

In the winter of my third Gathering the cold set in early and hard, forcing the worms and the insects to go deep. When at last the cold abated, the sky became permanently morose, a monotonous, interminable drizzle, lost in grief and weeping for we-knew-not-what. Despite the softening earth, the worms did not return, and our hunger grew. We listened to the endless ‘plick, plick’ of bare and dripping branches, the ‘plock’ of water filling the crooks of the Roosting Tree, the great ash chosen so wisely by the Founder, before the sickness and the hunger, before Akka turned against us.

We preened and preened against the damp, until our glands would give no more, until, like blight on a carcass, water began to seep into our black coats. A thin mire lay over the land, drowning even the faintest possibility to forage in the fields. Birds shook and fluttered, puffing themselves against the ooze, hunkering down with one thought...Spring.

With our backs to the forest, we stared southward, across the narrow field, to the farmhouse that stood amongst the low sheds, the tall barn to the west a shield against the wind. The lamps were lit in the lower level of the house and in a single room above. We watched, hoping the young woman would come once more to feed the fat-ones or throw offal into the pit. Foolish notions fueled by want.

The Forest-Foragers had failed us again. They were our eyes and ears, our beaks, our claws, supposedly the most skilled amongst us, sniffing out the precious dead hidden by the woods, a stray animal, a fallen bird, the gift of carrion that might yet save us from starvation. But they found nothing. A tasteless grub at the last moon became a feast in memory. The crones of the flock muttered about the one who had brought this upon us, the one who had blasphemed.