

The Wanderer: Elfred's Tale

This story builds on historical bases in that several ancient tribes, including some from the British Isles, worshiped a goddess who was represented by an earthly avatar, and, although there is nothing to cause one to suppose that these tribes were matriarchal societies, it is true that many tribes, including several Celtic tribes, sometimes had female leaders. One can further suppose that the earthly representative of the goddess established traditions and gave rules that females should be dominant in the tribes, and, given that females are normally weaker physically than men, women in leadership roles would need an advantage against the occasional male who wanted to use force. Throughout history, several groups have independently developed body and mind training that can turn an unarmed person into a disciplined killing machine; so, one may imagine that the goddess prescribed such for her adherents and that these adherents found unarmed fighting often the best way for them even in warfare. This story takes place at an unspecified place in the British Isles in the first century A.D.

As the youngster of fifteen summers surveyed his surroundings and the improvements he had made, he decided he had made the best he could of the situation, that situation being that, less than a fortnight ago, the elders of his village had banished him from both the village and his tribe for being a troublemaker. While he knew it was true that he questioned in his mind everything not supported by evidence, he had recently made real attempts not to make his every doubt known to the rest of the village. That he was right about most of the controversial matters didn't give him much reason for hope for changes in tribal customs, but, still, he hoped. A person who was deemed a troublemaker would normally be put to death, and Elfred had expected exactly that when he was charged because he had no one to defend him; however, because of his age, he was given banishment from all the territory of the tribe. He remembered thinking as the elders went through the formal rite of banishment that it was a fate which, in most cases, would merely amount to death over a longer period of time, but, in his case, he didn't view the banishment as a tragedy.

Although wolves, bears, boars, and, of course, human predators were not uncommon, even within the tribal border, and all Elfred was given to take along with him was the garment he wore, sandals, and a second-class iron knife, not one of the better steel knives most men carried, he knew that death was not so certain for him because, several summers ago, he had begun collecting supplies and weapons and secreting them in a spot where he and Becky could get them quickly and slip away to the north. They had begun talking of the journey north together when they were mere children because, even then, they knew they wanted to be together all their days; however, the cache had begun when Becky, not yet eleven summers, had, to their surprise, been forced to be a bride to a much-older man. They had known such a situation could occur and was likely; however, they were not prepared for it so soon because they had observed no warning signs. He knew now that they should have slipped away immediately after she was forced to wed, even though their chance of surviving the journey without adequate preparation was dismal.

By the time he could scrounge together what was needed to help them survive and could get word to Becky, almost a year had passed and she had become pregnant. Her first pregnancy ended in only a few months, and she survived it; however, by the time she recovered sufficiently

to travel, she was again pregnant and ill and died trying to give birth to the child. Something in Elfred died along with Becky, but he vowed not to live out his life among the people who had caused her death and kept making preparations to leave. While making their plans, he and Becky had recognized that one of them might die on the journey while the other survived, and they promised each other that, although they would never forget their love, the survivor would attempt to find another mate; however, they knew finding an acceptable mate would be difficult because neither would willingly have anyone who wasn't a match in intelligence, independence, and wit, traits they found in short supply among their fellow villagers and the other tribespeople they had met. Still, somewhere, there must be others like him and Becky, even other women like her, although tribal women were beaten down if they showed spirit.

After Becky's death, he had continued to add to the collection, and, at the time of his banishment, the cache included flint for making fire, two good steel knives, a few coins, shoes that he had made from pieces of leather, some pottery, a hunting bow and a few arrows for the bow. The shattering of his world by Becky's death had left Elfred with no ties to anyone in the tribe except her mother, his mother's sister, whose man would not permit him to be around their home; so, there was no one to miss him or for him to miss in his banishment.

Although the village from which Elfred was banished was one of the tribe's main villages, it was near the tribal border, and he didn't have to go far outside the border to set up a camp about a half-day's hike from the village's cluster of houses and huts in a little copse near a stream that would provide fish to eat and water for drinking and bathing. It was easy to cut branches and make a shelter against the worst a rainstorm could bring, and, for the present, he could find edible roots to go with the fish and the occasional rabbit he could kill. Later in the spring and in summer, there would be berries and fruits and, then, in autumn, a plentiful supply of nuts. He would not die of starvation, and he could likely avoid or ward off the wild animals now that he had fire; death, if it came, would probably come from an encounter with one of the bands of lawless men, and, in truth, they would prefer to capture him to sell as a slave instead of killing him. He vowed to himself not to be captured to spend his life as a slave and, although he had never been in an actual fight, he believed that he could kill or disable a group of no more than three or four bandits, one or two with arrows and one or two more in hand-to-hand fighting because, from tales he had heard about the bandits and from the two or three men he had known to go bandit, he knew most were quite stupid, and they, like most men who resort readily to violence, never learned the strategy of fighting. For himself, although he didn't like fighting, he had watched fighters in training and in two small battles and, with every one, he had observed weaknesses he could use, and he had practiced maneuvers to exploit these weaknesses although he had never put the maneuvers into action. During the early days of the banishment, he spent his days in exploring the surrounding territory, and, at night, he returned to his shelter tired and ready to sleep. He didn't need to begin the journey north before the beginning of summer and could wait a bit before sneakily visiting villages along the border to determine whether any were home to a woman whom he might find suitable as a mate. If he found such a woman, he anticipated no difficulty in getting her to join him even if she had already been claimed by a man because a woman with spirit would never be happy with any village man he knew.

On about the fourth day of his banishment, he observed a woman, young from her movements, come alone to the stream below his camp and, after drinking from the stream, remove her clothing for a bath in the same stream. From the distance, he couldn't tell much about her, but he could see that she had flaming-red hair, and he left his bow and knives in the shelter and approached the young woman. He had no fear of her because, if she was from a local tribe, she would likely be subservient to any man who approached, and, if she was of the tribe he believed to be hers, she would be subservient to no one and fear no one and, thus, have no reason to harm him unless he tried to harm her.

When he was close, he raised his hands and called to her in trader speech, "Hello, I'm Alfred, banished from the Marlar village and Chotan tribe." She didn't panic or show any signs of distress but, instead, began wading slowly toward the stream's bank nearest him without making any attempt to hide the fact that all her hair was red or to cover herself in any way. "You're a Viggan, aren't you?" he asked.

He knew that the Viggans, who occupied an area far to the northwest of the Chotans, were one of several tribes that held to the supremacy of women over men, and even the male-superior tribes of areas near them afforded females more in life than did the southern tribes. It was to one of the border tribes that he and Becky had hoped to flee. Alfred knew that all these female-dominated tribes worshiped a goddess, who, according to them, long ago prescribed the way their lives should be lived if they wanted her blessing. The leaders and warriors of these tribes were all women, and the Viggan women, many of whom had red hair, and the warrior women from some of the other tribes were reputed to go into battle unarmed.

Actually, Alfred knew it was only partially true that they fought unarmed because many of their warriors were also skilled in the use of bows and slings and in close-up fighting with knives and spears; however, they were happy to promote the image of the fearless unarmed warrior woman because the audacity of fighting without weapons struck fear in many opponents, and, for the Viggans, at least, Alfred knew every warrior had to be proficient in unarmed combat. A tale was told of a Viggan warrior, who was beset by a group of fifteen male warriors and killed nine of them before the final six managed to immobilize her. Instead of killing her or binding her for delivery to their tribe, the six captors foolishly decided to rape her, which she allowed without fuss. Four men raped her and rolled off her — or were pushed off her — never to move again, and the fifth man noticed, just before his turn, that only he and one other man were moving. He raised his knife to her and died, but the last man survived the encounter because she let him live; at least, he survived until he returned to his tribe and related what had happened. The Viggan woman lived into her old age, when she would recall the battle for children of her tribe.

"Yes, I'm Marita of the Viggan tribe," the young woman said as she took Alfred's offered hand to climb to the bank. She stood in the cool air to allow her body to dry. "We may have trouble from your former tribe; so, you may want to hide from them. I'm on my wandering." She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

“I know what your wandering is,” he told her. “I may be only fifteen, but I try to learn as much as possible.” He took pride that she didn’t need to tell him that the Viggans and some of the other female-led tribes had a tradition that a young woman of eighteen or nineteen wandered the countryside for up to a year, partly for adventure and partly in search of a life mate from outside her tribe. While on her wandering, she was supposed to be an ambassador for her tribe and to do nothing to cause trouble between her tribe and other tribes, and, although Viggan women were often hated by the male-led tribes of the south, no one harmed a Viggan on her wandering without extreme provocation. Such had happened many years ago, and the tribal village that was home to the ones who killed the young Viggan woman no longer existed in Elfred’s time. He knew that, if his tribesmen were coming for Marita for some affront or imagined affront, trouble was brewing.

Marita continued, “I stopped with the Chotans in Marlar, just east of here, yesterday and met with two young men who the village leader thought might be suitable as my consort, but neither of them measured up because they were both too stupid even to hold a decent conversation. Although I knew I didn’t want either of them, I bedded one of them last night because I wanted a man. Upon reflecting over what I had done, I realized that I had wronged him because I knew I didn’t want him before our coupling and, this morning, I told the leader of my offense and offered coins as payment for the man’s service. The leader spat on me, and I killed him and his guards who tried to interfere. This is the first chance I’ve had to bathe since then.” She stopped talking and looked at Elfred as if trying to decide if he was as stupid as the men of whom she had spoken earlier. Making a decision, she asked, “Did the leader intend to insult me by spitting on me merely because I didn’t want any of the village men as my consort?”

“What would you do if someone offered you coins after coupling with you?” Elfred answered with a question, as he looked at her from head to toe. He had seen some of the village women slink around without clothes, but he had never before seen a woman stand naked and proud as Marita did, and, although he couldn’t help but stare, she didn’t seem to care. She was a bit taller than he, but he was still growing; her breasts did not appear as large as those of most adult tribal women, but those women were probably wed before they were his age and had several children by the time they were Marita’s age. Her belly was flat, and she was well muscled with no excess fat. Her legs appeared to be well formed and fit for running, as he remembered Becky’s legs had been.

“I’d kill him for insulting me,” she said.

“Just as you insulted the village leader,” he told her.

“But the man I bedded was just a Oh!” she said.

“He was just a man,” he said. “And the tribes here have difficulty in not considering you just a woman.”

“You think a lot, Elfred. Too bad you’re only a boy, well a youth. If you were my age, I’d consider YOU as a consort, but Viggan women are prohibited from taking boys as consorts or for coupling. What do you know about us, the Viggans?”

“Not much,” he replied. “The women rule in your tribe, and they have great renown as fearless warriors. I know you Viggan women sometimes look for a mate, a consort you called him, during your wanderings. For myself, I wouldn’t want to be the consort of a woman who thought I was worth less than she was, and I wouldn’t want my mate to feel she was worth less than I was. and that’s what my tribe believes.” His thoughts went back to dear Becky, who was now gone, but who along with him had, in their childlike innocence, hoped for a life together as true partners, not a life with one dominated by the other.

“As a potential tribal leader, I’m not permitted to wed a man from my own tribe; so, I look for my mate during my wandering. And, actually, Elfred, in response to what you said, I don’t seek a submissive young man or one that I can make submissive; I want a man to stand by my side. My father was such a man; he was strong and wasn’t intimidated even by my grandmother, who scared many of the warriors, but he died from an awful disease five winters ago, along with my sister and many other tribespeople. To further your knowledge about my tribe, I’ll tell you that our young men live in the tribe only until they are eighteen unless a woman from the tribe chooses one of them to wed, and, if tribal women don’t wed them, they must leave. We let them settle nearby, where our warriors can provide them protection, and the tribe even barter with other tribes to get them women, although we have difficulty in getting enough women without raiding, which we no longer do. This results in many cases, in the sharing of a wife by two men, usually brothers.” She paused. “Elfred, I’m putting my garments on. Have you seen all of me you want to see?” She opened her mouth wide to show her teeth; she held her breasts up to show him; and she turned her back to him, bent forward, and pulled the cheeks of her butt apart. Having finished her display, she donned her undergarment and, then, her outerwear, which were almost like those Elfred wore, although perhaps of better quality. Almost unemotionally she continued, “Oh, I killed three guards along with the Chotan village leader. How many more men in the village might be really dangerous?”

“Only one, named Jode,” he replied. “And a few more who think they are dangerous. And, of course, there are dangerous leaders in other villages, but they probably won’t get involved because almost nobody likes, er, liked our leader, Tivor.”

She asked, “How do I make amends to the Chotans for the insult of offering coins? Other than letting them kill me, that is, which I don’t intend to do. I will ask nothing more and give nothing more on the spitting incident; he spat on me, and I killed the spitter and his guards. We are even on that.”

“The tribe may not think all is even except for insult by the coin offer; that is, Jode and one or two of the others who think they are dangerous may not think so,” he said. “If you can kill Jode and, maybe, one or two more, the elders from the village will be easier to treat with. Without

Jode, I would venture that they would consider the tables clean if you eliminate the band that's been raiding around here for two or three years. The raider band varies in size from about eight to ten members." Elfred knew that he, personally, had something to gain by elimination of the raiders, a higher degree of safety. Marita wanted to think over the ideas of taking out the raiders and of killing Jode, and she decided to stay with him in his shelter for the night.

Elfred had never coupled with a woman or girl because Becky and he were too young when she was forced away from him, and he found no temptation in any other village woman; however, Marita was different from those village women. He asked boldly for her to couple with him; however, she didn't consent to do so. "Males and females under sixteen years, even those from other tribes, are supposed to be off limits to Viggans, and that's correct about including females; there are a few, not many, Viggan women who want other women for coupling."

He seized on the part that interested him because of his dear Becky, and posed a question, "So, Viggans never couple or marry until they are eighteen?"

"Viggans may not marry until they are eighteen, but, as I've already said, males between sixteen and eighteen still live in the tribe, and females and males do lots of things for fun when we are in that span of years, but only after getting permission from the donna for each time. She keeps a schedule, and almost no one ever births a baby from activities between sixteen and eighteen." In answer to his inquiry, she told him that coupling between sixteen and eighteen without the donna's permission usually resulted in the punishment of death for both. She said that no female Viggan was ever banished; killed, perhaps, but not banished, and, if a Viggan turned outlaw, the tribe hunted her down and slew her. Elfred got lots of information, but they didn't couple; however, they did cuddle close together for warmth during the night, and it felt good to Elfred to sleep next to a woman. He even got a real adult kiss before they went to sleep and another when they awakened.

During the night, Marita had decided that she would kill Jode if he would only offer the opportunity; so, Elfred started with her back toward the Chotan territory, and, about mid-morning, they met Jode and six other armed men coming toward them. Elfred knew Jode could not hit a hut with an arrow at ten paces, but one of the other men in the group, Gib, was a decent archer. When they were about twenty paces apart, Marita held up her hands and advanced toward them while Elfred stopped eight or ten paces from them. "Hello!" she hailed them. "I came to talk it over. Who is the leader?"

"I am leader," Jode said, stepping forward three paces. Elfred was unsure now what was going on because he knew Jode was lacking in the ability to think logically; however, he didn't believe even Jode was stupid enough to fight a Viggan hand to hand, one on one or even four or five to one, nor did he believe that Gib would shoot a Viggan who was asking to talk. While he knew that anything devious Jode had planned was as likely as not to slap him in his own face, it might slap everyone else in the face as well. If it came to a fight against all of this party, Elfred concluded that he could kill at least one and probably two for Marita; however, he hoped neither

of them had to kill Gib because he was the only one of the so-called leaders who might have enough intelligence to take command and actually do a fair job of leading the village. Perhaps, he could get some information from Gib.

“Gib, what’s going on?” Elfred yelled. “What tricks are planned here? Why are you with these fools?”

This did not please Jode. “Shoot him!” he ordered Gib, but Gib stood without raising his bow. “I told you to shoot him!” Jode yelled again. One of the other men moved to fit an arrow to his bow to shoot Elfred, but Gib held up a hand to stop him. Gib drew back the string on his bow, and Elfred decided he would have to try to kill him. He wasn’t sure that he was good enough as a bowman; however, he had practiced with the bow more than a bit and could usually, but not always, hit a body-sized target at the distance between them. Before he could react, instead of even lifting his bow, Gib swung it and shot the arrow into Jode’s chest. The other men turned on Gib, and Marita kicked off her sandals and went into action. As she ran forward, she leaped into the air before reaching the group and dropped the first two men with her heels to their noses. Then, she did a backward somersault, landed on her feet, and stabbed one in the pit of his stomach with her foot and another in the throat with her hand. The fifth man spread himself on the ground, awaiting whatever fate would befall him, but Marita spared him. All this occurred before Elfred could run the distance from where he stood to the group. He checked Jode and the other four men, and all were dead.

“I didn’t do that for you,” Gib told Marita boldly. “I did it for the village, the tribe. If we had killed you in a trap and the word got back to your people, our tribe or at least our village would have been wiped out, and Jode wouldn’t have known enough not to brag about killing you. I expected to die myself after killing Jode”

“Thanks. I have no quarrel with you if you have none with me,” Marita addressed Gib.

“May we have a treaty?” Gib questioned her, and she nodded assent.

The first thing Elfred did was gather the arrows and bows of the dead men because he knew he and Marita might need more arrows. The man who had lived pledged to support Gib as village leader and as one of the tribal leaders, and the group began to discuss what Marita could do to pay the debt of honor she owed to Chotan tribe and Marlar village for offering payment for sexual favors from a man of the tribe, and she and Elfred easily steered the discussion to wiping out the band of raiders. Elfred knew they needed something to entice the bandits to come after him and Maria, and he suggested that the tribe begin telling visiting traders that they had banished a fifteen-year-old boy and a sixteen-year-old girl and that the two had been reported as camping somewhere along the stream in the vicinity of Elfred’s camp. He expected that Marita wouldn’t like pretending to be a sixteen-year old, but, surprisingly, she didn’t object. She and he planned to wait in his camp for the raiders to pounce, but they went first with Gib to the village

of Marlar to trade some of Marita's coins for pieces of pottery, metal containers, grain, cheese from the village's cows and goats, and other food.

They returned to their camp and cooked a rabbit and a bit of grain. As they ate, Marita said, "Fighting and killing make me want a man for coupling. Tomorrow, I will go to find a man. Tell me how to approach this with a man I am not testing as acceptable for a consort because I don't wish to have to kill anyone just because of this need. If I couple, I must do it soon, because, according to the donna's rules, only in the next two or three days can I be sure of not getting with child."

"I won't tell you that," Elfred said. "You have a man to couple with right here with you." Actually, he knew almost any Chotan tribesman would have been willing, but they would have expected to do it on their terms, not hers. They would certainly have considered her an inferior, not one equal to or above them in station. He was correct that he was probably her only logical choice.

"Elfred, you are a youth, a youth intelligent beyond your years, but still not a man in age," she said.

"And you are a girl of sixteen, and that is certain because it is spelled out in the treaty we made with Gib today," he said. "So, we can couple legally even if I am a youth. Do you suppose no other woman in your tribe has ever coupled with a youth on her wandering?" He might not be a man in years, but, if she meant what she said about wanting as consort a man who would challenge her, he had decided that he would be that man.

"I give up, Elfred," she said with a laugh. "I've broken so many rules already that another won't matter, at least not if my tribe doesn't find out. If there has ever been another wandering like this one, I've never heard of it. But, then, I'll probably not tell the entire truth about what I did this wandering because, if I admit to coupling with a boy of fifteen, I'll certainly die, and, if you stay with me, I'll have to couple with you or kill you, and I like being with you too much to kill you. So, we'll couple. Have you ever been with a woman?"

"No," he told her, "but, if you tell me what to do, I'll do exactly that, and everything will be just the way you want it." And so they did, and the coupling included lots of hugging, kissing, and caressing, activities never mentioned in tales of sexual exploits Elfred had heard from braggarts in his village. Marita gave orders all the time, and he was to find that she liked giving orders to men with whom she coupled. He did exactly as she instructed him, and, to say the least, both of them found it very enjoyable. For Elfred, it was as if the sun exploded and rained down its heat and light on him and Marita; so, he was not surprised to see it gone from the sky and replaced by stars when they were finished.

"Elfred, that was wonderful. No other man has ever done exactly what I wanted him to do, when I wanted." Happily, Elfred noted his promotion to manhood. "Although you are a boy in years, I

certainly won't need to go looking for a man for coupling while you are with me," Marita said to him, "although I may die afterwards if anyone learns of what I did with you. I wish you could be my consort, and I don't know what we will do with you when my wandering is finished." Alfred knew that her wandering did not have to end for many moon cycles, and, by that time, he hoped to make himself the only candidate as her consort. He said nothing but held her in his arms as they went to sleep.

Next morning, Marita and he both wanted to bathe and did, even though the water was almost icy cold. After a bit of dried fruit and grain, Marita began practicing her fighting moves. Some were exactly what Alfred had tried to develop on his own, but they were much more sophisticated than his moves. After watching for a while, he began to follow her practice script to the extent he was able, and, as he had known or guessed, effectiveness of the moves depended on quickness and speed during execution, and he was able to perform some half dozen of them quite well. On others, for example, the forward leap, double kick, and back flip she had used on Jode's men, he failed miserably, and, in attempting that one, he not only failed but almost broke his neck. As he lay on the ground, Marita extended a hand to help him up and said with a laugh, "You'll never get that exactly right if you didn't start it as a child. I suppose you know men aren't allowed to have knowledge of how to fight in this manner."

He replied, "I believe I'll omit that one unless I can come up with a variation I can do more easily. And, in response to the prohibition for men, I suppose you know that I could already do some of the maneuvers fairly well before I ever saw you perform them."

"Indeed, I noticed that," she said. And that means that you developed these moves on your own. It's a good thing for my tribe that you were banished from yours, but, then, again, probably not many men in your tribe would take the time and experience the pain or even have the discipline to learn these maneuvers. I've broken most of my tribe's rules; let's break a few more." She demonstrated and talked him through some of the combat moves with which he was having trouble, and he began to improve on most of them. There were a few that he knew he could never achieve, but, with practice, he was fairly certain he could become a competent, although not great, unarmed warrior.

They spent the day practicing combat and just sitting around talking. Each learned of the other's life growing up, and Alfred thought that her childhood and youth were more interesting than his had been. Several times, Marita mentioned the goddess. Finally, he interrupted her, "Marita, you know it is not likely that this goddess exists."

"Alfred, most Viggans would kill you for blasphemy, and I, of all people, would be expected to do so because I may someday have to be the goddess here on earth. You're lucky that I consider the likelihood of the goddess's existence to be about as low as you do."

"How can you be a goddess when you don't even believe in her?" he asked.

“I’ll do what’s good for my tribe. Our goddess is not vicious, as are some of the gods and goddesses worshiped by other tribes, and, if I am the goddess, I will try to do what I think she would do if she existed. As for you, I suspect you told your tribal leaders your gods were false, didn’t you?” He admitted that he had brought up the subject and that, according to tribal law, he could have been put to death for blasphemy.

“When you get the wisdom of adulthood, if you live that long, you will realize that you can use knowledge without revealing everything you know,” she said. “I sense that it’s more than just the gods’ existence that concerns you because I doubt you care much about them one way or the other.”

“It’s what the gods or their agents in our world won’t condemn!” he almost yelled. “At least, your goddess tells you not to couple with children. You wouldn’t think of taking a ten-year old as a mate even though you couldn’t harm him as some young brides are harmed. Some men in our tribe have taken ten-year-old brides without the girls even getting to refuse, and many die in pregnancy and childbirth. while they are still children themselves. Becky, the daughter of my mother’s sister was the only friend I ever had, and she was one of them.”

“I’m sorry, Elfred,” Marita said and pulled him to her in a hug. “Will Gib change any of that?”

He replied, “Actually, he may stop the ten-year-old brides but only because he doesn’t think it’s good for the tribe for so many young women to die childless. It’s not because he cares for the girls.”

“It amounts to the same thing,” she said. “I, too, can be cruel for my tribe when necessary, and you witnessed Gib’s helping us because he thought Jode would destroy your village. Gib was willing to die for the good of the tribe; so, he may be a good leader. If you had done it all without a fuss, you could probably have used your intelligence and skill in fighting to become tribal leader or at least village leader some day. It doesn’t pass from father to son in your tribe, does it?” He told her that leadership was not hereditary, and he thought upon it all and admitted to himself that Marita was correct that he needed to do some growing up mentally as well as physically.

The next few days passed in nearly the same way. They engaged in a bit of hunting and fishing, lots of combat practice, and more conversation about themselves and their lives. They coupled only once more, with great pleasure for both again, although Elfred suggested it more often. Marita said that they would certainly couple more times during her wandering since they had already broken the taboo barrier but that it was not her safe time and that it would be good for him to learn to control himself a bit. In a move that was unusual for him, he was diplomatic and didn’t point out to her that it was her giving in to her desires that had started her troubles.

After a few days, they had an unusual occurrence. In the past, Elfred had seen wanderers only a few times and never two at once. Now, he found himself companion to a wanderer, and, as they

looked across the field late one afternoon, they saw another woman who also appeared to be a wanderer walking along the stream. He didn't know anything about the tribe of the newcomer, but Marita thought she knew her tribe. They walked toward the stranger, unarmed.

"Hello," Marita said to the young woman in trader speech. "I am Marita of the Viggan tribe, and this youth is Elfred, who was banished from his tribe. We are friends." The trader-speech word she used to express the friendship between her and Elfred was that used to express the relationship between two males who have no sexual attachment, and Elfred knew Marita would not want anyone to know she had coupled with anyone as young as he. "You are welcome to our camp. As one wanderer to another, I greet you in peace."

"I am Dora of the Welcan tribe," the newcomer said. "I accept your hospitality." Elfred had brought along Marita's tin cup and, after dipping it into the stream to fill it, offered Dora cold water. She accepted and expressed thanks to Marita, and Elfred was uncertain whether he was being ignored as a boy, a male in general, or as an underling, but he decided not to challenge the situation at the moment. Dora was dark haired, a bit shorter than Marita, about his height, in fact, and had a slim muscular body. Like Marita, her legs appeared to have muscles needed for running. Neither Marita nor Dora appeared soft, as all the village women beyond girlhood were, even the village women who performed difficult, physically demanding work. Actually, these women were probably still considered girls by their tribes.

Elfred and Marita escorted Dora to their camp, and he began fixing food to share with their guest. Marita and he had earlier dressed a fish for the evening meal, and he buried it in hot ashes and cooked a mixture of grain and fruit in a small clay pot. As they sat to eat, Dora said to Marita, "I'm looking for an adventure before I pick my consort and return to my tribe. Do you know of anything interesting to do as an adventure? Your boy cooks well. Does he do anything else well? If so, may I borrow him for a short while?"

Without waiting for Marita's response, Elfred answered the last part of Dora's questions, "I am not Marita's slave or servant but, instead, her friend. To answer your implied question, Viggans consider it against their principles to couple with a youth who is not yet a man." His word for their relationship was the same Marita had used earlier. "If you want to couple with me, ask me and I may say yes if you can promise to give me pleasure."

Marita frowned at him and, then, put in, "As Elfred and I said, we are friends. If your tribe has no prohibition against coupling with boys, he will decide whether he wishes to couple with you. For the other question, we have a project that you might find an interesting adventure. There is a band of about eight or ten raiders in the countryside here, and we know that sooner or later they will attack Elfred to make him a slave. I owe a nearby tribe a favor and will help both them and Elfred by disrupting this band. We invite you to join us. You fight unarmed as I do, correct?"

"Mostly yes," Dora said, "I am an unarmed fighter, and I would like to join your venture against these raiders. Two of us against eight or ten should make it an adventure we can tell about when

we return to our tribes, and, if there are more of them, I trust you have nothing against killing a few with arrows before they get close enough for hand-to-hand combat. I am fairly good with a bow in addition to my skill in unarmed combat.” Marita had never mentioned her use of weapons or any proficiency in their use, but Alfred had suspected and later confirmed that she was skilled in the use of bow, sling, spear, and knife.

“There will be three fighters against them,” Alfred broke in. “I developed unarmed fighting methods before I met Marita and have improved them from watching her fight and practice fighting, and I can use a bow and a knife although I have no real skill with either. Marita is doing this to protect me, and I will certainly be part of the fight.”

“It is not lawful for a man to know unarmed fighting,” Dora said. “What must we do with him?” she asked Marita.

“It is unlawful for us to teach men unarmed fighting,” Marita corrected. “I don’t know that it is unlawful for a man to develop it on his own. Anyhow, Alfred is my friend and whoever attempts to harm him attempts to harm me.”

“Very well, I have no desire to harm him. The three of us take on the raiders. Women of my tribe have fought beside men who used blades and clubs; it will just be a bit different.. We’ll discuss methods tomorrow. Now, Alfred, my boy, I must say you have spirit, and I can certainly show you pleasure. Let’s couple.”

“I know how to please some females, but I want to learn more,” Alfred said to Dora. “If you will tell me everything to do to please you, we can do it.” She vowed that she would certainly do so and began removing her clothes. Although he had not thought they would couple in Marita’s presence, part of his reason for coupling with Dora was to make Marita jealous. He knew this was risky, but he knew also that he had to take chances to get her to choose him as her consort.

With only a bit of kissing and caressing beforehand, he and Dora coupled there right in front of Marita, who watched for a while and then wandered off from the camp, and they had finished by the time she returned. Dora told him what to do, and it was very pleasurable for both of them as she had promised; however, he knew that, with Dora, it was only for pleasure and for his learning experience because he did not want to be Dora’s consort. He had discovered what he wished to know; that he could please and be pleased by other women but that something that was present with Marita was lacking with Dora.

That night each of the three slept apart, but not far apart, from the others. Next day, they discussed how they would fight against the raiders, and both women decided to cover their hair so that the raiders would not see Marita’s fiery red if they were spied upon. Later, Marita and Dora practiced their unarmed fighting, some of the practice being play-fighting against each other, which, to a viewer, was like a dance, but a single false move from either and one of them would have been killed. Finally, when she was resting, Dora said to Alfred, “Let me see some of

your fighting moves.” He demonstrated some of them, and she broke her own rules by telling him some of the things that looked wrong to her. Some were deliberately different from the way she performed them because he had to simplify the maneuvers to be able to perform them at all; however, she gave him a few helpful hints that he could incorporate to improve his skills.

It was early one morning, only a few weeks later, that he awoke to a pebble hitting his chest, a pre-arranged signal. He opened his eyes without moving and looked at Marita, who gave him a quiet hand signal. He gazed in the direction her eyes were looking and saw two men at the edge of their copse. Another glance showed two more just around from them. He tossed the pebble at Dora with the tiniest flick of his fingers, and it hit her breast. As he had done, Dora awakened quietly and observed her surroundings. They awaited a signal from Marita to be on their feet and ready to strike.

The raiders crept forward trying to catch them unaware and capture them, since they did not want to kill those they stalked because their value as slaves was higher than the value of any possessions they might have. When the raiders were within range, Marita gave the signal and assigned groups to each of them. Elfred was on his feet and found his two raiders so close together that he was able to kill them both at once with the foot and hand stab he had perfected after watching Marita demonstrate it. By the time he located the others, Marita had four men lying at her feet, and Dora was surrounded by three downed raiders. There was at least one raider left because Elfred felt an arrow hit his arm, but, fortunately for him, the arrow had passed through and been partially deflected by bushes in the copse, and it merely scratched him. He signaled to Marita that he was all right and that he wanted to stalk and remove the last raider. She signaled back approval, knowing that she and Dora had the tougher and more dangerous tasks of keeping the raider interested in shooting at them while they made poor targets. Elfred managed to move from tree to tree and finally got behind the bandit and tapped him on the shoulder and deflected his arrow downward as he turned to shoot. Turning his bow loose, the bandit reached for his knife, and Elfred saw that he was holding his knife correctly, low for an upward swing under a warrior’s defense. Elfred let him swing at him and danced backward, causing him to miss. Then, he kicked at the bandit’s knife arm with one foot and his other arm with his other foot, a maneuver that would leave him vulnerable if he didn’t perform it correctly; however, the overconfidence of youth paid off; The knife left the bandit’s hand, and the other arm broke when Elfred’s foot hit it about half way between his shoulder and a tree against which his hand hit. Elfred actually landed on his feet, although a bit off balance, and he kicked the raider in the area of his stomach, very lightly. Marita and Dora joined him after a search of the copse revealed that this raider was the only one left. Marita cut a straight stick, and Dora ripped strips from a garment of one of the dead raiders and used the stick to immobilize the broken arm.

Later, they marched the prisoner to the village of Marlur, where they told their tale and the man was questioned. Gib and the other leaders were satisfied that this was the raider band that had preyed on lone traders and other travelers, and they sent a party to check the dead men and bury them. Although Marita was willing to surrender the prisoner to be killed, she would not let the Chotans have him to torture. Gib saw no reason to kill him and put him out of his misery; so, he

left the prisoner with Elfred's party, and they marched him back to the camp, where they found the Chotans had removed all the bodies. Marita was about to kill the prisoner when Dora asked him if he wished to live or die. When he replied that he preferred to live, she took him away. A bit later, Marita and Elfred heard a blood-curdling scream, and when they investigated, Dora said that she had released the prisoner after half emasculating him and promising to complete the task if she ever heard of his involvement in violent activity. The man was free, but Elfred estimated his chances of survival to be very low after a broken arm and removal of a testicle without even being dosed with wine or ale.

A few days later, they were on the verge of bidding goodbyes. Dora and Elfred had coupled one final time the night before; they had used each other for pleasure a total of three times. Dora would go in one direction, and he and Marita in another. Before they parted, Dora embraced both Elfred and Marita. "I feel like we are all comrades in arms, and I hope we never find ourselves opposed in battle," she said. "I've had a great adventure, but I'm still looking for my consort. I'd pick you, Elfred, even though you are young, but I can't take a man with your knowledge to my tribe. I'll never tell anyone, Marita, but I know you, too, have coupled with Elfred even though it's against your doctrine. Just as you do, I know he is a man, not a boy. Blessings of the goddess to you both." Elfred and Marita wished Dora the best, and pledged their friendship as they parted.

Elfred stayed with Marita during all the rest of her wandering, and, although they had no more major adventures, they helped fight off a band of raiders that attacked a party of travelers they had joined for a few days. Elfred noticed one day that he no longer had to look up at Marita and was, in fact, slightly taller than she, and anyone who had known him from earlier times would have notice that he had filled out his body and even had a bit of a beard. He and Marita coupled from time to time, but she continued her quest for a consort, often interviewing eligible men from the tribes they visited. She found them all unsuitable for consideration as her consort, but she did couple with one and gave Elfred a 'so-there' look afterward. He was jealous but managed not to let Marita know it bothered him.

One day, he told her, "Marita, you do know that you and I have spoiled each other for normal people. I could never be satisfied with a tribal woman after talking, fighting, arguing, and loving with you, and I believe I've had the same effect on you. What other man would you trust with your life? I have nothing against aging a couple of years tomorrow, if that is necessary, and you could even give me a few small scars on my face to make it look a bit older."

"Elfred, you are barely sixteen, and my consort needs to be at least eighteen. Could you keep up the pretense for years and never give anything away? Could you live knowing that you never really had a time of youth? That you did none of the dallying and playing that most young people do? Rest assured that, if you were my consort, there would never be another woman or girl for you. Being my consort would have awful responsibilities."

From early on, he had been aware that Marita was not just a member of her tribe; however, he had not asked any questions about this. Now he broached the subject. "Is it true that you will be the hereditary leader of your tribe?" She nodded. "And that's the major reasons you don't think you could be successful in taking me back to your tribe as your consort."

"And, for all the reasons you state, I must have you as my consort," Marita said. "I go through the pretense of interviewing men and find they are all fools compared with you. You didn't say it, but I suspect you have realized that many of our wanderers come back with youths because youths can be trained and because few adult men from male-dominated tribes can live successfully in our female-dominated tribe. The leader accepts a bit of creative lying from regular warriors when they bring back consorts who aren't quite yet men, but their reason for picking youths is another reason not to pick you because I don't believe you can be dominated by anyone, even by me."

"I suspected there were more than a few boy consorts in your tribe," he responded. "Also, I suspect there may be boy consorts even in your own lineage, but that could never be admitted. On domination, actually, you and I each try to dominate the other without either being able to succeed., but I believe you know by now that I don't try to dominate because of my maleness or your femaleness; it's just that butting heads is part of the fun of being with you. And you do know, don't you, that, if I become your consort, I will be your only man, regardless of your tribal customs? And, yes, I know you will be my only woman. I needed to couple with Dora to know you and I are special."

Marita finally surrendered to the inevitable and agreed to take him back to her tribe as her pick for her consort. Together, they used her knowledge of her tribe's rules and customs, along with past revelations by the goddess, to work out a strategy that they hoped would allow them to survive his introduction to her mother and her grandmother, who were the leaders of her tribe. If they were correct, much would depend on his ability to be respectful and, strange to say, at the same time, to refuse to be dominated. Before they left for the north, they negotiated with Gib and other tribal elders that Elfred would be accepted back into the Chotan tribe temporarily, without ever actually going back, except for one act, and that the Chotans would be paid a consort's price for him.

It had taken tough negotiating, but Gib had finally agreed to let Elfred challenge Karl, the man who had taken Becky as a bride while she was a child and had then coupled with her and left her with child again while she was trying to recover from her miscarriage. Both Karl and Elfred were armed with knives, but Elfred knew he wouldn't use his. Karl was confident because he was larger than Elfred and had engaged in a couple of drunken brawls when knives were used, with no one getting more a few shallow cuts; however, Elfred saw that his opponent had no skill with the knife. He knew that this was really merely an execution, and, although he briefly considered tormenting Karl for his cruelty to Becky, he dispatched him with two kicks, one to the testicles and, when Karl bent over, a backward heel kick that drove his nose into his brain. A few villagers

grumbled, but no one dared challenge a Viggan and a youth who appeared to fight with the skill of a Viggan. Elfred saw tears and, possibly, a wisp of a smile on the face of Becky's mother.

With business attended to, Elfred and Marita were off. They stopped at several villages along the way back to the Viggan territory, and, for the first time, he saw communities where women were permitted to be people, where many stood with pride alongside their men and shared tasks with the men. As they moved further northward, he saw that agriculture was more difficult in these hilly, mostly wooded areas, but, still, these tribes managed to harvest a few crops and tend goats, sheep, and cows. His beloved Becky and he had dreamed of running away to one of these fabled villages where women were accepted as human, but she was only a memory now, and he was with Marita, who knew that he still loved Becky and knew that this love would not harm what they had together. They did not hurry, and, by the time they got back to Marita's tribal area, Elfred had grown to more than an inch taller than she and had added a bit more bulk to the muscles of his body. Among these Viggan villages, he noted unhappily that equality among men and women had given way to female superiority; however, even here, he didn't see males subjected to physical abuse or made to feel they were not human. Still, he would not live in such a relationship, and he knew Marita didn't intend their relationship to be such. When they reached her home village, he thought he looked and acted like a man; however, Marita, the same Marita who had faced seven warriors without showing fear, was nervous and trembling when they met her mother and grandmother, the tribal leader, Helma, and the goddess, Greta. She had warned him that he would be part of her mother's household until they wed or met their other possible fate.

Physically, Helma was almost exactly an older version of Marita; although slightly heavier, the extra was mostly muscle except for a bit larger breasts. Her hair was the same fiery red as Marita's, and her green eyes had the same intelligent look and ability to pierce to the soul. Greta, who had hair that was streaked with grey and looked to have been originally less fiery than her daughter's and granddaughter's, was retired from leading warriors and certainly not as agile as Marita; however, she looked as if she would still be a formidable foe in battle, and Elfred suspected that she still practiced combat maneuvers alongside tribal warriors.

Marita made the introduction, "Goddess Greta, Lead Warrior Helma, this is my choice as my consort, Elfred of the Chotan tribe. We are here for examination as you wish."

"How much do you know about this man, this Elfred?" Goddess Greta asked.

"I met him soon after I began my wandering, and he has been with me on most of it. He has participated with me on my adventures and stood beside me in my battles. We have talked, bickered, coupled, and talked more. Of all the men I met, he is the one upon whom I can depend if I become tribal leader or goddess."

"Is there anything that should not be revealed to the entire tribe?" Warrior Leader Helma asked.

“Goddess, Lead Warrior, may I speak?” Elfred bowed and addressed them. At their nods, he continued, “Marita and I decided to hide nothing from you and to let you, in your wisdom, decide what should be told to the entire tribe. If what we reveal results in your condemning Marita, be aware that I demand death also because I was as active in choosing Marita as she in choosing me, even though we know that is against your principles.”

“Speak boldly, Elfred,” the goddess ordered. “We will decide.”

“You may consider me a boy, but I am a man, and I freely chose to participate with Marita in all that occurred. In our time together during her wandering, we have been equals, and, if we wed, we will continue to be equals, although I will not have any part in her leadership of the tribe, if she gains that, except for giving her the best advice I am able to give. If she goes into battle, I will fight at her side.” At the leader’s and goddess’s attempted interruption, he said “Please,” and continued, “I will fight as you fight, unarmed, again, something against your principles. Thank you, and I await your judgement.”

“And what do you say?” they asked Marita together.

Marita replied, “It is as Elfred says; however, if you judge me guilty, he does not have to die.”

“We have no war or ongoing battles now. Do you insist on starting a war, Elfred, so that you can fight beside Marita?” Goddess Greta asked him.

“I would be happy if we never had a war, Goddess,” he said. “But we wanted to hide nothing from you.”

“These things need to be discussed with your mother and grandmother, Marita,” the goddess told her. “We will give our rulings to them to share with you.” The women changed personas, and both hugged Marita like the long-absent daughter and granddaughter she was. Then, Greta came and embraced Elfred.

“Elfred and I decided that the prohibition against youth-consorts is not honored, even with the tribal leaders. Why is it still in place?” Marita asked.

Instead of answering the question directly, Helma responded with, “Haven’t you found that adult men of most tribes would not make suitable consorts for a strong woman? Generally, only a youth who can be trained can fit in. You have implied that, from the beginning, Elfred did not feel himself superior to you because you were a woman; however it may be difficult for us to accept his notion of full equality with you.”

“You are only hinting at what you mean, but, if I understand correctly, you are saying that, if there were no prohibitions on taking youths as consorts, our wanderers, who are supposed to be the tribe’s ambassadors, wouldn’t interact at all with adult men from male-dominated tribes and,

thus, learn about these tribes,” Marita interpreted. “Without the prohibition, the wanderers would merely look for boys and youths. Of course, with the rule, everyone worries that choosing a youth as consort will doom her.”

“Bringing back a man who couldn’t fit in our world would have made you unfit as a leader, and your being able to come to such a conclusion in spite of the prohibition was part of your test,” Helma said. “We’re not sure yet what picking Elfred as your consort will mean for you because, to my knowledge, there has never been another such as he. You can’t wed him until we decide, and he can’t live in your house until then.”

During the time that they waited, Elfred stayed in Helma’s house and was not permitted to wander around the tribal village. Helma and he talked each day, and he did not try to mislead her about his viewpoints or about Marita’s and his relationship. He and she, as Marita’s mother, came to have a real fondness for each other, even though both knew that she, as the Warrior Leader, would possibly have to condemn him. He learned that she had also been somewhat of a rebel in her youth — probably even at present! — and that she had won her consort Waylon, Marita’s father, in a wager with his father, a leader of one of the southern tribes. Because of Waylon’s issues with female leadership or even female equality, she spent much of her period of wandering coming to a decision whether he would become her mate or die. Apparently, they resolved their problems because he did father her children and Elfred could tell as she spoke that she felt for him as he felt for Marita.

It was half a moon cycle before Elfred and Marita learned their fate, but, finally, they were called to meet together with Helma as Marita’s mother and Greta as her grandmother to get the ruling that Helma as the warrior leader and Greta as the goddess had made known.

Helma began, “Marita and Elfred, you may wed when the moon goes through one change of phase. You show enough maturity, Elfred, and your assumption of equality to Marita will not harm the tribe or your relationship with her; however, you may not fight alongside Marita until the goddess has ruled that this is permissible. Now, you can be sure that this will happen, but it will take a bit of time; meantime, you may train with and learn combat from Marita and other women chosen by her. This opportunity will apply to other consorts who can pass the test, but we believe there will be no others who qualify. Since we have no war and hope we have none in the near future, the prohibition shouldn’t be a problem.” And that was the way it all worked out.

Elfred’s dear Marita was healthy up until her last year of life but had passed on a few moon cycles ago at the age of ninety four. During her long life, she had served in roles as ambassador to other tribes, Warrior Leader, and, finally, Goddess, and he had served with her when she was ambassador, and they agreed that they had helped prevent a few wars. During this time, they represented the Viggans mostly with the tribes to the south and tried to make men of these tribes realize that their women were also humans, and they often thought that they would have had greater success but for the Roman influence among those tribes. Marita even represented the Viggans and a consortium of other female-dominated tribes to the Romans, a people with whom

she and Elfred dealt but never trusted, which was the correct stance, Elfred still believed. Elfred fought at Marita's side, ready to give his life for hers, when she was Warrior Leader, and, although they had only one very short actual war, there were a few times they fought outlaw groups from other tribes. Marita and he even developed methods of fighting the disciplined Roman legions; however, they thanked the goddess the Roman forays never reached as far north as their region and that they never had to put theory into practice. Also he and Marita set up a group that provided protection to traders whose routes passed through bandit territory, and, as part of this group, they got in a bit of easy combat with the bandits. They sometimes saw Dora, who had shared their wandering adventure, and, when the three met, they shared tales of their lives. Neither Dora nor they ever heard again of the bandit she had half-neutered and, then, released, and Elfred suspected that, if he lived, he wanted nothing more to do with any of them. Dora had died from carrying a child, years ago, when she was in her forty-sixth year, an age much too old for bearing children but much too young for such a vigorous woman to die. At least she died from carrying a child she wanted, even knowing the risk, not from giving birth to a child long before she was ready to do so.

When Marita gave over her role as the goddess's earthly avatar to their more-conservative daughter at age ninety, she and Elfred, both of whom were still healthy and vigorous, made a partial retrace of Marita's wandering and found one lingering effect from that time in Elfred's native village of Marlar, which still prohibited the wedding of girls younger than thirteen, too young, they both believed, but much better than ten. The knowledge that he had helped bring this about gave Elfred satisfaction, and he would have considered his life a success for that one change because of the lives saved and kept from ruin, even if there had been no other accomplishments. The couple visited their former camp by the stream and spent a night there, after which they wondered how they had remembered their bedding on the ground there as being so soft and comfortable.

After his long life, Elfred was tired and ready to join Marita, but he was satisfied with continuing in life, if that was the will of the Goddess in whom he didn't believe, because he was willing to stick around a few more years to watch and enjoy the upheaval and excitement that he expected when his beloved great-granddaughter Rega became the tribal leader.