join the choir. My Lady doesna want to let him go but My Laird says it will pit them in good stead with the Archbishop and thus with the King.'

'Shush,' said a voice frae the ither side of the room. Catriona moved closer to my ear and lowered her voice.

'She refuses and My Laird says she is a selfish – I will not repeat the word – who thinks only of her ain pleasure and what use is a singing lad to her, she can get a dozen of them. And she

says not one with a voice like this and he says that is why he should be singing for the glory of God and she says much you think of the glory of God, you are only thinking of your ain skin.'

The arguments atween My Lady and the Laird continued and, while they rarely sparred in public, it was obvious frae their demeanour that things werena douce. My faither seemed trauchled too, no about their fechting but about the land.

Catriona was now betrothed to Robert, a steady lad who worked alangside our faither, and she took great pleasure in explaining all he had tellt her about the matter.

'It's all about the feu-ferming, Robert says.'

'Whit's that?'

'The tenants of the King's lands, the lairds and the gentry, will now be renting them in perpetuity insteid of a fixed term.'

'Is that no a good thing?'

'The new feu is thrice the auld one and the lairds have tae pay it all in advance. They dinna ken how they will mak any siller. Robert says the King is trying to raise a heap of money so he can have all his fancy palaces and pictures and boats.'

Catriona shook her heid. 'But whit can they dae? At least the Laird has the prospect of keeping the land. There is talk that some of the nobles, men who have farmed their land for a hunner year, have had it taken awa and given to those who are friends of the King. It is wise to remain on his side.'

The time when trees turn gowden and rid is the bonniest of the year. One misty morn, Feilamort and I jouked out

without being seen, walked in the forest. Dampness sparkled, specks of watter dreeping doon like pearls on a lady's ballgoun. The wind had been strong the nicht afore and our path atween the huddled trees was strewn wi leaves. Further on, in a place exposed tae the scourge of the weather, a young birkie had been uprooted and lay on its side like a wounded fawn, severed frae the earth that nourished it. I turned awa, unable to look at it.

When we returned, my mither called me.

'Lady Alicia is to have a new dress, a special one. And I want you to embroider it.'

'Oh thank you, Mither.'

She smiled. 'I ken you are ready tae tak on something like this. And if it pleases Her Ladyship, she may let you work some of her ain dresses.'

Lady Alicia is a bonny wee thing wi skin white and soft as snaw. Her hair is bricht copper and glinting in the sun; it curls and ripples like a bush in autumn, sparkles like the gossamer. The dress is of emerald velvet and I am tae broider a panel on the bodice. I look at the threids my mither has laid out on the table. We are fortunate for My Lady brocht fine fabrics and twines frae her hame in France and she has mair sent ower whenever she can. Usually the pattern is laid out and I fill it in, mibbe choosing atween red or deep blue. But the day I am tae tak whitever I wish under my mither's supervision.

I choose gowden yellow, crimpson and ochre.

My mither watches carefully, says nothing. I ken she is thinking that young girls usually wear lighter colours.

'Vert, jaune, wald, vermeloun. This is a dress of autumn. These colours will make Lady Alicia's pale skin glow and her rid hair sing.'

'Aye,' says my mither.

I sit with my minnie and the other women. The act of sewing pleases me, maks me calm and contentit: the rhythm of the needle pushing in and out, tiny stitches forming a line and a pattern. And now I am permitted my ain flichts of fancy: berries and leaves intertwine, and a bird keeks frae under a tangle of leaves.

We dinna talk as much as the folk who work in the kitchen. We are up the stair, close to the chaumers of the Lady and the Laird (no that he is often tae be seen indoors during the daytime) and too much mirth and chatter isna seemly. The women speak a little of the betrothal and the fine party which is to tak place but my mither keeps a sharp eye out for any talk which would be frowned upon or anything she thinks I shouldna hear. I dinna mind, I ken Elinor will report the claik of the kitchen. And, in any case, I am happy here in the clear light of the morn.

Feilamort lurks in the shadows. He has been excused the usual duties and training in case he catches cauld and is unable to sing for the party. My Lady suspects his chest is weak; she feeds him dried fruits and wraps a cloak round him. Certainly he has never looked strong. The other lads are filling out under the regime of fresh air, riding and archery practice. They are big and bonny, skin coarsening frae being outside. But his skin is like the vellum in My Lady's books, with a creamy transparency.

They've been running up and doon stairs since early morn. Louis is grumbling and clattering pots while the rest of the servants scuddle like mice to dae his bidding. The castle rings wi licht and laughter, voices blether in different languages. We ken the sound of French frae My Lady but Jules says there are some Spanish and Italian too. The guests' voices ripple and trill; ours are rough and burr-like in comparison. Their servants are housed in all the best places while we are stuffed intae cauld corners.

Lady Alicia is to be bethrothed again, this time to Monsieur Jacques, a young French lord whose faither is cousin to My Lady. It is perceived wise for them to mak their alliance with this family frae ower the watter, rather than within Scotland, since naebody kens how the wind will blaw and who will fall in or out of favour.

Louis has befriended their cook, Alphonse, and I hear the speak of the kitchen frae Elinor. According to Alphonse, the young lad's parents are charmed by My Laird and Lady.

'Mercifully, no as charmed as the last lot,' laughs Elinor. 'Her Ladyship has mair sense than tae start her haivers this time.'

'So the betrothal will go aheid?'

'It has all been sorted by thon Monsieur Garnet,' says Elinor.

'Who's he?'

'The French lord and lady's adviser. He's aye sniffing round the place, kens aabody's business. Alphonse says young Jacques and Lady Alicia are baith related tae some auld man who has nae heir and if they make a match, they will inherit a castle and a fortune.'

They all seem guy happy wi the arrangement. The French lord rides wi the Laird, the ladies discuss their children and the French fashions, and at nicht they all come thegether to dine and dance and listen to the music. Lady Alicia and the young French lad lead the dancing. He is lighter on his feet than the last suitor, capers and gigs with grace. Lady Alicia is stiff but no awkward, aye a solemn lass. The colours of the dress tak fire in the licht frae the torches, bleeze in harmony wi her hair till she looks like an autumn tree hersel, douce and graceful. My Lady speaks to my mither, who in turn beckons me. I cross to My Lady, clumsy and embarrassed at her attention. I curtsy, barely daring to look at her. She holds out her haund tae me, its emerald ring clawed ower her bonny white finger.

'Ma petite, you have done well indeed. What a pretty sempstress you are turning into. You follow your bonne maman. I will ask for you to embroider one of my gowns too.'

'Thank you, My Lady.'

The dance ended and Feilamort came tae stand in front of the ladies. I looked round, feart I wouldna be able tae return to my place. My mither motioned me behind her, close by where I could see everything but stay out the road.

It is usual for merry tunes to be sung on these occasions; all must be licht and joyful. But Feilamort sang a doleful melody that tore at the heart, his throat rounding and clinging to the notes as though he couldna bear tae let them go. Listening tae him you felt as if you were fleeing with the notes, cupped inside them. I had ne'er heard this song afore and didna

understaund the words, but the feeling of longing, of being left and lost, choked my heart. All around I could feel the silence; even the servants attending to their masters stood reverent.

'Mon petit, mon petit,' My Lady cried. 'Even more beautiful than usual, but why so sad?'

Feilamort looked at her with big brown een.

'La vie est triste, Madame,' said the French lord.

'No, no, not at a betrothal. Now sing something heureuse.'

And Feilamort sang again, this time a merry tune, but his voice so plaintive that its joyousness was tinged like a November sunrise, when it is hard tae ken if the sun is coming or going.

Monsieur Garnet was the only one no enraptured by the singing. Sleekit and weaselly he seemed, his face thin and dark, the bones jutting out; he looked at Feilamort in a way that made me feel unricht. He saw the beauty of his voice, but it seemed that he stood apart, weighing it.

When the singing was ower, My Lady took Feilamort to sit on a low stool at her knee. She fed him pieces of apple and gave him sips of water and wine, stroked his curls.

'L'enfant chante comme un ange.'

'Beautiful, indeed, Madame.' Monsieur Garnet twisted his lips intae a smile.

'Every year I have a new page who sings for me, but there has never been one like this.'

'I have heard many fine singers but never one of such quality.'

'You have travelled much, Monsieur?'

'Indeed.'

'I should love to hear of it; in this country one is somewhat . . . limited.'

Monsieur Garnet glanced at My Laird, deep in conversation about hounds.

'The boy's voice has a particularly plaintive quality.'

'Oh,' she sighed. 'If only one could keep them like this. It is sad that the voices of boys must change.'

'Some say that is what gives the voice its beauty, the poignancy of knowing that, at the time of greatest perfection, it could be lost at any moment. I recall in the court of . . . I must not name him, you understand, but at a great court we were being entertained by a young boy with a beautiful voice and as he reached the top note, the crescendo of the song, out came a croak that would have shamed a frog.'

My Lady put her haund to her mouth. 'Oh Monsieur, how embarrassing.'

'But amusing too, though not for the boy. I believe he never sang again, though of course the first break is not the end of the singing. But he could not bear the thought it might happen again.'

Monsieur Garnet drew closer to My Lady.

'I have heard, though, Madame, of ways in which the voice may be preserved.'

'Indeed.'

'Rather extreme measures, of course, not to be undertaken lightly, but . . .'

He looked at Feilamort.

'Is he destined for an esquire?'

'That was, of course, why he came but he seems of a

delicate constitution. The training does not suit him and to protect his voice he has been kept more indoors.'

'And who trains his voice?'

'Our choirmaster, Father Graham, oversees all the singing. But Feilamort does not need to be trained; it comes naturally to him.'

'A good Italian singing master could do wonders with your little lark; with proper training he would be able to delay the difficulty of the changing voice and allow you to enjoy his singing for longer. And, of course, he could also give lessons to Lady Alicia.'

'Ah, but where would we find such a person? It would need to be a man of the highest ability and delicacy of feeling. Surely someone of that nature would be able to find a position far more attractive than this one.'

'My Lady, no position could be more attractive than this.'

'Monsieur, I am flattered of course, but this is a cold, rough country and our home is without polish, other than the little I try to introduce.'

'I have someone in mind.'

'We will discuss this further. But now, the dancing is about to recommence.'

Snaw fell for my sister's wedding at the Yule time. The cranreuch had been upon us for days and a haze of frosty air rose frae the fields. Our toes nipped wi cauld on waking and steamclouds chuffed frae our mouths. But though auld Maggie blethered on about how the moonbroch foretellt a storm, the weather

held and we tripped alang tae the chapel tae see her and her lad joined thegether.

Bonny she looked in the blue frock that suited her fairness, and happy too; Robert was a suitable match but there was true hert-liking atween them, and when they turnt tae us efter the words were said, their faces shone. We followed them outside and, as they stood at the door of the chapel, a wauff of snaw skirled around them; the blue skimmered wi white, Catriona shrouded for a moment, then revealed again, laughing and turning tae her man.

A fine party there was; the Laird is generous to his loyal servants and there was much feasting and merriment afore the bedding of the bride. I kept out the road as much as I could, avoiding the glaiber of the auldwives about who would be the next. When Catriona gied me a piece of her cake, one said, 'Put it unner your pillow, lass, and you'll dream of the one you will marry.' Feilamort wasna singing that nicht, as he had a glisk o cauld. I took the cake and shared it wi him, as we sat in a corner awa frae the festivities.

I felt strange and hingy; I was happy for my sister, but sad too in a way, for things wouldna be the same now she was wed. That nicht we werena cooried thegether unner the blankets, whispering. As I lay wi the ither maids, my mind was filled wi wondering of Catriona and her first nicht wi her man.

Signor Carlo arrived the week after Easter, in the midst of a thunderplump. It had been a bonny morn and I was fair scunnered at having to stay indoors. The blossom was white agin a

blue sky as we sewed, and my heart felt full tae bursting with longing to escape intae the air and licht. Sometimes in the summer we tak our work outside but my mither thocht it still too cauld, since a kene wind bewaved the branches on the edge of the river.

Suddenly a shadow covered my work; I looked up tae see blackness fill the sky. A brattle of thunder, a flaff of lightning and the rain blattering doon.

It didna last, but the carriage clattered intae the yerd at the storm's height. My mither continued her sewing as if naught had happened. Then she nodded tae me and said, 'Run doon and ask whether any threids have arrived in the carriage alang wi the singing mannie.' She kenned fine there were nane but she wanted tae let me gang doon and see him.

The hall was filled wi fowk. Aabody frae kitchen tae yerd who had a reason tae be there and hauf those who had nane were gathered tae watch. It is aye this way when the carriage arrives as it happens seldom. And a singing teacher, frae Italy.

He was wee, the mannie, like a droukit corbie in his thin black cloak and velvet shoon that were made for dancing, no travelling. He held a silken handkerchief tae his face as though feart of contamination. Even frae my position, I could smell the cloves and garlic, and some unfamiliar herbs.

My Lady held out her haund and he bowed low. 'Signor Carlo, we are honoured. My husband is attending to his duties on the land, but he will be delighted to meet you at dinner. Please, come to my chamber, where you can warm yourself.'

I almost forgot tae ask for the threid, but as I was about

tae ascend the back stair it occurred tae me I had better pretend tae have done my mither's errand.

Donald, a shrivelled auld man who was bringing in boxes frae the carriage, said, 'Naa, lass, I have nae threids for your mither, but there is something a gentie lass like yoursel will be interested in.'

He held out a velvet pouch, steeked in silk. I oped it and out fell twa ribbons, one red and one blue. 'Tie that round your bonny white neck, or use it tae tame these curls.' He tugged at my fanklit brown locks.

I fingered the ribbons, saft in my haunds, their brichtness contrasting wi the darkness of my frock.

'But do they no belang tae Signor Carlo?'

'He'll no miss them. He has that mony parcels. And whit does an auld stick like him want wi triffles like these. Keep them, lassie.'

'Thank you,' I whispered, and rushed up the stair. I kenned that I would be able tae hear what went on atween the Lady and the Signor while we worked.

We sewed in silence. I caught glimpses of the next room and could hear the rise and fall of voices, mak out maist of what My Lady was saying. The Signor sat at the fire, his feet streetched out in front of him, steam rising frae his claes and his shoon; he held a cup of warm wine, infused wi cloves and spices. At his side was a plate of bannocks, no the kind we have for breakfast but thin delicate ones Louis maks for My Lady and her guests. One time when they were left ower after a party I sat in the kitchen wi Elinor and we ate them, nibbling like wee birds. The Laird canna abide sich dainties; if they are served he taks four or five and eats them thegether.

He prefers the bannocks that we all eat, muckle slabs of oats that fill yer belly.

'You had a difficult journey, Signor?' My Lady asked.

'Not too difficile, Signora.' His voice was wavery and thin. 'But,' he shivered. 'Freddo, froid.'

'It is a cold country,' My Lady replied. 'In many ways.'

'I am used to travelling, I accept it.'

'You have travelled to many countries?'

'When I was young I sang for the courts of Europe, now I train young voices. Music is my mistress. I follow her.'

My Lady nodded.

'Do you wish to rest now, Signor? Dinner is at two o'clock. I am unable to prevail upon my husband to change the savage habits of this country and eat our main meal later, as I was brought up to do. He says that we must fit round the needs of the farm and the land. Only for large parties, at Christmas and on special occasions, do we dine at a civilised hour.'

'I prefer to meet with my young pupils now, Signora, if it pleases you. I understand there are two?'

'I should like you to attend to the musical training of my daughter, Lady Alicia. This will be a part of her education as a young lady, and in keeping with her status.'

Signor Carlo bowed his heid and placed his haund on his breast. 'I am honoured, Signora.'

'But I also have a young boy, with a very special voice. He came to us with the pages, but I do not think the training of an esquire is suitable for him. I wish you to take complete charge of him, and work with him as you see fit. His voice is paramount. Everything else takes second place and whatever you need for him will be provided.'

'I understand, Signora.'

Feilamort, a slight figure, like a wee speug wi his faughie claes and skinny legs, appeared at the door. He looked at me wi his huge broon een and I nodded towards the entrance to My Lady's room. He stood in the arch of the doorway, his back tae me. I could see he'd streetched, was takkin on the gangly look that the loons get afore they turn frae bairns tae lads.

My Lady's voice rang oot. 'Mon petit, may I present Signor Carlo, your new master. Signor, your pupil, Feilamort.'