THE WAY TO IMPOSSIBLE ISLAND

Books by Sophie Kirtley

The Wild Way Home
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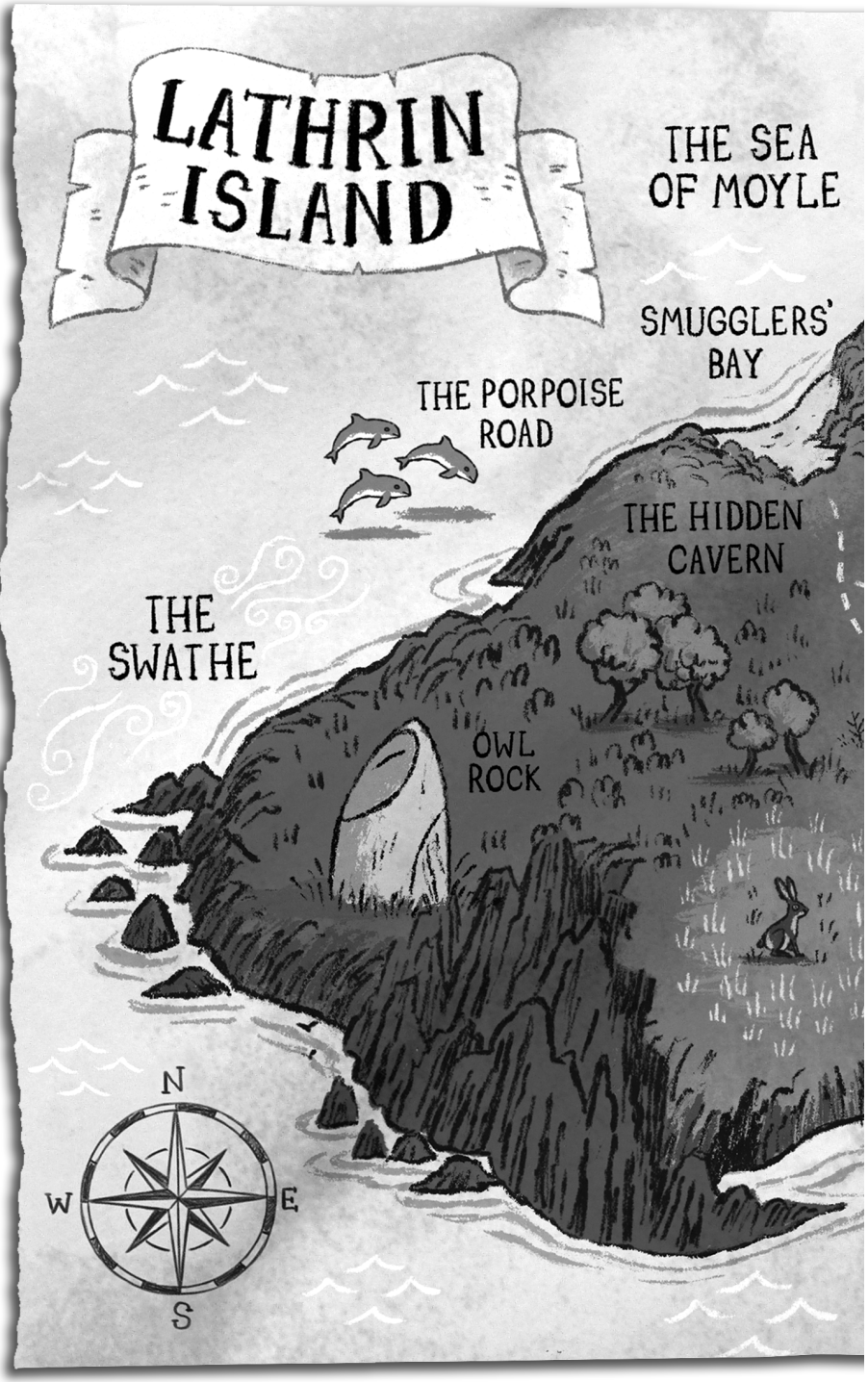
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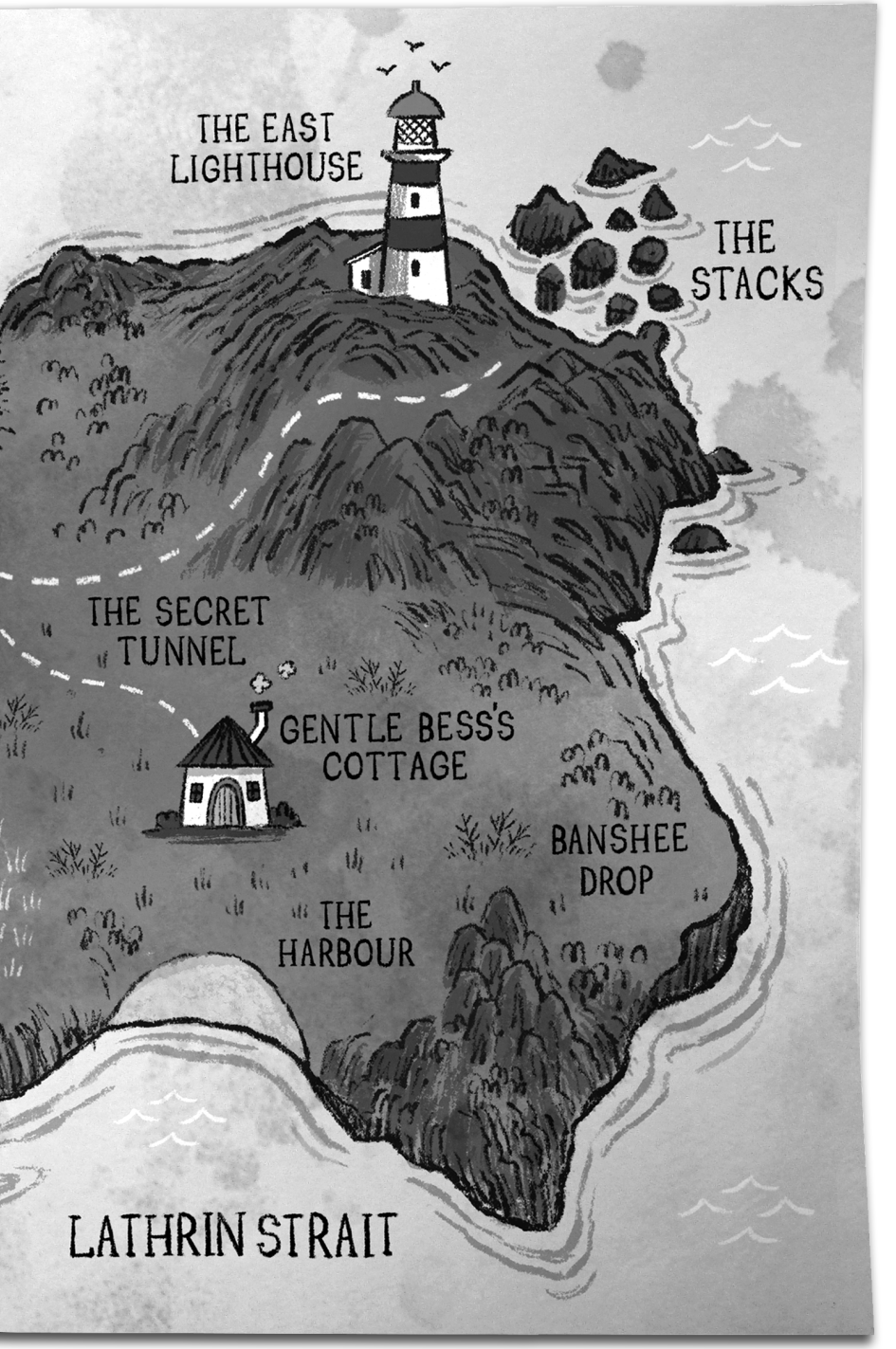


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For Mum
and
For Dad

With love

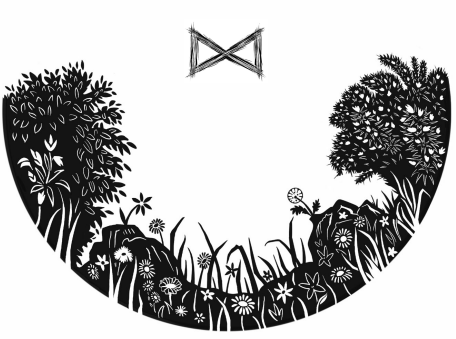

LATHRIN ISLAND
THE SEA OF MOYLE
SMUGGLERS' BAY
THE PORPOISE ROAD
THE HIDDEN CAVERN
THE SWATHE
OWL ROCK
N
W
E
S


THE EAST LIGHTHOUSE
THE STACKS
THE SECRET TUNNEL
GENTLE BESS'S COTTAGE
BANSHEE DROP
THE HARBOUR
LATHRIN STRAIT

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild

W.B. Yeats, 'The Stolen Child'

HART



Mothgirl perched on a strong branch and peered out across the wide green forest, hoping for signs of her brother – a wisp of smoke perhaps; the splosh of his homeward paddle in the river water; the high cry of an arrow-struck boar …

But no. Trees were trees, as they always were. River was river. Wind was wind. 'Where you, Hart?' she whispered. Her brother had been gone for two moons now, and although Hart was a full-grown man, strong as a bear, brave as a wolf, still Mothgirl was afraid for him.

From high in her tree, she squinted out beyond the forest to the Great Plain; that was where Pa believed Hart had gone, to the hunting grounds where herds of aurochs roamed. 'Your brother will return to us soon and we shall feast like never before,' said Pa each sunfall, but as the days and nights passed, Mothgirl noticed

that even Pa's strong voice had begun to flicker with doubts. Even further off, beyond the flatlands of the Great Plain, Mothgirl could just make out the dark shape of Lathrin Mountain, jagged and bold on the shores of the Big Water.

'Lathrin Mountain,' she whispered. And she shuddered, pulling her white rabbit-skin close. In her mind Mothgirl heard the firestories Pa had told so many times about Lathrin Mountain and the restless spirits that roamed there.

'Oh, Hart,' she breathed. He had been gone too long. What if her brother had been snatched by spirits? Or what if strange clans had come, invaders, and taken her brother away with them to their far-ice-lands? Mothgirl squinted beyond that furthest, darkest place on the very edge of the land; her skin prickled.

A sharp yelp from the forest floor made Mothgirl's heart jolt.

She glanced down to the foot of the tree. It was ByMySide; he was waiting there for her, watchful always. As his amber eyes met hers, Mothgirl's wolf growled his soft warning signal.

Mothgirl listened full-eared; she could hear it too – the crunch and rustle of someone making their way towards them through the trees.

Swinging silently down, branch to branch, Mothgirl

landed lightly next to her wolf. ByMySide nuzzled his girl softly. She nuzzled him back, then, silent as shadows, they edged towards the old yew tree by the clearing and slid together inside its hollow trunk.

The air in here smelt damp and sweetly rotten. Mothgirl crouched down low enough to peep through a little hole in the wood at whoever was coming. It had better not be one of Vulture's clan, she thought; her eyes narrowed and her grip tightened on her spear. Resting her cheek on the soft warmth of ByMySide, she pulled the rabbit-skin cape tight around her shoulders, and she waited.

The rustling footfalls approached. Mothgirl breathed light, making ready to run … or to fight.

But as the figure moved into the circle of her peeping hole she saw that it was Pa. Only Pa!

Mothgirl breathed easy. She was about to emerge from her hiding place and walk with him, but she saw his spear was high – he was hunting. 'Wait, my wolf,' whispered Mothgirl, laying a steady hand on ByMySide's neck.

Just then a brown hare lolloped into the clearing – old and slow. Mothgirl's mouth watered at the easy meal; she felt ByMySide's muscles tense as he shared her thinking. They waited for Pa's swift spear to land.

But Pa's spear hand wavered, tremblish and weak as

he threw. Mothgirl's eyes widened in astonishment; Pa's strong spear had fallen foolishly short, like the spear of a small boy, not like the spear of a great hunter many summers old.

The hare vanished once more amongst the leaves. Mothgirl heard Pa swear under his breath.

She studied him closely: he retrieved his ill-thrown spear and walked on slowly up the hill: his breath rasped; the old hurt in his snake-bite foot made him lumber and hobble. A sudden truth hit Mothgirl, clear and sharp as ice – Pa was an old man now; his strength was fading.

A golden leaf twirled and fell. Soon the gentle green summer days would slip away and sharp winter would come; they would need to up and move their camp to the lake-lands as they did each year when the leaves started to fall. But could Pa still walk all that long long way? And what if Hart did not come back by next moon? They would need to leave for the lake-lands without him. Mothgirl's eyes prickled with tears as she imagined Hart returning to find a cold fire, an empty camp. ByMySide sensed Mothgirl's sadness and nuzzled her softly.

Suddenly ByMySide's whole body stiffened; his ears pricked and his neck fur stood on end.

A thin man ran, light-footed and shadow-fast, through the clearing. He was too quick-passing for Mothgirl to

glimpse his face, but she could tell by his smell, which still hung bitter in the air, that the man had been wearing blood paint.

'Vulture's clan,' she whispered in disgust.

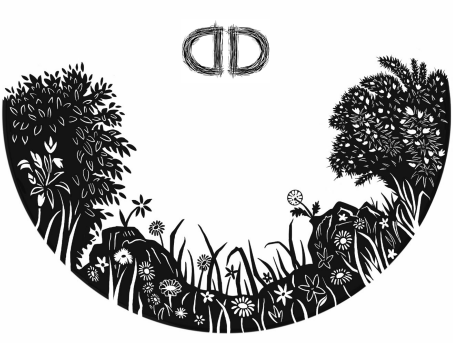
Why was one of Vulture's men hunting here? This was not their clan-lands! Angry now, Mothgirl slipped from the tree hollow and crept silently in the man's wake. ByMySide kept so close to her she could feel the soft tickle of his grey fur on her bare legs; he knew stealth like she did and his wolf paws padded noiselessly in time with Mothgirl's own feet.

They tracked Vulture's man unseen until he had passed back, empty-handed at least, to his own clan-lands in the next valley. Mothgirl spat in the hollow of his footprint, narrowing her eyes. If Hart had been here, none of Vulture's men would have dared to stray.

But Hart was not here.

Mothgirl swallowed; she looked towards the distant snake of smoke that rose from the trees across the next valley – Vulture's camp. Did Vulture and his men know that Hart was gone, that only Pa and Mothgirl and Eelgirl and Owlboy were here now? Mothgirl shuddered – if they did know, then that meant danger. Big danger. ByMySide growled low and long, like coming thunder.

THE STRAND



Dara climbed slowly up the tallest sand dune, letting the seagrass prick and tickle his bare legs. It was hard work; the sand was so powder-soft it slid down with his every up-step, but it was warm and delicious under his toes so Dara didn't mind. Not one bit.

Reaching the top of the sand dune, he rested his palm for a moment on his thundering heart. A gust of swirling salt-fresh wind flung itself at Dara's cheeks, like a whirl-about hug from a long-lost friend. He laughed aloud, breathless and triumphant. Flinging his arms wide, he let his T-shirt billow like a sail and he giggled again as the fast, wild air cooled his sticky skin.

Back at home the world felt all solid and real. Like it was held together with screws and nails and hinges. At home there were just the facts of things – he was Dara Merriam; he was twelve years old; he got up at 7.30 on

schooldays, 8.30 at weekends; he liked bananas; he did not like pineapple; he always remembered to brush his teeth before bed and never forgot to take his pills. But here, by the sea, on holiday, all the facts of the world loosened and stretched and softened somehow. This morning he'd woken up at sunrise and gone outside in his bare feet beneath the pinkening sky, just to watch the world wake up, just because he could.

Dara grinned. Still panting, he gazed at the endless strand, a beach so big that when Dara was little they used to play that it was an actual desert; he and Charlie would trek across it pretending dogs were camels and even calling the sea a 'mirage'. Dara stared out at the grey-green surging sea, far too vast and noisy and wild to ever be anyone's illusion.

Squinting his eyes, Dara peered across the waves and drifting mist. On the far horizon, where grey sea met grey clouds, loomed the jagged, craggy shape of Lathrin Island. Wind-whipped; abandoned; wild.

'Lathrin,' whispered Dara, and even just the word made him tingle and shiver with longing.

After his operation, he was going to charge right down these dunes and run all the way to the harbour and leap straight into a rowing boat and row right out between the buoys all the way to Lathrin Island, single-handed, bold and brave. Dara had had it all planned out for as long as

he could remember. He'd moor his boat on the island and explore all day, right until sunset, and then he'd set up camp and stay there all night too. Maybe, if he could keep his eyes open long enough, he'd even spot the Golden Hare. The Golden Hare – just imagine! A shiver of nervous hope and excitement danced up Dara's spine.

Dara took a deep breath. Still a little shaky. Still a little tight. He swung his bag off his shoulders, unzipped the pocket, grabbed his inhaler and took a puff. He felt his lungs opening like blossoms. He felt his heart ease. He popped his puffer back into the pocket, quickly checking that his little brass hare was still in there. It was; he gave the hare a squeeze for luck, like he always did. Then he swung his bag back on his shoulders and half walked, half slid down the sand dune towards the water's edge.

The damp sand was hard and cool on Dara's bare feet. He looked behind him at his footprint trail. 'Like a snail,' he murmured, imagining the muddly mess that the world would be if everywhere we went we left a trail behind us. Lines on lines on lines like a spirograph picture. He thought about all the trails that would be here; all the trails of all the people who had walked here first; yesterday and last week and his own last-year footprints, and all the others too, spinning back and back through time,

right back to the beginning when every grain of sand was a rock and every rock was a mountain and –

The soft splat of a raindrop hit Dara's arm. He gazed out to sea at the ominous clouds rolling in from beyond the island. In the car on the way here Mum had said it might storm tonight. Dad had said 'But it never rains at Carn Cottage!' and they'd all laughed at that one.

Another raindrop landed, on Dara's cheek this time. Dara heard Mum's voice in his head; it was *not a good idea* to get soaked. He got his red raincoat out of his bag and put it on. He pulled his hood up and kept on walking. Rain pitter-pattered fast and noisy around his ears. He walked right out past where the hard sand was rippled like it still thought it was underwater.

Dara stood where the sand got sloppy and let his feet sink into the cool softness. He watched the out-to-sea waves rise up, fierce and lionish, before crashing down with a roar.

A brave little wave came rushing in, right over his sunken feet. Dara wriggled his toes and schlooped his feet out of their sand swamp. The rain was falling faster now, making tiny leaping ripples on the surface of the sea, like it was bubbling and fizzy almost.

Dara took three steps, edging deeper.

AAAAAAAAK-AAAAAAAAK-AAAaaaak! taunted

a pair of young herring gulls, grey as the sky and wheeling on the wind.

He stuck his tongue out at the gulls and took another step; a wave licked the hem of his shorts. He'd love to dive right in and swim. Dara looked over his shoulder; he could see Carn Cottage through the haze of the drizzle. Were Mum and Dad watching him nervously through the window? Swimming on his own was another thing that was *not a good idea*. Dara knew that. He sighed, wishing he could do all the daft and daring things that everybody else did, or even just the ordinary things.

Soon, he told himself. *So soon. After the Big Op. Not long now.*

Dara anchored himself and let the waves rush in around him. Just a bit. Not too much. He gazed out beyond the waves, to where Lathrin Island rose like a rugged dream from the wide grey sea. He bit his lip. 'Soon,' he whispered, and Dara almost thought he saw a tiny flash of brightness dart along the craggy summit of the island – the Golden Hare? He gasped and it was gone; quick and impossible as a shooting star.

A sound came then. From behind him. The wind and the waves and the rain whooshed and swooshed and tipple-tappled so noisily that Dara thought for a moment he was imagining it …

He blinked.

Pushing back his hood, he listened.

No. He hadn't imagined it; there it was again:

A howl.

A howl so wild and lonely, the hairs on Dara's neck prickled and his mouth gawped open as he peered through the mizzle along the endless empty strand looking for a dog; it must be a really big dog to howl like that.

The howl came again, from somewhere beyond the dunes.

Dara shivered; this wasn't a *dog* howl. No way! This howl was different; this howl carved coldness into tunnels in his ears that he didn't even know were there; this howl rippled itself deep in his blood and echoed in his bones.

He felt sick. He knew it was madness, but this howl was a wolf howl. Dara was sure of it.

But it didn't make sense. There weren't any wolves; not here; not now.

Another howl.

Dara's heart fluttered like a moth in a jar.

He pulled his feet from the sucking sand and he ran.

HUNTING DAYS



Out there in the valley a lone wolf howl soared. ByMySide pricked his ears but he did not answer. Mothgirl was his family now; she laid a soft hand on ByMySide's neck; she smoothed his fur, soothed him. But Mothgirl herself was far from soothed. Out in the forest howls answered howls answered howls and Mothgirl thought about what winter does to wild wolves when the hunger comes. Vulture was not the only danger if they did not up-camp and move to the lake-lands for the frozen months.

ByMySide licked her ankle. She ruffled his thick fur lovingly. 'Wise wolf,' she whispered in his ear. ByMySide knew the most important things: he knew not to think too long; he knew to be ready and to be swift. And he knew that he was Mothgirl's and she was his.

Together they made their way to the riverbank, where Eelgirl and Owlboy played a game of jump-stones.

'My papa come back?' said Owlboy hopefully when he saw Mothgirl.

Mothgirl shook her head. She missed her brother, but Eelgirl and Owlboy missed Hart double-much. 'Your papa come back soon,' she answered in a certain-sounding voice, turning her face away in case Owlboy might see worry clouds in her eyes.

Mothgirl waded into the river to check the fish traps, but all were empty. As she stood in the cold, fast water, a leaf fell into the river and whirled off downstream … to the Great Plain … to the hunting grounds … to Lathrin Mountain … to Hart …

She wished she could go, paddle her own canoe all the way to the Big Water. Perhaps she could find her brother; perhaps she could bring him home.

'Look me, Mothgirl! Look me!' It was Eelgirl. As soon as she knew Mothgirl was watching, the small girl skimmed her jump-stone across the river. 'One … two … three …' She counted the stone's small leaps aloud. 'Ha!' she declared triumphantly to her brother. 'You throw a three-jump-stone, Owlboy?'

The little boy shrugged. 'I not want play jump-stones,' he said sadly, scratching a line in the mud with his toes. 'I not throw good jump-stones. All *my* jump-stones broken.'

Mothgirl swallowed her smile. Poor Owlboy; he was

the youngest, only four summers old. 'Here, Owlboy,' she called as she reached into the clear water. 'Look this – this jump-stone not broken.' She picked up a pebble, perfectly smooth and flat, and offered it to Owlboy. He splashed into the water and snatched it fast, solemn eyes flashing happy again.

Owlboy readied the jump-stone, but just as he was about to send it skimming across the river, there was a shiver in the bracken and a young deer sprang suddenly out from the trees. They all froze.

Silently, slowly, Mothgirl raised her spear, taking aim …

She threw true, but the sudden *whoosh* of the spear startled the deer, who leaped away and plunged back into the undergrowth, with ByMySide charging after. Whooping wildly, Eelgirl ran to chase the chase, and Owlboy thrust the jump-stone back at Mothgirl before he scrambled after his sister, waving his small stick-spear in the air.

Mothgirl slid the jump-stone into her waist pouch. Heart still pounding, she retrieved her empty spear and peered into the dim. She listened hungrily; if ByMySide caught that deer he would bring her back to camp and they would all eat well tonight. She longed to charge after them and join the hunt, but Mothgirl knew the

hour was growing late; she had better go home and blow the fire aflame.

As the sun sank lower, Eelgirl and Owlboy returned to camp, but not ByMySide. Mothgirl's cooking stone was hot; she scooped splats of nutcake mixture on to it so that they sizzled.

Mothgirl sighed, and peered out into the long forest shadows, her heart full of longing; this was the finest hour for a hunt, the hour when day turned to night. Mothgirl's skin tingled as she imagined running, sharp spear in hand, and returning with more meat than they could eat! 'Ha!' she whispered proudly under her breath. She knew that she was a fine fine hunter; Hart had taught her all he knew. But she also knew that this was not enough. Even if she were the finest hunter that had ever breathed amongst these trees it could change nothing; she was a girl, a twelve-summers-old girl, and as the seasons turned her wild, fast-hearted hunting days slipped ever faster from her. Soon Pa would say it was time to call her Moth and not Mothgirl, and her days would become woman-days only, slow and dull as mud, filled only with making nutcakes and scraping deerskins and smoking meat upon the fire.

A wisp of sweet smoke stung her eye, she rubbed it

fiercely with her fist and flipped the nutcakes. If Hart was here *he* would let Mothgirl hunt even in her woman-days. He would say *more hunters, more meat*. But Hart was not here and Pa did not think fresh thoughts like Hart did. 'Some things are done, Mothgirl,' she mumbled crossly in a Pa voice. 'And some things are simply not the way.'

Mothgirl hung her head; her anger wilted into disappointment. Perhaps her hunting days were already behind her now?

Since last winter when dearest Mole had gone to spirit sleep it was she, Mothgirl, who had prepared the nutcakes and bubbled the broths. Mothgirl's woman-days had come too early.

'Moth,' she whispered, trying the taste of her own unworn woman-name. She scrinkled her nose. It tasted unready, like a hard green berry.

Heart-heavy, Mothgirl gazed into the fire glow; she thought of things that are done and things that are not the way and her world clenched tight around her, like impossible vines. The smell, smoky and sweet, drifted up into the leaves, which flickered yellow in the gentle light.

'Nutcakes ready soon, Mothgirl?' called Eelgirl from her high-up perch on an elbow-bent branch.

'Ready when ready, Eelgirl!' Mothgirl answered grumpily. 'If you hungry, you go help Owlboy pick

berries. You six summers old, Eelgirl! You go fill your own belly.'

'Ha!' said Eelgirl, and she dropped a caterpillar on Mothgirl's head.

Mothgirl called out angrily as Eelgirl, still giggling like a chipmunk, leaped from the tree and ran up the hill. While the nutcakes cooked, Mothgirl picked hawthorn leaves and thought of Pa; a hawthorn poultice was good for steadying the breath. Perhaps with a poultice he could walk the long way to the winter camp, when Hart returned of course. As she filled her pouch with leaves, ByMySide came running out of the shadows.

Mothgirl crouched and held out her palm; the wolf came to her. 'Where is she?' asked Mothgirl. 'Where is our eating deer?'

ByMySide just blinked at Mothgirl.

Yes, sometimes ByMySide ate his fill first, but he always brought something home for the rest of them to share. That was just how they all lived: leaning on each other, needing each other, providing for each other. She rubbed her hand along his muzzle to check for blood, but there was none. The deer had got away.

Mothgirl sighed, her belly rumbling. ByMySide nudged her shoulder with his wet nose.

All of a moment Mothgirl smelt the burnt smell of too-cooked nutcake and she heard the familiar sound

of Pa's slow, heavy footfalls approaching through the forest. Mothgirl ran to tend the cooking stone and, just in time, flipped the nutcakes again before they charred. She could hear Pa's rough breathing now, as he climbed through the grove; nearly home. But why did ByMySide not go running to Pa as he usually did?

Mothgirl saw his hackles prickle as ByMySide growled softly.

'What is it, my wolf?' she whispered. Then *she* heard the other noises too.

There were different footsteps further off, and a hiss of whispered voices – Pa was not alone, someone else was following him here.

Mothgirl rose from the fireside, muscles tight with danger. She could not see Eelgirl, but Owlboy was near, so she made the owl-hoot signal, and when he looked to her, she put her finger to her lips; he hid himself amongst the brambles.

'Go. Find Eelgirl!' she whispered to ByMySide, and like a shadow he bounded off up the hill.

Gripping her spear tightly, Mothgirl lifted the skins at the entrance to the hut and slipped quietly into the dark. She hid. She waited.